12-2013

Factors and Influences Contributing to the College Selection Decision of High Achieving High School Seniors

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FACTORS AND INFLUENCES CONTRIBUTING TO THE COLLEGE SELECTION DECISION OF HIGH ACHIEVING HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

By
Dana D. Clayton

December 2013
FACTORs AND INFLUENCES CONTRIBUTING TO THE COLLEGE SELECTION DECISION OF HIGH ACHIEVING HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

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From the day I took my first breath, I have been blessed by two parents, Odie and Ruth Curlee, who always reminded me I could do anything I set my mind to accomplish. Whether it was running a half-marathon or achieving my professional goals, their belief in me has never wavered. Their sacrifices began early, paving the way for me to pursue my dreams with abandon. While they have always been my greatest cheerleaders, they also have served as my greatest teachers. The education they provided me was simple – embrace life, look for the blessing amidst the challenge, trust God, and love others with all your heart. My dad left for heaven while I was in the middle of conducting my research, and although there were painful moments of sadness and loss, I was blessed with moments of tenderness and grace that made saying goodbye bearable. I miss you Daddy, but I feel you are in my heart and hear your whispers of love and support every single day. My mother continues to be the best role model I have ever known. She taught me at an early age what it means to be a strong woman with a tender heart and has demonstrated how to embrace the gift of life amidst heartache and challenge. Mom, I am continually amazed by you, and so grateful to have you as my mom.

God also has blessed me with an incredible husband, Randy, who has truly been my partner throughout this process. Randy, I am well aware of the sacrifices you have made for me over the last few years and, yet, you never complained, but instead have offered support, sacrifice, hugs, and provided more Dairy Queen Blizzards than any one woman should ever consume. This accomplishment is as much yours as it is mine, and I am blessed to be able to share it with you.

With a grateful heart that is full of love and devotion, this dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Odie and Ruth Curlee, and to my husband, Randy Clayton.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is often said that writing a dissertation is a solitary process. However, I have been fortunate to have the support of many throughout this process. The WKU family has been a great source of encouragement. My dissertation chair, Dr. Barbara Burch, has offered guidance and encouragement every step of the way; and I feel extremely blessed to have learned from her both personally and professionally. Thank you, Dr. Burch, for everything you have done for me, and especially for standing beside me throughout my dad’s illness. I am so grateful you were able to meet him before he left for heaven. In addition, I want to thank my committee, Dr. Monica Burke, Dr. Dean Kahler, and Dr. Lora Becker, for your willingness to guide me through this process. You have provided challenge with support that has made me a better professional.

A very special thank you also is offered to Mr. Bob Cobb from the doctoral studies program. Bob, you are a wonderful teacher and a tremendous asset to every doctoral student. I cannot begin to tell you how much I have learned from you. Thank you for always taking the time to answer my emails and talk me through the statistical haze of my study. In addition, I want to thank Cathie Bryant for editing my dissertation. Cathie, you have an amazing gift, and I am very thankful for all the time and care you devoted to my final product.

I also want to acknowledge my WKU Cohort 5 family. You are the people who truly made this a good experience. A special word of gratitude is offered to my classmate, Rachel Rosales, who painstakingly tutored me in statistics, commiserated with me through the challenges, and celebrated my successes. Over the last three years we have laughed, cried, laughed, cried, and laughed some more. I am overwhelmingly
confident that God brought you into my life for such a time as this, and, I am so grateful for your friendship. By far, it has been one of my greatest blessings during this journey. Next summer, we are going to the lake without a laptop and a bunch of books!

Pursuing this degree would never have been possible without the support of my University of Evansville family. For the last twenty-five years, I have been mentored by some of the greatest leaders I have ever known. Vice President Emeritus Dr. Howard Rosenblatt, your confidence in me and willingness to teach me has made me the professional I am today. You will always be “the Dean,” as I hear your words of wisdom echoing in my mind on a daily basis. Thank you for believing in me more than I believed in myself. I must also extend a word of gratitude to Board of Trustee member, John C. Schroeder and his wife, Diane, for their constant support of my professional and personal goals. You demonstrate what it means to be a successful, yet humble, human being whose first commitment is always to serve others with a generous hand and gentle spirit. I also want to thank former President Dr. Steve Jennings for taking a chance on a young professional and selecting me as your Vice President for Student Affairs. Your confidence in me gave me confidence in myself. Last, I want to thank President Thomas Kazee. You will never know how much your support, encouragement, guidance, and wisdom have contributed to this particular accomplishment. I never could have balanced my professional responsibilities and educational goals without your support and encouragement. Thank you for your willingness to work with me through this process.

I want to acknowledge the incredible professionals with whom I work every single day. The Division of Student Affairs at the University of Evansville is comprised of some of the most amazing individuals I have ever known. As I navigated through this
process, you provided kindness and encouragement when I was overwhelmed with the
demands of the job and the requirements of the doctoral journey. I especially want to
thank Michael Tessier, Assistant Vice President for Student Affairs, for his willingness to
help me regardless of the need. Whether it was filling in for me at a committee meeting,
pulling together an extensive report in a short amount of time, or spending countless
hours attempting to navigate through challenging issues, you continue to be a great
colleague and friend. Your professionalism and positive attitude are attributes I admire
and appreciate more than you will ever know. A special word of gratitude also is offered
to my administrative assistant, Karen Martin. Your ability to anticipate what I need
before I ask and to do it with professionalism and excellence is greatly appreciated. You
have been my sounding board and my encourager through every step of this process.
God has truly blessed you with a beautiful servant’s heart, and I am so grateful for
everything you have done, and continue to do, for our students and for me.

Most importantly, I want to thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Without
Him, I am nothing. With Him, I am complete. Lord, may everything I do bring You
honor and glory all the days of my life.
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The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how high achieving high school seniors navigate the college search process and ultimately make a decision to attend a particular institution. Specifically, it considered how institutional reputation contributes within the search process and how students consider the influence of others such as parents, friends, etc. Students enrolled in AP or Honors courses at three private and one charter school in southwestern Indiana were administered the College Exploration Questionnaire (CEQ) in the final weeks of their senior year. The CEQ measured the level of importance students placed on various academic and non-academic factors of college. It also identified the top three reasons why a student selected a public or private institution.

Based on a sample of 114 students, 67% indicated they planned to attend a public institution and 33% a private institution. Both groups placed the highest degree of importance on the quality of the academic program and identified it as the number one reason for selecting a particular institution. However, further analysis of the data revealed that students selecting private colleges placed a higher level of importance on three academic elements associated with academic quality: student/faculty ratio, international emphasis in the curriculum, and academic support services. In addition, students selecting private colleges placed a higher level of importance on the values
promoted by the institution than those promoted by their counterparts. Students selecting public institutions considered cost to be more important in their final decision and also placed a higher value of importance on location, winning athletic programs, and their friends’ opinions of the institution.

This research found that students selecting public and private institutions place varying degrees of importance on elements comprising institutional reputation. It also found that the opinion of their peers was significantly more important to students choosing public institutions than those choosing privates. This information can be helpful to enrollment managers and higher education marketers as recruitment and marketing plans are developed for both types of institutions.
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

High school students receive many signals from today’s culture that college should be strongly considered as the next level of education after graduation. This is often reinforced by their teachers, counselors, families, and peers. Even the government has invested in initiatives intended to increase the number of college degrees earned. However, the most substantial signals for deciding to attend college come from the higher education industry itself. College recruitment efforts target prospective students as early as elementary and middle school by creating programs of short-term residencies and specialized studies. This is an intentional attempt to introduce children at a young age to the idea of attending college at their institution after high school. Recruitment activities become much more intentional in high school and include the wooing of parents, as well as the student. All of these recruitment activities support Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) College Choice Model, which categorizes the selection process into three phases: predisposition, search, and choice (Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Bergerson, 2009; Bouse & Hossler, 1991; Paulsen, 1990; Shaw, Kobrin, & Packman, 2009).

Colleges and universities are marketing institutional characteristics that may or may not have any level of influence on the decision of prospective students as they navigate the challenging task of selecting a college. However, it is unclear as to what prospective students are looking for as they attempt to identify colleges for consideration. These students may be placing a considerable level of influence on elements that are of little control by the college, such as institutional reputation among one’s peer group. Some students may decide to choose a particular college simply because they have always been told it is a great school, yet are unable to articulate exactly what that means.
In preparation for college, students have opportunities to earn college credit and participate in college-track curricula while enrolled in high school. This includes courses designated as advanced placement (AP) courses. AP courses offer students the opportunity to study advanced material with the intention of testing out of certain college course requirements or gaining entrance into higher level college courses upon admission. Students who participate in AP courses, as well as honors courses, also strengthen their college admission application, as they are perceived by educators to be better prepared for college coursework (Farkas & Duffett, 2009). These college-track courses also may prepare students to perform better on standardized admission exams such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Test (ACT), both considered standards for college admission criteria.

Every college and university is concerned about recruiting a strong freshmen class, which means enrolling a targeted number of new students who meet the institution’s admission criteria. This is especially true for the private college that is primarily dependent upon tuition dollars for financial stability. If private colleges are going to successfully compete for admissible students, it is important to understand what factors are important to today’s prospective student during the college search process.

**Statement of the Problem**

In 1975, T. H. Bell served as the U.S. Commissioner for Education. At the annual meeting of the Council of Small Private Colleges in Washington, DC, Bell told his audience that all institutions of higher education across the nation were struggling because of inflation, which in turn meant colleges and universities were charging higher tuition to their students (Bell, 1975). He explained this was particularly threatening for
private institutions because public institutions were beginning to solicit funds from private donors and foundations as a way to compensate for the economic challenges. In 2005, Dehme wrote of the struggles private colleges and universities faced in light of the then current economy, as well as the perceptions of the students they were attempting to recruit. While Bell and Dehme spoke directly of private institutions, the economic challenges applied to public institutions as well. Today, higher education continues to address the same issues touted in the mid-70s with respect to enrollment challenges and financial instability.

The U.S. Department of Education’s report, *Projection of Education Statistics to 2021* (Hussar & Bailey, 2013), indicated enrollments at four-year public institutions increased by 36% between 1996 and 2010 but are projected to increase only by 15% between 2010 and 2021. Four-year private institutions enjoyed an increase of 81% in enrollment between 1996 and 2010 but are projected to experience a smaller increase of 15% between 2010 and 2021 (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). While enrollments will continue to increase based on these projections, the rate will be less than previously experienced. Furthermore, a shift in commitment for federal and state financial aid programs has reached a level of uncertainty not experienced prior to this decade. This means institutions are faced with a new level of fiscal challenges for managing their organizations, particularly the private sector that is primarily tuition dependent.

Private institutions rely heavily on government student aid programs for their students. From 1998-2008, these programs grew by 80%. However, private institutions continued to increase tuition at an average rate of 6%. Some students applied for student loans to make up the difference, and these colleges increased the distribution of
institutional financial aid through designated scholarships. Nevertheless, the number of private institutions with enrollments of less than 1,000 declined by 6.7% between 1996 and 2007 yet enrollment at all institutions increased by 23.4% (Zumeta & LaSota, 2010). This increase occurred because some have healthy endowments that provide financial relief during challenging economic seasons. Endowment earnings are often funneled into substantial institutional aid packages to protect enrollment levels. However, Hartle (as cited by St. John, Paulsen, & Carter, 2005) stated that, in general, the public does not understand the fundamental differences between private and public institutions or the financial aid programs available for attending college, arguing that “71% do not believe college is affordable for most families” (p. 548). The public no longer appears to understand the value of the investment in a college education, as they are overwhelmed with the overall cost of college attendance regardless of the type of institution being considered. This mindset regarding value of investment is especially difficult for private institutions. The real challenge lies with educating the general public about the “sticker price and real price” of attending a private institution as those two figures typically are vastly different. The private sector becomes more affordable because of substantial financial aid or significant discounting from the sticker price of tuition. However, if the public sees only the full price of tuition and isn’t educated about the actual cost associated with attendance, the private institution often is not considered as a viable option. In turn, this creates a considerable restriction for private institution recruiters to build prospect pools with viable candidates for enrollment.
Purpose

Recruiting a freshmen class is one of the most important responsibilities for the sustainability of the college, which is especially true for private institutions because of the significant reliance on tuition revenue. Without governmental support, private institutions are financially dependent on tuition dollars, healthy endowments, strong donor support, and financial assistance offered to individual students through federal and state programs. Because they tend to charge considerably more for tuition, prospective students and families may feel the need to weigh the financial investment of attendance against the expected value of the degree from said institution. This has significant ramifications for those responsible for recruiting new students and securing the freshmen class. To that end, this study will consider the importance and influence of various factors on the college-track high school senior’s decision to attend a particular type of college or university. The information gleaned from the research will provide colleges with a better understanding of the factors students consider important and will allow recruiters to target their marketing plans in a way that aligns with what students seek during the college search process. Specifically, this study will provide enrollment managers with a window into the mind of students who have decided to attend a private college, in comparison to those who have chosen a public college.

Prospective students consider many factors when searching for colleges. Paulsen (1990) researched these factors and identified the following ten criteria for selecting a college: “cost, financial aid, academic programs, size of the institution, location of the institution, quality, social atmosphere, athletics, religious emphasis and jobs available” (p. 74). These are the same factors other researchers have identified but with varying
degrees of importance (Sevier, 2001; Weiler, 1996). One of the largest factors that emerged in the most recent research is the idea of quality. Hossler (1999) discussed the idea of higher education as an “intangible product,” and Anctil (2008) supported this notion by explaining how academic quality is difficult to measure or quantify. For this reason, institutions are reliant upon their individual reputations as a main driver in convincing the prospective student of a particular college or university’s educational value.

As challenging as it is to define quality with respect to education. The idea of value is equally difficult. Institutions tend to associate quality with value. However, the elements considered valuable or value added are not always held in the same regard by the public. Students often fail to see the implied value of the elements institutions advertise as assets or beneficial (MacAllum, Glover, Queen, & Riggs, 2007). Therefore, institutions must be knowledgeable of how the prospective student determines which elements of the institution’s reputation mean the most to them in terms of identifying value in a degree obtained from a particular college. The elements considered important by admission officers may not necessarily be the same as those important to the prospective student. Institutions would be wise to target their recruitment efforts to those individuals who value what the institution has to offer (Paulsen, 1990). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to provide colleges and universities with a better understanding of the elements valued by the students they are attempting to recruit.

**Research Questions and Hypotheses**

The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of how institutional reputation influences the college selection process of high achieving high school seniors.
enrolled in college-track courses such as AP or honors courses. This study will consider the level of importance students assign to each factor that comprises institutional reputation, as well as identify the top three reasons when finally selecting a particular type of institution. It also will identify other individuals with whom the student consulted and the search practices of the student during the college selection process. The research questions addressed through this study are:

**Research Question 1:** What are the elements of institutional reputation valued by high achieving college-track high school students who plan to attend public and private colleges or universities?

**Hypothesis:** There are identifiable aspects of institutional reputation that are of value to students when they are selecting the college they will attend.

**Research Question 2:** To what extent do high achieving college-track high school seniors consider the influence of others when deciding to attend a particular institution?

**Hypothesis:** The opinions of others are influential factors in the student’s decision to attend a particular college.

**Significance of Study**

The College Choice Model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) defines three phases of the college selection process. A significant component of the model is the identification of the colleges one will consider as part of the search process. Another college choice model which coincides with the Hossler and Gallagher model is the Econometric College Choice Model (Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Bergerson, 2009; Kinzie, Palmer, Hayek, Hossler, Jacob, & Cummings, 2004). The Econometric College Choice model is based on the theory that students will weigh the perceived benefits of attendance at one
institution over another. Therefore, it would behoove administrators to understand how
the student ultimately arrives at a decision and what institutional factors are considered of
greater value during the college choice process. This has been the same directive given
by researchers for more than 30 years (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995; D. Chapman,
1978; Hazelkorn, 2009; Hossler & Christensen, 2009; Kinzie et al., 2004; Litten & Hall,
1989; McClung & Werner, 2008; Nurnberg, Schapiro, & Zimmerman, 2012; Paulsen,
1990; Weiler, 1996; Zumeta & LaSota, 2010).

Compared to previous decades, higher education has less governmental support
and more public criticism about the perceived value of a college degree. Although
students moved toward a consumer model of education in the 1970s (D. Chapman, 1978;
Koch 2009; Litten & Hall, 1989; Paulsen, 1990). This trend is stronger today as the
public often associates a college degree as nothing more than a “credential” (Arum &
Roska, 2011). For higher education to respond effectively within the marketplace, it is
imperative for administrators to be able to articulate their value to prospective students
and their families (McClung & Werner, 2008). Nurnberg et al. (2012) described value as
the result of the student’s belief that the “investment utility and financial and opportunity
costs” (p. 2) will come together in a beneficial way. In other words, the investment will
be worth it and yield positive results both economically and personally. Institutions must
find a way to articulate their value to the prospective student in a way that is quantifiable,
believable, and beneficial.

Many prospective students and their families possess a consumer mindset when
selecting a college or university (D. Chapman, 1978; Koch 2009; Litten & Hall, 1989;
Paulsen, 1990). Arum and Roksa (2011) refer to this as credentialing, meaning students
and parents focus on the instrumental value of possessing a degree as opposed to the holistic value of a college education. Others have supported this mindset, including the federal government. The Education Amendments of 1976 enacted requirements on institutions under the heading Student Consumer Information Provisions (D. Chapman, 1978), which implies by its very title that the student is considered a consumer of a product. These provisions required institutions to disclose job placement rates of graduates as well as withdrawal, or retention rates. This nurtured the consumer mindset of linking a degree from a particular institution with the expected value of likely job placement and completion of degree.

Similar to the product industry, prospective families are looking for evidence to validate their decision to invest in an education at a given institution. The emergence of ranking systems in the 1980s has supported the public’s notion that education can be quantified, and, therefore, institutions can be categorized and recognized for their quality (Hazelkorn, 2009). Although not supported by the majority of higher education institution, the public’s reliance on national rankings to provide some level of quality accountability has become part of the college search process for many prospective students and their families. Kinzie et al. (2004) concluded that “the widely publicized rankings play an increasing role in colleges’ marketing efforts and in students’ college-choice process” (p. 30). For this study, national rankings will be considered a factor that comprises the institution’s reputation.

As with many commercial products, the public views colleges in light of the cost of attendance and the value of investing in such a product. Pressing economic issues and changing demographics require higher education administrators to realistically consider
the perceived value of their institutions in the marketplace. A significant need exists to strategically respond with a recruitment plan that corresponds to the factors prospective students and their families consider during the college search process, including cost and funding sources, academic programs, institutional characteristics, and job and graduate school placement rates.

One of the top factors for college selection is academic quality (Bradshaw, Espinoza, & Hausman, 2001; Johnson & Stewart, 1991; Kinzie et al., 2004; Noel-Levitz, 2012; Roszkowski & Spreat, 2010). The ability to define academic or institutional quality in a widely acceptable manner is quite challenging. Educators often define academic quality by faculty credentials, publications, and research. Bradshaw et al. (2001) included liberal education, small classes and direct access to faculty as elements indicative of academic quality. The corporate world often associates quality education with the ability to be financially successful in one’s chosen profession. Humanitarians tend to consider a quality education to be one in which the student’s mind has been expanded to include a variety of perspectives resulting in the ability to think critically and therefore contribute to solutions sought for social challenges. All of these perspectives can be included in the definition of academic quality. However, prospective students and their families often consider college to be an investment of not only money, but time and effort (McClung & Werner, 2008). They want some level of assurance the product is of a certain quality. For some, this will mean the ability to get a good job or obtain admission into a quality graduate school (Litten & Hall, 1989; McClung & Werner, 2008; Nurnberg et al., 2012; Paulsen, 1990; Toutkoushian, 1999). Other families will compare the quality of an institution based on selectivity for admission, national rankings, and name
recognition. A consumer perspective also exists that comes into play as families will associate cost, or tuition, with quality. Carey (2008) stated that “price and quality in higher education are assumed to be the same” (p. 38). Because highly selective private institutions tend to have a higher published tuition rate, some may conclude that such an institution provides a higher quality education.

Quality and value often are perceived by prospective students and their families as one in the same. Parents and students reason that, if an institution is considered of high quality, it should be a good investment. However, there is no industry standard for the definition of academic or institutional quality. Quality education means different things to different people and institutions (Litten & Hall, 1989). The collective definition of quality for the individual prospective student must be considered by those who market the institution. Unless a prospective student is able to identify and articulate the individual factors that comprise his or her definition of an institution’s quality or value, significant reliance will be on the perceived institutional reputation for determining whether the college is worth the investment.

Hazelkorn (2009) stated that “Institutional reputation is a key driver of student choice” (p. 81). From the student’s perspective, academic quality is only one element of an institution’s reputation, which may have nothing to do with education and everything to do with institutional name recognition and other non-academic characteristics such as housing, athletics, and recreation (Steele, 2010; Weiler, 1996). Some researchers have found that students indicated their reason for selecting a particular school was its reputation for providing a certain type of environment. This included an attractive campus, active social environment, and the self-pride and peer influence promoted by
being associated with a particular institution (Hazelkorn, 2009; Nurnberg et al., 2012).
For this reason, colleges and universities need to invest the time and resources necessary to identify their differentiating qualities.

**Limitations of the Study**

All participants in this study were high school seniors enrolled in private and/or charter schools, thereby excluding applicability to public school students. In addition, all participants were enrolled in AP or honors courses, which restricted the results from being applied to students not enrolled in such academic courses.

The study was conducted in a Midwestern city with a population of 150,000. Different geographical areas may reflect varying cultural norms with respect to factors that are important when selecting a college or university. In addition, student interest in private versus public institutions may vary by geographic location because of access and familiarity with particular colleges or universities. For this reason, applicability to other geographical areas is limited.

**Definitions**

*Admissible* – a student who meets the admission criteria established by the institution

*Campus* – the property in which the college or university is located

*College and University* - a four-year postsecondary institution of higher education offering a traditional baccalaureate degree

*College Exploration Questionnaire (CEQ)* – a survey created by the researcher to measure factors of influence students consider when selecting a college

*College-track* – a high school senior enrolled in advanced placement or honors courses
Influencer - a high school student’s parent(s), siblings, teachers, counselors, peers, and general public who may play a role in the student’s decision to pursue a particular college or university (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; D. Chapman, 1981; Dixon & Martin, 1991; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Kellaris & Kellaris, 1988; Moogan, Baron, & Harris, 1999)

Institution – a four-year postsecondary college or university

Institutional reputation – a collection of institutional characteristics and impressions resulting in a holistic impression of quality or value

Private Institution – a four-year college or university that does not receive governmental funding for operational costs

Prospective family – refers to the immediate family of a student currently enrolled in the k-12 education system

Prospective student – a student currently enrolled in the k-12 education system

Public Institution – a four-year college or university that receives governmental funding for operational costs

Senior – a high school student enrolled in the last semester of secondary instruction

Assumptions

The following assumptions are made by the researcher:

1. The questionnaire was distributed and administered in the manner agreed upon by the principals of each high school.

2. Based on the information shared by the principals, all participants were enrolled in AP or honor courses at the time of the study.

3. Students enrolled in AP or honor courses are high academic achievers.
4. All participants intend to begin college in the fall semester following high school graduation as a traditional college student.

5. The participants understood the difference between a public four-year institution and a private four-year institution when indicating the type of college they planned to attend.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Colleges and universities have attempted to gain a better understanding of how prospective students determine where they will pursue their college education. Theories of college choice became particularly prevalent during the 1970s through the 1990s. Embedded within these theories are institutional factors considered by prospective students and parents when determining which colleges they wish to pursue. In addition to these theories, other research considers the influence of race, gender, socio-economic status, and the overall cost of obtaining a college degree.

As competition increased for freshmen enrollments, colleges and universities began to enter the world of marketing to promote their particular institution and gain an edge in recruiting an entering class. This has become particularly true for private institutions as they compete with public institutions for new students, which has resulted in institutions attempting to build a brand, or improve their name recognition, as validation of a quality education. In the eyes of the public, one of the most significant tools for validating a quality education is the ranking of institutions in commercial publications such as the *U.S. News and World Report*, *Forbes Magazine*, and the *Princeton Review*.

This literature review will consider various theories of college choice. It also will explore institutional factors of influence and personal influencers identified through previous research as important elements in a prospective student’s decision to consider a particular institution. Literature will be reviewed relative to marketing an institution’s reputation as a quality investment.
The goal of college choice theory is to identify the process embraced by prospective students and their families as they navigate through the college search process. Some theories are linear, i.e., they follow a systematic process for progressing through the search process. Other theories are based on economic and sociological models indicating that, for some students, the decision to attend a particular school will be based solely on elements such as socio-economic status, race, gender, culture, and cost of attendance. Finally, some theories are blended which implies a linear process based on the assumption that a student’s response is grounded in individual perspectives and characteristics when searching for a college. The college choice research changed its focus in the 1990s as institutions moved more toward a marketing approach to attracting students (Bradshaw et al., 2001). Current college choice research is geared primarily toward institutional branding and the economics associated with attending college. That being said, foundational college choice theories continue to serve as significant guides for understanding the processes generally followed by prospective students and their families when searching for a college or university.

**David Chapman’s Student College Choice Model**

D. Chapman’s Student College Choice Model (1981) considered how external influences impacted the student’s decision to attend a particular college. This included the influence of others, institutional characteristics, and the communication between the institution and the student. D. Chapman indicated these factors, combined with the student’s personal characteristics, resulted in the development of the student’s expectation of what it would be like to attend a particular college. This expectation was
influenced particularly by others including parents, peers, and students currently enrolled at the institution.

The influence of others was a cornerstone of D. Chapman’s (1981) research. He defined influencers as parents, siblings, friends, high school teachers, and counselors and suggested parental influence in the choice process was generally linked to the cost of attendance. However, he suggested peer influence was much more impactful on the student’s consideration of a particular institution. The influence of others appeared to “shape expectations of what a particular college is like and [consequently] offered direct advice on where the student should go” (p. 495). This was particularly true if the student sought counsel from a friend currently enrolled in college. While D. Chapman’s research suggested that friends have the most influence on the student’s decision, other studies contradict this by stating parents have the most influence at various stages of the search process (Anctil, 2008; Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Dixon & Martin, 1991; Dupaul & Harris, 2012; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McDonough, Lising, Walpole, & Perez, 1998; Paulsen, 1990). However, these researchers suggested teachers and counselors have a stronger influence on high achieving students than on those of average academic ability.

D. Chapman’s (1981) Student College Choice Model also considered the role played by institutional characteristics in a student’s decision to select a particular college, although academic compatibility was primary. He suggested students pursue colleges that enroll students with similar academic abilities. Nolfi (1979, as cited by D. Chapman, 1981) found that “students do not want to be with students whose academic aptitude is very different than their own” (p. 493). To determine academic compatibility, students
considered the average ACT scores, high school GPA, and rank of the admitted class. Other institutional characteristics of influence included admission selectivity distance of the college from home, availability of desired course programs, and financial aid packages (D. Chapman, 1981).

The third factor of influence identified by D. Chapman (1981) was the communication by the institution. Along with fellow researcher Johnson, D. Chapman interviewed students at a state school in Indiana to better understand the influence of communication from prospective colleges. They found printed materials had little influence in the initial selection process but were used to confirm the perception the student had about a given institution. D. Chapman concluded that more research was needed specific to institutional marketing and its impact on prospective students and their families to better understand the role played by marketing in the college search process.

**Randall Chapman’s Model of the College Selection Process**

R. Chapman (1986) proposed a model of the college selection process based on a review of previous college choice research. In this model, the selection process was divided into five stages: 1) pre-search behavior, 2) search behavior, 3) application decision, 4) choice decision, and 5) matriculation decision. The pre-search behavior stage was the most difficult to study, as the beginning of this process is different for every student. The pre-search behavior stage could begin as early as elementary school, depending on parental conversations about college. The search behavior stage signified an active process in which the student intentionally sought information from various institutions. During this stage, students rely on information from other sources to supplement the information received from specific colleges and may come from family,
friends, teachers, and college alumni (Anctil, 2008). Many students also chose to visit colleges during this stage. Chapman and Litten, (as cited by R. Chapman, 1986) described these perceived “benefits” as “consumption and investment benefits” (p. 247). During the search behavior stage, students weighed specific benefits such as the academic experience, campus experience, and potential for future career success. The search behavior stage concluded once the student decided upon which schools for admission.

In R. Chapman’s (1986) model, the third, fourth, and fifth stages were closely linked together. The third stage, entitled application decision, signified the actual process of applying to a school. During this stage the student considered the institution’s information such as cost of attendance, academic programs, and campus life. Once notification of the institution’s decision regarding admission was received, the student progressed to the fourth stage referred to as choice decision. The choice decision stage is when the student is forced to carefully weigh the options of attendance based on the schools from which admission was approved. During this stage the student may have conducted a focused search on a particular institution to determine which college to attend and often sought additional information regarding financial aid in order to make an informed decision about the cost of attendance. This stage ended when the student selected a specific institution which signified the beginning of the matriculation decision stage. The final stage concluded when the student officially enrolled and began classes.

Together, R. Chapman and Jackson (1987) expanded R. Chapman’s 1986 college choice model by considering how individual characteristics interplay with the search and decision process of prospective students. Their model suggested students behave
differently with respect to the college search process based on the perceptions and preferences they form about objective and subjective variables. Objective variables were defined as descriptive institutional characteristics such as size, location, and programs of study and also included an element of institutional reputation and name recognition by others. Subjective variables were defined as those elements about which the student makes a decision based on their own perceptions and came into play later in the search process after the student formed an opinion about the value of the various elements. The result is a multistage model of college choice that considers how the student’s perception and preference judgment values are formed during the various stages identified in R. Chapman’s (1981) model. Specifically, the three stages of the model are: 1) Perception Judgment Formation, 2) Preference Judgment Formation, and 3) Choice Behavior. The Perception Judgment Formation stage considered objective characteristics that are not absolutes but relative to the individual’s personal perceptions (R. Chapman & Jackson, 1987). During this stage parents’ and students’ perceptions of various institutional elements are considered. The Perception Judgment Formation Stage is further divided into three particular perception formations: 1) “personalness perception formation, 2) lifestyle perception formation, and 3) location perception formation” (p. 84). During the Perception Judgment Formation Phase, a student’s perception of the institution’s academic quality is considered. R. Chapman and Jackson (1987) defined academic quality as a term inclusive of academic character, prestige, admission criteria, retention and graduation rates, and overall reputation. Other institutional characteristics are evaluated by the prospective student, such as the type of institution (private or public), size, gender (single sex or co-ed), and appearance and social atmosphere of the
campus. Students have differing opinions on these characteristics. Therefore, a
categorical conclusion cannot be drawn as to the role these characteristics play in the
decision to consider a particular college.

The student’s perception of academic quality and institutional characteristics
becomes significant during the second stage referred to as Preference Judgment
Formation. This stage basically builds a case for the student to prefer the idea of
enrolling at a particular institution based on the perceptions they formed during the
previous stage. R. Chapman and Jackson (1986) found that “high ability students are
quite rational in their college choice preference…a college’s perceived academic quality
in the student’s area of interest is of paramount importance…[however,] students also
give weight to perceptions of lifestyle, location, and quality of personal contact
association with a college” (p. 76). Furthermore, R. Chapman and Jackson (1986)
concluded that high ability students considered many factors when determining their
preferences for enrollment.

During the third stage, Choice Behavior, students began to actively search for a
college. Unlike other college choice models, the financial implications of enrolling at a
particular college are not considered during the perception or preference stages but are a
significant component of the third stage. The preferences students identify during the
Preference Judgment Formation stage facilitate the creation of a set of colleges they wish
to explore for potential enrollment and includes communication with the admissions
office, faculty, alumni, and current students. For many students, it also includes visiting
the campus and exploring situational contexts such as considering what it would be like
to study in a particular geographical location, attend a school of a certain size, etc. The
student also begins to consider the “brand name effects” of the individual institutions. During the Choice Behavior stage, “prior preference is the primary determinant of college choice behavior” (p. 54). The financial implication of attendance is the second preference element considered. Institutional costs will often override one’s preference for a particular college, although this tends to decrease for students of a certain income level.

R. Chapman and Jackson (1987) proposed that students consider the elements of the decision that are unconstrained preferences and situational constraints during the choice behavior phase. By combining these two elements, a student considered what type of educational experience they preferred and placed it in a situational context of reality, which included financial considerations and brand name effects of the institution. In simple terms, the student decided if the financial investment was worth the return they expected for attending a particular institution and whether the institution was going to be able to provide them with the education and experience they preferred. Jackson (1982) referred to this as the evaluation stage in his previous college choice model. He suggested that students applied a rating scale to their decision based on the level of importance of elements they preferred and the ability of the college to actually deliver what the students expect. The challenge with Jackson’s model was that it is difficult for the student to truly know if the institution will be able to meet the expectations until enrollment occurs. “Students are unable to differentiate among colleges according to benefits, in part because their choice sets are homogeneous” (p. 241). For this reason, R. Chapman and Jackson suggested students made a choice decision based primarily on “family background, academic experience, location, and college cost” (p. 241).
Angulo, Pergalova, and Rialp (2010) used R. Chapman’s (1986) model of the college selection process as a foundation for their research, which was based on 12 focus groups that totaled 168 juniors and seniors at public and private high schools in Peru. They also distributed a questionnaire to 729 additional high school students and surveyed 28 high school counselors. The result was the identification of two factors within the five stages of R. Chapman’s (1986) college selection process: “rational factors and emotional factors” (p. 3). The rational factors include attributes such as “academic excellence, career opportunities, quality of education, cost, tuition fees, and reputation” (p. 2). The emotional factors are harder to measure, as they are based on “personal and subjective criteria such as taste, pride, desire for expressing themselves, and attaining emotional goals in their consumption decisions” (p. 4). The emotional factors take into consideration one’s “personal values, wishes, expectations, and sociocultural influence” (p. 5). Research by Baker and Brown (2007, as cited by Angula et al., 2010) “suggests that the romantic or exotic quality of sights, sounds, and smells of traditional institutions can be an emotional influencer in University choice” (p. 5). The rational and emotional factors were only two categories of additional components to be considered in the college selection process models.

Others researchers incorporated R. Chapman’s (1986) proposed model for college selection when considering other approaches to the college selection process (Angula et al., 2010; Dixon & Martin, 1991; Hamrick & Hossler, 1996; Paulsen, 1990; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; R. Chapman & Jackson, 1987). Some of the additional research included, but is not limited to, economic, sociological, and cultural components of the college selection process. These models will be discussed briefly later in this chapter.
Hossler and Gallagher: College Choice Model

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) developed the College Choice Model which specifies three specific linear phases a student progresses through during the search process. The model was built upon the work of D. Chapman (1981), R. Chapman (1984), Jackson, (1982), and Litten, (1982, as cited by Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), all of whom described the college choice decision as a developmental process. Three phases are identified in Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) College Choice Model: predisposition, search, and choice.

The first phase, predisposition, considered all the elements that come together in determining the level of interest and expectation for a student to pursue a college education. Jackson (1982) referred to this as the preference phase, which encompasses influential sociological processes such as parents, peers, aspirations, and academic orientation. The strongest influence identified in the predisposition phase (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) and Jackson’s (1982) preference phase were the student’s parents. Other researchers concurred that parents play a significant role in the student’s tendency to consider college, particularly if the parents have college experience (Bergerson, 2009; Bouse & Hossler, 1991; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Paulsen, 1990; Shaw et al., 2009). However, Hossler and Gallagher, as well as other researchers, suggested the quality of the high school, college-track coursework, and academic ability also played a major role during the predisposition phase (D. Chapman, 1981; DesJardins, Dundar, & Hendel, 1999; Jackson, 1982; Perna, 2006; Shaw et al., 2009). Manski and Wise (1983), Alexander (1978), Hearn (1984), and Litten (1982) (as cited by Hossler and Gallagher, 1987) found students to be more predisposed to college if they attend a high
status high school, performed well academically, took part in a college preparation curriculum, and participated in high school activities such as student government, clubs, and sports. Furthermore, students who were exposed to the idea of attending college, either through family, friends, or teachers, were more predisposed to the possibility of attending college themselves. Other influences included the proximity to a college campus while in high school and geographical location of one’s home town. Students who were from an urban or suburban area were more predisposed to attending college than those from rural areas. Students who lived in close proximity to a college campus were more likely to consider enrolling in college after graduation (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Hossler and Gallagher suggested that prospective students decided whether they were going to actively consider the idea of attending college during the predisposition phase. They proposed that this decision was the outcome of many influential factors, including the influence of individuals, contributing to the student’s thought process in determining whether college was something to pursue post high school.

The second phase in Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) College Choice Model is search. The concept of search was first introduced by R. Chapman (1986). Hossler and Gallagher (1987) condensed the components described in R. Chapman’s model of college choice into their second phase of the College Choice Model. During the search phase, students take an active role in investigating the institutions they are interested in pursuing. In contrast, institutions actively pursue students believed to have an interest in attending their school. The communication methods described in D. Chapman’s (1981) model of student college choice are prominent during the search phase as interaction between the institution and the prospective families increases. It is important to note that
Hossler and Gallagher suggested the search process was embraced differently by each student. They found students who were high achievers tended to do a more extensive search. In contrast, students who did not have family or friends with college experience tend to play it safe by considering only the colleges close to home or institutions with which they were most familiar. Students who were generally unfamiliar with all the institutions to which they had access limited themselves to a handful of colleges with which they were most familiar. Hossler and Gallagher suggested that “search activities alone do not assure a rational, well-researched college choice” (p. 213).

R. Chapman and Jackson’s (1987) Preference Judgment Formation stage coincided with Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) search phase. Once students had an understanding of the qualities of the institutions they preferred, they began an active search by identifying potential colleges with the corresponding characteristics they desired. During the search phase, students began to embrace their preferences for a particular type of college that had the academic and lifestyle experiences they believed would best suit them. Included in the search phase is an element of Jackson’s (1982) college choice model referred to as exclusion. Jackson suggested that during the exclusion stage, students began to eliminate schools from their choice set based on a variety of personal and institutional factors. The result was a narrowed list of schools.

The third phase of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) College Choice Model is choice, in which choice was defined as the time in which students determined the institutions to which they would apply and ultimately attend if accepted. These decisions were guided by the information gleaned during the search phase, as well as preferences formed (R. Chapman & Jackson, 1987). It is important to note that the authors
suggested, institutions had limited influence on the student’s enrollment decision once the choice phase was entered. For this reason, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) suggested institutions concentrate recruitment efforts toward students during the search phase, as they “are discovering the differences between public and private [institutions], high cost and low cost, residential and non-residential, research and teaching institutions” (p. 218). This meant intentionally recruiting students during the early years of high school in an effort to provide students with relevant information. However, this is contrary to the way in which most institutions approach recruitment. Most admission counselors are focused on closing the deal with high school seniors in an effort to secure a freshmen class for the upcoming academic year.

R. Chapman and Jackson’s (1987) model referred to the third stage of their college choice model as choice behavior which is very similar to Hossler and Gallagher’s (1989) third phase of choice as it emphasizes the actual behavior of the student in selecting a college. R. Chapman and Jackson (1987) suggested that during the choice behavior stage, students considered the elements of the decision that were “unconstrained preferences and situational constraints” (R. Chapman & Jackson, 1987, p. 13). By combining these two elements, a student considered what they preferred and placed it in a situational context of reality. The situational context included financial considerations and brand name effects of the institution; i.e., the student decided if the financial investment was worth the return they expected for attending a particular institution. Students also considered the likelihood of the institution actually providing the education and experience they preferred. Jackson (1982) referred to this as the evaluation stage in his model of college choice. Jackson (1982) posited that students applied a rating scale to
their decision based on the level of importance of elements they preferred and the ability of the college to actually deliver what the students expected. The challenge with Jackson’s (1982) model is the difficulty of the student to truly know whether the institution will be able to meet the expectations until enrollment occurs. “Students are unable to differentiate among colleges according to benefits, in part because their choice sets are homogeneous” (p. 241). For this reason, students tend to make a choice decision based primarily on “family background, academic experience, location, and college cost” (p. 241). Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) choice phase embraced Jackson’s findings by concluding that parental influence returns as a primary element toward the end of the decision-making process, suggesting that this was primarily because of the financial elements and family expectations connected to attending college.

Economic, Sociological, and Consumer Models of College Choice

Embedded within the previously discussed college choice models are elements of other theories that include the perspectives of economists, sociologists, and psychologists (Paulsen, 1990). As one considers the variety of perspectives associated with the college search process, it becomes increasingly clear that no definite process exists for decision making employed by all students. Individual backgrounds and preferences play distinctively different roles in how a student approaches the search process, and ultimately, identifies the type of institution to attend. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the contributing elements of these theories and the role played by each in the traditional search process.

Economic elements of the college search process appeared to dominate much of the literature, although at different levels of importance. Paulsen (1990) referred to the
“investment decision making behavior” (p. 23) that many economists suggest takes place as prospective families consider whether to enroll in a particular college. Other researchers affirmed this by concluding that the decision to invest in a particular institution was weighed against the perceived benefit of increasing one’s social status upon degree completion (Bergerson, 2009; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hamrick & Hossler, 1996; Kinzie et al., 2004). Paulsen (1990) posited that prospective families considered the investment value at the beginning of the college search process, which continued even while the student was enrolled at a particular institution. The cost of attendance is inclusive of many elements including tuition, housing, and location or travel costs. R. Chapman and Jackson (1987) found that families were concerned with the ability to obtain financial assistance throughout the enrollment tenure. Depending on the socio-economic status of the prospective family, different weights are placed on the value of investing in a particular institution. Paulsen and St. John (2002) discovered that “students attending private colleges were much more likely than those at public colleges to consider high aid an important factor in their college choices, and were less sensitive to tuition and living costs” (p. 192). DesJardins et al. (1999) found that family income played a direct role in a student’s decision to consider a “high cost, highly selective, distant, private” (p. 117) institution. However, Weiler’s (1996) research contradicted that finding as he detested no evidence supporting family income as a decision factor for selecting a particular type of college.

The economic aspect of college choice behavior embraces a wide range of variables including family income, race, gender, geographic location, culture, type of high school, professional aspirations, college costs, and financial aid availability. Much
of the research has targeted sub-populations to gain a better understanding of how certain groups of prospective students approach the economics of choosing a college. Because many variables exist within the economic context of college choice, it is difficult to measure economic factors on the decision-making process of the general population. Therefore, this study will address only college cost and availability of financial aid in the broadest of terms. Furthermore, it will not address the socioeconomic status, race, geographic location, or professional aspirations of the respondents.

Sociological and psychological models of college choice behavior consider how other factors influence a decision based on individual factors, status of attendance, and prestige (Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Jackson, 1982). Sociological models include an individual’s characteristics including “race, peer groups, school contexts, parental expectations, student and parent educational aspirations, academic achievements, and high school curriculums” (Bergerson, 2009, p. 3). Psychological models consider how the student perceives the personal impact of attending a particular college (Paulsen, 1990).

Perna (2006) developed the Conceptual Model of College Choice, which specified the social, economic, and habitus influence in the decision process. Morgan (2002, as cited by Bergerson, 2009) created a model of college choice based on three levels of commitment: purposive, normative, and imitative. Collectively, these commitments embraced the influence of others, including the decision making behaviors of others, and the determination of what was in one’s best interest. Other sociological models supported Morgan’s findings particularly as it related to one’s own interest or human capital (Toutkoushian, 1999). Breen and Goldthorpe (1997) and Pitre (2006) (as
cited by Bergerson, 2009) concluded that students made decisions based on risk aversion, i.e., the student’s desire to maintain or improve social class and to be successful at the institution they attend. Hamrick and Hossler (1996) referred to this perspective in status attainment models, as they combine sociological and psychological approaches to college choice decisions. These models suggest students select an institution based on what their peers think, family influence, and a desire to obtain a certain level of education from a given college based on the prestige expected to accompany the accomplishment. For example, D. Chapman (1981) cited the previous research of Davis and Van Dusen, who found private institutions were preferred by upper-income students. Sociological models of college choice support this finding, in that students seek familiar academic and social cultures when selecting an institution (Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Bergerson, 2009; Paulsen, 1990; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). The theory behind status attainment models is embedded in Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) College Choice Model.

Another prominent approach to college choice is consumer theory. One may believe students approaching college with a consumer mindset is a product of the last two decades. However, consumer college choice theory emerged in the 1970s and the result was a buyer’s market of higher education (Paulsen, 1990). Woven into the concept of consumer theory are the economic, sociological, and psychological elements embedded in college choice models. In addition, the consumer mindset of prospective families has resulted in a significant presence of intentional marketing efforts by the institutions. Dupaul and Harris (2012) depicted college choice by the consumer as inclusive of two processes: internal and external search. The internal search process is when the “consumer recalls prior experiences, feelings, and impressions about possible solutions to
the problem” (p. 10). The external search process is how the consumer gathers information about a particular product such as consulting friends, family, and teachers and reviewing accessible information via print or the internet. The challenge for institutions is the inability to influence the internal and external search processes. Even the best marketing campaign is subjective to the internal interpretation of the product. In addition, students determine the level of inquiry they want to pursue when conducting a college search. For some, the reliance on word of mouth information from influencers is how they determine whether an institution is worthy of their consideration (Abrahamson, 2010; Moogan et al., 1999; Paulsen, 1990).

Consumer theory embraces elements of economic, social, and psychological theories of college choice, supporting the claim that college choice behavior is multi-layered, inconsistent, and varied for each student (Angulo et al., 2010; DesJardins et al., 1999; Dupaul & Harris, 2012; Paulsen, 1990; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Enrollment managers who want to recruit students according to consumer theory must be willing to invest resources in marketing the institution in a manner that addresses specific areas of concern to the student. Because of the internet, students have more direct access to information about an institution, which allows them to make personal judgments about its value (Briggs, 2006).

Summary of College Choice Theories

College choice theory is addressed from a variety of perspectives. R. Chapman (1986) and Hossler and Gallagher (1987) provided two of the most predominant theories while considering other theoretical models. Although the models of the 1980s may be considered old, Shaw et al. (2009) suggested these models “provide a foundation to
understand the current college choice process” (p. 665). Other models emphasized the economic and sociological elements in determining whether a student will pursue a college education and, if so, how an institution will be identified that best fits educational and personal goals (Bergerson, 2009; Bouse & Hossler, 1991; Paulsen, 1990; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Toutkoushian, 1999; Weiler, 1996).

A new term has recently entered the college recruitment industry. Stealth applicant refers to the student who does not necessarily follow the traditional search process embraced by most admission officers. To date, little empirical research can be found regarding this group of prospective students. However, a recent study of applicants at a private institution was conducted by Dupaul and Harris (2012), who found that 33% of the students in the applicant pool were stealth applicants, meaning the institution knew nothing of them until their application was submitted. The stealth applicant stays low on the radar in terms of interest in the institution and, therefore, is not actively recruited by the admissions team. The student conducts the college search by researching institutions via the internet, reading publications, and discussing options with other influencers. The search process for a stealth applicant is basically uninfluenced by direct institutional recruitment efforts.

Furthermore, the institution is generally unaware of the student’s interest in the institution because they do not appear through traditional mechanisms such as ACT reporting or college fairs. Enrollment managers must be cognizant of the fact that institutions are being considered for enrollment by this new group of anonymous students. While they may not be able to intentionally recruit stealth students, they can
prove effective in the marketplace by keeping institutional websites fresh and engaging in two-way conversations via social media.

The literature review regarding college choice theory suggested that students consider a variety of elements as they progress through the search process, including sociological, psychological, and consumerism factors. The literature review provided a theoretical perspective of how students conduct their search and, ultimately make a decision about the college they want to attend. It also considered the degree to which others influence a student’s search process. While some of the processes may be similar, one cannot assume that a single college choice theory can be equally applied to all prospective students. The process continues to be highly influenced by individual student characteristics, perceptions, and preferences.

**Persuasive Elements of the College Search Process**

Prospective students are influenced in a variety of ways when searching for a college. As explained by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), a student’s predisposition to attend college is the result of others guiding and influencing them to develop a college mind-set. Influencers include parents, family, friends, teachers, and counselors (Bradshaw et al., 2001; Cabrera, & La Nasa, 2000; Chapman, 1981; Dixon & Martin, 1991; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Kealy & Rockel, 1987; Kellaris & Kellaris, 1988; Moogan et al., 1999). The amount of influence these individuals have on the student varies during the search process. In addition, the factors considered by students during the search process also may change depending on the status of the search, the student’s
personal preferences and the situational contexts associated with various institutions
(Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Jackson, 1982; R. Chapman &
Jackson, 1987).

**Influencers**

The previously discussed theories indicate the level of influence of parents during
the college search process, particularly during the predisposition and choice stages
(Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). However, Abrahamson (2010) suggested students “trust
and rely on advice from their parents at every step in the process” (p. 1). He cited
findings from a survey of 1264 high achieving seniors across the nation conducted by
Lipman-Hearne, in which “seventy-five percent of students reported their parents being
involved in identifying colleges to consider…and students’ conversations with parents
ranked number two out of thirty sources considered important in making their final
decisions” (p. 2). Regardless of the decade, it appears that researchers have consistently
found parents to have a significant influence on the search process (Abrahamson, 2010;
An, 2010; Anctil, 2008; Broekemier & Seshardri, 2000; D. Chapman, 1981; R. Chapman
& Jackson, 1987; Flint, 1992; Johnson & Stewart, 1991; Kealy & Rockel, 1987; Kinzie et
al., 2004; MacAllum et al., 2007). However, the degree of influence varied based on
parental education level and family income. Parents who held a college degree tended to
advise their child based on the educational experience they had as a college student.
They used their own college experiences as a frame of reference for gauging institutional
quality and evaluating the associated costs and perceived benefits of attending a
particular college.
Siblings are influential in the college search process relative to the economic decision of the family. If the family plans to provide a college education to multiple children, there will be limited resources to devote toward college attendance (An, 2010). An (2010) found “the number of siblings to have little predictive power in determining where students apply” (p. 317). However, students may be limited in considering all the options available to them, as various factors such as distance and travel may play a bigger role for families sending more than one child to college.

In addition to parents, peers tend to have a significant level of influence in the college search process. Kealy and Rockel (1987) found peers to be influential in defining institutional quality across a variety of elements. Fogg and Harrington (2010) discovered that high school students are more likely to attend college if their classmates intend also to pursue a college degree. Additionally, high school students considered friends currently enrolled in college as a major influence in the search process (Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000). R. Chapman (1986) discussed how students built a mental picture of what it would be like to attend a particular institution. Without a doubt, conversations with peers about particular elements of various institutions shaped the vision to which R. Chapman referred. D. Chapman (1981) also found that peers “shape expectations of what a particular college is like…and if it is a friend – where the friend [chooses to go to college] influences the choice” (p. 495). The sociological models of college choice addressed this element of peer influence and also applied to the expectations placed on students by their peer group because of the students’ academic ability or personal characteristics. Bradshaw et al. (2001) interviewed 16 national merit scholars relative to their institutional choice. All cited strong academic programs and college rankings as
significant factors in selecting institutions for consideration. They also stated they felt
tremendous pressure by others to attend “private, prestigious and selective” (p. 19)
schools or those highly ranked in national publications. For these high achieving
students, the expectations of their peers strongly influenced the development of their
college choice set.

High school counselors and teachers also serve as influencers during the search
process. Many college admission staff cultivate relationships with counselors as part of
their recruitment efforts (Johnson & Stewart, 1991). However, Hutchinson and Bottorff
(1986, as cited by Johnson & Stewart, 1991) found that, although “three quarters of high
school students used their counselor as a source of information, only fifty-nine percent
received the information they sought” (p. 84). In Litten’s 1991 research, high school
counselors and teachers ranked third on the list of influencers after parents and peers, yet
Murphy (1981, as cited by Kealy & Rockel, 1987) and Hossler and Stage (1992) reported
counselors and teachers had little influence in the process. This influence may vary
based on the academic ability of the student. Bradshaw et al. (2001) found counselors
and teachers tended to favor “prestigious, highly selective out of state public or Ivy
league institutions” (p. 18) when counseling high achieving students. In addition, Kinzie
et al. (2004) reported that counselors at private or affluent public high schools were
significantly more influential with high ability students in seeking selective colleges.
This suggests counselors play a role in the process, but the extent of their influence may
be more significant for students with strong academic abilities and those who attend a
particular type of high school.
In an effort to understand prospective students’ decisions to attend a particular institution, researchers have studied the various levels of influence of institutional factors on the student’s college choice. An institution’s reputation is comprised of academic and non-academic factors that may or may not be considered important to a particular student. Kealy and Rockel (1987) suggested three “universal perceptions of quality: academic, social life atmosphere, and location” (p. 685). The degree of importance of these factors often depended on sociological features including parental education level, socioeconomic status, type of high school attended, and career aspirations (Niu & Tienda, 2008).

Academic quality and academic reputation are terms often used interchangeably in college choice research. For the purposes of this study, the term academic quality will be used, with the understanding it can be interchanged with academic reputation as it tends to be defined in the same manner throughout the research. The challenge is that academic quality, or academic reputation, is defined differently from person to person. Neither can be defined in specific terms because they encompass a variety of elements associated with the academic program that may or not be of importance to the individual. The most common elements associated with academic quality and reputation include program of study, faculty credentials, academic advising, facilities, career and graduate school placements, and classroom environment (i.e., size, style, technology, etc.) (Sevier, 2001). However, the importance placed on these elements cannot be determined in conclusive terms.
Academic quality is repeatedly cited as the most important factor for deciding whether to attend a particular institution and, therefore, should be considered a significant element of an institution’s reputation (Bradshaw et al., 2001; Capraro, Patrick, & Wilson, 2004; D. Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Roszkowski & Spreat, 2010). However, in Broekemier and Seshadri’s (2000) study of 380 prospective students and their parents, academic quality was more important to parents than students. The students ranked academic quality ninth in terms of important elements to consider when selecting a college. Dolinsky (2010) supported this finding with his research, as he discovered that students failed to rank academic reputation as highly important when selecting a college. However, he identified academic elements, such as programs of study and job placement rates, as significant influences in the college choice decision.

**Non-academic factors** Non-academic factors of influence include co-curricular and social opportunities at a given institution, as well as institutional characteristics. Institutional characteristics include, but are not limited to, location, enrollment size, admission requirements, residential versus commuter campus, athletics, and facilities. Capraro et al. (2004) conducted a survey of high school juniors and found that “attractiveness to social life, defined in terms of characteristics of the people and experiences to be found at a school, is at least as important as quality of education” (p. 93). R. Chapman and Jackson (1987) referred to these non-academic elements in their college search model with respect to the student’s preference for a certain experience and the ability to visualize what it would be like to attend the institution. The literature suggested selecting a college is not simply choosing an academic program of study, but is
a decision in which students can visualize themselves as active members of the campus community on a variety of personal and social levels.

**Identified factors of influence** The literature review included research suggesting the top factors considered by students when selecting a college. However, some research was limited to students of certain socioeconomic groups, race, gender, and geographic locations. Paulsen and St. John (2002) suggested student choice behavior was dependent on the characteristics of the group and should be studied by these individual characteristics. Most of the research referenced in this literature review pertains to students in general and is not limited to the subgroups previously listed.

Bradshaw et al. (2001) conducted a literature review and identified several studies regarding factors of influence. Moore and Elmer (1992, as cited by Bradshaw et al., 2001) identified the following factors as the top five influences in the college choice process: majors available, academic reputation, cost of tuition, financial aid, and job placement. Other researchers, including D. Chapman (1981) and Hossler and Gallagher (1987), identified similar factors: academic reputation, programs, financial aid, and location (Bradshaw et al., 2001). Canale (1996, as cited by Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000) identified excellent teachers and areas of study as the two most important factors and academic reputation, cost, and teacher availability as relatively important. In the same literature review, Galotti and Mark (1994, as cited by Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000) suggested students identify factors differently depending on whether they were early or late in the choice process. Their research also concluded that faculty credentials and quality were not important factors in the search process.
Paulsen (1990) conducted a similar literature review, in which he compiled a master list identifying 10 factors considered most influential by students in the college choice process. Of those, cost and financial aid ranked one and two, respectively, while academic programs were listed third and academic quality sixth. Paulsen (1990) concluded his review by suggesting college choice behavior “must be intensely focused on the points of interaction between student and institutional attributes” (p. 87).

The most comprehensive and recent research regarding college choice comes from Noel-Levitz (2012). Over 36,000 students from public and private institutions participated in the Student Satisfaction Inventory (SSI). The factors of influence measured with the SSI include “cost, financial aid, academic reputation, size of the institution, recommendations from family and friends, geographic setting, campus appearance, and personalized attention prior to enrollment” (p. 3). This study revealed that “academic reputation is a strong factor, ranking as one of the top three enrollment factors across all institution types, with at least seventy percent of students indicating it is important or very important [in their enrollment decision]” (p. 4). Of students attending public institutions, cost was the number one factor, while academic reputation was the top factor for students attending private institutions. Academic reputation was the third most important factor for those attending public institutions, and cost was third for those attending private institutions. In addition, students attending public institutions were more concerned with geographical location, while campus appearance was more important to those attending private institutions. Noel-Levitz (2012) compared data from 1994-1995 against data collected in 2009-2010 and concluded that students, in general,
placed a higher importance on cost, campus appearance, and financial aid during the most recent study.

Other factors of considerable value to the prospective student are the likelihood of job placement and graduate school admission. While some would argue these two factors are characteristics of academic quality and reputation, no significant evidence was found for making this assumption. As such, these factors were referenced in several studies as having influence on the college search process (Abrahamson, 2010; Bradshaw et al., 2001; Flint, 1992; Kealy & Rockel, 1987; Nurnberg et al., 2012). For some students, the value they placed on these two factors was driven by their career aspirations (Abrahamson, 2010; Flint, 1992). For those who intended to pursue an advanced degree, greater influence was placed on the academic reputation and selectivity of the undergraduate institution (An, 2010).

Some of the research was limited in terms of sample, yet the results appear to be generally the same as those with larger samples. Dolinsky (2010) surveyed 187 upperclassmen at one institution and found students placed the highest importance on factors regarding program of study, tuition cost, financial aid, and job placement when selecting a college. A similar study was conducted by Bradshaw et al. (2001) of national merit scholars at a public research institution. The students indicated they considered only schools with high rankings, good graduation rates, and graduate school admission rates. With respect to cost, they commented that a cheap school was more likely to be perceived as lower quality (Bradshaw et al., 2001). These targeted studies may be useful to institutions who share the characteristics of the respondents within these samples. For example, if an institution strategically wants to enroll national merit scholars or high
achieving students, the study by Bradshaw et al. (2001) can provide valuable insight with respect to enrollment behaviors of this particular population.

**Summary of Persuasive Elements**

The studies reviewed in this chapter consistently refer to the influence of others in the decision-making process of students considering college. Of equal importance are the academic reputation and quality, cost, and institutional characteristics of individual institutions. R. Chapman and Jackson (1987) referred to perception and preference judgment formations as significant stages in the search process. They suggested that, during these stages, students formed perceptions of various factors and developed their preferences for particular college characteristics. They also suggested the student assigned various weights to consideration factors as part of the process. The literature suggests that students who choose to enroll in a private institution tend to be more concerned with academic quality and reputation than those who choose to enroll in a public institution. Academic quality and reputation also appeared to be strong considerations for those students with high academic abilities. However, the Noel-Levitz (2012) 15-year trend report made it clear that students have become increasingly more concerned with the economics associated with college attendance. In addition, non-academic elements of the institution such as social experience and location, appeared to be factors considered by students when making their decision to attend a particular college (Capraro et al., 2004).

As the student progresses through the college search process, information is received from various influencers, which include parents, siblings, peers, and counselors. Different influencers have various degrees of persuasion based on the stages of the search
process, the student’s individual characteristics, and the socioeconomic expectations of the family. Institutions should consider the influence of these individuals when developing marketing and recruitment plans.

**Marketing and Recruitment**

As students enter into the search (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) phase of the college choice process, institutions take an active role in providing prospective students with differentiating information about their particular college. The challenge in marketing higher education is two-fold: education is an intangible product (Anctil, 2008; Brewer, Eide, & Ehrenberg, 1999; Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2002; Clarke, 2002; Hazelkorn, 2009; Hossler, 1999a; McDonough et al., 1998) that the majority of institutions are promoting similar elements of quality about the educational experience they provide (Steele, 2010). In order to be effective in recruiting new students, enrollment managers need to understand a variety of elements, including marketing theories relative to higher education and the process by which students determine whether the investment in a particular college has economic and social value. This literature review discusses aspects of marketing theory and how institutional reputations are affected by various marketing efforts, branding, and institutional rankings.

Colleges and universities are in a continual battle for their market share of new students. This is of special concern for private institutions dependent upon tuition revenue for meeting operational expenses. The U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Educational Statistics (Hussar & Bailey, 2013) published comparative enrollment trends at public and private institutions from 1996-2010, compared to projected enrollment trends for 2010-2021. Public institutions experienced a 36%
increase in enrollment from 1996-2010. However, demographic shifts lead to projections of only a 15% increase in public institution enrollment from 2010-2021. The data is much more alarming for private institutions. Private institutions experienced enrollment increases of 81% from 1996-2010 but are projected to have enrollment increases of 15% from 2010-2021 (p. 23). The projected number of first-time freshmen full-time enrollment decreases for 2010-2021 by 25%. In addition, the number of baccalaureate awarded is expected to decline for 2010-2021 by 20% when compared to 1996-2010. These projections, coupled with a tough economy, are forcing all universities to intentionally market their institutions in order to secure the enrollment numbers needed for continued operation.

**Marketing in Higher Education**

Many educators cringe at the marketing approach to higher education. For faculty, the idea of a student being a customer means the customer is always right and, therefore, contradicts the traditional educational mindset of the academy. Very few studies of marketing in higher education existed prior to 2007. Institutions approached recruitment with similar mindsets and utilized traditional recruiting efforts including open houses, direct mailings, and high school visits (Vander Schee, 2009). However, subsequent to 2007 the economy, coupled with the consumer mindset of prospective students and families, created the need to intentionally consider how they were recruiting students. Rising tuition costs and public scrutiny resulted in the challenge of proving their value in light of the financial investment required. Most important, colleges can no longer assume the inferred message of value is understood by the prospective family. In many contexts, families have little knowledge about a particular element of the
institution, such as small class sizes or faculty with terminal degrees, to make a
determination of its value or impact on their educational experience (Dehme, 2005).

Marketing is defined by the American Marketing Association as “an
organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and
delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that
benefit the organization and its stakeholders” (Helgesen, 2008, p. 52-53). Marketing in
higher education tends to focus on relational marketing and reputational marketing
(Helgesen, 2008; MacAllum et al., 2007; McDonough et al., 1998; Myers & Robe, 2009;
Paulsen, 1990; Vander Schee, 2010; Woodbury, 2003; Yang, Alessandri, & Kinsey,
2008). Most colleges and universities rely on name recognition and institutional
visibility as the driving force of marketing efforts, although different techniques are
employed (Hossler, 1999a). Some colleges focus their efforts on target marketing based
on mission, selectivity, and academic programs (Paulsen, 1990), often referred to as
segment marketing built upon the “premise that while some prospective students share
similar characteristics…not all have the same expectations…[therefore] students with
similar attributes can be grouped into segments” (Angulo et al., 2010, p. 1).

Relative Theories of Marketing and Higher Education

Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006, as cited by Constantinides & Zinck Stagno,
2011) researched theoretical models of higher education marketing and found that none
existed. This continues to be the case today, although some theories are applicable to the
higher education industry. Institutions benefit in status and reputation from the
characteristics of the students they enroll. Marketing theories and strategies should be
considered in light of the unique relationship of the customer, or student, with the
product. For example, colleges that enroll high academic ability students will experience a stronger institutional reputation for academic excellence. Therefore, higher education must consider various approaches to marketing, as many institutional characteristics contribute to the student’s perception of institutional quality and reputation.

Marketing models that emphasize trust building tend to be most applicable to higher education. The influence of economic and status attainment elements is often shaped by how the institution is marketed. This is particularly evident in Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) College Choice Model, which embraces marketing as a key element of the search stage (Hossler & Stage, 1992). The impact of this method is particularly influential in the decision-making process of high achieving students (Bergerson, 2009; R. Chapman & Jackson, 1987; DesJardins et al., 1999; Niu & Tienda, 2008; Shaw et al., 2009) and those who have attended strong academic public or private high schools (Angulo et al., 2010; Hoxby, 2004; McDonough et al., 1998; Nurnberg et al., 2010; Shaw et al., 2009). In addition to Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) College Choice Model, R. Chapman and Jackson’s (1987) model explained how perception and preference judgments are formed during the predisposition and search phases of the college choice process. Because perceptions and preferences are shaped by one’s knowledge of institutional characteristics, prospective students need to trust that the institution will deliver the education marketed during the recruitment process.

For many prospective families, the trust elements of higher education marketing are strengthened by peer opinion and the reputation of the institution. Reputational marketing is a key element of many recruitment plans where the intention is to create an impression of value. Name recognition is frequently considered the equivalent of
reputation. The name recognition that accompanies an institution is often the pre-emptor for prospective students to seek additional information via the internet or from other influencers such as parents, peers, and high school counselors (Hossler, 1999b). Flint (1992) studied 1300 parents and found those in higher socioeconomic classes, or college-educated individuals, tend to consider an institution’s reputation or prestige as a significant component for consideration in the selection process.

Sevier (2001) discussed the idea of reputational capital relative to colleges and universities. Reputational capital was coined by Charles Fombrum, in which he defined it as “intangible wealth that equals brand equity” (Sevier, 2001, p. 2). Institutions with considerable reputational capital have an advantage, as a certain quality is associated with strong brand or name recognition. Prospective students often associate reputation or name recognition with institutional quality, yet no universal definition exists for this attribute. Some students define institutional quality as a conglomerate of characteristics associated with the institution, including the academic program, campus community, and athletics. Others hone in on one particular characteristic such as graduate school placement rates or athletic success. Anctil (2008) found institutions experience a halo effect, meaning their success in one area is transferred to other programs within the college. This is particularly true of institutions with strong athletic programs, as athletic success can result in increased visibility for the institution on a regional and national level due, in part, to media exposure (Anctil, 2008).

Reputation or name recognition does not always signify quality. Some institutions have a mediocre reputation because of characteristics such as easy admission criteria, mediocre programs, lack of athletic success, geographic location, and cost of tuition. An
institutions' reputation can cause some students to disregard potential enrollment based on characteristics such as high admission standards, reputation for being academically challenging, or the advertised sticker price of tuition. This is particularly challenging for private institutions that typically publish a sticker price for tuition that can be perceived as too expensive. Although private institutions will discount the tuition by offering substantial financial aid packages, many families eliminate the college from the choice set simply based on its reputation of being private and expensive (Bouse & Hossler, 1991; Pike, 2004). Highly reputable institutions, such as Harvard, will be eliminated based on their reputation for high admission standards and high level of academic rigor (Dupaul & Harris, 2012). In contrast, some colleges will be eliminated because they are perceived by the student as institutions of low academic quality due to minimum admission criteria (Bradshaw et al, 2001; Paulsen, 1990).

One element of reputation marketing that cannot be overlooked is word-of-mouth marketing. Vander Schee (2009) suggested that institutions of high reputation receive the benefit of word-of-mouth marketing, as others are touting the institution through personal conversations about the quality of the college. However, the prominence of a college or university is often the result of an intentional marketing campaign that leads to increased name recognition.

Reputation marketing is generally associated with branding marketing, although branding represents a more intentional effort. Anctil (2008) defined branding as “creating a clear message about an intangible product and helps to build awareness and relevance in an often crowded marketplace” (p. 31). He explained that a strong brand is something people can rally behind, resulting in strong loyalty and affinity. Cable and
Turban (2003) suggested that consumers are willing to pay more for a brand product or choose membership in a particular organization if they believe the associated brand will bring personal benefit. Soloman (1999, as cited by Bradshaw et al., 2001) associated brand theory with the desire to increase one’s self-esteem or social status by partaking of a particular brand. With respect to higher education, Soloman found high achieving students favored prestigious institutions that would facilitate an enhanced social standing or increase their self-esteem, should they choose to attend (Bradshaw et al., 2001). The same students reported that some colleges “were not as high quality as other prestigious institutions but they could not articulate why they thought that” (p. 3).

Sevier (2001) cited Lloyd’s definition of the brand as the “sum of experiences customers have whenever they are exposed to a product or message” (p. 4). Sevier expanded by explaining that a strong college brand produces an emotional response of trust and confidence. Furthermore, the brand must be relevant to the student’s interests. Although the brand message for most institutions tends to be the same (i.e., academic quality, excellence), the extent to which the student is aware of the brand, and therefore name recognition, is paramount. This often requires a significant institutional investment to create the desired impact of positive name recognition.

Relational, or relationship marketing, is embraced by higher education because of its ability to facilitate loyalty (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Helgesen, 2008). Al-Alak (2006, as cited by Helgesen, 2008) defined relationship marketing as “a set of marketing activities or actions that attract, motivate, and enhance existing and potential student relationships as well as students’ parents, relatives, friends, reference groups for the benefit of all sides concerned emphasizing the retaining of existing students until their
graduation and [therefore] attracting [more] students” (p. 53). Huang (2001, as cited by Yang et al., 2008) identified “trust, satisfaction, commitment, and control mutuality as four indicators of relational outcomes” (p. 150). These outcomes take into account the benefit to the individual involved in the relationship with the institution and the expectation of the institution to benefit others with whom it is associated (Yang et al., 2008).

Social media is one medium often utilized for increasing visibility with prospective students. It has the potential to facilitate the type of interaction referred to in the study of relational marketing theory. If utilized correctly, social media can create platforms for dialogue between the institution and the individual. However, few studies exist regarding the impact of social media on relational marketing in higher education, yet one can easily assume the desired trust element is promoted by reviews and comments shared across the internet between participants (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011).

Helgesen’s 2008 research considered the impact of reputational marketing and relationship marketing on level of satisfaction and loyalty. He surveyed 443 students attending baccalaureate-level institutions in Norway, and found that reputational marketing had little effect on creating loyalty to the institution. However, “satisfaction, loyalty, and reputation are interrelated” [based on the relationships and experiences of the students] (Helgesen, 2008, p. 67).

For many institutions, the attempt at relational marketing begins with the personal contact initiated by the admissions staff (Vander Schee, 2010). This personalized approach creates a sense of service that further promotes personal and individual
In general, private institutions tend to market personal and individualized attention as unique elements of their campuses (Anctil, 2008; Vander Schee, 2010; Yang et al., 2008). Recently, public institutions have attempted to reach the same group of prospective students by promoting Honors Colleges that simulate the private school experience (Dehme, 2005).

Institutional marketers who are able to integrate aspects of reputational and relationship marketing are presented with better opportunities for creating a brand that is believable and dependable. Prospective students hear similar marketing messages from many institutions, yet the differential is the name recognition and reputation associated with a given college. Reputation is enhanced by customer loyalty of many stakeholders including faculty, students, alumni, and parents. Their satisfaction and loyalty is the result of an integrative, collaborative relationship approach that has direct experience with the mission, values, community, and successes of the institution. In turn, this creates a trust element voiced by many constituents that influences prospective students in their college search.

The Impact of Rankings on College Choice Behavior

The ability to quantify institutional or academic quality is challenging on a variety of levels. First, no universal definition is accepted by the public or the academy for academic quality. In addition, measuring academic quality is challenging because individual perceptions and abilities contribute to the institution’s educational outcomes. Yet, commercial rankings appear to play a role in the marketing of higher education, particularly to parents and students of high academic ability, as the rankings suggest an objective evaluation of institutional quality (Anctil, 2008; Astin & Oseguera, 2004;
Bergerson, 2009; Hazelklorn, 2009; Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2007; Kuh & Pascarella, 2004; Litten & Hall, 1989; Machung, 1998; McDonough et al., 1998; Meredith, 2004; Myers & Robe, 2009; Pike, 2004). Clarke (2002) considered the objective and subjective indicators that allow an individual to make a value judgment regarding the quality of an institution. These indicators are inclusive of faculty accomplishments, student achievements, and institutional resources. However, if these indicators comprise the ranking systems that have become quite popular with consumers, the rankings cannot be considered definitive measures of quality.

Most commercial rankings include elements of the academic program that are tangible, such as admission and acceptance rates, retention, and graduation rates. These rankings are published in popular magazines such as *Barron’s Profile of American Colleges*, *The Fiske Guide to Colleges*, *Money*, *Peterson’s Four-Year Colleges*, and the *Princeton Review* (Ehrenberg, 2005). Based on the literature, the most popular commercial ranking is the *U. S. News* (USNWR) *Best Colleges*, first published in 1983. USNWR has become the gold standard of rankings, often referred to by presidents, trustees, faculty, and the media (Ehrenberg, 2005). In addition to objective data such as admission and graduation rates, the USNWR solicits presidents, chief enrollment officers, and chief academic officers to provide a peer assessment score for various colleges. Significant weight is given to the peer assessment score, often the result of the scorer’s familiarity with the institution and the level of value the scorer individually places on certain elements associated with quality. Standifird (2005) reviewed the peer assessment scores for 129 of the top doctoral-granting institutions, as identified by *U. S. News* in 2005. He noted the instrument used to assess institutions allowed the peer
assessor to rank items on a scale of “marginal” to “distinguished,” yet the definition of distinguished was left for interpretation by the peer assessor. Standifird also found institutions with a top 25 sports team were highly visible and possessed strong name recognition received a higher peer assessment score. He also observed that private institutions were generally ranked higher and suggested it was due to “their level of student attention and selectivity” (p. 233). Although the emergence of ranking systems provides “tangibility to academic claims” (Anctil, 2008, p. 41), the peer assessment score appears to be generally comprised of elements unrelated to academics and, therefore, influenced by name recognition and institutional visibility through non-academic programs such as athletics.

Various opinions abound about the usefulness, accuracy, and appropriateness of ranking systems in higher education. For the prospective student who creates perception and preference judgments grounded in the economic and sociological elements of the search process, college rankings can be a validation of their investment in a given institution (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; R. Chapman, 1986; R. Chapman & Jackson, 1987). However, since the rankings are ordinal, they do not allow for similar institutions to be ranked at equal levels. The result is that an institution may receive a lower ranking, yet be very similar to those ranked at a higher level. For this reason, Zemsky (2008) suggested that rankings measure market position more than quality. Furthermore, he proposed that students interpret the rankings incorrectly and, subsequently, eliminate quality institutions from their set of prospective colleges for considered enrollment. In addition, the rankings do not consider the actual experience of students at a given institution and, therefore, should not be relied on as a comprehensive evaluation of the
institution’s value (Kuh & Pascarella, 2004; Pike, 2004). Because of the consumer mindset that has infiltrated the higher education market, parents and prospective students will continue to rely on published rankings until a better alternative is identified that implies an objective evaluation of quality (Pike, 2004).

Studies of prospective students have reached conflicting conclusions regarding the influence of such rankings in the choice process. The literature review supports the conclusion that rankings are more influential with students of high academic ability (Bergerson, 2009; R. Chapman & Jackson, 1987; DesJardins et al., 1999; McDonough et al., 1998; Meredith, 2004; Niu & Tienda, 2008; Shaw et al., 2009). This conclusion is not surprising, as college choice research indicates students want to attend institutions where others of similar academic abilities are enrolled (An, 2010; Angulo et al., 2010; Capraro et al., 2004; R. Chapman & Jackson, 1987; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Brennan, Brodnick, and Pinckley (2007) found the ranking influence on college choice varied depending on the geographic region of the country. For example, 50% of the students in the Mid-Atlantic region indicated they consulted the rankings as part of their search process, while only 25% in the Midwest consulted the rankings. This may be explained by the amount of exposure to private institutions in the Mid-Atlantic region, as opposed to the Midwest. If private institutions tend to dominate the rankings, one may assume students who are more familiar with private education consider the publications as an important component in making their decision to enroll at a particular institution.

The majority of higher education institutions object to the notion of commercial rankings as legitimate measures of academic quality. These objections include the lack of consensus regarding the definition of quality and the use of an ordinal ranking system
that promotes a perception of one best school followed by all the others (Myers & Robe, 2009). Suggestions for revising the ranking system have been proposed by institution officials. However, most ranking systems continue to use the same criteria and methodology with some revisions to the applied weights. It also has been recommended that these commercial publications consider gathering data directly from employers and students. Employers have limited experience with the majority of institutions, and scores from students may prove to be too subjective based on the individual experience. Kuh and Pascarella (2004) suggested partnering the USNWR ranking tools with other instruments that measure the student experience, such as the National Survey for Student Engagement. However, the name recognition associated with national commercial publications provides the public with the perception of an objective analysis of the institution’s quality and is therefore, assumed to be a desired tool for college consideration.

The USNWR ranks by several categories including national and regional institutions and degrees granted (i.e., liberal arts, masters, doctoral). Because this study focuses on Indiana high school students who intend to pursue a four-year degree, the Midwest rankings are considered. Of the top 10 institutions identified in the USNWR Best Universities in the Midwest ranking, only one is a public university. Out of the 107 Midwest institutions ranked, 39 are public universities. These ratios are consistent with institutional rankings of the other regions (U.S. News, 2013).

Institutions that score high in commercial rankings utilize the information in recruitment and marketing materials as validation of reputation for quality. An internet
search of the institutional websites for the top Best Universities in the Midwest reveals every university promotes the USNWR ranking.

*U.S. News* has created one additional ranking in its Best Colleges publication. The “Great Schools at Great Prices” ranking infers the price of attendance is perceived as a good value or investment. The ranking considers the academic quality of the institution, coupled with the investment required for attendance. USNWR goes one step further and suggests in its publication that even “the priciest private colleges may end up cheaper than State U” (Wetzel, 2013, p. 146). In the “Great Schools at Great Prices for Midwest Regional Universities” rankings, 14 of the 15 institutions are private (*U.S. News*, 2013), most likely due to their expensive tuition sticker price considered in light of the net cost of attendance after financial aid. For these institutions, the published ranking could provide a significant benefit in recruiting families concerned with return on investment. However, for institutions not identified as “Great Schools at Great Prices,” the risk of being perceived as not worth the investment cannot be ignored. Therefore, until a reputable and objective measurement of the collective academic experience is developed and embraced by institutions and the public alike, rankings such as those published by USNWR will continue to be a vital component in the public’s perception of individual institutional quality.

Selecting a college or university is a complicated process influenced by many factors. From an early age, prospective students are influenced as to the likelihood of pursuing a college education. Identifying possible institutions for enrollment includes a variety of processes for researching colleges and creating a choice set of colleges for consideration. The search and choice process is influenced by various degrees of input
from parents, siblings, peers, and high school counselors and teachers. The student, based on personal preferences, creates a list of important factors for differentiating between colleges within their choice set. These factors typically include academic quality, cost, institutional reputation, social life and campus atmosphere, and athletics. For students of high academic ability, the use of commercial rankings may be also used to differentiate between colleges. Although private institutions, in particular, appear to benefit the most from commercial rankings of colleges and universities, public institutions cannot afford to ignore the impact rankings on their perceived reputation. Reputation encompasses many characteristics that may or not be perceived by the student as significant components to the educational experience they desire at a particular college. For this reason, institutions should identify the type of prospective students they want to recruit and determine the factors such students consider when making a decision to enroll in a particular college.

Summary of Literature Review

A review of the literature provided a theoretical foundation of college choice behaviors, factors students considered when examining different colleges, and marketing strategies relative to higher education. The most prominent college choice theories were developed in the 1980s. Most research post 1987 referred to the work of D. Chapman (1981), R. Chapman and Jackson (1987), and Hossler and Gallagher (1987). In particular, Hossler and Gallagher’s College Choice Model appeared as a foundational theory in nearly all of the literature regarding college choice behavior, most likely because it condensed the various stages of the other models into three easily identifiable phases: predisposition, search, and college choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Most of
the literature after 1987 regarding college choice behaviors referenced one or more of these phases.

Noticeably absent in the literature was a choice theory that addresses the impact of technology during the search process, although some of the literature published post-2000 discussed elements of technology. However, technology was addressed in the marketing literature, particularly as it related to real time information access about a college or university. The current generation of prospective students displays a sophisticated knowledge of technology. The internet can provide quick access to a wealth of information and provide students with a plethora of peer reviews regarding certain elements of an institution. A review of the literature revealed a significant need for empirical studies regarding the role of technology in the college search process, particularly as technology continues to advance at rapid speed.

The literature reviewed confirmed a need for institutions to understand the factors considered by students to be most important when selecting a particular college. It also confirmed the need to understand and respond to the influence of others on the decision making process. Much of the literature addressed the idea that students and their families approached the college search process with a consumer mindset. Different values were placed on institutional elements based on the students’ perspective of the individual factors. Overwhelmingly, students and parents were concerned with identifying the value expected for their investment in a particular institution. This value for investment perspective included academic and non-academic factors that comprised an institution’s reputation. While researchers found that academic quality was the predominant influence for high achieving students, other factors cannot be ignored. The literature reviewed
demonstrates that there are many elements which comprise the student’s decision to select a particular institution. Last, the literature review confirmed the significant contribution of marketing in the recruitment process, particularly with respect to institutional reputation and name recognition.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how institutional reputation influences the college selection process of high achieving college-track high school seniors who intend to pursue a four-year degree. Furthermore, it will explore decision factors relative to the type of institution the prospective student intends to attend – public or private. This chapter will discuss the research questions, project design, and implementation processes. It also will detail the steps taken to secure participant consent and ensure confidentiality throughout the study. A thorough description of the pilot process also will be discussed.

This study will provide enrollment managers and marketing professionals in higher education a better understanding of the influential factors students consider when determining where to go to college. A review of the literature explained how students consider an institution’s reputation to be comprised of academic and non-academic factors associated with a given college (Anctil, 2008; Bradshaw et al., 2001; Capraro et al., 2004; D. Chapman, 1981; Ehrenberg, 2005; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Kealy & Rockel, 1987; Nie & Tienda, 2008; Roszkowski & Spreat, 2010; Sevier, 2001; Vander Schee, 2009). However, some institutions may define institutional reputation in a different manner than the student. As part of the college search process, most prospective students and their families consider the value of the investment required to attend a particular institution. The perceived value is based on institutional reputation, which is inclusive of academic and non-academic factors, as well as others’ perceptions about a given college. Most perceive private institutions to be very expensive based on the published tuition fees, despite the financial aid discounts offered by most private
colleges. For this reason, private institutions need to understand the differentiating institutional factors attributed to a student’s decision to enroll at a private college. This will provide the private sector with applicable knowledge to compete in a marketplace where a college degree is considered by some to be nothing more than a credential (Arum & Roksa, 2011).

**Research Questions**

This study will address two research questions:

1. What are the elements of institutional reputation valued by high achieving college-track high school students who plan to attend public and private colleges or universities?

2. To what extent do high achieving college-track high school seniors consider the influence of others when deciding to attend a particular institution?

The hypothesis for Research Question One is: *There are identifiable aspects of institutional reputation that are of value to students when they are selecting the college they will attend.* The hypothesis for Research Question Two is *the opinions of others are influential factors in the student’s decision to attend a particular college.*

**Research Design**

**Survey Development**

This is a quantitative study that utilizes a descriptive survey design to answer the research questions. A survey entitled College Exploration Questionnaire was developed by the researcher following an extensive literature review with the intent to better understand the factors of influence associated with an individual’s decision to attend a private or public institution. Because the survey was developed by the researcher, two
Specific processes were employed to test for face and design validity. The first consisted of gathering input from recruitment and marketing professionals in higher education. The same individuals reviewed drafts of the survey until a final version was developed. The second process consisted of consulting a group of 22 college freshmen at a private college who reviewed several versions of the instrument and provided feedback regarding survey items and the administration processes. The final survey was designed based on the feedback received from both the higher education professionals and the group of college students. The final version of the College Exploration Questionnaire is presented in Appendix A.

The College Exploration Questionnaire consisted of five parts: demographics, college interest, college choices, future plans, and college selection. The survey consisted of factors identified in previous studies in which specific academic and non-academic factors were considered important during the college choice process (Abrahamson, 2010; An, 2010; Broekemier & Seshadri, 2000; Capraro et al., 2004; D. Chapman, 1981; Dolinsky, 2010; Flint, 1992; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Noel Levitz, 2012; Nurnberg et al., 2012). These factors include academic elements, institutional characteristics, and the influence of others. Part I of the survey asked for demographic information including gender, age, grade in school, and confirmation of enrollment in a college-track course. Parts II, III, and IV included elements that pertained to both research questions, as well as information relative to college search behaviors and influences. Part II of the survey asked yes/no questions about the educational level of parents and siblings. It also asked about the student’s participation in certain college search behaviors such as campus visits and meetings with counselors. Part III provided
nine factors considered influential in the search process. From the nine factors, students were asked to identify and rank the top three factors in their decision to pursue a particular college or university. Part IV requested students to indicate the type of post-secondary institution they plan to attend. The researcher used responses from Part IV to create two comparison groups – students intending to enroll in a four-year public institution and those intending to enroll in a four-year private institution. Part V asked the students to indicate the level of importance of 25 academic and non-academic factors using a 5-point Likert scale. A score of 1 indicated “not important”; 2 indicated “slightly important”; 3 indicated “somewhat important”; 4 indicated “rather important”; and 5 indicated “very important.” Of significance is that Parts III and V allow the researcher to analyze the responses from a variety of angles when considering the factors identified as most important in the college choice process. In addition, Part II inquired about the educational level of parents and siblings and the student’s participation in certain college search behaviors such as campus visits and meetings with counselors.

Pilot Study

The survey was piloted to high school seniors enrolled in AP courses at a public school. Because students under the age of 18 are considered a protected class and, therefore, need parental consent to participate in a research study, advice was solicited from the office of Institutional Compliance at Western Kentucky University to administer the pilot to high school seniors 18 years of age or older. The researcher received permission from the principal of a high school to administer the pilot and a teacher was assigned the specific responsibility of identifying students for the pilot. Twenty-six students, 18 years of age or older and enrolled in an AP course, were identified by the
teacher at the participating high school. All who participated in the pilot were volunteers and received no class credit or compensation.

To test for reliability, a paper survey was administered in a test and re-test format over the course of two weeks in March 2013. The survey distributed for the pilot study included a unique identifier created by the participant in order to track the pre- and post-test results. No other personal identifier was gathered, ensuring the anonymity of the participants. The researcher provided written instructions and materials to the teacher who supervised the administration of the survey. The teacher read the instructions to the students, which included the purpose of the study and instructions for completing the survey. This was repeated for both administrations.

Twenty-six students participated in the first test; 20 students participated in both the test and re-test. The six students who did not participate in the re-test were either absent that day or participating in another class project that demanded their time. At the conclusion of both the test and re-test administrations, students were solicited for feedback regarding clarity of the survey items and directions for completion. No feedback was received that warranted a redesign of the instrument or an adjustment in the administration of the instrument.

The reliability of the instrument was measured using the test and re-test data. Twenty students participated in the test and re-test as part of the pilot study. To test for reliability between the test and re-test responses, Kappa values were calculated. Table 1 provides recommended interpretation Kappa values, as suggested by Landis and Koch (1977). The Kappa value indicates the percent of agreement between the student’s
responses for both the test and re-test survey items. The higher the Kappa value, the stronger the agreement between the test and re-test response.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kappa Values for Pilot Study of College Exploration Questionnaire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kappa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part II of the survey asked yes/no questions addressing parents’ and siblings’ education levels and college search behaviors. Table 2 displays the Kappa values for survey test and re-test responses. The agreement levels between the test and re-test for Part II are identified as “substantial” to “almost perfect” for items referring to parent and sibling education levels and college search behaviors, including applying to college, discussing colleges with friends who are also considering college, and visiting college websites. “Moderate agreement” levels exist for survey items regarding discussing college with friends currently attending college, meeting with faculty from the college and meeting admission personnel from the college. “Fair agreement” levels exist for the survey item Have you discussed different colleges with your high school counselors or teachers?
### Table 2

*Kappa Values for Part II, College Exploration Questionnaire*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Interest</th>
<th>$n$</th>
<th>Agreement</th>
<th>Kappa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have any of your parents/step-parents attended a 4-year college or university?</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have any of your brothers/sisters attended a 4-year college or university?</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you applied to a 4 year college or university?</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you met with admission personnel from the college(s) you have applied to?</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you met with faculty from the college(s) you have applied to?</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you visit the website of the colleges you would consider attending?</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you discussed different colleges with your high school counselors or teacher?</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you discussed different colleges with your friends who are also considering college?</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you discussed different colleges with friends who are currently attending college?</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part III asked students to rank the top three reasons why they chose a particular college. The Kappa values for this section can be found in Table 3. The factors ranked as the number one reason for choosing a college have a “slight agreement” between the test and re-test response. The factor ranked as the second most important reason for choosing a college reveals a “fair agreement” between the responses. The third factor ranked as most important has a “moderate agreement” between test and re-test responses.
Part III is considered reliable because the Kappa values reveal levels of agreement between the test and re-test for all responses.

Table 3

*Kappa Values for Part III, College Exploration Questionnaire*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part III College Choices</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Agreement</th>
<th>Kappa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factor – Ranked 1st</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor – Ranked 2nd</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factor – Ranked 3rd</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part IV of the survey asked students if they planned to pursue a four-year degree and, if so, to identify what type of institution they planned to attend. Table 4 displays the Kappa value for these questions. The Kappa value is 1.0 for plans to pursue a four year degree. This means the students’ responses to this question were exactly the same from the test to the re-test. Their responses regarding the type of school they planned to attend had moderate agreement between the test and re-test. It is important to note that most colleges send financial aid awards during the month of March, which is when the test and re-test were administered. This could account for the moderate agreement on this particular item.

Table 4

*Kappa Values for Part IV, College Exploration Questionnaire*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Future Plans</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Agreement</th>
<th>Kappa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plan to pursue a 4-year degree</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of school you plan to attend</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part V of the survey asked students to indicate the level of importance they place on 25 factors regarding college choice. Table 5 displays the Kappa values for Part V. A Likert scale of 1 to 5 measures the level of importance for each factor. Because there are five answers available to the respondent for each survey item, the possibility of lower levels of agreement are more likely. Nevertheless, all items reveal some level of agreement and are considered reliable for the purpose of this study.

Three factors indicated significant agreement levels: 1) international/study abroad is encouraged as part of the academic program, 2) the availability of scholarships and grants, and 3) the location of the college is within a few hours of home. Of these, the location factor received the highest Kappa value, 0.74. Ten factors received a “moderate agreement” score based on Kappa values, and eight received a “fair agreement” rating. Four factors revealed a “slight agreement” between test and re-test responses: 1) classes taught by full-time professors, 2) teaching and lab facilities are state of the art, 3) opportunities for campus involvement, and 4) students complete their degree in 4-5 years. Because all of these items reveal some level of agreement based on the Kappa value, they are considered reliable for the purpose of this study.

The pilot study consisted of a test and re-test process to measure the reliability of the survey. Based on the Kappa values for the test and re-test data, levels of agreement were present for all items. Therefore, the survey is considered a reliable instrument for the purpose of this study.
Table 5

*Kappa Values for Part V, College Exploration Questionnaire*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part V College Selection</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Agreement</th>
<th>Kappa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The college has an outstanding academic program in my major/area of study</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classes are mostly taught by full-time professors</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching/lab facilities are state of the art</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internships/Clinicals are required for graduation</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student/faculty ratio in class is 20 to 1 or less</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most students complete their degree in 4 to 5 years</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The college has rigorous admission standards</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International study/travel is encouraged as part of the academic program</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The college promotes values that are important to me</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The college promotes community service/volunteer work as part of the academic experience</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The college is nationally ranked in publications and magazines</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The college is highly regarded among my friends</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The college is highly regarded among my teachers</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The college is highly regarded outside of my state</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are many opportunities for campus involvement through extra-curricular activities</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are many opportunities for social interaction (fraternities, clubs, etc.)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most students live on campus</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

continued
Table 5 - continued

*Kappa Values for Part V, College Exploration Questionnaire*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part V College Selection</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Agreement</th>
<th>Kappa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The location of the college is within a few hours of my home</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The campus buildings and grounds are attractive</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are scholarships and grants available</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cost of tuition is helped with access to student loans</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are employed in positions that utilize their degree within six months of graduation</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduates are considered as strong candidates for graduate, medical, and law schools, etc.</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a lot of “school spirit” at the college</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a “winning” tradition of athletics at the college</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Procedures**

All procedures relative to conducting research were authorized by the Western Kentucky University Institutional Review Board (WKU IRB 13-320). The application for permission and letter for approval can be found in Appendix B.

**Participants**

The literature suggests students who attend a private or academically challenging high school are more likely to consider enrollment in a private college or university. In order to identify a sample of high school seniors who intended to enroll in a private institution, four high schools in southwest Indiana were identified for the study. Two are parochial, one is private, and one is a public charter school. Each offers AP and Honors
courses. The researcher made the assumption that students enrolled in AP or Honors are high achieving academic students because of the academic rigor typically associated with these types of courses. The principal of each school was personally contacted by the researcher, who explained the purpose of the study. The principals provided letters of cooperation indicating their approval for the high school to participate in the study. The letters were provided to Western Kentucky University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) as part of the research application (see Appendix C). Prior to distribution of the questionnaire, one parochial school withdrew from the study. The remaining three received packets of materials including directions, consent forms, and the questionnaires. Because the high school seniors consisted of individuals who were under the age of 18, as well as those who were 18 and older, different consent forms were provided. All consent and participation assent forms were approved by Western Kentucky University’s IRB and can be found in Appendix D. The consent forms consisted of parental informed consent forms for those under the age of 18. If a parent did not want their student to participate, they were offered an opt-out option on the parental form. In accordance with Western Kentucky University’s IRB guidelines for protected classes, the parents had five business days to determine whether they wanted their student to participate in the study. The student under the age of 18 whose parents did not choose to opt-out of the study was provided a participant assent form for signature. Students 18 years of age or older were provided an informed consent form.

Each principal received a packet of instructions, consent forms, and questionnaires. The instructions for distributing the consent forms and administering the questionnaires can be found in Appendix E. The principals identified the AP classes for
distribution and provided the materials to the teachers. All consent forms and questionnaires were distributed according to the instructions provided by the researcher. The parental informed consent forms were distributed May 1, one week prior to the administration of the survey. The parental informed consent forms indicating an opt-out option were collected on May 8. The questionnaire was distributed, along with the informed consent forms and assent forms, on May 8 or after, depending upon the preference of the school. This time period coincided with AP end-of-the-term testing for all three high schools. At the conclusion of the questionnaire administration, completed consent forms were placed by the teachers in signed and sealed envelopes, separate from the questionnaires to ensure anonymity. All materials were returned to the principal and collected by the researcher. The researcher compared the number of appropriate signed consent and assent forms to the number of questionnaires based on the age indicated on the surveys by the respondents. The number of informed consent and assent forms matched the number of returned questionnaires appropriate for the age class for all three high schools. This resulted in a sample of \((n = 114)\) high achieving high school seniors. It is important to note that the names of the participants, as indicated on the consent forms, were not matched with a questionnaire, thus ensuring anonymity of the responses. All forms and questionnaires were kept in a secure location.

The data were entered in an excel worksheet and, ultimately, uploaded to statistical analytical software. Students were asked in Part IV to identify what type of institution they would be attending: public four-year college or university, private four-year college or university, public two-year college, or a specialty school. All respondents indicated their intent to pursue a four-year degree at a public or private institution. The
data were divided into two sets based on the type of four-year institution the student planned to attend – public or private. The data are not identifiable by the participating high school or by respondent, thus ensuring anonymity of both the student and school.

Summary

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how institutional reputation influences the college selection process of high achieving college-track high school seniors and the level of influence others have on the student’s decision to attend a particular type of college. Based on an extensive literature review, the researcher has defined institutional reputation as a collection of institutional characteristics and impressions resulting in a holistic impression of quality or value. Research questions and hypotheses were detailed in this chapter. Furthermore, the development and testing procedures of the College Exploration Questionnaire were explained and the instrument was found to be valid and reliable based on Kappa values. Finally, details regarding the pilot study, institutional review board approval process, consent, and research design also were discussed in this chapter.
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS OF DATA

This study examined how high achieving high school seniors perceived the importance of institutional reputation when selecting a college or university. Furthermore, it considered the level of influence others have on students’ decisions regarding enrollment at a particular college. The literature reviewed suggested institutional reputation is comprised of many elements that collectively provide an impression or perceived reputation for a particular college. A survey entitled the College Exploration Questionnaire was administered to high school seniors enrolled in AP courses at three high schools in southwest Indiana. The instrument was divided into five parts:

- **Part I, Demographics**, asked questions about gender and age.
- **Part II, College Interest**, asked questions regarding college search behaviors and family education levels.
- **Part III, College Choices**, asked students to identify, in priority order, their top three reasons for selecting a particular college.
- **Part IV, Future Plans**, asked students to identify the type of institution they planned to attend to obtain a degree. These responses identified the two groups used for this study – those who intend to enroll at a four-year public institution and those who intend to enroll at a four-year private institution (see Table 6).
- **Part V, College Selection**, asked students to indicate their level of importance regarding 25 elements associated with college exploration.

The College Exploration Questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.
All respondents ($N = 114$) verified on the survey that they were high school seniors; enrolled in AP, honors, International Baccalaureate, or college-track courses; and intended to pursue a four-year degree.

The guiding purpose of this research was to understand how elements of institutional reputation are valued by high achieving high school students who plan to attend public and private institutions. To this end, data from Part IV of the survey was used to identify two groups for this study. Of the total number of participants, 67% indicated they planned to attend a four-year public institution, and 33% indicated they planned to attend a four-year private institution (see Table 6). According to the Independent Colleges of Indiana (2013), 20% of the total college population attends private institutions, and 56% of students attending private colleges in Indiana are residents of the state (Independent Colleges of Indiana, 2013). Based on proportion similarity, the number of respondents provides a generalized representation of high school students from Indiana who intend to pursue a four-year degree at a private institution.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Plan</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plan to attend a 4-Year Public Institution</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan to attend a 4-Year Private Institution</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This study considered how students differ in their approach to the college search and selection process based on the type of college they ultimately choose to attend—public or private. To gain an understanding of the population involved, respondents were
asked a series of questions about family education levels and their college search behaviors. To that end, the college search behaviors and family educational levels of the two groups were considered (see Table 7).

For respondents who intended to enroll in a public institution \((n = 76)\), 86% had a parent or step-parent who had attended a four-year college, 47% had a sibling who had attended or was currently attending college, 78% had met with admission personnel from the college they planned to attend, and 70% had met with faculty. Ninety percent or more had discussed colleges with their high school counselors or teachers, friends who also were considering college and friends who were currently enrolled.

For respondents who intended to enroll in private colleges \((n = 38)\), 82% had a parent or step-parent who had attended college, 37% had a sibling who had attended or was currently attending college, 87% had met with faculty and admission personnel from the college, and 95% had discussed different colleges with high school counselors or teachers. All students selecting private institutions had discussed colleges with friends who also were considering college, but only 76% had discussed colleges with friends who are currently attending college.

A chi-square analysis was performed to measure differences in the frequencies of college search behaviors and family educational level survey items between the two groups. Of the nine items on this portion of the survey, two were found to be significantly different \((p < .05)\). The first item was item 5, *Have you met with faculty from the college(s) you have applied to?* \((\text{chi-square} = 4.00; p < .05)\). The chi-square analysis revealed 13% of students planning to enroll in a private college had not met with faculty from the college. Of the students planning to attend a public institution, 30% had
not met with faculty from the college. The second item of significant difference was item 9, *Have you discussed colleges with friends who are currently attending college?* (chi-square = 4.39; *p* < .05). Ninety-one percent of the students who planned to attend a public institution had discussed colleges with friends currently enrolled in college. Of those planning to attend a private college, 76% had discussed colleges with friends currently enrolled.

**Findings for Research Question One**

The first research question addressed by this survey is: What are the elements of institutional reputation valued by high achieving college-track high school students who plan to attend public and private colleges or universities? As discussed in Chapter II, institutional reputation is comprised of many academic and non-academic elements associated with a given college. The College Exploration Questionnaire Part V, *College Selection*, was developed based on the literature reviewed and includes 25 items identified as having some level of importance in a student’s college selection process. These items comprise the following categories: academic program, social opportunities, campus culture, institutional characteristics, and reputation. Using a Likert scale, students identified the level of importance they assigned to each of the 25 items. The top five items by group receiving the highest importance ratings are presented in Tables 8 and 9. The data revealed that both groups of respondents, those choosing to attend publics and privates, placed the highest value of importance on the selection item (1) *The college has an outstanding academic program in my major/area of study*, with means of 4.63 and 4.58, respectively. The mean scores of all college selection items by group are presented in Appendix F.
Table 7
College Search Behaviors and Family Education Levels by Survey Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Statement</th>
<th>Selecting Public</th>
<th>Selecting Private</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Have any of your parents/step-parents attended a four-year college or university?</td>
<td>Yes 65 85.53, No 11 14.47</td>
<td>Yes 31 81.58, No 7 18.42</td>
<td>Yes 96 84.21, No 18 15.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Have any of your brothers/sisters attended (or currently attend) a four-year college or university?</td>
<td>Yes 36 47.37, No 40 52.63</td>
<td>Yes 14 36.84, No 24 63.16</td>
<td>Yes 50 43.86, No 64 56.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Have you applied to a four year college or university?</td>
<td>Yes 76 100.00, No 0 0.00</td>
<td>Yes 37 97.37, No 1 2.63</td>
<td>Yes 113 99.12, No 1 0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Have you met with admission personnel from the college(s) you have applied to?</td>
<td>Yes 59 77.63, No 17 22.37</td>
<td>Yes 33 86.84, No 5 13.16</td>
<td>Yes 92 80.70, No 22 19.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Have you met with faculty from the college(s) you have applied to?</td>
<td>Yes 53 69.74, No 23 30.26</td>
<td>Yes 33 86.84, No 5 13.16</td>
<td>Yes 86 75.44, No 28 24.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Did you visit the website of the colleges you would consider attending?</td>
<td>Yes 76 100.00, No 0 0.00</td>
<td>Yes 37 97.37, No 1 2.63</td>
<td>Yes 113 99.12, No 1 0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) Have you discussed different colleges with your high counselors or teachers?</td>
<td>Yes 69 90.79, No 7 9.21</td>
<td>Yes 36 94.74, No 2 5.26</td>
<td>Yes 105 92.11, No 9 7.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) Have you discussed different colleges with your friends who are also considering college?</td>
<td>Yes 74 97.37, No 2 2.63</td>
<td>Yes 38 100.00, No 0 0.00</td>
<td>Yes 112 98.25, No 2 1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) Have you discussed different colleges with friends who are currently attending college?</td>
<td>Yes 69 90.79, No 7 2.61</td>
<td>Yes 29 76.32, No 9 23.68</td>
<td>Yes 98 85.96, No 16 14.04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8

*Top Five College Selection Items Indicating High Level of Importance by Students Selecting a Public Institution*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Item Statement</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>The college has an outstanding academic program in my major/minor area of study.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>4.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(20)</td>
<td>There are scholarships and grants available.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>4.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(22)</td>
<td>Students are employed in positions that utilize their degree within six months of graduation.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(23)</td>
<td>Graduates are considered as strong candidates for graduate, medical, and law schools, etc.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>4.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(15)</td>
<td>There are many opportunities for campus involvement through extra-curricular activities.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9

*Top Five College Selection Items Indicating High Level of Importance by Students Selecting a Private Institution*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Item Statement</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>The college has an outstanding academic program in my major/minor area of study.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(22)</td>
<td>Students are employed in positions that utilize their degree within six months of graduation.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(20)</td>
<td>There are scholarships and grants available.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(23)</td>
<td>Graduates are considered as strong candidates for graduate, medical, and law schools, etc.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9)</td>
<td>The college promotes values that are important to me.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: A 5-point Likert scale was used for this part of the survey.
1 = not important
2 = slightly important
3 = somewhat important
4 = rather important
5 = very important
The mean was calculated using the numerical value of the ratings.
To examine differences between the two groups, t-tests ($p \leq .05$) were performed on all 25 items. Table 10 presents the results of the t-tests, in which five survey items were identified as significantly different ($p \leq .05$) between the two groups. The items were: student/faculty ratio, values of the college, how friends regard the college, location, and a winning tradition of athletics. When considering this data as it relates to the groups, respondents who indicated they planned to attend a public institution placed a higher level of importance on college location (located within a few hours of home) and a winning tradition of athletics than their counterparts who planned to enroll at a private institution. They also placed a higher level of importance on how the college was regarded by their friends. Respondents planning to attend a private college placed a higher level of importance on student/faculty ratio and the values promoted by the college.

To further examine how elements of institutional reputation are valued by high achieving students, the researcher considered the data presented in Part III, College Choices, of the College Exploration Questionnaire. Based on the literature reviewed, this part of the questionnaire asked students to rank their top three reasons for selecting a particular college. Because students often cite many reasons for selecting a college, the top three rankings provided a better understanding of how the students made their selection decision. The data were analyzed by considering the weighted mean values for the total ranking. Different weights were assigned to each ranking position. The highest ranking received a value of 3, second ranking a value of 2, and the third ranking a value of 3. Thus, the higher the weighted mean score, the stronger the reason for choosing a particular college. The top three ranked reasons for selecting a college were the same for
both groups, but in a different ranking order based on the weighted mean: academic program, costs, academic support, and employment advantage after obtaining degree.

Table 10

**College Selection (Part V) Items with Significant Differences Between Groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>Survey Group</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Selecting Public</td>
<td>Selecting Private</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) The student/faculty ratio in class is 20 to 1 or less.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) The college promotes values that are important to me.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(12) The college is highly regarded among my friends.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(18) The location of the college is within a few hours of my home.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(25) There is a “winning” tradition of athletics at the college.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05

Note: The higher the mean value, the higher the level of importance.

Tables 11 and 12 present the rank order of reasons for those choosing public institutions and those choosing privates. Because these items appeared to be valued at different levels based on the weighted means, a t-test \((p \leq .05)\) was performed on each of the survey responses to determine whether a significant difference existed between the two groups. Item C, *Costs associated with attending the college/university (tuition, financial aid, housing) are manageable*, was the only ranked reason of significant difference between the two groups (\(t (112) = 2.70; p < .001\)). No other reasons for
selecting a particular college were significantly different between those selecting a public or private institution.

To further examine the elements of institutional reputation valued by high achieving college-track high school students, the researcher developed a cross-reference of items related to college selection. Table 13 presents the corresponding cross-referenced survey items for each reason for selecting a particular college. The first step in developing the cross-reference was to review the literature relative to college selection factors. Based on the literature, the researcher identified the College Selection items in Part V of the survey that were associated with the various reasons for selecting a college in Part III of the survey.

Once the cross-reference table was developed, the top reason for selecting a particular college was identified, along with the corresponding college selection items. The analysis of these data considered the number one ranked reason identified by the two groups – public and private – and the corresponding College Selection items in the cross-reference tables in which students indicated the level of importance they assigned to each item. Only the top ranked reason and its associated college selection items were examined in this analysis.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Weighted Mean*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The college/university has a strong reputation for its academic program(s).</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>1.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Costs associated with attending the college / university (tuition, financial aid, housing) are manageable.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A degree from the college/university will give me a competitive edge when seeking employment in my field of study.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The college has the academic support structures in place to help me be successful.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The college/university has the type of social experience I want in a college.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>A degree from the college/university will enhance my admission opportunities to the graduate school of my choice.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Family members are encouraging me to attend the college/university.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>I am excited about being affiliated with this particular college/university.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>My friends are attending the college/university.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The weighted means were calculated by assigning a value of 3 to the highest ranked survey item, a 2 to the second highest ranked item, and a 1 for the third ranked item. The higher the weighted mean score, the stronger the importance of the survey item in the college choice process.
Table 12

*Rank Order of Weighted Means for the Reasons for Selecting a Particular School; Respondents Selecting a Private Institution*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Weighted Mean*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The college/university has a strong reputation for its academic program(s).</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The college has the academic support structures in place to help me be successful.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Costs associated with attending the college/university (tuition, financial aid, housing) are manageable.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A degree from the college/university will give me a competitive edge when seeking employment in my field of study.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The college/university has the type of social experience I want in a college.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>A degree from the college/university will enhance my admission opportunities to the graduate school of my choice.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I am excited about being affiliated with this particular college/university.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Family members are encouraging me to attend the college/university.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>My friends are attending the college/university.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The weighted means were calculated by assigning a value of 3 to the highest ranked survey item, a 2 to the second highest ranked item, and a 1 for the third ranked item. The higher the weighted mean score, the stronger the importance of the survey item in the college choice process.
Table 13

Cross-referenced Reasons for Selecting a Particular College (Part III) with College Selection Items (Part V).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Selecting a College</th>
<th>Corresponding College Selection Items from Part V Associated with Reason for Selecting a College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| (A) The College / University has a strong reputation for its academic program. | (1) The college has an outstanding academic program in my major/area of study.  
(2) Classes are mostly taught by full-time professors.  
(3) Teaching/lab facilities are state of the art.  
(4) Internships/Clinicals are required for graduation.  
(5) The student/faculty ratio in class is 20 to 1 or less.  
(6) Most students complete their degree in 4 to 5 years.  
(7) The college has rigorous admission standards.  
(8) International study/travel is encouraged as part of the academic program. |
| (B) The College / University has the type of social experience I want in a college. | (9) The college promotes values that are important to me.  
(10) The college promotes community service/volunteer work as part of the academic experience.  
(15) There are many opportunities for campus involvement through extra-curricular activities  
(16) There are many opportunities for social interaction (fraternities, clubs, etc.)  
(17) Most students live on campus.  
(25) There is a winning tradition of athletics at the college |
| (C) Costs associated with attending the college/university are manageable. | (20) There are scholarships and grants available.  
(21) The cost of tuition is helped with access to student loans. |
| (D) My friends are attending the college/university. | No associated College Selection items |

continued
Table 13 - continued

Cross-referenced Reasons for Selecting a Particular College (Part III) with College Selection Items (Part V).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Selecting a College</th>
<th>Corresponding College Selection Items from Part V Associated with Reason for Selecting a College</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(E) The college has the academic support structures in place to help me be successful.</td>
<td>(3) Teaching/lab facilities are state of the art. (5) Student/Faculty ratio in class is 20 to 1 of less.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(F) Family members are encouraging me to attend the college/university.</td>
<td>No associated College Selection items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(G) A degree from the college/university will enhance my admission opportunities to the graduate school of my choice.</td>
<td>(23) Graduates are considered as strong candidates for graduate, medical, and law schools, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(H) A degree from the college/university will give me a competitive edge when seeking employment in my field of study.</td>
<td>(22) Students are employed in positions that utilize their degree within six months of graduation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I) I am excited about being affiliated with this particular college/university.</td>
<td>(11) The college is nationally ranked in publications and magazines. (12) The college is highly regarded among my friends. (13) The college is highly regarded among my teachers. (14) The college is highly regarded outside of my state. (24) There is a lot of “school spirit” at the college. (25) There is a “winning” tradition of athletics at the college.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To determine whether students choosing public or private colleges value elements of institutional reputation differently, an independent t-test was performed to identify significant differences between the two groups. Of all the corresponding college selection items in the cross-reference table, only two were found to be significant. Both items were associated with the number one reason for attendance; *The College/University has a strong reputation for its academic program*. The two corresponding associated college selection items with significant differences were *The student/faculty ratio in class is 20 to 1 or less* $(t (39) = -2.48; p < .001)$ and *International study/travel is encouraged as part of the academic program* $(t (39) = -2.61; p < .05)$. Students who intended to enroll in a private institution rated *The student/faculty ratio in class is 20 to 1 or less* as more important in their college search process. They also rated *International study/travel is encouraged as part of the academic program* as more important in the search process when compared with responses from students intending to enroll in a public college. Descriptive data regarding the cross-reference is presented in Appendix G.

In sum, the findings regarding Research Question One, *What are the elements of institutional reputation valued by high achieving college-track high school students who plan to attend public and private colleges or universities*, suggest elements of institutional reputation are perceived relatively the same in terms of importance for all students regardless of the type of college they plan to attend. An analysis of Part V of the College Exploration Questionnaire revealed both groups rated the quality of the academic program as having the highest level of importance in their selection process. Further analysis suggested six of the 25 college selection items were significantly different in terms of their level of importance to the two groups of students. Those items were
• Student/faculty ratio in class is 20 to 1 or less. (private rated higher)
• The college promotes values that are important to me. (private rated higher)
• The college is highly regarded by my friends. (public rated higher)
• The location of the college is within a few hours of my home. (public rated higher)
• There is a ‘winning’ tradition of athletics at the college. (public rated higher)

This study also suggests students in both groups considered extracurricular activities, opportunities for social interaction, residential campuses, reputation among teachers, national rankings, and campus aesthetics relatively the same in terms of importance.

An analysis of Part III, College Choices, revealed all participants considered the quality of the academic program as the top reason for selecting a particular college. Although cost was identified by both groups as one of the top three reasons for selecting a particular college, t-test revealed a significant difference between those choosing publics and those choosing privates. Those choosing public colleges identified cost as a stronger reason for selecting a particular college. Last, the ability to gain a competitive edge when seeking employment was ranked third as the reason for selecting a particular institution, with no significant differences between the two groups.

The cross-reference of college selection items that corresponded with the top reason for selecting a particular college confirmed that elements of academic quality were considered the most important in the college choice process. These elements included:
student/faculty ratio, quality of facilities, graduation rates, internships, full-time professors, admission standards, international elements in the academic program and community service as part of the academic experience. Interestingly, t-tests revealed that students selecting public and private colleges approached this differently. The t-tests found student/faculty ratio and the inclusion of international elements in the academic program were significantly different between the two groups of students. This suggests that these elements may be more important to those selecting private institutions than to those selecting publics.

**Findings for Research Question Two**

The second research question is: To what extent do high achieving college-track high school seniors consider the influence of others when deciding to attend a particular institution? Based on the literature reviewed, the researcher defined the influence of others to include family, peers, teachers, and the public. For this study, public influencers are identified as national rankings, perception of those outside of the state, and a winning tradition of athletics. Anctil (2008) described athletics as a significant influencer in terms of institutional reputation because of its halo effect. He suggested that colleges with winning teams tend to be perceived as winning institutions by the public as a result of media coverage and increased name recognition.

To address Research Question Two, the researcher identified the survey items in the College Exploration Questionnaire considered as influencers. Part III of the survey, College Choices, suggested three reasons for selecting a particular college relative to influence: (1) My friends are attending the college/university and (2) Family members are encouraging me to attend the college/university, and (3) I am excited about being
affiliated with this particular college/university. Table 14 presents how the two groups ranked these items, based on the weighted mean rankings. To contrast whether students intending to enroll at a public or private college ranked these reasons differently, t-tests were performed on each to compare the weighted mean ranking for the two groups. Using \( p < .05 \), there were no significant differences in how these items were ranked by the two groups.

Table 14

*Weighted Mean Rankings for “Influence” Reasons to Select a Particular College (Part III) Between Groups*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Item</th>
<th>Selecting Public</th>
<th>Selecting Private</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(D) My friends are attending the college/university.</td>
<td>76 .079 0.32</td>
<td>38 .053 0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(F) Family members are encouraging me to attend the college/university.</td>
<td>76 .158 0.49</td>
<td>38 .237 0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(I) I am excited about being affiliated with this particular college/university.</td>
<td>76 .145 0.56</td>
<td>38 .290 0.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The mean reflects the relative importance of the weighted mean ranking for each survey item. Ranks range from 0 – 3, with the higher value indicating a higher level of importance.

Part V of the survey, *College Selection*, included five items identified as influencers: national rankings; how the college was regarded by family, friends, teachers, and those outside of the home state; and whether there was a winning tradition of athletics. Table 15 summarizes the college influence selection items by group. To
determine whether significant differences existed between the means of the two groups, a t-test was performed on each of the five College Selection influence survey items. Using $p < .05$, two of the five items were significantly different. The first of significant difference was *The college is highly regarded among my friends* ($t (112) = 3.04; p < .001$). This item was considered more important for those choosing to attend a public institution. The mean, 2.9 on a 5-point scale, revealed students choosing to attend a public institution placed a moderate level of importance on how their friends regarded the college while their counterparts attending private institutions, considered it less important ($X = 2.1$). The second survey item of significant difference was *There is a winning tradition of athletics at the college* ($t (112) = 2.27; p < .05$). This item was also considered more important for those choosing to attend a public institution. The mean score, 2.5 on a 5 point scale, reveals a moderate level of importance for those attending public institutions, while those attending private institutions scored this item relatively low ($X = 1.8$).

### Table 15

*Means for College Selection Items (Part V) Identified as Influencers by Group*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Group</th>
<th>Survey Items</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selecting Public</td>
<td>(11) The college is nationally ranked in publications</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and magazines.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(12) The college is highly regarded among my friends.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>1.28</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(13) The college is highly regarded among my teachers.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>1.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

continued
Table 15 - continued

(14) The college is highly regarded outside of my state.  

|   | 76 | 3.34 | 1.16 | 38 | 2.95 | 1.43 |

(15) There is a “winning” tradition of athletics at the college.  

|   | 76 | 2.50 | 1.38 | 38 | 1.90 | 1.27 |

**Summary of the Findings**

This chapter presented the findings relative to two research questions: What are the elements of institutional reputation valued by high achieving college-track high school students who plan to attend public and private colleges or universities? and To what extent do college-track high school seniors consider the influence of others when deciding to attend a particular institution?

Regarding Research Question One, the elements of institutional reputation considered highly important by all students, regardless of the type of institution they plan to attend, are academic reputation/quality, manageable costs of attendance through scholarships and grants, available academic support, likelihood of graduate school admission, and the ability to have a competitive edge in the marketplace after obtaining a degree. However, even though both groups placed a high level of importance on academic quality, students selecting private institutions rated student/faculty ratios and international elements of academic programs significantly higher than their counterparts. Students selecting private colleges also rated the level of importance of values promoted by the institution at a significantly higher rate. In contrast, students selecting public institutions placed a significantly higher degree of importance on elements of cost, how their friends regard the institution, winning athletic programs, and location of the college.
The findings for Research Question Two, To what extent do college-track high school seniors consider the influence of others when deciding to attend a particular institution, were presented in this chapter. Elements of influence included family, peer, teachers, and the public. Two significant differences were revealed in how students are influenced by these groups. Those selecting a public institution placed a significantly higher level of importance on how their friends regard the college and a winning tradition of athletics than students selecting a private institution.

These findings will be discussed in Chapter V. The discussion will include implications for applicability, limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Discussion of the Findings

This study examined how high achieving high school seniors engage in college choice behaviors and decision making. This study considered two research questions: 1) What are the elements of institutional reputation valued by high achieving college-track high school students who plan to attend public and private colleges or universities? and 2) To what extent do high achieving college-track high school seniors consider the influence of others when deciding to attend a particular institution? The data gathered provided a better understanding of how 114 high achieving seniors in southwest Indiana arrived at their decision to attend a particular institution. This chapter discusses findings relative to the research questions and the literature reviewed. It also considers college choice and marketing theories. Limitations, implications, and suggestions for further research are discussed last.

Findings for Research Question One

Two parts of the College Exploration Questionnaire addressed Research Question One: What are the elements of institutional reputation valued by high achieving college-track high school students who plan to attend public and private colleges or universities? The data supported the hypothesis: There are identifiable aspects of institutional reputation that are of value to students when they are selecting the college they will attend. The findings suggest that, depending on the type of institution selected, high achieving students place different levels of importance on certain institutional elements that comprise the reputation of the college. As suggested by D. Chapman (1981) and R. Chapman and Jackson (1987), institutional reputation is often defined by academic and
non-academic elements. Bradshaw et al. (2001) suggested high achieving students consider elements of institutional reputation differently than other students and placed more emphasis on the quality of the academic program and college rankings. The findings of this study suggests that high achieving students place varying levels of importance on many facets of an institution including athletics, social life, academic programs, institutional values, or location when considering different colleges.

For high achieving students selecting public institutions, a significantly higher level of importance was placed on the location of the college, manageable costs, and a “winning” tradition of athletics. R. Chapman and Jackson (1987) addressed the importance of location for students, particularly related to cost. They suggested students concerned about the cost of attendance prefer in-state public institutions, which typically are located within a few hours of their home. This study supports their theory, as students choosing public institutions identified both location and cost as two variables that were significantly more important in their selection process.

The reputation of the academic program was identified by both groups of students as the number one reason for selecting a particular college. However, the cross-reference revealed that student/faculty ratio and international study as part of the academic program were rated significantly different between the two groups, with those attending private institutions considering both elements as more important. In addition, students attending private colleges identified the college has the academic support structures in place to help me be successful as the second highest reason for selecting their school, while those attending public institutions ranked it fourth. This may suggest that students attending private institutions perceive student/faculty ratio as an important
element in their ability to be academically successful, while those attending public institutions may not perceive any distinct value in smaller class sizes. In addition, because many private colleges tout smaller classes and personal academic support as part of their identity, students choosing private colleges may identify these elements as highly important because due to the emphasis given to such elements in an institution’s recruitment plan. The study also revealed that students selecting private colleges visited with faculty as part of the recruitment process at a higher rate than their counterparts. Vander Schee (2010) posited that this sort of personal contact facilitates a perception of individual attention that could reinforce the idea of access to academic support. As stated in Chapter II, private institutions generally tend to market personal and individualized attention as unique elements of their campuses (Anctil, 2008; Vander Schee, 2010; Yang et al., 2008). By meeting with faculty from the college, students in this study may have been more inclined to perceive small student/faculty ratios and access to academic support as more prominent at a private college.

*International study as part of the academic curriculum* also was considered significantly more important by students selecting private colleges. This could have been a result of the type of private institutions the students were considering, if the colleges included international education and study abroad requirements as part of their liberal arts curriculum and institutional mission. The type of high school attended may have contributed to the value placed on international education, particularly if it was part of the secondary curriculum.

Students attending private colleges also placed a significantly higher level of importance on the *values promoted by the college*. Most private colleges are affiliated to
some degree with a particular religion or were founded upon some religious or cultural principle. For this reason, institutional values are often portrayed as a fundamental element of their identity. Public institutions do not have the same affinity to a particular religion or culture. Therefore, it is not surprising that, for this study, students attending public institutions did not associate college values as significantly important, given the institution’s lack of public commitment to a particular religion or culture. Furthermore, many private colleges tout their commitment to globalization as a fundamental value of their institution, as evidenced by the general education curriculum or a study abroad requirement. This study might suggest students associate commitment to international education as a value promoted by the institution, since both elements were rated significantly higher by those selecting private colleges.

The hypothesis for Research Question One, There are identifiable aspects of institutional reputation that are of value to students when they are selecting the college they will attend, was confirmed by this study. Depending on the type of institution selected, high achieving students placed significantly different levels of importance on certain institutional elements that comprised the reputation of the college. These elements include student/faculty ratios, international elements of the academic program, institutional values, access to academic support, winning athletic programs, and cost of attendance. The implications of these findings are discussed later in this chapter.

**Findings for Research Question Two**

Research Question Two was, To what extent do high achieving college-track high school seniors consider the influence of others when deciding to attend a particular institution? As presented in Chapter IV, certain survey items were identified as
influencer for the purpose of analyzing data specific to Research Question Two. These influencers included family, peers, counselors, teachers, and the public. The hypothesis was, The opinion of others are influential factors in the student’s decision to attend a particular college. The findings from this research support the hypothesis that students are influenced by the opinions of others when selecting a college. However, not all influencers were found to have an equal level of influence when considering particular colleges.

In this study, friends were found to have the greatest influence for those choosing public institutions. Students had several opportunities to indicate the importance of their friends’ opinions in the search process. One of the survey items, the college is highly regarded by my friends, was ranked significantly higher by those attending public institutions. It is possible the students defined highly regard as familiarity with a particular college, rather than a regard for the quality of the institution. For example, if their friends liked the institution, the respondent may have interpreted the fondness as highly regard, or if their friends speak often of a certain college because they have a high profile sports team, it may be interpreted as having a high regard for the institution. One cannot conclude from this study if highly regard speaks of institutional reputation or quality. The study also found that students selecting public institutions indicated they spoke with friends currently attending college at a significantly higher rate than those selecting private colleges. This may be a by-product of the actual institution the student has selected. For example, if a student is choosing an in-state public university, it is more likely someone from their high school has selected the same institution. Nevertheless, when asked to rank the reasons for selecting a particular institution, both groups ranked
friends who were attending the same college as the least influential reason for their decision. Conversely, the study suggests that students place a level of importance on their friends’ opinions; and, therefore, one’s friends may have influence on the decision to select a particular college.

Influencers also included categories of individuals such as counselors and teachers. The data revealed no significant differences in the importance of these influencers when it came to the students’ rankings of reasons for attending a particular college. This supports the findings of Hossler and Stage (1992), who reported counselors and teachers had little influence in the college search process.

The literature overwhelmingly suggested family, particularly parents, as the most significant influence in the college selection process. However, this study indicated the influence of family may not be as influential as the literature suggested. Students selecting public colleges, based on weighted mean values, ranked family as the seventh reason for their decision while and students selecting private colleges, ranked family eighth. This appears to contradict college choice behavior theories (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; R. Chapman, 1986; R. Chapman & Jackson, 1987) that suggest parents have the most influence in the final stage of the selection process.

The last group of influencers identified for this study was public. Two specific elements included institutional reputation and its impact on employment opportunities and graduate school admission. Students in this study identified *a degree from this institution will give me a competitive edge in seeking employment* as the third highest reason for selecting a particular college. However, the results do not provide specific data to support an interpretation beyond this general statement. Students also were asked
to consider survey item, *a degree from the college/university will enhance my admission opportunities to the graduate school of my choice*, in their list of three reasons for selecting a college. The item was ranked sixth out of nine reasons for both groups of students, yet the literature suggested high achieving students tend to associate academic quality with strong *graduate school admission rates* and, therefore, choose a college based on the likelihood of enrolling in a quality graduate program (An, 2010; Bradshaw et al., 2001; Sevier, 2001). Caution should be exercised in reaching any conclusion regarding the importance of graduate school placement rates in the selection process based solely on this research. The students involved in this study may have had fewer intentions of pursuing a graduate degree and, thus, rated this particular item fairly low as an actual reason for selecting a college.

The marketing theories discussed in the literature review indicate students are persuaded by name recognition when it comes to selecting a college or university. Vander Schee (2009) suggested name recognition is the result of others marketing an institution via word of mouth. The more one hears the name of an institution, the more familiar one becomes with the college. In addition, Cable and Turban (2003) suggested that consumers were willing to pay more for a brand product or choose membership in a particular organization if they believe the associated brand will bring them personal benefit. Their theory may be supported by this study, in that students indicated they believed a degree from a particular institution would provide them a competitive edge in gaining employment. However, when asked about whether affiliation with a particular college was a reason for attendance, the students attending public institutions ranked it eighth out of nine reasons for selection, and those attending private colleges ranked it
seventh as a reason for selecting a particular school. Although the place rankings were low for both groups, the weighted ranking data revealed that students selecting private schools consider affiliation with a particular college to be more important than their counterparts selecting public colleges. Other influence survey items considered the importance of national rankings and “winning” athletic programs in the selection process. No significant differences were noted in how both groups considered the level of importance placed on national rankings. This is contrary to much of the research presented in Chapter II, which indicated that high achieving students pay close attention to national rankings. The other item, a “winning” tradition of athletics, was significantly different for both groups. A “winning” tradition of athletics was considered more important by those attending public institutions, although the mean score of 2.5 suggested it was an item of average importance in the selection process. This result may be because more public institutions have higher profile athletic programs, which increase the likelihood of this item being considered more important by students selecting public universities.

Last, this study found that students selecting private institutions met with faculty from the college during the recruitment process at a significantly higher rate than those attending public colleges. This may have contributed to the reason that students’ perceptions of academic quality and academic support were the two highest ranked reasons for selecting a private college. The students may have interpreted the personal contact with faculty as an indicator of the type of academic support they could expect which subsequently influenced their decision to select a particular institution.
The hypothesis for Research Question Two, The opinion of others are influential factors in the students’ decision to attend a particular college, was confirmed by this study. The findings suggest students selecting public institutions consider the opinion of their friends more significant than those students selecting private institutions. Students selecting public institutions also considered “winning” athletic programs to be more important than their counterparts. These two influencers, friends’ opinions and winning athletic programs, may be connected if the friends’ conversations regarding a particular institution are centered on its athletic success. While all respondents reported some level of importance assigned to other influential factors, no significant differences were found regarding the influence of family, teachers, counselors, national rankings, or national reputation on the student’s decision to attend a particular college.

**Summary Conclusions of Findings**

This study supports the researcher’s hypotheses that high achieving high school seniors consider certain elements of institutional reputation and the influence of others when deciding to attend a particular college or university. Although there were limitations regarding the sample, this study enabled the researcher to conclude that students attending private colleges tend to place a higher value of importance on certain academic factors such as student/faculty ratio, international focus, and academic support. The study also enabled the researcher to conclude that students selecting private colleges appear to consider the values promoted by the institution as an important element in the selection process. For those selecting public institutions, the researcher concluded that students are more concerned with the cost of attendance and the opinion of their friends when making their decision to attend an institution. Furthermore, this study supported
the researcher’s conclusion that students selecting public institutions place a higher degree of importance on location of the school and a winning tradition of athletics than those selecting private colleges. Based on the data collected, the researcher was unable to draw any additional conclusions regarding the role other academic and non-academic elements contribute to the decision-making process for either group of students.

**Implications**

This study provided some support for elements of the college choice theories described in the literature review. While individuals should be careful not to draw conclusions based on one study, elements of this research provide some degree of insight into the college selection process of high achieving high school students. Although the sample size was relatively small, the data revealed significant differences in how students selecting public and private institutions engage in the decision-making process of choosing a college and, therefore, may have implications for enrollment managers, higher education marketers, and executive leadership teams as plans for recruiting high achieving students are considered.

**Targeted Populations**

Angulo et al. (2010), Hoxby (2004), McDonough et al.,(1996), Nurnberg et al. (2010), and Shaw et al. (2009) found that students attending private high schools or affluent public schools placed varying degrees of importance on elements of institutional reputation. This study provides a level of support for their findings, as the results suggest that the type of high school the student attends can contribute to the definition of institutional reputation for that particular individual. Students and families who have bought in to the concept of private education may be more predisposed to pursuing a
college degree from an institution that can provide same sort of tailored experience. In addition, they most likely have entered into a financial practice of paying tuition and may be more inclined to consider the cost of private higher education as an investment rather than a fee. Furthermore, the type of academic culture often found at private high schools and affluent public schools more likely mirrors the experiences at a private college. This includes small classes, access to instructors, and personalized attention. Building a prospective pool of potential students based on their familiarity with private education may be an asset for enrollment managers of private colleges.

Another element of significant difference was the level of importance placed on the values promoted by the institution. This study suggests students selecting private colleges perceive institutional values as more important than their counterparts. Many public institutions cannot point to a commitment of certain values, particularly as they pertain to religious faith or heritage. To that end, enrollment managers and marketers at private institutions may consider intentionally promoting the fundamental values that comprise their mission and history into their recruitment plan. This includes identifying potential pools of prospective students who share similar commitments, as revealed through their affiliations with non-profit organizations, churches, and their communities. If prospective students understand that a potential college shares the same commitments to the values they hold dear, they may be more likely to select a particular institution. This also may be an influential factor with parents. If these particular values are shared by the family, there may be more consideration given to a college that shares the same values as part of its mission.
Academic Elements of College Choice

The most significant differences between the two groups of students in this study pertained to the level of importance they placed on certain academic elements of the college selection process. While both groups indicated the quality of the academic program was the most important factor in the selection process, those selecting private institutions placed a higher value on three elements pertaining to the academic experience: low student/faculty ratio, international focus of the academic program, and accessibility to academic support. Institutions that can point to these three elements as key components of their educational experience may have a distinct advantage in attracting high achieving students. However, enrollment officers may need to provide an explanation of the benefits that accompany these elements, particularly as this study suggests these factors are more important to students selecting private colleges than to students selecting publics. Possibly, a prospective student who has not considered a private college education or who is unfamiliar with the general differences between the two types of institutions may have never considered the benefit these elements can provide in their overall educational experience. In addition, the college choice reason, a degree from this institution will give me a competitive edge when seeking employment in my field of study, was considered among the top three by both groups when selecting a particular college. Private institutions that can effectively link distinctive academic elements to future employment outcomes may be more successful at recruiting high achieving students who value these particular elements. This may include promoting access to faculty who are willing to serve as references, professional relationships with faculty to enhance networking opportunities, and academic programs supporting

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globalization through curricula and experiential education. The results of this research suggest that institutions should market strong placement rates to potential students and their families and tie strong placement potential to testimonies directly related to the academic experience at the institution.

Public institutions also may consider how the results of this study can provide support for creating a tailored recruitment plan geared toward high achieving students. All students in this study indicated academic quality was the number one reason for selecting a particular college. However, those selecting private institutions identified distinct academic elements as important to their college decision. Public institutions can benefit from this knowledge by identifying these elements at their institutions, or creating specific programs inclusive of these elements through honors colleges or targeted discipline living learning communities, to include programs committed to smaller student/faculty ratios, curricula inclusive of an international focus, and access to academic support.

Results from this study also suggest a higher percentage of students selecting private colleges met with faculty as part of the admission process. For high achieving students, meeting with faculty may support the perception that they would receive personalized, individual attention and access to professors throughout their career at that particular college or university. Both types of institutions may find it advantageous to utilize faculty as part of the recruitment process, particularly if they are intentionally targeting high achieving students.
Resource Allocation

Due to limited resources, institutions regularly consider how to allocate resources that will ultimately yield strong enrollments and quality programs. For example, while it may make fiscal sense to increase the student/faculty ratio at a private institution in order to decrease the total number of faculty, or the level of academic support services due to operational costs, findings from this study suggest institutions should exercise caution in making these decisions. If high achieving students perceive small student/faculty ratios and other academic elements as important to the academic experience, particularly at private colleges, institutions may be eliminating some of their greatest assets without considering the repercussions in the marketplace.

Steele (2010), Weiler (1996), Hazelkorn (2009), and Nurnberg et al. (2012) suggested students incorporate academic and non-academic elements into the institution’s reputation. For this reason, some colleges have invested significant resources in non-academic elements as a strategy for attracting more students, including athletics, housing, elaborate fitness centers, technology, etc. The data from this study provide no definitive support that these factors play a defining role in the college selection process, when compared with other elements such as academic programs, cost, employability, and graduate school. Therefore, institutions should exercise caution when making such investments in non-academic elements to the detriment of elements that appear to have some level of influence in the enrollment decision.

Cost of Attendance

Both groups in this study indicated cost and future employment as top reasons for selecting a college. However, cost was considered to be significantly more important to
those choosing public institutions rather than privates. In order for private colleges to attract this potential pool of students, they should consider the methods used to market affordability of attendance. This research reveals that students selecting public institutions valued location and manageable costs higher than their counterparts. As previously discussed, this may be the result of access to in-state tuition at public institutions. If these students are considered part of the potential recruitment pool for private colleges, enrollment managers and higher education marketers may need to consider how they present elements of cost as part of their recruitment plans. The theories of college choice presented by D. Chapman (1981), R. Chapman and Jackson (1986), and Hossler and Gallagher (1987) suggest that the pool of potential colleges is identified as early as the sophomore year of high school. They further suggest, and this study confirms, that private colleges should consider an extensive marketing plan to reach families early in the college search process with the challenge of attracting potential students who may have a preconceived idea that a private college is beyond their financial reach. Many private institutions are simply viewed as more expensive than publics, and rightfully so, given their published tuition rates. Private institutions need to combat this perception early, in order to be part of a student’s college consideration set. These marketing plans should explain how discounted tuition through financial assistance has the potential to lessen the cost differentiation between the two types of institutions to combat high sticker prices.

Findings from this study reveal that students selecting public institutions identified cost as the second most important reason in their decision. Those selecting private institutions identified cost as the third most important reason for enrolling in a
particular college. If both types of institutions are recruiting the same high achieving
students, private institutions may need to think unconventionally about pricing structures
and funding methods in order to successfully compete with their counterparts, i.e., if
sticker prices are eliminating potential students from the prospect pool.

Most students attending private institutions receive a significant discount on the
published sticker price due to financial aid. However, many prospective families are
unfamiliar with the term discount rate and never look beyond the published tuition rate.
In order for private institutions to successfully compete in the marketplace, it is essential
that they approach this element of their recruitment plan with great care. Explaining the
concept of a discounted rate of tuition to families early in the recruiting process is critical
if they wish to be considered as a viable option. For many families, the information
regarding cost of attendance will supersede all other components of the educational
experience at a particular institution.

Institutional Name Recognition

The literature also suggested that many colleges, particularly privates, place a
strong emphasis on obtaining high rankings in national publications. This research
provided minimal support for these assumptions, as national rankings were found to have
little influence in the decision-making process. Furthermore, the students in this sample
appeared to place little importance on the opinions of their teachers. Although this study
was limited by the composition of the sample, it suggests higher education senior leaders
should evaluate the value gained by investing resources to improve their market position
with high school teachers and secure national rankings.
One of the two influence survey items that was significantly different for the two groups of respondents was *this institution is highly regarded by my friends*. Based on the literature, the influence of peers is believed to be a significant contributor to the selection process. This study suggests that students consider their friends’ opinions as an important component of the selection process, although the term highly regarded was not defined in the survey. The term may have been defined in a variety of ways, including academic reputation, social reputation, athletics, aesthetically pleasing, etc. For institutions to understand their perception in the marketplace, third-party focus groups and research may be needed. This research may provide marketers and enrollment managers with a better understanding of their institution’s perception among the targeted population and create recruitment plans and campaigns that emphasize their perceived strengths. When colleges understand the elements of their institutions perceived as valuable by high school students, the information can be utilized to build an institutional reputation among the particular group of influencers.

The other influence survey item that was significantly different between the two groups was *there is a “winning” tradition of athletics*. Students selecting public institutions rated this item as more important than their counterparts. This notion may be attributed to the fact many private institutions are not Division I NCAA institutions and, therefore, do not experience the prestige and name recognition as some of their public counterparts. Given the extensive media coverage of college sports, students who plan to attend public colleges may desire the atmosphere associated with a “winning” athletic program as part of their college experience. Students selecting private institutions may make their decision with the knowledge they will never experience the “game day”
aspects that often exist at public institutions with successful athletic teams. However, this study did not provide the reason for the indicated level of importance. At face value, one may assume students enjoy their association with colleges that have strong school spirit or want to be affiliated with “winning” institutions. Yet, when students were surveyed about the importance of school spirit or affiliation with a particular college, neither group ranked these items as very important. This result might suggest administrators may want to gain a better understanding of the level of influence such information has on the decision-making process to enroll at their particular school before investing resources to develop and maintain a “winning” athletic program. Although students generally enjoy attending athletic events or being part of a national championship college, a “winning” record may have little influence for the majority of the students when making their decision to enroll at an institution.

Limitations

This study was conducted in southwest Indiana and involved students enrolled in two private schools and one charter school of national prominence. Due to circumstances beyond the control of the researcher, the study was not conducted in the general public school system, thus limiting the sample size and composition. The size of this sample, as well as the characteristics of the sample itself, limited the researcher from drawing substantial conclusions. For example, with the exception of the charter school, representation of public school students was absent. Therefore, the majority of responders possessed experience with private education at the high school level, which could have biased their responses toward private institutions. The sample also appeared to be primarily comprised of students whose parents and/or siblings had attended college.
The literature reviewed suggested a difference in how students approach enrollment at a private versus public institution based on the parents’ educational level. However, the small sample for this study hampered the ability to draw substantial conclusions regarding this theory.

Another limitation was the location in which the study was conducted. The literature review suggested that geographic location either increases or decreases the likelihood of considering enrollment at a private institution. Proximity and familiarity with private institutions, as well as the social and economic climate of a particular geographic region, influenced the college selection process for high school seniors. The location of this study was conducted in a city that houses a private and a public institution. The private institution recently conducted an intentional marketing campaign emphasizing its international focus, values, and small class sizes, which may have contributed to the results of this study, as these items were rated significantly different between the two groups of respondents. In addition, the public institution recently embarked on an intentional marketing campaign due to recent recognition as having the lowest tuition cost in the state. Furthermore, if the students who planned to enroll in a public institution had intentions to enroll in the local public university, this clearly would have biased the results relative to preferring a college location within a few hours of home.

Findings from this research provided limited knowledge about the types of public or private institutions the students were planning to attend. The study did not specifically request the name of the private or public institution to which the students were referring when completing the survey. Various categories of institutions are found within these
two subsets: flagship publics, research institutions, Ivy-league, nationally recognized liberal arts colleges, high profile NCAA institutions, etc. All of these subsets of institutions have distinctive characteristics. Therefore, one should exercise caution in inferring generalized conclusions about high achieving students and their interests in public or private institutions based solely on this study.

Future Research

This study provided a general overview of institutional reputation and influence to a high achieving college-track student’s decision to attend a particular institution. Based on the results, opportunities exist for additional research that would allow higher education marketers and enrollment managers to intentionally focus on key elements in their recruitment processes. The development of a survey instrument that elaborates on identified items of significant influence would be beneficial in achieving this goal. Furthermore, expansion of the sample size and diversification of the sample composition would allow for more substantial findings.

Several of the significant results of this study beg the question of why. To gain a better understanding into the thought processes behind the data, future researchers may want to conduct a mixed methods study involving qualitative research, such as focus groups and interviews. A quantitative study, similar to this one, will most likely result in the researcher lacking a better understanding as to the specific reasons a student responded in a certain manner. A mixed methods study would enable the researcher to gain a better understanding of the individual perspectives of the respondents, in conjunction with the data derived from a quantitative analysis. Institutions may benefit from a survey of the entering freshmen in an attempt to identify qualities of the college
that played a significant role in the decision to attend. Additional research with prospective students who did not choose a particular college is warranted in an effort to gain a better understanding of institutional reputation and attraction.

An additional suggestion for future research includes the consideration of a longitudinal study. The theoretical research of D. Chapman (1978), Hossler and Gallagher (1987), and R. Chapman and Jackson (1987) regarding college choice behavior suggested the majority of families identify potential colleges for enrollment as early as the freshman year of high school. The same researchers also suggested that various elements of the college are considered to varying degrees based on the position of the student in the college search process (freshman year of high school versus senior year). This study surveyed students in the final two weeks of their high school career. To better understand how different elements contributed to the narrowing of a college choice, one would need to follow the sample over a period of time. This type of longitudinal research would assist enrollment managers and marketers in tailoring their recruitment plans and in providing relevant information important to prospective students based on where they are in the search process.

To gain a clearer understanding of how students make decisions regarding college selection, other factors must be considered which include family socioeconomic status, race, gender, area of interest, and high school academic culture. In addition, a review of college affordability via access to scholarships, grants, loans, and personal savings would be needed to understand how students interpret the benefits, or value, of investing in a particular institution. Finally, the level of influence of one’s family on a decision to
attend a particular school should be considered from a variety of perspectives including financial provision, social status, and personal support.

**Summary of Conclusions**

An understanding of the college selection process is important to institutions recruiting a particular population, such as high achieving college-track high school students. This study provided a general overview of the most important institutional reputation and various influencers including family, friends, counselors, teachers, and the public, on the college selection process. While the limitations restrict one from drawing extensive conclusions, some insight is provided into the level of importance high achieving students place on certain factors when selecting a college. Also supported is the conclusion that higher education marketers and enrollment managers should not depend solely on literature to draw definitive conclusions about college choice behavior, but rather should consider the theories relative to their targeted prospective populations. The results of this study suggest particular populations may value different elements of an institution with varying degrees of importance. Therefore, higher education professionals should possess a clear understanding of their institutional identity and mission. Once established, enrollment managers can identify the populations that tend to value these elements and create a marketing and recruitment plan to intentionally target a particular group of prospective students. This information would assist institutions in avoiding the assignment of resources to recruitment efforts that ultimately may not significantly contribute to the final decision regarding attendance.

The enrollment landscape has changed significantly over the last 10 years. With shifting demographics and a public outcry for educational accountability and college
affordability, institutions can no longer afford to approach recruitment utilizing the same methods employed in the past. Enrollment managers and marketers must identify institutional strengths and values that are considered to be assets in terms of the educational experience. Furthermore, they also must identify targeted populations upon which to focus recruiting efforts and tailor marketing strategies that speak to the interests of those particular groups. A recruitment strategy grounded in theory alone may not yield substantial results, as one cannot generalize the college choice behaviors of all students. As such, an intentional marketing and recruitment campaign, based on data relative to a particular institution and the type of student sought, has the potential to create a stronger presence in the marketplace and yield a higher number of new students for the institution.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: SURVEY INSTRUMENT

COLLEGE EXPLORATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Part I: About You

(1) What is your gender? ___Male ___Female
(2) What is your age? ___
(3) What is your grade? ___11th ___12th
(4) Have you ever taken a college prep course (AP course, bridge course, international baccalaureate, honors course, college track course, etc.)? ___Yes ___No

Part II: College Interest

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<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<td>Have any of your parents/stepparents attended a four-year college or university?</td>
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<td>Have any of your brothers/sisters attended or currently attend a four-year college or university?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Have you applied to a four-year college or university?</td>
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<td>Have you met with admission personnel from the college(s) you have applied to?</td>
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<td>Have you met with faculty from the college(s) you have applied to?</td>
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<td>Did you visit the website of the colleges you would consider attending?</td>
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<td>Have you discussed different colleges with your high school counselors or teachers?</td>
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<td>Have you discussed different colleges with your friends who are also considering college?</td>
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<td>Have you discussed different colleges with friends who are currently attending college?</td>
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Part III: College Choices

Listed here are a few reasons students give when identifying a college/university to attend. In your opinion, what are the TOP 3 reasons? Place a “1” next to the most important reason, a “2” next to the second most important reason, and a “3” next to the third most important reason. Select only the top three reasons.

1. The college/university has a strong reputation for its academic program(s).
2. The college/university has the type of social experience I want in a college.
3. Costs associated with attending the college/university (tuition, financial aid, housing) are manageable.
4. My friends are attending the college/university.
5. The college has the academic support structures in place to help me be successful.
6. Family members are encouraging me to attend the college/university.
7. A degree from the college/university will enhance my admission opportunities to the graduate school of my choice.
8. A degree from the college/university will give me a competitive edge when seeking employment in my field of study.
9. I am excited about being affiliated with this particular college/university.

Part IV: Future Plans

Do you plan to pursue a 4-year college degree? ___Yes ___No

If yes, what type of College/University do you plan to graduate from? (choose only one)

___ 4-year Public College/University
___ 2-year Public College/University
___ 4-year Private College/University
___ Other, ____________ (please specify)

-Please Continue Questionnaire on Reverse Side-
## Part V: College Selection

Below are some things students often consider when selecting a college or university to attend. For each, circle the number that best describes how important the consideration is to you when making the decision to attend a college or university. Use this scale:

1 = Not Important  
2 = Slightly Important  
3 = Somewhat Important  
4 = Rather Important  
5 = Very Important

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consideration</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The college has an outstanding academic program in my major/area of study</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classes are mostly taught by full-time professors</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
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<td>Teaching/lab facilities are state of the art</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Internships/Clinicals are required for graduation</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>The student/faculty ratio in class is 20 to 1 or less</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most students complete their degree in 4 to 5 years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The college has rigorous admission standards</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>International study/travel is encouraged as part of the academic program</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The college promotes values that are important to me</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The college promotes community service/volunteer work as part of the academic experience</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The college is nationally ranked in publications and magazines</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The college is highly regarded among my friends</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The college is highly regarded among my teachers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The college is highly regarded outside of my state</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are many opportunities for campus involvement through extracurricular activities</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are many opportunities for social interaction (fraternities, clubs, etc.)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most students live on campus</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The location of the college is within a few hours of my home</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The campus buildings and grounds are attractive</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are scholarships and grants available</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cost of tuition is helped with access to student loans</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are employed in positions that utilize their degree within six months of graduation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduates are considered as strong candidates for graduate, medical, and law schools, etc.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a lot of “school spirit” at the college</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a “winning” tradition of athletics at the college</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thank you for completing this survey!
APPENDIX B: IRB LETTER OF APPROVAL

DATE:        April 29, 2013
TO:          Dana Clayton, Ed.D.
FROM:        Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB
PROJECT TITLE:  [448345-2] Factors high school students consider when selecting a college or university.
REFERENCE #:  IRB 13-320
SUBMISSION TYPE:  Amendment/Modification
ACTION:       APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE:  April 29, 2013
EXPIRATION DATE:  April 1, 2014
REVIEW TYPE:   Full Committee Review

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Full Committee Review based on the applicable federal regulation.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this office prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

This project has been determined to be a Minimal Risk project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of April 1, 2014.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Paul Moonsey at (270) 745-2120 or irb@wkul.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Western Kentucky University (WKU) IRB’s records.
APPENDIX C: SAMPLE LETTER OF COOPERATION

Note: Due to confidentiality of participating high schools, signed letters of cooperation were submitted to the Institutional Review Board of Western Kentucky University but are not included in this document.

(Please print on school letterhead)

Letter of Cooperation

This letter signifies agreement between ______________________ and Western Kentucky University doctoral candidate, Dana Clayton, regarding the distribution of surveys to our students for research purposes.

1. As Principal of ______________________, I have received the necessary approvals to allow doctoral candidate, Dana Clayton, to administer the College Exploration Questionnaire pending final approval by the Institutional Review Board of Western Kentucky University.

2. The survey will be distributed to seniors who have participated in some type of college preparation coursework such as AP courses, bridge, honors, international baccalaureate, etc. It will be administered in May of 2013 in accordance with the directions provided.

3. All students under the age of 18 will be provided a parental consent form prior to distribution of the survey. Parents will have a minimum of 5 days to return the forms before the study will proceed. Students who are 18 and older will sign a consent form stating they understand the purpose of the survey and that their participation is voluntary and will remain confidential. Students under the age of 18 will sign an assent form stating the same.

4. I am aware that all information collected will remain confidential. All consent forms will be treated confidentially and no names of those participating will be disclosed for any purpose relative to this study.

5. Instructions for distribution, administration and collection of the consent forms, assent forms and surveys will be provided by Dana Clayton. All procedures will be followed to insure the integrity of the research process.

6. Dana Clayton has agreed to share with me the results of the aggregate data regarding this survey.

Should there be any questions regarding this agreement, please contact me at ______. I understand I have the right to cease participation in this research study if the terms of this agreement are modified or not carried out in the manner described.

Thank you.

__________, Principal
APPENDIX D: APPROVED CONSENT AND ASSENT FORMS

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Project Title: College Exploration Study
Investigator: Dana Clayson, Educational Leadership Doctoral Program, Western Kentucky University, (812) 488-2500 (office phone)

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. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Your teacher will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project. If you have questions, please ask your teacher. If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. You may keep a copy of this form for your files. Questions should be directed to the investigator or IRB contact person if the teacher cannot answer the question.

1. Nature and Purpose of the Project: The College Exploration Study is designed to identify factors that college-bound high school seniors consider when selecting a college or university. The information gathered from the study will be the basis of the researcher’s dissertation.

2. Explanation of Procedures: After you sign and return the informed consent form, your teacher will provide you with the College Exploration Questionnaire. You will complete the questionnaire according to the directions and return the form to your teacher.

3. Discomfort and Risks: A slight emotional risk may exist as questions regarding college may create some level of anxiety about one’s future educational goals. Students choosing not to participate will not qualify while the rest of the class completes the questionnaire.

4. Benefits: The College Exploration Questionnaire may make students aware of certain elements about that they had not previously considered. This could allow for a better informed decision about selecting a particular college.

5. Confidentiality: Your name and school will not be identified on the questionnaire or in the study. The signed informed consent forms will be kept under lock and key for a period of three years to ensure confidentiality. At the end of the three year period, the forms will be destroyed.

6. Refusal/Withdrawal: Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on your grade, receipt of recommendations from teachers or counselors, or 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 is it 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

Witness

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) 745-2131

WKU IRB# 13-320
Approval - 4/29/2013
End Date - 4/1/2014
Expedited Original - 4/29/2013

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PARENTAL INFORMED CONSENT FORM for Individuals Under the Age of 18

Project Title: College Exploration Study
Investigator: Dana Clayton, Educational Leadership Doctoral Program, Western Kentucky University, (812) 480-2000 (office phone)

Your high school student is being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement for your child to participate in this project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. If you are willing to allow your child to participate in this project, please sign the form below and maintain the second copy for your files. Your child should return the form to their teacher as instructed. Questions should be directed to the investigator or IRB contact person if the teacher cannot answer the question.

1. Nature and Purpose of the Project: The college Exploration Study is designed to identify factors that college-bound high school seniors consider when selecting a college or university. The information gathered from the study will be the basis of the researcher's dissertation.

2. Explanation of Procedures: After students submit the signed parental informed consent form, the teacher will provide the student with the College Exploration Questionnaire. The student will complete the questionnaire according to the directions and return the form to their teacher.

3. Discomfort and Risks: A slight emotional risk may exist as questions regarding college may create some level of anxiety about one's future educational goals. Students choosing not to participate will sit quietly while the rest of the class completes the questionnaire.

4. Benefits: The College Exploration Questionnaire may make students aware of certain elements about that they had not previously considered. This could allow them to make a better informed decision about selecting a particular college.

5. Confidentiality: The student's name and school will not be identified on the questionnaire or in the study. The signed parental informed consent forms will be kept under lock and key for a period of three years to ensure confidentiality. At the end of the three year period, the forms will be destroyed.

6. Refusal/Withdrawal: Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on your grade, receipt of recommendations from teachers or counselors, or 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 mitigate both the known and potential but unknown risks.

I DO NOT want any child to participate in this survey. (SIGN BELOW). Return by May 7, 2013.

Name of Student

________________________________________
Signature of Parent/Guardian

________________________________________
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) 745-3129

WKU IRB# 13-320
Approval - 4/29/2013
End Date - 4/1/2014
Original - 4/29/2013
INFORMED ASSENT

Nature and Purpose of the Project: The College Exploration Study is designed to identify factors college-track high school seniors consider when selecting a college or university. The information gathered from the study will be the basis of the researcher's dissertation.

Parents, legal guardians, or a legally authorized guardian must sign the "Parental Informed Consent Forms" indicating they choose for their child to opt-out or not participate in this study. If the Parental Informed Consent Form is not signed indicating the parent's decision to opt-out of this study and returned by the designated date, minors may participate in the research project and are required to sign an "Assent" Form.

I, __________________________, understand that my parents (mom, dad, or guardians) have given permission for me to complete the College Exploration Questionnaire under the direction of my teacher. I am participating in this project because I want to and understand that I can stop at any time I want to without penalty.

Signature __________________________   Date __________________________

Printed Name of Student __________________________
APPENDIX E: INSTRUCTIONS FOR ADMINISTERING QUESTIONNAIRE

College Exploration Questionnaire

Instructions for Consent Forms and Questionnaire Distribution

Dear Teacher:

Thank you for assisting me with this study regarding college exploration. Your school principal has identified ______________ as the date for administering the questionnaire to your students. To prepare for the study, you have received four labeled envelopes containing the following:

1. Parental Informed Consent Forms
2. Informed Consent Forms
3. Assent Forms
4. College Exploration Questionnaire

I have provided instructions for you to read to your class prior to the distribution of the questionnaire, along with instructions to be read on the day the survey is distributed to student. You will also find instructions regarding the collection of the documents. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at (812) 598-8926.

Thank you.

Dana Clayton
Doctoral Student, Western Kentucky University
College Exploration Questionnaire

One week prior to administering the Questionnaire:

Please read the following to your class:

“Our high school has partnered with a doctoral student from Western Kentucky University to study what factors high school seniors consider most important in their college selection process. You have been selected to participate in this study because of your experience with college track courses in high school. The College Exploration Questionnaire will be given during class on ____________. Participation is not required as part of this class but we hope you will assist us with this study. That being said, you will not be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or if you decide during the questionnaire that you don’t want to finish it. Your participation in this study will be kept confidential as well as all the information gathered on the questionnaire. None of your teachers or the school will see your responses on the questionnaire. Your participation is strictly voluntary but we hope you will participate as the questionnaire may help you think about certain factors of college you have not considered before. If you are 18 or older and want to participate, I will distribute your consent forms on the day we administer the questionnaire. If you are under the age of 18, and you or your parent or guardian does not want you to participate in the study, you will need to have them sign the “Parental Informed Consent Form.” By signing this form, they are indicating that you will not be participating in the study. I will give you two copies of this form—one to be signed by your parent or guardian if they do not want you to participate and the other to keep for their records. Should they choose to sign the form, you will need to return it to me by May 7, 2013. Please raise your hand if you are under the age of 18 and you do not want to participate in the study. Remember these forms are due May 7, 2013.”

Action: Please distribute two “Parental Informed Consent Forms” to students who raise their hands. The other three envelopes will be utilized the day the questionnaire is distributed. You will want to keep the envelope labeled “Parental Informed Consent Forms” as this is the envelope you will place the signed forms in for the researcher.

(Questions: Call Dana Clayton, 812-598-8926)
On the day of Questionnaire Distribution:

Please Read:

“You will recall last week I informed you that our school has partnered with a doctoral student from Western Kentucky University to conduct a study about the college selection process. In just a few minutes I will distribute the College Exploration Questionnaire. The questionnaire will take about 5-7 minutes to complete. Those of you who have signed ‘parental informed consent forms’ indicating you are not participating in the study, please raise your hand so I can collect your form. For those of you under the age of 18 who did not turn in a parental informed consent form, I am going to give you an “Assent form” which verifies that you are participating in this study voluntarily. Please sign the assent form and I will collect it in a minute. If you are 18 or older and want to participate in this study, please raise your hand and I will provide you with two consent forms — one to sign and one to keep for your records. You will also need to have a witness sign the form so please identify another student to sign the form after you complete it. Please read this form carefully before you sign it. Remember that this is not a requirement for our class but your participation is appreciated. All information collected will be kept confidential between you and the researcher. None of us here at the high school will see your responses on the questionnaire.”

Action: Distribute two copies of Informed Consent Form to those 18 and older and collect one signed copy. Collect assent forms from those under 18.

Once all signed forms have been collected, please read the following:

“The College Exploration Questionnaire is designed to identify the level of importance high school seniors place on certain factors when considering whether or not they will attend a certain college. It will also ask for some demographic information such as gender, age, parents’ education, sibling’s education and so forth. I will now distribute the College Exploration Questionnaire. Only take a questionnaire if you have given me a signed consent form or assent form. Each section of the questionnaire has specific directions so please read them carefully. Please do not skip a question. You may use pen or pencil to complete the questionnaire. Once you are finished, please come and place your completed questionnaire in this envelope.”

Please make sure you only provide a questionnaire to those for whom you have signed consent forms or assent forms. Once the questionnaires are completed, please place them in the labeled envelope and seal it. Also, please place any signed Parental Informed Consent Forms in the labeled envelope. Please return all four envelopes to your principal. Thank you so much for your help with this project! (Questions: Call Dana Clayton, 812-598-8926)
### APPENDIX F: MEAN SCORES OF ALL COLLEGE SELECTION ITEMS

**Mean Scores of the Level of Importance Assigned to College Selection Items by Total and by Survey Group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Statement</th>
<th>Selecting Pub</th>
<th>Selecting Pri</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) The college has an outstanding academic program in my major/minor area of study.</td>
<td>N: 76, M: 4.63</td>
<td>N: 38, M: 4.58</td>
<td>N: 114, M: 4.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Classes are mostly taught by full-time professors.</td>
<td>N: 76, M: 3.54</td>
<td>N: 38, M: 3.61</td>
<td>N: 114, M: 3.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Teaching/lab facilities are state of the art.</td>
<td>N: 76, M: 3.67</td>
<td>N: 38, M: 3.53</td>
<td>N: 114, M: 3.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Internships/Clinicals are required for graduation.</td>
<td>N: 76, M: 2.99</td>
<td>N: 38, M: 3.00</td>
<td>N: 114, M: 2.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) The student/faculty ratio in class is 20 to 1 or less.</td>
<td>N: 76, M: 3.16</td>
<td>N: 38, M: 3.82</td>
<td>N: 114, M: 3.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Most students complete their degree in 4 to 5 years.</td>
<td>N: 76, M: 3.86</td>
<td>N: 38, M: 3.89</td>
<td>N: 114, M: 3.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) The college has rigorous admission standards.</td>
<td>N: 76, M: 3.25</td>
<td>N: 38, M: 3.11</td>
<td>N: 114, M: 3.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) International study/travel is encouraged as part of the academic program.</td>
<td>N: 76, M: 3.20</td>
<td>N: 38, M: 3.45</td>
<td>N: 114, M: 3.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) The college promotes values that are important to me.</td>
<td>N: 76, M: 3.57</td>
<td>N: 38, M: 4.00</td>
<td>N: 114, M: 3.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10) The college promotes community service/volunteer work as part of the academic program.</td>
<td>N: 76, M: 3.11</td>
<td>N: 38, M: 3.42</td>
<td>N: 114, M: 3.21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Appendix F - continued

Mean Scores of the Level of Importance Assigned to College Selection Items by Total and by Survey Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Statement</th>
<th>Selecting Pub</th>
<th></th>
<th>Selecting Pri</th>
<th></th>
<th>Total</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(11) The college is nationally ranked in publications and magazines.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(12) The college is highly regarded among my friends.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(13) The college is highly regarded among my teachers.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(14) The college is highly regarded outside of my state.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>3.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(15) There are many opportunities for campus involvement through extra-curricular activities.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(16) There are many opportunities for social interaction (fraternities, clubs, etc.)</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>3.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(17) Most students live on campus.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>3.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(18) The location of the college is within a few hours of my home.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>3.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(19) The campus buildings and grounds are attractive.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>3.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(20) There are scholarships and grants available.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>4.39</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>4.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
### Mean Scores of the Level of Importance Assigned to College Selection Items by Total and by Survey Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Statement</th>
<th>Survey Group</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<td>Selecting Pub</td>
<td>Selecting Pri</td>
<td>Total</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(21) Cost of tuition is helped with access to student loans.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(22) Students are employed in positions that utilize their degree within six months of graduation.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(23) Graduates are considered as strong candidates for graduate, medical, and law schools, etc.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(24) There is a lot of school spirit at the college.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(25) There is a “winning” tradition of athletics at the college.</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Respondents were asked to indicate the level of importance for each college selection survey item using a 5-point Likert scale.

1 = not important  
2 = slightly important  
3 = somewhat important  
4 = rather important  
5 = very important  

The mean was calculated using the numerical value of the ratings.
## APPENDIX G: CROSS-REFERENCE DATA

Cross-reference: T-test of Means Values for Corresponding College Selection Items (Survey Part V) with Reason for Selecting a Particular College (Survey Part III): (A) “The College/University has a strong reputation for its academic program” by Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Selection Items</th>
<th>Survey Group</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Selecting Public</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Selecting Private</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t-value</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) The college has an outstanding academic program in my major/area of study.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.39</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Classes are mostly taught by full-time professors.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td></td>
<td>-1.50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Teaching/lab facilities are state of the art.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Internships/Clinicals are required for graduation.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) The student/faculty ratio in class is 20 to 1 or less.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.48*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) Most students complete their degree in 4 to 5 years.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(7) The college has rigorous admission standards.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(8) International study/travel is encouraged as part of the academic program.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.61*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Appendix G - continued

Cross-reference:  T-test of Means Values for Corresponding College Selection Items (Survey Part V) with Reason for Selecting a Particular College (Survey Part III): (B) “The College/University has the type of social experience I want in college” by Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Selection Items</th>
<th>Survey Group</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Selecting Public</td>
<td>Selecting Private</td>
<td>t-value</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) The college promotes values that are important to me.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10) The college promotes community service/volunteer work as part of the academic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(15) There are many opportunities for campus involvement through extra-curricular</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>activities.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(16) There are many opportunities for social interaction (fraternities, clubs, etc.)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>1.15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(17) Most students live on campus.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>1.73</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(25) There is a winning tradition of athletics at the college</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Appendix G - continued

Cross-reference: T-test of Means Values for Corresponding College Selection Items (Survey Part V) with Reason for Selecting a Particular College (Survey Part III): (C) “Costs associated with attending the college/university are manageable” by Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Selection Items</th>
<th>Survey Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Selecting Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(20) There are scholarships and grants available.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(21) The cost of tuition is helped with access to student loans.</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cross-reference: T-test of Means Values for Corresponding College Selection Items (Survey Part V) with Reason for Selecting a Particular College (Survey Part III): (E) “The college has the academic support structures in place to help me be successful” by Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Selection Items</th>
<th>Survey Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Selecting Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Teaching/lab facilities are state of the art.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) The student/faculty ratio in class is 20 to 1 or less.</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Appendix G - continued

Cross-reference: T-test of Means Values for Corresponding College Selection Items (Survey Part V) with Reason for Selecting a Particular College (Survey Part III): (G) “A degree from the college/university will enhance my admission opportunities to the graduate school of my choice” by Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Selection Items</th>
<th>Survey Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Selecting Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(23) Graduates are considered as strong candidates for graduate, medical, and law schools, etc.</td>
<td>N  M  SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4  5.0  0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cross-reference: T-test of Means Values for Corresponding College Selection Items (Survey Part V) with Reason for Selecting a Particular College (Survey Part III): (H) “A degree from the college/university will give me a competitive edge when seeking employment in my field of study” by Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Selection Items</th>
<th>Survey Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Selecting Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(22) Students are employed in positions that utilize their degree within six months of graduation.</td>
<td>N  M  SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13  4.2  0.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Appendix G - continued

Cross-reference: T-test of Means Values for Corresponding College Selection Items (Survey Part V) with Reason for Selecting a Particular College (Survey Part III): (H) “A degree from the college/university will give me a competitive edge when seeking employment in my field of study” by Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Selection Items</th>
<th>Survey Group</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(11) The college is nationally ranked in publications and magazines.</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(12) The college is highly regarded among my friends.</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(13) The college is highly regarded among my teachers.</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(14) The college is highly regarded outside of my state.</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(24) There is a lot of school spirit at the college.</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.83</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(25) There is a “winning” tradition of athletics at the college.</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p ≤ .05.

Note: The higher the mean, the higher the level of importance placed on the College Selection survey item.