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The Lived Experience of College Choice

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By

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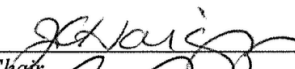Has been approved as a

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the college decision-making process of high school juniors and seniors. In previous studies, researchers asserted that participants undergo a sequential multi-staged process to determine their college of choice. This study moved away from a standard methodological approach, framing the college decision-making process as complex, multifaceted, and deeply personal. Data for participants were presented in thematic form, showcasing an ever-changing college choice process. Participants began with a dream school and fallback school in mind, which helped to guide their initial search efforts. However, these schools were not static, and various factors (economic, sociological, and psychological) had more or less relevance to individuals as they progressed through the process. In predisposition, economic and sociological factors held particular significance as participants made their initial decisions. In the later stages of search and choice, these gave way to psychological factors, which became prominent in participants' final choices as they visualized their future college lives. Three profiles of the college choice process illustrate participants' lived experience. Overall, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the college decision-making process, with a focus on helping institutions reach prospective students through the admission procedure. This research could be useful in designing university marketing campaigns, enhancing university branding initiatives, or improving recruiting practices, moving particular institutions into students' college choice set.

University personnel could utilize some of the lived experiences found here to create

personal connections with prospective students through the use of authentic, direct, and

visually oriented marketing materials.

Keywords: college choice models, university marketing, consumer decision

making, interpretative phenomenological analysis

Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Research Problem

  The traditional college student segment in the United States is shrinking. Projections indicate that the number of 18- to 22-year-old first-year students who stay in dorms, take classes on campus, and earn a college degree in 4-5 years will remain flat through the year 2020 (Chronicle Research Services, 2009). More than ever, marketing to these students is critical. Members of this generation, often referred to as the millennials, have been bombarded with marketing messages their entire lives. More authentic and targeted methods of marketing communication are replacing traditional ones. The millennial generation represents the majority of residential, traditional students attending college and is unlike any previous generation. Millennial students are relational, at least through technology, which has always been a part of their lives. They grew up in an environment with social, digital, and mobile technology, to which they are addicted (Van Den Bergh, Veins, De Ruyck, & Sbarbaro, 2012). Millennials expect universities to communicate with them through technological applications. A recent survey of 2,655 millennials indicated that only 18% wanted to learn about non-profits through print materials and only 17% wanted to learn about them face to face (Millennial Report, 2013). In the same survey, 65% of millennials preferred Web sites and 55% preferred to learn about the university or college through social media (SM). Furthermore, the survey found that millennials support causes they are interested in rather than specific

institutions. Therefore, colleges and universities must demonstrate their cause through technological avenues to attract millennials.

College choice theories suggest that individuals move through a step-by-step process and evaluate various pieces of information to decide on a college of choice (Chapman, 1981; Chapman, 1986; Hossler & Gallagher 1987; Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982). As researchers further explore the college choice process, new studies featuring millennial participants will help to expand on how college choice decisions are made. Quantitative studies featuring the relationship of college choice factors continue to tout the importance of top-ranked factors of choice, such as parental involvement, friends, interaction with college personnel, the college Web site, and campus visits (Forbes & Vespil, 2013; Pooja, Black, Berger, & Weinberg, 2012; Sago, 2013; Themba & Mulala, 2013; Wang, Yu, & Wei, 2012). Few researchers have attempted to comprehend how prospective students consume marketed college information and use factors to evaluate matriculation decisions. Furthermore, the millennial generation, with its connection to technology, has forced many colleges and universities to utilize different techniques in an attempt to reach this generation. These techniques have produced mixed results. SM in particular, even with its extensive use by millennials, is producing mixed results (Pandey, 2012; Sago, 2010; Tempkin, 2012; Themba & Mulala, 2013).

Whether new marketing efforts that colleges and universities use are truly affecting college choice processing, demonstrating an understanding of prospective students' lived experiences, will not only help answer this question but also give colleges and universities insight into how to assist prospective students as they progress through their college choice process. Therefore, this study explored the lived experiences of

prospective students during their college decision-making process and the effects of traditional and new marketing efforts.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was to understand how residential first-year traditional undergraduate college students make sense of their lived experiences in the college choice process. To understand personal lived experience, this study uncovered previously hidden revelations of college choice factors and highlighted their role in the decision-making process. Because of advancements in technology, the matriculation of millennials attending college, and the rise of more comprehensive college and university marketing efforts, the present researcher sought to validate and expand on aspects of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) previous model of college choice in this new environment. This study forms an analysis of the role of new marketing efforts, such as SM strategy, and personal relationships on college choice. This study addresses a gap in the literature on how prospective students are making sense of their lived experiences of the college choice process and serves as a potential resource for future quantitative studies on the decision-making process for college choice.

Research Questions

Primary Research Question

- How do 16- to 17-year-olds understand and make sense of their lived

  experiences of college choice?

Secondary Questions

- To what extent do key factors − economic (e.g., family income, tuition, and

  financial aid), sociological (e.g., family background, academic experience,

  and location), and psychological (perceived institutional fit) − at each stage of

  the college choice process (predisposition, search, and choice) help to

  understand how the millennial generation makes a college choice decision?

- To what extent do forms of higher education marketing (e.g., campus visits,

  print advertisements, SM, brochures, billboards, and viewbooks) influence

  students' lived experiences during their personal college choice processes?

Delimitations and Limitations

The delimitations of the study include geography and purposeful sampling. The

study featured participants from selected locations around the United States, as the

researcher did not attempt to represent a broad population. He used opportunistic

methods and their ability to grant access to the college choice phenomenon for sample

selection. This IPA is an interpretation of the lived experiences of prospective students

and involves a process that includes a double hermeneutic. While the participants were

attempting to make sense of their college choice processes, the researcher was doing the

same. Therefore, he followed the participants in different directions rather than simply

attempting to bracket preconceived beliefs. Though this study will not have statistical

significance, it will have practical significance in relation to college and university marketing efforts to prospective students and other individuals interested in the college choice process.

Definition of Terms

The *choice set* is a group of colleges to which participants will submit applications for acceptance (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

The *consideration set* "is a group of brands [consumers think] about buying when they need to make a purchase" (Kardes, Cronley, & Cline, 2011, p. 216).

The terms *college*, *institution*, and *school* are all used to describe a four-year public or private university.

The *evoked set* is a group of brands a consumer finds during the external information search process (Kardes et al., 2011).

Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation and is focused on understanding both written and spoken language to offer judgment and to establish the identity of texts from data and other evidence that are collected (Schleiermacher, 1998).

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a "qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 1).

An *iterative process* is the idea in qualitative research that the researcher may move back and forth and repeat a process to make sense of individuals' lived experiences.

The expressions *millennials* and *digital natives* are used interchangeably in this study to describe the participants. Millennials are people born after 1982 (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Prensky (2001) further defined millennials or digital natives as "students who are all native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet" (p. 1).

Phenomenology is the study of the essence of experience in the living world (Creswell, 2007).

A *phenomenon* is a description of the universal essence of human experience consisting of both what and how humans experience it (Creswell, 2007).

Psychological factors are characteristics that affect the behavior of the human mind. These factors are manifested through personality traits and learned behavior and are exhibited through a reflection on an individual's experiences (Ogborne, Harrison, & Carter, 2004). In this study, the concept of psychological factors refers to a participant's personality traits and experiences and the ways in which these fit with the factors of a particular institution.

Sociological factors include "socioeconomic status [SES], student academic ability, high school context, gender, and views of significant others…[which influence] students' desires to attend college, or college aspirations" (Kinzie et al., 2004, p. 26).

Social media (SM) is a set of "activities, practices, and behaviors among communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions using conversational media" (Mohammadian & Mohammadreza, 2012, p. 58). This definition encompasses collaborative projects, such as Wikipedia; content communities, such as YouTube; virtual game worlds, such as World of Warcraft; virtual social worlds,

such as Second Life; and social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. In addition, the present researcher views testimonials on Web sites (such as Yelp and Google reviews) as forms of SM.

The enrollment funnel is "a systematic method of moving prospective students to becoming actual students as a result of generating positive feelings and emotional attachment[s] that tie directly to your marketing plan. It can be accomplished on a broad, school-wide basis or selective for an individual program" (Perna, 2005, p. 36).

The *traditional college experience* "represents the idea [that] a student begins college immediately after high school, enrolls full time, lives on campus, and is ready to begin college level classes" (Deli-Amen, 2011, p. 1).

Significance of the Study

Previous literature has produced a thorough understanding of college choice. As the percentage of digital natives who are matriculating continues to remain flat, more emphasis will continue to be placed on how to target this population in the various stages of the search process. Researchers have achieved mixed results on the outcomes of new marketing efforts when it comes to college choice (Barnes, 2012; Noel Levitz, 2012b). While these new marketing tools are continuing to spread, some confusion exists as to their effectiveness and their ultimate utility to potential students. Even with the positive factors of influence that researchers have identified, such as campus visits, family influences, and institutional fit, how prospective students are making sense of and understanding the process remains largely unexplored. Therefore, the present researcher

sought to recognize how prospective students understand and make sense of the college choice process.

Expected Outcomes

The expected outcomes of the study were as follows:

- To address the literature gap in understanding the process of college choice through IPA.

- To provide a better understanding of the factors influencing individuals in each of the three phases (i.e., predisposition, search, and choice) of the college choice process.

- To understand how digital natives are consuming information, determining their choice set, and making selections regarding their future institutions.

- To make sense of how participants in this particular context use directed admissions marketing efforts in all three stages of the college choice process (i.e., predisposition, search, and choice).

- To provide a basis for a survey design conducive to quantitative testing and the generalizing of findings.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review includes concepts related to the present study's purpose, problems, and general research questions and offers a foundation for how the study can make a useful contribution to the college choice literature. In particular, this literature review begins with an overview of millennials' characteristics and traditional marketing in higher education. Colleges and universities are still marketing to prospective students through multiple channels to communicate the perceived value of enrolling. Institutional efforts are still viewed as an important contributor to the search for authentic information during the college choice process (Kinzie et al., 2004). Therefore, highlighting institutional efforts in marketing will provide a foundation to understanding institutions' continued role and influence in the college choice process. Following traditional marketing in higher education, the literature review will examine the historical development of comprehensive models of college choice; it will also look at how both marketing efforts of the institution and economic, sociological, and psychological factors play a role in determining perceived fit and subsequent enrollment. Finally, the literature review will explore the rise of technology, including SM, and its influence on college choice factors.

The Millennial Generation

The millennial generation − often referred to as gen Y, "generation me," or generation nice − was born after 1982 (Atkinson, 2004; Howe, 2014; Howe & Strauss, 2000). Millennials are very different from any generation that came before. Howe and Strauss (2000) referred to this generation as affluent, educated, and diverse. Millennials are focused on achieving, making a difference, and changing perceptions. In addition, they are socially conscious, technologically savvy, influential in the information revolution, impatient, image driven, and desirous of instant gratification (NAS, 2014). Various stereotypes exist about this generation, but acknowledging their characteristics is critical to understanding their progression through the college choice process. Howe and Strauss (2000) conducted an extensive study of the millennial generation to uncover the reasons millennials are challenging conventional assumptions about the power a generation holds. These authors believe millennials possess seven core traits: (1) special, (2) sheltered, (3) confident, (4) team oriented, (5) achieving, (6) pressured, and (7) conventional (Howe & Strauss, 2006).

Millennials are special. According to Howe and Strauss (2006), millennials have always been treated as important; they received praise and admiration for every achievement, milestone, or success. Consequently, the belief is that this generation has developed a sense of entitlement. Twenge (2006) even proposed not only that millennials are entitled but also that they are completely narcissistic. She argued that millennials have been taught this not only from parents but also through their environment. The

environment in which millennials grew up was one that rewarded high self-esteem; this esteem was emphasized on talk shows and in books, which consistently communicated, "Be a winner" or "You are special" (Twenge, 2006). In addition, Twenge (2006) recognized that school districts promoted programs to increase the self-esteem of their own students and that these programs were focused on students' feeling good about themselves rather than strictly on their performance in the classroom. As a result, she asserted that millennials have not just developed a feeling of specialness, but full-fledged narcissism. A survey, using the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, conducted on American college students between 1987 and 2006 revealed that members of younger generations were far more narcissistic and scored 65% higher on the narcissism inventory than generation X participants. Whether they simply feel special or they are narcissistic, clearly millennials view themselves as special and exhibit characteristics of high self-esteem.

Millennials are sheltered. Howe and Strauss (2006) described the millennial generation as one that has grown up in a world in which safety is a very important component of their daily lives. They are thought of as highly protected, as they represent a time where parents solved conflicts and rarely left them unattended, unlike the latchkey kids of previous generations. Millennials always had supervision in their lives, from coaches, teachers, babysitters, counselors, or chaperones. This supervision resulted in a 37% decrease in the amount of unsupervised time in their daily lives (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Gen Xers, the millennial parents, further defined the sheltered life of this generation through developing unhealthy habits in areas other than supervision, such as the following: limiting activity on Web sites, searching for vehicles with more safety

features, and protecting them from predators (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Because of this and other cultural influences, the millennial generation has seen rates of homicide, violent crime, abortion, and pregnancy among their age group decline (Butts, 2013; Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Millennials are confident. Millennials are confident in themselves as individuals and in their future. Over 80% of millennials are satisfied with their lives, and even more of them identify their daily moods as overwhelmingly happy (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Millennials believe they can make a difference in the world around them (Howe & Strauss, 2006; Rainer & Rainer, 2011). This belief seeps into their optimism on the economy and the government and their outlook of being more stable and better off than their parents were (Howe, 2014). While their parents often view the direction of the economy as negative, millennials have positive outlooks on both their personal future and the political future (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Their parents often worry about wars, the stock market, and crime, while millennials' worries are related to grades or fitting into their social environment (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Furthermore, survey results indicated that 96% of millennials believe they can do something great (Rainer & Rainer, 2011). Millennials' positive thoughts about life after high school include going to college, pursuing the American dream, starting a family, and giving their children similar experiences as they had (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Millennials are team oriented. Millennials love to be part of a team; they are more willing than members of previous generations to associate themselves with a team instead of focusing on themselves. Their team generally includes members of their generation, and at times they may politely prevent members of other generations from

participating (Howe & Strauss, 2006). In addition, millennials are frustrated with unruly behavior that occurs in their high schools (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Therefore, they often attribute the selfish behavior of others to larger problems in the United States. Furthermore, they believe their generation will come together over the next 25 years and do more than previous generations to save the environment (Howe & Strauss, 2000). The best example of their team orientation comes from their choice of friends. Naturally, millennials are drawn to social circles; over 60% socialize in groups (Howe & Strauss, 2000). From these social circles, they bring team orientation into their daily lives.

Millennials are achieving. Millennials worry a great deal about achievement. They focus on performing well academically, being involved in extracurricular activities, and working hard (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Millennials and their parents share this focus (Twenge, 2006). From the positive messages on children's shows to the healthy view that their career choices are not largely defined by their SES and upbringing, millennials believe in external achievement and seek opportunities to excel in science, technology, and math (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Therefore, millennials think very highly of college and view it as an opportunity to get a good job that will make them successful. Because of this mindset, many of them feel pressured to perform well to gain entry into a great college. Twenge (2006) found that millennials are "loading their schedules with every advanced placement class available, and then piling on three or four extracurricular activities and hours of community service, all in pursuit of getting into the right college" (p. 117). With the increasing desire to achieve, members of this generation are often defined by their accomplishments, and they remain confident in their potential for greatness.

Millennials are pressured. Because of the pressure millennials face due to their achievement mentality, this generation has a hard time being spontaneous and is very driven when it comes to accomplishments. With this drive has come pressure that was not present in other generations. Howe and Strauss (2000) described the pressure millennials feel in the following way: "Today's kids feel a growing sense of urgency about what they have to do to achieve their personal and group goals. They feel stressed in ways their parents never did" (p. 184). Because of this, they have turned to multitasking, and many of them struggle to find free time because of their extensive and time-consuming schedules (Howe & Strauss, 2006). Parents are also contributing to pressure, with 80% of millennials indicating that they felt pressured by their parents to maintain good grades, attend college, and find a good job (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Millennials are conventional. In contrast to members of previous generations, millennials are a very respectful, non-rebellious group. They believe the government will provide for and take care of them, and they have an overall fear of being rebellious. In fact, 50% of them trust the government to do what is right, and more than half of them believe the lack of parental discipline is a major problem in society (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Their clothing, music, and cultural artifacts are conventional. In addition, because of their sheltered childhood, they view their parents as important in regards to providing advice and giving opinions. Rather than rebel against parental values, this generation's values are more congruent with those of their parents as compared to previous generations (Howe & Strauss, 2006). Therefore, 60% of millennials seek advice and guidance from their parents. Furthermore, 90% indicated that they view their parents as trustworthy and that they feel extremely close to them (Howe & Strauss, 2006; Rainer &

Rainer, 2011). Not only do they get along well with them, but also they agree with their decisions on right and wrong. Millennial ideas are very traditional and neo-classical in nature. Many millennials even have a traditional perspective of marriage, and over 80% of them believe they will only marry once (Rainer & Rainer, 2011).

Millennials and Technology

Millennials are savvy when it comes to technology adoption and communication through technological devices. They communicate in a variety of ways, such as through cell phones, SM, email, and video conferencing. Younger millennials prefer text messaging as their main form of communication, while older millennials still prefer the phone. In addition, family members have begun to use these avenues to communicate with millennials. The cell phone was identified as vital to the lives of 70% of millennials (Rainer & Rainer, 2011). Cell phones provide the means for the two most common communication methods millennials use: texting and calling. According to millennials, the best way to reach them and the way they communicate is via text message, which allows them to communicate in short bursts and fits into their multitasking routines. Because of such short burst, instantaneous communication, they are often impatient when it comes to searching for information or consuming news stories (Rainer & Rainer, 2011). Furthermore, millennials are the generation behind SM and often define it as their connection to the world in which they live (Rainer & Rainer, 2011). They use SM to find friends, follow news stories, meet spouses, and even support causes they think are important. One of the most visual examples of the power of millennials' SM activity is

Barack Obama's presidential campaign, where they rallied together, forming a critical element in his ultimate election (Rainer & Rainer, 2011). Millennials have integrated technology into their personality more than anything (Rainer & Rainer, 2011).

Millennials and Debt

Millennials are actually risk avoiders when it comes to debt. According to Howe (2014), many of them have a conservative portfolio and want a stable career and job security. In addition, they are less likely to have debt than their Generation X counterparts at their age (Howe, 2014). A study the DeVere group conducted indicated that millennials were as risk averse as baby boomers, citing their difficulties with finding work and the fact that they were part of one of the worst recessions in history as the reasons for this aversion (Dornbrook, 2014).

Even with their risk-averse nature, one of the biggest concerns older millennials face is debt, with over half believing it is actually their biggest concern (Wells Fargo, 2014). In spite of their adversity to risk, many of them feel they are already overwhelmed by debt (Ellis, 2014; Wells Fargo, 2014). Credit card debt, student loans, and mortgages are the driving force behind their feeling of being overwhelmed. At least 47% of them are paying more than half of their monthly income toward debt (Wells Fargo, 2014). Nevertheless, even with their debt struggles, over half of millennials are currently saving for retirement, and 70% of them believe they will be able to create the lifestyle that they want in the future (Ellis, 2014). The optimism of the millennial generation continues;

however, clearly they engage in debt avoidance as a result of the economic struggles they witnessed both during and after the recession.

Marketing and Higher Education

One can divide the history of marketing in higher education into three different time frames: (1) the post-space race expansion, (2) the commodification of higher education, and (3) the marketing era. During the post-space race expansion in the early 1950s and 1960s, higher education was experiencing significant increases in federal funding. The goal was ultimately to create advances in technology that would lead to scientific discoveries for private businesses. Therefore, the federal government invested large sums of money into research at different institutions (Anctil, 2008). The increased funding institutions received during this period slowly decreased in the 1970s, the 1980s, and the early 1990s. The decline in funding led to what many believe was the commercialization (or commodification) of the modern university (Anctil, 2008; Maringe & Gibbs, 2009; Zemsky, Wegner, & Massy, 2005). During this "commodification," for-profit institutions began to capitalize on public institutions' inability to adapt and appropriately serve a particular segment in the market, the full-time working adult student, whose main focus was on flexibility and the ability to complete a degree at convenient times (Anctil, 2008). In fact, for-profit institutions were among the first to adapt online education and spent large amounts of marketing dollars on reaching prospective students. This commercialization of higher education led to the marketing era.

The marketing era represents a change in the marketplace brought about by decreases in funding, the rise of for-profit institutions, and declining enrollments. This era has forced institutions to take a look at their identities in this crowded marketplace and make adjustments to reach unserved segments of the market (Anctil, 2008). To remain competitive within this era, institutions have worked to enhance their institutional identifications and focus on their institutional culture (Toma, Dubrow, & Hartley, 2005). To promote this identification, institutions have turned to sophisticated marketing departments to assist with building awareness and brand equity in a commercialized market (Anctil, 2008). Therefore, modern institutions must be both market driven and mission driven, as they must market an intangible product, establish a brand identity, and engage in market differentiation strategies.

Market Driven or Mission Driven. Sands and Smith (1999) recognized that a long-standing debate exists in higher education over whether institutions should be either market driven or mission driven. This "either/or" proposition causes significant tension between institutional marketing departments and academic departments. Anctil (2008) argued that the answer to the question of whether an institution should be market driven or mission driven is that they should be both. Anctil (2008) acknowledged that while some educational institutions would prefer to be strictly educational endeavors, the truth remains that higher education is now big business. Blumenstyk (2006) highlighted the usage of call centers, online lead generation, search engine optimization, and other similar initiatives in for-profit institutions that have communicated their desire to offer education while also marketing their institutions. According to Zemsky et al. (2005), even with changes in the marketing activity of non-profits, institutions must "make sure

that market success remains the means, not the end. Institutions can exploit opportunities

to gain revenue, but also those opportunities must be reasonably in sync with [their]

mission" (p. 1).

Marketing an Intangible Product. One of the difficulties of marketing for an

institution remains the classification of the product. According to Canterbury (1999),

characteristics of higher education represent many of the characteristics of a service.

Most specifically, institutions are offering an intangible product: the student. Rather than

viewing the student as the product, Canterbury (1999) argued that the product of the

institution should be opportunities. These opportunities allow students to "learn from and

contribute to experiences and associations which will clarify any change their lives, short

and long term, forever" (p. 23). The opportunities are the students' to take advantage of

and the institution's to market, a situation that is both market driven and mission driven.

Brand Identity in Higher Education. University branding is a concept that has

seen much attention in the marketing era (Anctil, 2008). Kotler and Fox (1995) defined

university branding as something that is "given a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or

some combination that identifies them (products and services of universities) with the

institutions and differentiates them from competitors' offerings" (p. 225). Sevier (2001)

described a brand as a promise. This promise delivers value to consumers and provides

quality and consistency that allows consumers to identify products that might interest

them (Armstrong & Kotler, 2013). Ultimately, a brand is made up of two essential

elements: awareness and relevance (Ries & Ries, 2002; Sevier, 2001).

Sevier (2001) asserted that if students do not know the institution well and the

institution does not understand exactly what it represents, then the institution has no

brand. In that case, the institution is simply a commodity. Once the institution is perceived as a commodity, differentiating factors include price and convenience. The goal of branding an institution is to get prospective students to include that particular institution in the choice set in their decision-making process (Sevier, 2001). Brand awareness is important because it lies inside the choice set within which consumers evaluate a particular brand. Therefore, an unknown brand has very little chance of selection (Aaker, 1991). Second, brand relevance is the evaluation of the fit of the particular message communicated and the need the consumer has that must be met. If institutions offer high-quality academic programs, prospective students must be aware of these programs through the execution of a relevant message (Sevier, 2001). According to Anctil (2008), the trust test of a university brand is the willingness to actually pay for it.

Consumers have a strong affinity for brands and often look to them to make meaning and develop strong relationships (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). Therefore, an institution should work on strengthening preference for its brand. Aaker (2012) asserted that the basis of competition is to win the brand preference battle. Within this battle, the idea is that a competitive advantage is realized if a product is superior in one of the categories of choice and similar to competitors in others. This preference must first be developed through brand equity. Kotler and Keller (2006) defined brand equity as the "customer's subjective and intangible assessment of the brand, above and beyond its actual perceived value" (p. 151). Brand equity is ultimately a combination of the elements of a brand (awareness and relevance) as well as perceived brand quality, brand loyalty, brand associations, and proprietary brand assets (Aaker, 1991). When building brand equity, institutions must differentiate themselves from others.

Market Differentiation in Higher Education. Market differentiation is the positioning of a particular organization to answer the consumer's value propositions. In higher education, market differentiation is defined as "communicating how your institution best suits consumers' needs and is the best choice of available options" (p. 49). This differentiation relies solely on perception. Prospective students are unlikely to have the ability to factor in all of the different characteristics of institutions (Anctil, 2008). Anctil (2008) provided a synthesis of seven market differentiation perspectives institutions can pursue (Best, 2008; Day, 1999; Kotler, 1999; Kotler & Armstrong, 1996; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Kotler & Keller, 2006). First, institutions can be exclusively available to prospective students. However, as Anctil (2008) pointed out, this option is not widely available. Second, an institution can provide a better product. This approach depends on the institution's ability to communicate how its brand is superior to that of competitors. Third, an institution can offer a better service experience for students across departments. Fourth, an institution can furnish a better value. With this approach, an institution can share why it represents the most value for the investment. Fifth, an institution can provide a lower price than everyone else. Sixth, an institution can offer convenient access. This approach focuses on making the entire purchase easy for the prospective student. Finally, an institution can provide a personalized solution for the prospective student, which the rise of technology has facilitated (Anctil, 2008). These seven differentiation perspectives can assist the institution in marketing its perceived tangible benefits. By making tangible the intangible, an institution can market the intangible characteristics of the educational experience through (1) perceived academic

quality, (2) social life and amenities, and (3) a successful and visible athletic program (Anctil, 2008).

Perceived Academic Quality. One heuristic students use to measure the academic quality of an institution is the annual *US News and World Report College Rankings* (Altbach, 2012; Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Conrad & Conrad, 2000). This list is an annual ranking of colleges and universities around the world based on numerous factors related to admissions, retention, and graduation rates. These rankings play a significant role in student matriculation decisions, with changes in rankings leading to increased student applications (Dearden, Grewal & Lilien, 2014). According to Altbach (2012), university rankings have reached an iconic status with significant amounts of annual buzz generated on which institutions have improved and which have underperformed. Frederickson (2001) argued that rankings put pressure on institutions to keep up quality and to help consumers succeed after graduation. In addition, consumers use these rankings to decipher what institutions have to offer in terms of value, prestige, and price (Altbach, 2012).

Prospective students' use and adoption has drawn much attention to marketing the ranking of institutions. The first *US News and World Report Rankings* appeared in 1995 and focused on master's degrees in public relations. Shortly after this release, universities began advertising their rankings to prospective consumers (Frederickson, 2001). The rankings have even led some institutions to design their entire differentiation strategies around improving scores (Farrell & Van Der Wef, 2007). Even though these rankings are being used in marketing-perceived academic quality, the list has angered some college presidents, who call it a beauty contest rather than a reputational survey and refuse to

promote it in any of the literature for their institutions (Arnoldy, 2007; Farrell & Van der Wef, 2007). However, others refer directly to their rankings when asked about the academic quality of their institutions (Zemsky et al., 2005).

Other studies have shown student perceptions of academic reputation (AR) are not solely found in the *US News and World Report Rankings*. Conrad and Conrad (2000) focused on assessing the following three aspects: (1) the relative importance of attributes that might comprise a college with a good AR, (2) the likelihood that particular attributes might be possessed by a college with a very good AR, and (3) the dimensions that underlie both AR and very good AR. When determining perception of AR, this survey indicated the most important piece identified by respondents was the ability to get a good job followed closely by teaching expertise. In addition, the number of different majors offered, technological facilities, tuition costs, course difficulty, and the academic quality of students enrolled were also important for AR. Students surveyed in a study Bowman and Bastedo (2009) conducted identified tuition costs and instructional expenditures as an indicator of a strong AR. Furthermore, according to Bowman and Bastedo (2009), institutions can attract students through dedicating resources to improving instructional quality or simply raising tuition.

Social Life and Campus Amenities. Perceived social life, the characteristics of the people and experiences found at the institution, has shown to be a factor in determining how attractive an institution is to a prospective student (Capararo, Kenneth & Wilson, 2004). According to a study Capararo et al. conducted (2004), after controlling for perceptions of quality, students were likely to find a school more attractive based on how they identified themselves with social life opportunities on campus (Capararo et al.,

2004). Institutions have become increasingly aware of this phenomenon and have begun

marketing the enhanced social life experience through a vast array of amenities for

prospective students (Anctil, 2008). Dubbed as "college as a country club," this trend has

seen large spending on upgrading recreation facilities, food choices, and campus housing

in an effort to attract prospective students (Drury, 2010; Jaschik, 2013; Kellogg, 2001,

Wang, 2013; Winter, 2003; Zimmerman, 2013).

Hot tubs, water slides, and rock-climbing walls are just some of the amenities that

can now be found in redesigned and upgraded recreation facilities at institutions

throughout the United States (Kellogg, 2001; McCormack, 2005; Winter, 2003). These

amenities have been justified as the cost of attracting new students to the institution and

of remaining competitive (Winter, 2003). Social life amenities are found in not only

recreation centers but also upscale private housing facilities, as demands for such living

conditions remain strong across the United States (Cohen, 2012; Drury, 2010). Schools

now feature lavish residence halls with apartment-style amenities rather than traditional-

style dormitories (Cohen, 2012; Dodd, 2014; Drury, 2010). Ultimately, this shift to

increased spending on amenities has proven valuable in the recruiting process, and

research indicates that colleges can attract students by spending more money in these

areas (Dearden et al., 2014; Jaschik, 2013). Perhaps, a quote by one student best

illustrates an institution's willingness to feature these amenities in its marketing efforts:

"If you are not going to an Ivy League school, why not have some fun?" (Zimmerman,

2013).

Successful and Visible Athletics. Anctil (2008) described athletics as the best

advertising money can buy. An athletic program that is successful and visible emphasizes

tangibility and assists in marketing an intangible product, such as higher education

(Anctil, 2008). The athletic program is often a principal part of the overall brand image of

the institution (Lee, 2008). Athletics offers three benefits for the institution: 1) helping

prospective students identify with the college or university, 2) giving the institution's

brand relevance through brand communities, and 3) provide advertising for the institution

through sporting events.

      In institutional marketing, athletics is a "double-edged sword." It remains a strong

way to recruit prospective students when institutions are winning, but it is not helpful if

the athletic brand is not widely recognized (Anctil, 2008). Studies on high-profile coach

hiring and successful sports performances have documented increased applications of

prospective students, demonstrating opportunities for institutions to focus on branding

through athletic programs (Anctil, 2008; Clark, Apostolopoulou, Branvold, & Synowka,

2009; McEvoy, 2005; Toma & Cross, 1998). Therefore, highlighting a successful athletic

program in institutional marketing efforts creates what is referred to as a "halo effect."

The halo effect occurs when a consumer rates one particular aspect of a brand as

favorable and in turn assigns a favorable rating to other aspects of a brand (Beckwith,

Kassarjian, & Lehman, 1978; Leuthesser, Kohli, & Harich, 1995). Thus, a successful

athletic program can lead to increased favorability in other institutional areas (Anctil,

2008; Landrum, Turisssi, & Harless, 1998; Leuthesser et al., 1995).

      Non-Traditional Methods of Marketing. As institutions continue to compete

for prospective students, marketing continues to change. With the need to market

intangible qualities, student social life and athletic prowess continue to be critical;

however, the manner in which these marketing efforts are occurring is changing.

Traditional viewbooks and push strategies are being replaced by a more collaborative

approach. According to Kotler, Kartajaya, and Setiawan (2010), this new age is defined

as marketing 3.0. In marketing 3.0, consumers are collaborative, cultural, and spiritual,

and they demand approaches that mimic these values.

The rise of collaborative marketing began with university Web sites. Geyer and

Merker (2011) stated that the Web site is a vital tool for prospective students, and

properly designed Web sites that deliver information are beneficial to prospective

students. However, in this study, 25% of students asserted that a poorly designed Web

site could actually cause them to stop considering the school (Geyer & Merker, 2011). In

the collaborative age of marketing 3.0, the Web site should be open and engaging and the

basis for the institution's relational marketing activities. In a different study, 50% of

prospective students indicated that the Web played a significant role in their enrollment

decisions and that they preferred Web sites that were simple and easy to navigate ("E-

Expectations Report," 2012).

This rise in simplicity is likely related to the increased use of mobile devices to

search for information and engage in online dialogue. In the "E-Expectations Report"

(2012), 52% of prospective students said they viewed higher education Web sites on

mobile phones, and 69% stated that they would use live chats if available. Furthermore,

60% were open to receiving text messages from admissions counselors ("E-Expectations

Report," 2012). Demand remains high for the capability to find program information with

mobile devices (Lee, 2013). This demand has led universities to adopt mobile channels to

reach prospective students. In the past, students were directed to the Web site; now the

goal is to strengthen the mobile offering (Goldie, 2006).

Web sites and mobile access have become important resources for prospective students; however, the rise of collaborative marketing through SM has led to disruptive changes in higher education marketing. Consumers can now express their opinions, wield influence, and search for authentic information through SM. Mangold and Faulds (2009) described SM as a hybrid element of the promotional mix because SM facilitates communication to customers and subsequent communication among customers. Therefore, higher educational institutions can no longer control the content, but they can take advantage of working with consumers to not only review content but also create and collaborate on content. One particular example of content collaboration was a study Fagerstrom and Ghinea (2013) conducted. This study looked at the creation of Facebook groups related to a particular subject of interest and invited prospective students interested in that subject to join the group. The university in the study assigned a university employee to oversee the group. This person was simply a facilitator who engaged in activities and answered questions if needed in the group. All dialogue was transparent, and often the prospective students answered each other's questions on the Facebook site. Conversion rates for applicants in these groups reached 88.8%, which is 45% higher than those who were not part of the Facebook group (Fagerstrom & Ghinea, 2013).

As illustrated, SM has become commonplace for institutions, with many college and universities conducting entire campaigns across SM platforms (Stoner, 2013). The rise of SM in higher education illustrates the importance of the relationship between institutions and prospective students. While university Web sites should remain focused on engaging prospective students, SM applications can assist students in being more

informed about enrollment decisions (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Hayes, Ruschman, & Walker, 2009).

Models of College Choice

Conceptual models of college choice began to materialize during the 1980s (Chapman, 1981; Chapman, 1986; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982). One can divide these models of college choice into three distinct perspectives: economic, sociological, and psychological (Bergerson, 2009; Kinzie et al., 2004; Paulsen, 1990). Economic models suggested that students selected colleges based on the perceived return a college degree could give them. Therefore, net costs, financial aid, the opportunity cost of missing earnings, and the projected return on investment after graduation were the most important predictors of the likelihood of enrollment (Bergerson, 2009; Kinzie et al., 2004; Paulsen, 1990). The second type of emerging models were based on a sociological perspective that "asserted that students' desires to attend college, or college aspirations, were influenced by SES, student academic ability, high school context, gender, and views of significant others" (Kinzie et al., 2004, p. 26). These background factors were significant in determining the likelihood of college attendance (Bergerson, 2009; Paulsen, 1990). Finally, psychological models focused on the interaction of student and institution to formalize a perceived fit at a particular institution. This model placed great emphasis on institutional characteristics, such as tuition, location, curriculum, financial aid, and other environmental factors, as well as stressing how they interrelated with student characteristics (Bergerson, 2009; Paulsen, 1990).

Researchers integrated these three perspectives to formulate specific models of college choice in the 1980s.

D. Chapman's Model of College Choice. One of the first conceptual models of college choice theory was formulated by D. Chapman (1981), who reviewed previous research to introduce a theoretical model of college choice. This model indicated that this selection was based on student characteristics, external influences, and student expectations of college life that students formulate to make a rational decision on attendance.

Reviewing each component of Chapman's (1981) model of college choice will illustrate the student's selection process. Regarding student characteristics, many factors can be attributed to the likelihood of attending college. First, SES was found to be a determinant of whether a student is more likely to attend college. Chapman (1981) asserted that students with higher SES are more likely to attend college than those with below average SES. Furthermore, SES was a contributor in determining which colleges are likely affordable for students. A second student characteristic, aptitude, was a basis for the screening of applicants by the college and the selection of a college by the student at which other students had similar aptitude scores. The third student characteristic, level of educational aspiration, involved what the student wanted to accomplish in the future, suggesting that certain levels of confidence would be positively associated with college choice. A fourth student characteristic, high school performance, was a criterion colleges used to accept or reject students. This performance not only helped students to judge into which colleges they could gain admission but also could reflect the amount of encouragement they received from friends, family, and teachers.

In Chapman's (1981) model, external influences also contributed to the student's

decision to enroll in a particular institution. One of the largest external influences was

that of significant persons, such as family, friends, and school administrators who offered

advice on life at a particular college, where students should attend college, or where they

"went" or were "planning to go" for college (Chapman, 1981). Another external

influence, fixed college characteristics, represented location, costs, campus environment,

and program availability. Chapman (1981) indicated that cost could be a restraining

factor, but financial aid has been found to offer the opportunity to increase a student's

college choices. Location, as a fixed college characteristic, was also found to be

important in the decision process, with over 92% of students attending college within 500

miles of their homes and 50% attending within 50 miles (Chapman, 1981). The final

external influence was the effort the college placed on communication with students.

Chapman (1981) asserted, based on previous research, that high school visits by

admissions personnel and communication with high school counselors were critical in the

college selection process. Chapman's (1981) model of college selection identifies major

factors in the process students use to make selections on which colleges to attend.

Jackson's Model. Jackson (1982) developed his model on college choice based

on previous research that illustrated economic and sociological factors as being

predominantly used in college choice theory. Jackson (1982) combined economic and

sociological factors to create a three-phase model of student choice. The first phase of the

model is preference. During this stage, academic achievement, according to Jackson

(1982), is the strongest correlation, followed by social context (i.e., peers, neighbors, and

schools) and family background. These components encompass aspiration, which

contribute to the preference a student has to attend a particular institution. Exclusion, the

second phase, is based on evidence that location is the strongest influence; family and

academic background follow. Jackson (1982) pointed out that this phase is one in which

institutions can intervene through marketing. Students in this phase create some type of

exclusion criteria to eliminate colleges in their choice set. The third phase, evaluation, is

a complex phase and occurs when a student evaluates and chooses a college. Many

scholars disagree over the consistency through which students evaluate colleges (Jackson,

1982). The most important variables in this phase include college cost, job benefits,

family influence, and college attributes. In this phase, students select colleges from their

choice sets by eliminating certain schools that do not meet evaluative criteria. Jackson

(1982) believed it was important to improve this model, especially regarding tactical

efficiency. He concluded his model by discussing variable effects and their influence on

college choice by phase (Table 1).

Table 1

Jackson's (1982) Variable Effects by Phase

	Preference	Exclusion	Evaluation	Overall
Family Background	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Strong
Social Context	Moderate			Weak
Academic Experience	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Strong
Location		Strong	Moderate	Strong
Information		Strong		Moderate
College Costs		Strong	Moderate	Strong
College Characteristics		Moderate	Weak	Moderate
Job Characteristics		Moderate	Moderate	Moderate

Jackson's variable effects suggest that if an institution wants to attract students, it should

do so by focusing on the strongest variables: (1) academic experience, (2) location, (3)

family background, and (4) college costs.

R. Chapman's Model. R. Chapman (1986) developed a model that proposed a

behavioral theory of college choice. Chapman's model contains five components: (1) pre-

search behavior, (2) search behavior, (3) application decision, (4) choice decision, and (5)

matriculation. According to Chapman (1986), this model includes both search and choice

components. "Search" refers to attributes students look for that characterize life at

college, including the quality of academics, career opportunities, cost, and quality of life.

"Choice" involves the process students use to select a college from all of those for which they submitted applications. The search phase ends with the decision to fill out an application, and the choice phase ends when students select a college. This behavioral model was Chapman's approach to a sequential process of decision making in college choice.

Pre-search occurs when students recognize that they want to obtain a college education. This phase could last for many years and usually involves a cost-benefit analysis of college education and alternatives. During this process, the students may begin to look at other information sources. Search behavior occurs when students begin collecting information regarding potential colleges. This collection occurs through family members, close friends, high school administrators, and direct materials sent from potential schools. According to Chapman (1986), the search phase eventually ends when the cost to continue is too great and the knowledge of college attributes is thought to be accurate. The application decision occurs when students decide to apply to a school after their search. In this stage, students send applications to a few select schools they have narrowed down in the search process. They make a choice based on the choice set, or colleges that have offered students admission. In this choice decision, students are thought to be knowledgeable about the attributes of the colleges and generally use heuristics to reduce choices to a manageable number based on the attributes the colleges possess. This phase ends with the choice of a college the students will attend. The last stage involves matriculation, which is the phenomenon that occurs because of the lag between when the selection of a college is made and the first date of attendance. Even

though college selection may be made in the spring, not until actual matriculation in the

fall is this stage is complete.

      Hossler and Gallagher's Model. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase

model of college choice was the result of a synthesis of previous literature and is the most

widely used model in college choice theory (Bergerson, 2009; Ceja, 2006; Cabrera & La

Nasa, 2000; Hossler, Braxton, & Coppersmith, 1989; Teranishi et al., 2004). This model

focuses on the characteristics of students as well as the current state of higher education.

Table 2 presents an example of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model.

Table 2

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model of College Choice

Model Dimensions	Influential Factors		Student Outcomes
	Individual Factors	Organizational Factors	
Predisposition (Phase 1)	Student Characteristics	School characteristics	College Options
	Significant Others		Search for other options
	Educational Activities		
Search (Phase 2)	Student preliminary college values	College and university search activities (search for students)	Choice Set
	Student search activities		Other Options
Choice (Phase 3)	Choice Set	College and university courtship activities	Choice

An in-depth look at Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model reveals important college

choice factors. The following section describes each area of Hossler and Gallagher's

(1987) model, with an emphasis on both individual and organizational factors:

predisposition, search, and choice.

Predisposition (phase 1). The first stage of this model is developmental in nature. First, students contemplate whether they would like to continue their education beyond high school. Pitre, Johnson, and Pitre (2006) described predisposition as the early stage of college choice that includes "aspects of school context, student demographics, academic and personal attributes, and abilities, as well as environmental and economic factors" (p. 36). During this stage, student characteristics, based on individual factors, are directly attributable to college attendance. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) identified SES, parental education, student ability, gender, ethnicity, and parental encouragements as individual factors that influence college choice in the predisposition phase. Paulsen's (1990) synthesis of research through 1989 has confirmed that certain student characteristics lead to a higher likelihood of college attendance. Table 3 provides a list of the identified student characteristics that result in a higher likelihood of attending college.

Table 3

Likely College Attendance Based on Student Characteristics

Students are more likely to attend college when:
1 They are Caucasian rather than non-Caucasian
2 They are not married
3 Family income is higher
4 Parents' educational attainment is higher
5 Father's occupational status is higher
6 Parental encouragement is greater
7 Their own educational/occupational aspiration is higher
8 Academic aptitude is higher
9 High school academic achievement is higher
10 A college preparatory curriculum is followed in high school
11 More peers plan to attend college

(Paulsen, 1990)

Recent studies also confirm these individual factors. Background characteristics of the

student, peers, and family continue to be contributing factors to specific college selection

(Desjardins, Dundar, & Hendel, 1999; Flint, 1992; Tierney, 2009; Weiler, 1994).

Organizational factors are also important in the predisposition phase of the

college choice model. Though not having as strong of a correlation as individual factors,

organizational factors interact with individual student factors to influence the college

choice decision. Positive organizational factors that exist in this stage include quality

curriculum in high school, involvement in high school, and proximity to a college.

Paulsen (1990) also found that an attractiveness of a college increases based on the

characteristics listed in Table 4:

Table 4

Attractiveness of College Based on Institutional Characteristics

The attractiveness of a college increases when
1 Tuition is lower
2 When financial aid is greater
3 Room and board costs are lower
4 The distance from home to college is less
5 Admissions selectivity is higher
6 Curriculum offerings are greater

(Paulsen, 1990)

According to Paulsen (1990), interactions exist between student characteristics and institutional characteristics that determine the likelihood of college selection. Because of the personalized nature of the process, it is difficult to standardize findings for every student; however, Paulsen (1990) has found the following:

- Colleges become less desirable as tuition, room and board expenses, and distance from home increase. However, the higher the parental income and students' aptitude, the less they affect students' decision to attend.

- Colleges become more desirable as financial aid increases, especially scholarship awards. However, this is magnified for students who have high academic achievement or represent minority groups.

- The selective nature of the institution represents a quality indicator for the student; therefore, the desirability of the college increases with higher levels of selectivity.

Other research has supported Paulsen's (1990) institutional characteristics and Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) findings. Hoyt and Brown (2004) conducted a factor analysis of 22 studies on college choice that used 10 or more factors. Hoyt and Brown (2004) found the nine factors that most frequently landed in the number one spot. They are as follows: (1) AR, (2) location, (3) quality of instruction, (4) availability of programs, (5) quality of faculty, (6) costs, (7) reputable programs, (8) financial aid, and (9) job outcomes. Furthermore, recent studies produced similar findings, including a continued focus on AR and an increased focus on campus life attributes (Acker, Hughes, & Fendley, 2004; Desjardins et al., 1999; Cho, Hudley, Lee, Barry, & Kelly, 2008; Conrad & Conrad, 2000; Joseph, Mullen, & Spake, 2012; Judson, Gorchels, & Aurand, 2006; Klein & Washburn, 2012; Rood, 2009; Rosen, Curran, & Greenlee, 1998).

Search (phase 2). This phase occurs once students decide they would like to continue their education. During this phase, students begin to search for information about particular schools to formulate a choice set, or a number of institutions to which they will submit applications. Litten (1982) found that parental education has the strongest effect on the college search process with the greatest factor being the way information is obtained. Parents with higher education levels assisted students with the assimilation of knowledge reported. Therefore, according to Litten (1982), colleges engaging in the search process will need to develop strategies to reach high school counselors where parental education is lower. While parents and students may both be collecting information to help evaluate colleges and universities, they find these sources differently. Table 5 provides a summary of preferred information sources of college

attributes during the search process based on Paulsen's (1990) synthesis of previous

research.

Table 5

Preferred Information Sources by College Attribute

College Attributes	Students	Parents
1. Financial	Admissions Officer	Admissions Officer
	College Publications	College Publications
2. Fields of Study	College Publications	College Publications
	Admissions Officer	Admissions Officer
3. Academic Reputation	H.S. Counselor	H.S. Counselor
	Commercial Guides	Commercial Guides
	Alumni	Alumni
4. Teaching Quality	H.S. Counselor	Alumni
	College Students	College Students
5. Academic Standards	H.S. Counselor	Alumni
		Admissions Officer
	College Students	College Faculty
6. Location	College Publications	College Publications
	College Students	College Students
7. Social Atmosphere	Alumni	Alumni
	Admissions Officer	College Students
8. Careers Available	Alumni	Alumni
	Admissions Officer	Admissions Officer

(Paulsen, 1990)

Because of the influence of these information sources on parents and students, colleges

and universities must take into account both interested parties and make efforts to direct

quality information to each. Recent studies have indicated that students and parents rely

heavily on campus visits and Web sites to gather information in the search phase (Hoyt &

Brown, 2004).

The most important occurrence during this search phase is the development of a

choice set by students. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) argued that students do not use

information rationally during this stage and do not distinguish between the list price and

net price of attending particular colleges. Galotti (1995) found that students consider four

to five alternatives and use between eight to ten criteria to determine their college of

choice. These four or five alternatives are usually determined through a variety of factors;

however, the advice of guidance counselors, friends, teachers, family, and coaches plays

a role in this search behavior (Noel Levitz, 2012b). Often, the biggest mistake that occurs

during this phase is when students narrow down what type of institution they want to

attend, eliminating those that could possibly be a good fit for them.

Choice (phase 3). The third phase of the college search process is selection and

ultimately matriculation to the college of choice. This stage is characterized by the

narrowing down of the student's choice set to select an institution to attend. Hossler and

Gallagher (1987) found that the influence of public policy is low and the outcome is

determined by a combination of individual and organizational factors that emerge during

phases 1 and 2. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) described the use of awards and strategies

offered by the institution with the student as a "courtship procedure" that demonstrates

some signs of influence on choice.

Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) highlighted the importance of college and the

evaluation of net costs in the final decision. Institutional characteristics such as

reputation, location, cost, program offerings, and sense of fit interact with individual

characteristics as all-important factors in the choice stage (Bergerson, 2009). Paulsen

(1990) examined 10 studies from the institutional perspective to determine what

attributes contribute most to the likelihood of enrollment. They identified the following

attributes: (1) cost, (2) financial aid, (3) programs, (4) size, (5) location, (6) quality, (7)

social atmosphere, (8) athletics, (9) religious emphasis, and (10) jobs available after

graduation.

The Emergence of Technology in College Choice

According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), during the search phase, students

look for information about colleges and universities to form a choice set and subsequent

evaluation criteria to eliminate choices. The purpose of college admissions in moving a

student from application to enrollment remains the same; however, traditional forms of

communication are being replaced by new technological opportunities to create

relationships with prospective students who are actively involved in the college choice

process (Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2009). Traditional-aged college students who are entering

the college search process were likely born between 1995 and 1997. This means they are

part of the millennial generation. Though college choice theory has been well

documented and researched, the rise of technology and the emergence of students who

are more adept at using technology have initiated some changes in the process.

Although some differences of opinion exist in the classification of the dates

millennials were born (Carlson, 2005; Howe & Strauss, 2000), they are often

characterized as "digital natives" (Carlson, 2005; Howe & Strauss, 2000). Prensky (2001)

defined digital natives as "students who are all native speakers of the digital language of

computers, video games, and the Internet" (p. 1). Smith (2012) argued that digital natives

are unique and require technique adaptation to reach. For example, research suggests that

digital natives are tech savvy "multitaskers" who are native speakers of technology and

that these natives embrace interaction and simulation, demand immediate gratification, and desire strong relationships with information (Smith, 2012). Therefore, college and university representatives should seek to highlight these claims rather than attempt to downplay them.

According to a recent Noel Levitz (2012a) study, student expectations regarding technology are a driving force in the college choice decision process. In a Noel Levitz survey, (1) 50% of students said the Web was influential in their application decision, (2) 75% preferred simplicity in Web site navigation, (3) 52% viewed college Web sites on their mobile phones, (4) 46% visited a college's Facebook page, and (5) 69% of those liked a college's Facebook page. In addition, over 69% of these students would utilize live chat features with admission personnel if available, and 97% said they would open email from a school they were considering. Lindbeck and Fodrey (2010) echoed these findings, asserting that over 80% of students use the school Web site, open school emails, and find both to be highly useful in making enrollment decisions. Other technologies students were using included cell phones, social networking, video content, and blogging. Lindbeck and Fodrey (2010) concluded that colleges and universities should improve technologies and utilize new technologies to engage prospective students.

Deciding which technologies to use more intently in the recruiting process could prove difficult. It is no secret that digital natives find a large portion of their community through online relationships (Liang, 2012). Recent reports indicated that 95% of millennials use the Internet, and 81% of them use some form of SM (Arts & Sciences Group, 2013; Duggan & Smith, 2013). Of those 81%, three-quarters frequent SNSs on a daily basis (Arts & Sciences Group, 2013; Duggan & Smith, 2013). With the rise in new

technology use in the college choice process, colleges have embraced alternative methods

of recruiting. Not surprisingly, one of the more popular methods used by colleges is SM

(Barnes, 2012).

SM can be difficult to define. Many definitions exist with reference to its presence

online. Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) offered a definition referring to the roots of Web 2.0

in SM. They defined SM as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the

ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow for the creation and

exchange of user-generated content" (p. 61). Blackshaw and Nazzaro (2004) defined SM

as "a variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated

and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services,

personalities, and issues" (p. 2). Mohammadian and Mohammadreza (2012) reiterated the

latter definition by "referring to social media as activities, practices, and behaviors among

communities of people who gather online to share information, knowledge, and opinions

using conversational media" (p. 58). Ultimately, simpler definitions exist, defining SM as

the way people share ideas, content, thoughts, and relationships online or simply as

technology people use to be social (Safko, 2012; Scott, 2011). In the end, SM has become

an outlet for communication regarding events, activities, products, and services in the

lives of consumers. Examples of SM outlets include collaborative projects (e.g.,

Wikipedia), content communities (e.g., YouTube), virtual game worlds (e.g., World of

Warcraft), virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life), and SNSs (e.g., Facebook and

Twitter; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). While companies are present in all forms of SM,

SNSs remain critical regarding brand reputation, as they provide the best tools for

companies to listen to consumers and to have access to their social connections.

In particular, colleges and universities frequently view SNSs as important in the process, with 18% more of those schools reaffirming SM as important in their marketing efforts in 2012 versus 2011 (Barnes, 2012). Not only are colleges and universities widely using SM, but also positive results are realized from institutional efforts to connect with students (Barnes, 2012). In fact, colleges that are not using SM are falling behind in their marketing efforts and may possibly be giving up a significant competitive advantage in the recruitment process (Greenwood, 2012; Zimmermann, 2014).

Chapter 3: Method

Research Design and Rationale

This study focused on making sense of the lived experience of the college choice process. An IPA was used. IPA is a "qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 1). Qualitative research is appropriate in this study because it is used to explore meaning individuals assign to specific problems that are aspects of their individual lives (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research focuses on making sense of the world in which participants live. The voice of the participant is the focal point, and qualitative research contains detailed accounts and write-ups that vividly portray this facet (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research is conducted when there is a desire (1) to arrive at a deep understanding of the issue, (2) to explain linkages in theories, (3) to develop partial theories for populations and samples that highlight the complexity of the issue examined, and (4) to answer questions quantitative methods fail to address (Creswell, 2009). The method of qualitative research involves the deductive process of identifying patterns in data, forming categories, and then producing a written narrative of this process (Hatch, 2002).

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three-phase model of college choice provides a theory on the progression of selection based on factors of influence in each of three

identified stages: (1) predisposition, (2) search, and (3) choice. While numerous studies have identified factors of influence in each of the stages, the question of "how they are used" remains puzzling. The high involvement and personal nature of the college choice decision is best studied in the personal context of each potential student. Therefore, qualitative methods allowed the present researcher to better understand participants' experience making decisions regarding college choice, while also giving them a voice to share their stories.

IPA is the most appropriate qualitative research approach because of the focus on experience, sense making, and the importance of college choice as a major life decision for the participant. According to Smith et al. (2009), as people begin to experience something major in their lives, they reflect on the significance of what has happened. The experience of choosing a college is a major event in anyone's life. It represents the first experience of being away from home, choosing a career, and providing for oneself without the aid and convenience of direct family intervention. Researchers utilizing IPA use those reflections to understand how individuals make sense of important decisions in their life. This understanding in IPA research comes from a realization of the context of cultural and socio-historical factors. Therefore, not only does the researcher look at how the participants make sense of their experiences, but also he or she is also looking at his or her own processing of how they are making sense of their experiences (Shinebourne, 2011). IPA thus involves collecting very detailed personal accounts of experience in an attempt to link the separate parts to the discovery of a common meaning through interpretation (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA emerged in 1996 when Jonathan Smith proposed that it was time for psychology to be both experiential and qualitative (Smith et al., 2009). Smith (1996) argued that psychological history precluded an experiential focus. Shinebourne (2011) asserted that IPA provides a "middle way between different qualitative methods" (p. 45). This "middle way" offers a lens to study the subjective experiences of individuals and allows the researcher to conduct qualitative research with a non-philosophical background (Willig, 2001). Many psychology researchers began to adopt IPA in their studies, and recent research has indicated that the IPA approach is continuing to gain popularity (Smith, 2011). According to Smith (2011), researchers published 293 papers on IPA from 1996 to 2008 with a majority of them coming from the United Kingdom (Smith, 2011). In addition, the number of papers originating from the United Kingdom utilizing an IPA approach continues to grow (Smith, 2011). From a theoretical background, IPA is an "approach to qualitative, experiential and psychological research which has been informed by concepts and debates from three key areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 11).

Phenomenology. Phenomenology is the study of the essence of experience in the living world (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 2002; Moustakas, 1994). The central question in phenomenology is as follows: "What is the nature of this phenomenon?" (Hatch, 2002, p. 30). Once the researcher identifies a phenomenon, he or she collects data from those who have experienced it, and the researcher then provides a description addressing the "what" and the "how" of this experience (Moustakas, 1994).

The contributions of three philosophical figures in phenomenology, that is to say, Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, have facilitated the construction of the

theoretical foundation of the phenomenological part of IPA. According to Smith et al.

(2009), Husserl established the "importance and relevance of a focus on experience and

its perception" (p. 21). Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre each followed this

development with a "view of the person as embedded and immersed in a world of objects

and relationships, language and culture, projects and concerns" (p. 21). IPA is

phenomenological because it attempts to make sense of how an individual engages with

the world based on the following: objects, relationships, languages, cultures, projects, and

concerns. Consequently, to fully understand an object, one must understand the context

of these. These are combined to form the lived experience of the individual (Frost, 2011).

IPA tends to lean toward Heidegger's view. He looked at this inquiry as interpretative,

concerned with attempting to reveal something that was previously hidden and focused

on what this revelation is like from the viewpoint of the participant (Frost, 2011).

        Hermeneutics. IPA is interpretative because the researcher is not only making

sense of what the participants are going through but also analyzing how they are making

sense of the experience. Therefore, at its core, IPA is a hermeneutical approach.

Hermeneutics is the art of interpretation (Schleiermacher, 1998). Schleiermacher believes

that hermeneutics is focused on understanding the written or spoken language and on

offering judgment to establish the authenticity of texts, both partial and full, from the

evidence and data that are presented or collected (Schleiermacher, 1998). The idea is that

the researcher obtains an idea of the whole and then attempts to see how the individual

parts of the writing or speech relate to the life of the author (Schleiermacher, 1998).

        Smith et al. (2009) called the hermeneutical circle "the most resonant idea in

hermeneutic theory" (p. 27). The hermeneutical circle focuses on the relationship

between the part and the whole and represents a visual pattern of thinking within

hermeneutics (Smith et al., 2009). Basically, the circle reflects a belief that the whole

informs the part and the part informs the whole. Examples of this relationship can be

found in Table 6.

Table 6

Hermeneutical Relationship

The Part	The Whole
The single world	The sentence in which the word is embedded
The single extract	The complete text
The particular text	The complete body of lifework
The interview	The research project
The single episode	The complete life

(Smith et al., 2009)

The hermeneutical circle suggests that parts only become clear when one realizes the

whole and vice versa (Smith et al., 2009). This circle offers much insight into the process

of IPA research. Most qualitative research involves a linear approach, and, while IPA is

no exception, Smith et al. (2009) stated "that the process of analytics is iterative − we

may move back and forth through a range of different ways of thinking about the data,

rather than completing each step, one after the other" (p. 28). Ultimately, the

hermeneutical circle proposes that no matter where a researcher begins an analysis of the

text, each piece can uncover different perspectives relating to the part-whole dichotomy.

The connection of hermeneutics and IPA goes beyond simply the hermeneutical circle, as

IPA goes further than simply trying to describe the experience. The researcher is interpreting what it means for the participant to experience this phenomenon within his or her context (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). IPA was developed to "transcend or exceed the participants' own terminology and conceptualizations" (Larkin et al., 2006).

Idiography. Idiography stands in stark contrast to most theoretical approaches in psychology that are concerned with making declarations at the population level about the behavior of humans (Smith et al., 2009). Idiography is "concerned with the particular" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29). IPA is related to idiography because of the concern with vivid detail and deep analysis (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is also related to idiography because of the focus on identifying the essence of a phenomenon for a particular person in a specific context (Smith et al., 2009). According to Shinebourne (2011), IPA is committed to the case and proposes that a single detailed case could offer "opportunities to learn a great deal about the particular person and [his or her] response to a specific situation, as well as to consider connections between different aspects of the person's account" (p. 47).

A single case affords the opportunity for the researcher to begin with a foundation for this particular person and use additional cases to feature claims that are more generalized and supportive across cases (Shinebourne, 2011). This method is called analytic induction and focuses on providing an initial hypothesis, which is tested across each case. Each new case the hypothesis comes into contact with alters it to fit (Smith et al., 2009). While the ultimate goal of this process is to arrive at an overall hypothesis that explains all cases, generally it is not possible, so a hypothesis that reflects most of the data is accepted (Smith et al., 2009). Those who use IPA focus on the particular and

believe an evaluation of these cases can provide "phenomenologically-informed models for the synthesis of multiple analyses from small studies and single cases" (p. 32).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Ultimately, as Smith et al. (2009) pointed out, IPA is concerned with the "detailed examination of human lived experience" (p. 32). This examination is deeply connected to each of the theoretical methods of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. Smith et al. (2009) believes the relationship with IPA and the three methods can be further described based on the following three ideas: (1) the reflection of personal experience, (2) the hermeneutical turn, and (3) the focus on the particular.

IPA is concerned with the reflection on personal experience because at the core of phenomenological research, the idea is that it is a reflection of everyday experience. When Husserl emphasized the importance of going back to the thing itself, he was referring to the actual lived experience of the individual, not necessarily the philosophical underpinnings of the experience (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, IPA examines the subjective experience of a particular phenomenon and is ultimately concerned with a particular moment of significance for the individual person. Small everyday experiences become a larger, more significant event in the life of the individual being examined (Smith et al., 2009). The experience reflected to the researcher is what Smith et al. (2009) referred to as "experience close" (p. 33). Experience close describes the reflection of an individual's sense making after the event has occurred, rendering it the closest thing to witnessing its occurrence. Regarding the reflection of personal experience, IPA is not committed to one particular perspective of phenomenology, but to the human lived experience and the meaning that is imposed on that experience (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA is highly committed to Heidegger's and Gadamer's version of phenomenology, which includes hermeneutic aspects. Smith et al. (2009) concluded that to make sense of what the participant has said or written, a very close interpretive process occurs on the part of the researcher. Therefore, rather than a complete focus on bracketing, the researcher should place importance on engaging with the participant in a positive process (Smith et al., 2009). This coincides with the fact that IPA employs a double hermeneutical approach with preference given first to the participant's sense making and second to the researcher's sense making (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, regarding textual analysis, IPA researcher transcriptions are contemporary in nature and reflect Schleiermacher's notion of the importance of understanding not only what is said but also who is saying it (Smith et al., 2009). IPA without phenomenology would produce nothing to interpret, and, without interpretation, the phenomenon would never be seen (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA's focus on the particular cannot be overlooked. The value of IPA is held in the detailed accounts of lived experience provided through cases (Smith et al., 2009). Examinations of individual cases and comparisons across cases can provide perspective on larger population studies in the future. These perspectives can be pieced together to provide the reader with insight for future research of the phenomenon.

Participants and Site

Smith et al. (2009) asserted that no specific guidelines exist for what the appropriate sample size for an IPA study should be. IPA research focuses on individual experiences, and these are complex in nature. Therefore, IPA studies tend to concentrate on a small number of cases (Smith et al., 2009). For doctoral studies, the rough

recommended sample size is between four and ten (Smith et al., 2009). Previous studies

using IPA as a methodology have various sample sizes. Cooper, Fleischer, and Cotton

(2012) explored the learning experiences of students using a sample size of six. Denovan

and Macaskill (2012) used a sample size of 10 in their study of stress and coping in first-

year undergraduate students. Ecklund (2013) conducted his dissertation research on the

persistence of male engineers in higher education and used 12 participants. The sample

size is intended to produce a detailed account of lived experience and should remain

manageable, so as not to overwhelm the researcher with large amounts of data (Smith et

al., 2009). Even though previous studies used smaller sample sizes, the present researcher

adopted a somewhat larger sample of 15 participants to prepare for potential dropouts and

varying participation levels due to the extended data collection process.

To be consistent with qualitative research, the sample was chosen purposefully

and will reflect an interpretation of participants' lived experience by the researcher.

Participants were located through various gatekeepers who knew participants who could

provide access to the college choice phenomenon of the study. The researcher was able to

identify gatekeepers through personal and family connections. The first gatekeeper was a

high school counselor who was a relative of the researcher and was selected out of

convenience. The researcher contacted the gatekeeper who provided access to 12 of the

participants through personal connections with students and parents. The gatekeeper

spoke with the principal and superintendent of education for the school district, and they

verbally instructed the researcher to send an email. The researcher sent an email detailing

the study purpose (and sent the same one to parents) to the superintendent of education to

gain approval to contact participants. Once approval was granted, the gatekeeper

provided a list to the researcher of students who were thinking about attending college, had verbally agreed to participate in the study, and had provided their parents' email addresses if younger than 18 years of age. The researcher first contacted the parents directly asking for permission and provided them with a copy of the release form. For participants 18 years of age or older, the researcher did not use the parental permission form. Once the release form was signed, the researcher contacted the students via email or through text message to sign the release form and answer questions about the process and time commitment for the study. Each of the other three gatekeepers was identified through a blanket SM message. The researcher posted a message on Facebook outlining the purpose of the study and the qualifications for participants. The intention of the Facebook message was to find the remaining three participants.

Three gatekeepers, friends of the researcher, responded that they had children or knew of children who were engaging in the college choice process. One of the gatekeepers attended college with the researcher and had a son who was currently going through the college choice process. The researcher sent over the release form for e-signature. Once the release form was e-signed, the researcher then contacted the person's son. Another of the gatekeepers who also attended college with the researcher had a niece who was engaging in the college choice process. This gatekeeper contacted her brother who gave verbal permission for the researcher to send an email to him for his daughter's participation in the study. Once her father signed the release form, the researcher contacted the participant directly. The last gatekeeper, the researcher's personal trainer, had a daughter who was 18 years old. The researcher knew the daughter worked at a local

gym, so he stopped by and spoke with the participant about the study. The participant agreed and signed the form for participation.

Of the participants, eight were male and seven female. Twelve of the participants were located in the state of Mississippi. Of those 12, 10 attended the same high school in the southern geographical region of the state. The other two attended a private high school located in the same region. These 12 participants were considering many of the same colleges in Mississippi: the University of Mississippi, the University of Southern Mississippi, Mississippi State University, Mississippi College, Milsaps College, and Belhaven University. Two of the participants from Mississippi were being recruited to play collegiate athletics and were speaking with various colleges throughout the United States. Two other participants out of the 12 from Mississippi were also looking at colleges throughout the United States, including the University of San Francisco, the University of Oregon, the University of Wisconsin (UW), Harvard University, and Vanderbilt University.

The other three participants were located in Missouri, North Carolina, and Florida, respectively. The participant from Missouri considered colleges throughout the United States, including the University of Oregon, Chadron University, the University of Alabama, and Montana State University, among others. The participant from North Carolina was considering mainly in-state colleges, including the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, the University of North Carolina–Wilmington, East Carolina State University, North Carolina State University, and Campbell University. The participant from Florida was also considering mainly in-state colleges, including Florida State

University, the University of South Florida, the University of Central Florida, and Florida

Gulf Coast University.

A breakdown of the participants is presented in Table 7. Most of the participants

in this study were high achieving, with test scores higher than state averages. The average

composite ACT score in the United States is a 21 ("2014 National ACT Scores," YEAR).

The average composite ACT score in the state of Mississippi is a 19. Participants in this

study from Mississippi achieved an average score of 25.41. The average composite ACT

score in the state of Missouri is a 21.8. The participant in this study from Missouri earned

a 30. The average ACT score in the state of Florida is a 19.6. The participant in this study

from Florida earned a 26. For the participant in the state of North Carolina, the SAT was

required. The average SAT score in the United States is a 1497 ("SAT Percentile Ranks,"

2014). The average SAT score in the state of North Carolina is 1483. The participant in

this study from North Carolina achieved a 1670 ("North Carolina Overview," 2014).

Based on average data by state, all participants but one in this study performed better than

their state average, with five of the participants performing at or above the 90th percentile

in the United States.

Table 7

Participant Demographic Data

First Name	Junior/Senior	ACT/SAT Score	Number of Parents with College Educations	Intended College Major
Laura	Senior	29	2	Biology/Pre-Med
Charles	Senior	30	2	Business
Sharon	Senior	21	2	Marine Biology
Linda	Senior	26	2	Biology/Pre-Med
Robert	Senior	24	1	Business
Mark	Senior	27	1	Civil Engineering
Kenneth	Senior	23	2	Biology/Pre-Physical Therapy
Paul	Junior	23	2	Undecided
Donna	Junior	24	2	Pre-Med or Engineering
Mary	Senior	1670	2	Biology/Pre-Med
Dorothy	Junior	27	2	Environmental Science/Engineering
David	Junior	30	2	Education
Edward	Junior	29	2	Biology/Pre-Med
Debroah	Junior	30	2	Biology/Pre-Med
James	Senior	18	1	Business

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in this study was to explore how participants make sense of their lived experience of college choice. Previously, the researcher worked in higher education as the director of enrollment for non-traditional programs at a small liberal arts college. As the researcher watched enrollments of traditional students slowly decline, he began to wonder if the inability to attract students was a result of a lack of innovation. Therefore, the researcher began to compile data on millennials' habits. Being part of the millennial generation, the researcher understands that millennials prefer to be communicated with by non-profits. As the researcher began to speak with admissions officers at other institutions throughout the South, he realized that many of them did not understand how their new marketing efforts, including enhancements to their technology and SM strategies, were affecting their enrollment. This was the basis for the researcher's decision to pursue this research and determine how the college choice decision was being made.

The researcher focused on the experiences and understandings of the participants' college choice decision-making process. He was oriented to these particular objects of interest and will explore them and their relation to the college choice decision (Smith et al., 2009). In this exploration, the researcher engaged in a double hermeneutical process and attempted to make sense of how the participants were making sense of their college choice process. During the process, the participants' meaning making was of most importance followed by the researcher's own (Smith et al., 2009). The researcher took a center-ground position during the study, which combined a hermeneutics of empathy

with a hermeneutics of questioning in an attempt to adopt an insider's perspective (Smith et al., 2009). More specifically, the researcher attempted to walk "in the shoes" of the participants while understanding their sense making during the college choice phenomenon.

Prior to conducting the interviews, the researcher bracketed ideas and perceptions of both the millennial generation and of college choice based on previous experiences. The researcher brought assumptions and prior experiences to interpretation of the texts. The interviews were collaborative, as the researcher worked with the participants to dissect and interpret relative meanings from responses (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). Therefore, the researcher followed the participants in unanticipated directions that were positively related to the study.

Data Collection Procedures

As Smith et al. (2009) recommended, the researcher discussed guidance on style, informed consent (see Appendix I), and interview location with the participants and the appropriate parents/guardians. Prior to the monthly interview, the researcher prepared an interview schedule (see Appendix II and III), which assisted the researcher in recalling topics to discuss with the participants. It also helped to prepare the researcher for any sensitive issues that arose while allowing him to remain flexible during the interview. The researcher used the schedule as a guide rather than a stringent tool, allowing follow-up questions and discussions on journal communications that related to the research questions (Smith et al., 2009). Data were recorded using a voice recorder, and the

researcher took field notes during the interview process. Data from the recorder were transcribed, and all words spoken by both parties, as well as non-verbal utterances, were identified in the transcription.

According to Smith et al. (2009), the data collection method best suited for IPA research is one that encourages the participants to offer a "rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences" (p. 56). Smith et al. (2009) concluded that the best methods to access these first-person accounts are in-depth interviews and the process of keeping a diary (journal). Even though very few IPA studies utilizing journaling as a method of data collection have been published, Smith et al. (2009) asserted that using diaries (journaling) combined with in-depth interviews would "facilitate the elicitation of stories, thoughts, and feelings about the phenomenon" (p. 56). The directions for the study included the participant's keeping a journal and speaking with the researcher monthly until a college decision was made or until search activities had ceased. The journal was to include a listing of the top five colleges the participants were currently considering. When the participants made a change to their top five lists, they were instructed to make note of that change in their journals and describe why they had made the changes.

The researcher created a password-protected Web site for participants to record their journal activities. During the process, participants were reluctant to share information, even through a password-protected Web site; however, many of them asked about sending journals through short messaging services such as text messaging, twitter direct messages, and Facebook messages. Smith et al. (2009) indicated that most people "have learned to give personal information in bite-sized, box-ticking packages and may need encouragement and guidance in engaging in fuller, deeper disclosure" (p. 56).

Therefore, the researcher encouraged participants to send journal entries through short messaging services. Once a participant engaged with the researcher in this manner, journal entries were collected and discussed during monthly interviews. On occasion, when short messages were unclear, the researcher would ask additional clarifying questions.

Smith et al. (2009) also encouraged creative and imaginative work and stated that IPA benefits from a collection of data from more than one perspective at more than one point in time. Therefore, once journal entries were being communicated via short messaging services, the researcher encouraged more "in the moment" communication during important college choice events, such as campus visits, receipt of interesting mailings and acceptance and rejection letters, and major changes in participants' top five colleges. This form of journaling was more immediate and allowed the researcher to be at the decision point of many of the participants' college choice decisions. Journal entries on password-protected sites tended to be short, fewer than 50 words; therefore, a change to short messaging services did not limit participants and allowed the researcher to seek clarification immediately if needed rather than at the monthly scheduled interview session.

After each monthly interview, participants were encouraged to update the researcher on any changes prior to the next scheduled monthly interview through the use of journaling. In addition, 2 weeks prior to the interview, the researcher sent out a reminder asking for any updates to encourage the collection of stories and to allow participants to speak freely. Participants who were seniors in high school (eight total in the study) used the journaling process more consistently than those who were juniors

(seven total in the study). This difference could be attributed to the immediacy of the decision. Seniors in high school were transitioning into college life more quickly than their junior counterparts.

The interview process began with an initial interview. This interview was voice recorded, included a formal introduction between participant and researcher, and continued with the collection of background information and the answering of the initial study questions (Appendix II). The goal of the initial interview was to get an idea of how far along the participant was in the college choice process and to identify a list of the top five colleges being considered. At the conclusion of the initial interview, the researcher provided guidance on journal communication and scheduled the next monthly interview. Between monthly interviews, journal entry communication was recorded. At the beginning of each recorded monthly interview, the researcher would recall events from the previous interview, ask about each journal entry recorded by the participant, and then continue with the monthly interview questions (Appendix III). Monthly interviews would be conducted with participants until either a formal college decision or a general decision to discontinue the search until further developments were made.

Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness, the researcher followed the four criteria presented by Guba (1981): credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability), and confirmability (objectivity). The researcher used the

following techniques to meet these criteria: (1) member checks, (2) peer debriefing, (3)

triangulation, and (4)

audit trails. In member checks, the researcher summarized information from previous

journal entries and interviews prior to going forward with the next interview. This

allowed the participant to clarify or make statements regarding comments and takeaways

from previous interviews. Peer debriefing was conducted with an expert methodologist

who evaluated interview questions prior to conducting interviews. The expert

methodologist was able to identify questions that were "searching" or "leading" prior to

engaging in the data collection process. Triangulation was used to compare written and

verbal data to ensure accuracy. First, the researcher transcribed each interview. Second,

the researcher compared each transcribed interview once again to the verbal recording

prior to data analysis to ensure transcript accuracy. Finally, an audit trail was established

that included a copy of the interview notes, each individual interview transcription,

journal communication, and data and coding files for the qualitative software MaxQDA.

Data Analysis Procedures

Smith et al. (2009) described the process of data analysis with IPA as being

"characterized by a set of common processes" (p. 79). The process of IPA moves from

particular to shared and from descriptive to interpretative and then to a commitment to

understanding the participant's point of view and subsequent meaning making that is

derived from the data. The researcher followed the six steps Smith et al. (2009) outlined

for unidirectional IPA analysis in each case. Step one is the process of reading and re-

reading the data. This step involves the participant's becoming the focal point of the transcription. Step two is the process of initial noting. This step is the most detailed, as the researcher makes note of anything of interest, which allows for a deeper understanding of meaning and the way in which the participant communicates through the exploratory note process. Step three, the development of emergent themes, requires the researcher to manage the data by decreasing the complexity of the transcript and exploratory notes. Step four is searching for theme connections; this step involves the researcher's looking for textual or conceptual reasoning for joining emergent themes. Step five involves moving to the next case and completing steps one through four in the same manner. Step six is pattern identification and is done across multiple cases to uncover common themes.

Prior to beginning the analysis process, the researcher had to import two types of data into the qualitative software MaxQDA: interview transcriptions and journal entries. First, the researcher transcribed each individual interview. The format for the transcription included space for the original transcription (dialogue between researcher and participant) and space for the researcher to type exploratory comments (to be completed in step two). The researcher then listened to an audio recording of the original interview and checked the transcription for accuracy. Appropriate corrections were made, and the researcher marked the interview as complete and formatted for entry into MaxQDA. Once the interview was in the desired format, the researcher imported the document and matched it to the appropriate participant in MaxQDA. Second, journal entries that occurred and were discussed in monthly interviews were copied from the appropriate short messaging service and imported into MaxQDA as a word document or

in .jpg format, whichever was appropriate for the type of data. This journal entry data were also matched to the participant and tagged with the appropriate interview date. This process was repeated for each interview with the participant and related journal entries matched and the date tagged.

IPA analysis is done in an idiographic fashion by analyzing each individual case. In this study, an individual case represented an individual participant. Because of the design of this study, each individual case was made up of several interviews and journal entries. Therefore, a single case was the conglomeration of all interview and journal entry data for the participant. When following the six-step unidirectional process for IPA analysis, the researcher completed steps one through three for each interview and related journal entry (that are part of a single participant case). Once a single interview and related journal entry were analyzed, the researcher would move to the next interview and related journal entry for the same participant. After all of these were completed, the researcher would then move to step four for the entire case. Once step four was complete, the researcher would move to the next case (new participant).

Step one of Smith et al.'s (2009) unidirectional IPA process involved the reading and re-reading of interview transcriptions. The goal of this step was for the researcher to immerse himself in the data as reported by the participant. For each individual case, prior to analysis, the researcher would listen to an audio recording of the original interview and read along with the transcription visualizing and recalling the voice of the participant within the original interview. Any major observations the researcher noticed during the interview process were recorded in the exploratory comments column of the interview transcriptions in an attempt to bracket these off while focusing on the remaining data in

the interview. Once the researcher listened to and re-read the transcription from the participant, he moved on to step two of the process.

Step two of the process was the longest and most comprehensive step for the researcher. This step, initial noting, is when the researcher engaged in a free textual analysis. For each interview, the researcher would make notes regarding anything of interest within the transcript. This was conducted in three distinct ways. First, the researcher would write down whatever came to mind when reading certain words or sentences. These comments were written in the exploratory comments section and typically involved identifying words or phrases participants used to describe things that mattered to them. These words or phrases were related to how participants were making decisions and changes regarding their top five colleges or who or what was influencing their decision-making process. Second, the researcher would also identify and make exploratory notes related to the participant's language use. Notes on language generally related to what words the participant used to make sense of his or her understanding of the college selection process and how he or she named or referred to certain aspects of the phenomenon. Finally, the researcher would make exploratory notes related to how the participant was conceptualizing the process and how he or she understood the way decisions were made. These exploratory notes were more interpretative and based on the personal experience and professional knowledge of the researcher. They represented how participants processed and understood how their decisions were being made.

Step three of Smith et al.'s (2009) process of IPA analysis involves the development of emergent themes by the researcher. Smith et al. (2009) described themes as statements that are "expressed as phrases which speak to the psychological essence of

the piece and contain enough particularity to be grounded and enough abstraction to be conceptual" (p. 92). The researcher grouped particular items together and interpreted the written exploratory comments to become much larger themes that represented the complexity of each of the interviews. Therefore, in this step, the researcher's experience and the participant's experience were connected, reflecting both the participant's comments and the researcher's interpretation. The researcher focused on analyzing the exploratory comments. Using MaxQDA, the researcher categorized themes into the following appropriate self-identified categories as they surfaced: (1) college attributes, (2) relation to college choice, (3) factors of influence, and (4) institutional marketing efforts. Exploratory comments that were related to these categories were highlighted and coded using a color system based on the related category. For example, if an exploratory comment included a reference to desired college location, it was coded based on that relation. Therefore, college location had multiple codes, but all of these codes fell under the college attribute category.

Step four of the process involves the search for connections across emergent themes. Prior to engaging in this step, the researcher completed steps one through three for all interviews and related journal entries for a particular case (a participant). Step four of the process was then focused on identifying these emergent themes for the entire case (all participant interviews). In this step, using MaxQDA, the researcher activated all emergent themes from step three for all interviews and journal entries for the participant being analyzed. The researcher then clicked on each of the emergent themes by self-identified categorization that arose during step three. Related themes were grouped together with a superordinate title. For example, if a participant mentioned handwritten

notes, personal admissions counselor communication, or a personal tour as factors of importance, a superordinate theme was created and named. For this example, the superordinate theme was personal communication and institution fit. Themes were also grouped together if they related to significant events in the participant's life. For example, if a participant mentioned different elements of her campus visit, such as university staff, random students, and atmosphere, a superordinate theme was then created that focused on the campus visit experience to help organize these emergent themes. Themes were also grouped based on numeration, or the frequency of occurrence. For example, if a participant mentioned the phrases "fallback school" or "dream school" multiple times throughout all of her interviews, these occurrences were grouped under a dedicated superordinate theme for each: dream school and fallback school. Finally, to bring all of the superordinate and emergent themes together, the researcher created a theme table. The theme table included the numbered superordinate theme for the case and emergent themes underneath. In addition, key quotes from the interview were also pulled out to emphasize the voice of the participant in the emergent theme.

Table 8

Partial Theme Table

Theme	Key Quotes from Interview
1. A search for trust and quality	
1.1. The Importance of authentic and trustworthy information in framing Laura's ideal college	"I met this guy at the career fair, and he told me a bunch of stories about what [he] experienced at Mississippi College. It was the exact same way my cousins described their experience. Their story was exactly what I wanted mine to be, and I was just like 'Wow, that's more than one story.' You know it's not one story; everybody I talked to after that has kind of confirmed that the school was just the way everyone had previously described it."
1.2 Perceived reputation matters	"As for Mississippi State, the programs [it] offers seem wonderful. I can't really speak for it because I haven't taken any classes or done anything there. However, one of the reasons I'm not really excited about going there [is] I know [its] pre-med program is not quite as great as [that of] other schools."
1.2 Perceived reputation matters	"My parents think that I will get a better education at Mississippi College."
2. A search for boundaries	
2.2 Parents' comfort level with top choice reassures Laura	"They like Jackson because it is closer than Starkville, and my grandparents live in Jackson, so I think I will like being able to go to their house. It's a little more comfortable for me."
2.3 Strong religious faith desires boundaries	"FCA is very important to me. We do a lot. We have devotion every Tuesday morning, and we do a lot of see you at the poll, global day of prayer, and praying with students. We have a little assembly, and we just talk to people and really try to spread the word."
2.3 Strong religious faith desires boundaries	"I am 100% a Christian. God is a very important part of my life, and we have church every Sunday and Wednesday. I am the children's minister. On Wednesday night I do children's classes."
2.3 Strong religious faith desires boundaries	"I like Mississippi College['s] being a Christian university, so yes religious is important to me. I love how on fire they are for Christ and how they're pretty strict . . . I kind of like the boundaries of that. I think that will be good for me."

Step five involved the researcher's repeating steps one through four with each additional case. The researcher began the analysis by bracketing emerging ideas from the first case and then began working on subsequent cases. This helped with the idiographic commitment of IPA and allowed the researcher to keep themes and perceptions separate (Smith et al., 2009). By following the same initial steps, additional themes and emerging themes had the opportunity to come to the surface.

Step six involves looking for patterns across each case. First, the researcher printed out theme sheets for every case and placed them on the wall. After each theme sheet was laid out, the researcher looked for connections across cases. Connections included the identification of similar superordinate themes. For example, the mention of the inclusion of a dream school and fallback school by many of the participants led the researcher to group these into a master recurrent superordinate theme related to the topic. While initial patterns could be identified from a visual review, the qualitative software MaxQDA allowed for a deeper analysis. After the researcher identified specific, recurrent master superordinate themes from the visual review of the theme sheets, he activated any previous emergent themes in MaxQDA related to the recurrent master theme to verify recurrence. The researcher used the principle that a superordinate theme must be present in at least one-third of cases to be identified as recurrent. Once recurrence was established, themes for the study were identified and grouped in MaxQDA.

Anticipated Ethical Issues

The ethical issues that emerged in this study focused on informed consent, psychological risk, time sacrifice, and data protection. Regarding informed consent, the researcher first obtained approval from the institutional review board of George Fox University. After receiving informed consent, the researcher obtained permission from the parents or legal guardians of all participants under 18 (Appendix I). Participants 18 years or older were able to sign the form on their own. Once permission from the parents or legal guardians was obtained, the researcher also provided each participant with an informed consent form that covered the expectations for the interview process and required a signature of acceptance as well (Appendix I).

During the process, the researcher was aware of psychological risk that may occur as participants consider relationships with family, friends, and colleges. However, participants did not report any occurrences of these issues during the process. Furthermore, the participants did have to sacrifice time; however, the researcher attempted to keep monthly interviews to less than 45 minutes and did not send unnecessary text or short message communications.

All of the data collected remain confidential. They are stored in a password-protected folder on the researcher's computer and a password-protected backup on an external hard drive. All paper copies of interview notes or random information about the participants were converted, placed into the protected folder, and then shredded.

Chapter 4: Results

The Results section was written in accordance with the guidelines Smith et al. (2011) proposed for IPA. The goal of this chapter is to provide an analysis of the participants' sense making. This sense making is presented using a comprehensive narrative account as supported by transcript extracts. Intertwined with transcript extracts is a systematic interpretation of the text. This chapter begins with an overview of the participants, providing some demographic information as well as a background and an overview of their progression through the college search process. Following the participants' overview, the findings are then presented and summarized using a thematic process.

Overview of Participants

The researcher, using a purposeful sampling procedure, selected 15 participants for this study. These participants were selected through the researcher's personal and professional contacts. Through gatekeepers, the researcher verified that each of the participants was engaging in the college choice phenomenon prior to obtaining necessary signatures for the study. Therefore, each of the participants had a desire to attend college after high school. Nine of the fifteen participants were in their senior year of high school, and six were in their junior year of high school. Thirteen of the participants' parents were

college educated, and all but two of the participants had never considered any other choice besides college. Twelve of the fifteen participants resided in Mississippi; the others were from Florida, Missouri, and North Carolina. In addition, four of the participants were being recruited for athletics at the college level.

The researcher asked for a commitment of 6 months in which the participants were to speak with the researcher monthly about their college choice process, keep a journal of constant communication with the researcher, and respond to prompts given by the researcher regarding college choice decisions. At the beginning of the study, the researcher gathered background information and the initial top five colleges (if formulated) participants were considering. After the initial interviews, the researcher would follow up with the participants through monthly phone interviews. The focus of these interviews was on further describing the reasons behind any changes to the participants' top five. In between interviews, participants were encouraged to send journal entries through short messaging services to update the researcher on changes to any colleges they were considering or on important events in their college search process. Events would often include additions and subtractions to their top five, interesting packets received in the mail, and thoughts on various campus visits. As participants became more comfortable with the researcher, various short messaging exchanges were made regarding their thoughts on college choice, pictures of interesting packets they received, copies of tweets and other communications with colleges over SM, and random thoughts on their own college search processes, both positive and negative. The technological communication between the researcher and participant was consistent with communication methods used by the millennial generation. The researcher would also

use this opportunity to send prompts to participants not communicating regularly, which

helped to keep the majority of the participants committed through the entire process.

Once a final choice or decision was made, a final interview was held, and the researcher

would then stop reoccurring communication with the participant.

Table 9

Participant Demographic Data (duplicate)

First Name	Junior/Senior	ACT/SAT Score	Number of Parents with College Educations	Intended College Major
Laura	Senior	29	2	Biology/Pre-Med
Charles	Senior	30	2	Business
Sharon	Senior	21	2	Marine Biology
Linda	Senior	26	2	Biology/Pre-Med
Robert	Senior	24	1	Business
Mark	Senior	27	1	Civil Engineering
Kenneth	Senior	23	2	Biology/Pre-Physical Therapy
Paul	Junior	23	2	Undecided
Donna	Junior	24	2	Pre-Med or Engineering
Mary	Senior	1670	2	Biology/Pre-Med
Dorothy	Junior	27	2	Environmental Science/Engineering
David	Junior	30	2	Education
Edward	Junior	29	2	Biology/Pre-Med
Debroah	Junior	30	2	Biology/Pre-Med
James	Senior	18	1	Business

Laura. Laura was a 17-year-old senior who desired to major in pre-medicine. She lived in Mississippi and was raised in a typical Southern home. Her family included both parents and two younger sisters. They were very religious and close knit, and both of her parents were college educated. Laura was a self-professed Christian who was actively involved in her local church. Laura was involved not only at her church but also in high school. She was an athlete, a member of numerous clubs and school organizations, and a student council leadership member. Laura even started an organization called Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) at her high school. Academically, Laura was a high performer and was ranked third in her class. She had a high school GPA of 4.2 and an ACT score of 28. She admitted that she tried very hard academically and recognized that as her strong point

Laura began her college search at the end of her junior year of high school. Initially, she was not sure what type of college she wanted. Her family had a long history with Mississippi State, a large 4-year public university; however, it was mainly in the form of being a "fan." The search phase for Laura lasted about 3 months before she decided on Mississippi College, a small, private Christian university, as the school she would likely attend. Laura was ultimately attracted to the authentic information she gathered from key individuals, including admissions personnel, family friends, and students who were currently attending Mississippi College. In the end, Laura chose Mississippi College due to the (1) quality of people, (2) size of the school, and (3) AR.

Charles. Charles was a 17-year-old senior who was looking to major in finance. Charles described himself as a nomad and said he moved around quite a bit because of his father's job, but had spent 6 years of his life in Mississippi. Charles lived with his

mother and father, who were both college educated. Charles mentioned frequently that his favorite part of high school was interacting with friends, and he liked a variety of classes from history to economics. His favorite subject was economics, which influenced his desire to become a finance major. In addition, he saw other family members succeed, particularly his uncle who majored in finance, and he believed he would be interested in that area of study. Charles was moderately involved in high school. He held leadership positions in the Beta Club and was active at his local church through community service. Academically, Charles was a high performer and enrolled in multiple advanced placement courses.

Charles's college search process started off somewhat dreary. Charles mentioned he felt disadvantaged because he had to go to college in Mississippi, and while he was considering colleges and universities outside the state, that was not his optimal plan. His desire was to attend a college or university that provided a delicate balance of cost and quality. Early on in his process, colleges located in Mississippi and Texas dominated his top three. As he moved forward, Texas was not a viable option because of out-of-state costs and low acceptance rates. Out of nowhere, a friend contacted Charles and enticed him to consider applying to UW. UW was a great option for Charles, since it could possibly prove to be a low cost (if he was awarded certain scholarships for which he applied) quality education (which UW was known for) in the finance world. At the end of the interview process with Charles, he was simply waiting on a response from UW on the essays he submitted for his scholarship. If UW provided him with the scholarships, he was determined to go there. If not, he would reluctantly choose a school in Mississippi.

Sharon. Sharon was a 17-year-old high school senior from Mississippi. Her parents were divorced; however, she remained very close to both. She was an only child and communicated that everyone in her family had attended college. Sharon, though not a huge fan of school, was very involved in extracurricular activities. She played volleyball, was involved in science club and the National Science Honor Society, and was the president of one of the student organizations. She described history as her best subject, and she ultimately wants to be a marine biologist. At first, she mentioned that she could not remember a time when she was first exposed to the field of marine biology. But upon further reflection, she talked about how her grandparents took her to the aquarium when she was younger, which was probably where she developed her fascination with marine biology.

Sharon's entire college search process was pretty quick. It took her 60 days to decide on which school was right for her, and she began at the beginning of her senior year (the time the interviews took place). Ultimately, her major drove a main part of her search. While she considered all large public universities in the surrounding areas, she ultimately decided on the University of Southern Mississippi because of its proximity to the ocean and good reputation for marine biology. She solidified her decision on a planned campus visit.

Linda. Linda lived in Florida where she grew up. She was an 18-year-old senior who attended a private Catholic high school. Linda's parents were divorced, but she maintained a relationship with both. Each of Linda's parents was college educated. Linda was also pretty involved in school and athletics and said her parents did not really bother her much as long as she kept her grades up. Linda was very drawn to culture and new

experiences, and she even mentioned that if she did not go to college directly after high school, she would love to simply travel the world.

Initially, Linda was open to many schools. During her junior year, she stated that she had visited several schools and understood a great deal about the college search process. Her favorite city in the United States was Boston, where her mother grew up and some family still lived. She liked this area so much that she considered attending Northeastern University because of its location in Boston and its excellent reputation. Throughout the process though, she looked at many Florida schools and eventually realized that Boston was not a good fit. After she made up her mind regarding this decision to stop pursuing Northeastern, she found out they rejected her application. As she set her sights more on schools in the state of Florida, Linda spent quite a bit of time visualizing her life and would frequently describe campuses as beautiful. Ultimately, she chose Florida State University because she could visually see herself there, found the campus to be beautiful, and was satisfied with Florida State University's reputation for medicine, in which she wanted to major.

Robert. Robert was one of the first of four participants being pursued for collegiate athletics. Robert was a senior in high school and grew up in Mississippi playing a majority of sports, as athletics is a major part of his life. His parents were middle class and had some college education, but neither of them completed a college degree. Robert was not very involved in high school activities; he focused solely on sports. One of the key decision factors in his process was net cost. He was looking to go to college and graduate without large amounts of debt and was willing to play any college sport he could. Therefore, his recruiting offers were coming from a number of different

colleges for a number of different sports. Ultimately, Robert decided to choose Millsaps College, a small private Christian institution where he was offered close to a full tuition scholarship. Though some of the expenses would be out of pocket, he believed Millsaps was worth the cost because of its reputation. He was enamored with the campus and felt like he belonged there. He also commented on the people and their hospitality. He posted his excitement to attend his college of choice on Twitter and was actually re-tweeted by his college of choice.

Mark. Mark was the second participant in the study who was being recruited for athletics. He grew up in the state of Mississippi and was a senior in high school. Although his parents did not attend college, they pushed for him to attend, as education was very important in their family. Mark mentioned that he has a sister who was high achieving and received a full-ride scholarship to her college of choice, so he was hoping to go down that same path. Mark was not very involved in high school except in basketball, which was his sport of choice. He played basketball at the high school level and was actively being recruited by all school types and all divisions. Ultimately, Mark famously said in his interviews that his only goal was to get college paid for so his parents did not have to come up with the money.

Kenneth. Kenneth was the third participant in the study who was being recruited for college athletics. Kenneth was a senior living in Mississippi and grew up playing sports. His sport of choice was football. His father played football at the college level, and Kenneth desired to do so as well. Kenneth played not only football but also soccer and baseball. Kenneth was open to playing any sport at the college level. Due to his busy athletic schedule, Kenneth did not spend a great deal of time on the college search

process. He waited for colleges to contact him for athletics. His focus was on athletic

opportunities at the college level, so other factors of college choice were secondary.

Kenneth achieved his desired goal and had multiple offers to play college sports. In the

end, he chose Millsaps College, his father's alma mater, to play football as his father had

once done.

Paul. Paul was the fourth participant in the study who was being recruited for

college athletics. He lived in Mississippi and was a junior just starting his college search.

At that point, Paul was unsure of exactly which school he wanted to attend; he simply

focused on playing football at the Division 1 level. He had always been involved in

sports, and playing Division 1 was a dream. Both of Paul's parents were college

educated, and they encouraged him to continue in sports at the college level. Paul viewed

a college degree as a fallback to playing professional football. Paul did not engage in an

extensive search process and had not been formerly contacted by any colleges for athletic

reasons.

Donna. Donna was a junior who grew up in Mississippi. Her mother and father

were both college educated. Donna had a love for medicine and always wanted to pursue

that path. Though Donna was just a junior, she was very active early on in the college

search process. She was torn between her dream school and a comfort school. Ultimately,

she found the process to be too complicated. She was scared of making an error in her

decision and decided to stay close to home to attend college. Therefore, she defaulted to

her fallback school until she found herself better prepared to decide what she wanted to

do with her life and which school she would attend.

Mary. Mary was born and raised in North Carolina. She had an extremely large family living in the area and said they were all very close. Mary's parents were both college educated, and her favorite thing about school was math and visiting with friends. Mary wanted to major in medicine but recognized the difficulty of admission to schools of her choice. She was very focused academically and even increased her standardized test scores during the college choice process in an attempt to get into her college of choice. Mary's search process was one of the most difficult. She applied to many schools and was waitlisted for her dream school, denied for her second choice, and then waitlisted for her third school. Therefore, her fallback school emerged as the college of choice for her and her likely place of attendance.

Dorothy. Dorothy was from Mississippi and had been there for the majority of her life. Both of Dorothy's parents were college educated. Dorothy was a junior, and her favorite part of high school was socializing with friends. Dorothy did not formerly choose a college major, but during the course of her high school career, she was introduced to environmental science, which she really liked. This introduction to science was driving her college major selection and school choices. Though she had not thought about a major, she liked to focus on the reputation of the school related to its "best" or most "well-known" majors. Dorothy wanted to decide on a major before her senior year to help her then formulate colleges she would consider. She was also torn about her desired college size. She saw benefits to both large and small colleges and realized that was something she would need to decide on prior to her senior year, as she would begin to consider more schools. Furthermore, she had a dream school, though she did not want to

just consider the dream school without giving ample consideration to smaller schools where a more personalized education may be present.

David. David was a junior who lived in Missouri. He was a high achiever and scored very well on standardized tests. His father was highly educated and had been a key factor in the college search process for David. Unlike other juniors in the study who spent most of their time deciding on a consideration set before the end of their junior year, David was focused on deciding on a college by the end of his junior year. Initially, David was considering education and was choosing colleges related to helping him become a teacher. These colleges generally featured strong reputations and high academic standards. Because of David's default to deciding on colleges that supported his major, he had to eliminate his dream school. Nevertheless, as David continued in the process, he was unsure about his major in education and thus considered other majors; he then placed his dream school back on the list.

David had assistance through the entire process. His father helped him formulate his consideration set and choice set. In addition, his father also helped to eliminate, add, and narrow down schools in his consideration set. Ultimately, he and David were concerned with getting a high-quality education. David and his father had a wide array of colleges they were considering and, therefore, received large amounts of traditional marketing mail. Each of them made judgments about colleges based on marketing efforts, and they both had a firm understanding of institutional marketing systems, which allowed them to secure larger packets of information, which they found more helpful than brochures or traditional flyers.

Edward. Edward was born and raised in Mississippi, though he moved around quite a bit during his childhood. He was a high achieving junior and was active in the college search. He described his family as very close, and he often saw many of his extended family in person. Both of Edward's parents were college educated. Edward enjoyed high school and was actively involved in many student organizations. He loved the field of biology and was introduced to it by a favorite teacher his freshman year. Because of this interest, Edward wanted to pursue biology. Edward had one of the more interesting formations of choice set. Early on, Edward had a few schools he was considering, mostly Ivy League colleges with great reputations. A representative from Harvard actually visited his high school and spoke with them about attending there. He became very interested in Harvard and decided to apply. His strategy in the search phase was basically to apply to as many Ivy League colleges as he could in the time frame he had and then see which ones he got accepted in to formulate a final choice set. Therefore, he saw his senior year as a very stressful and busy time of filling out applications and receiving admissions decisions from various colleges.

Debroah. Debroah was a junior who grew up in Mississippi. Both of her parents were college educated and valued college education. She and her mother had a very close relationship, and she had family who lived in the area as well. Debroah's involvement in high school was very complex; she belonged to many student organizations as a member and an officer. She was also an honors student with high standardized test scores. She played tennis and had a love for science. Debroah was leaning toward the medical field. She had not moved too far into her college search process, though she mentioned staying

close to home and the importance of affordability. Debroah did seem to be leaning

toward schools that offered the full "college experience."

      James. James, a senior in high school, grew up in the state of Mississippi. His

father was college educated, and his mother was a homemaker who was very influential

in his life. He was close to all his family who lived nearby. Initially, James was one of the

only participants in the study who was pursuing an alternative to college: the Air Force.

James did decide to attend college, though his process was somewhat erratic and

laidback. He decided to choose a school that was close to home, citing family as the

ultimate decision factor. His girlfriend was also attending the same college. Once James

realized the reputation of the nearby college was the same as that of one of the larger

schools he had originally considered, he made the decision to stay close to home.

Overview of Themes

      This study chronicled the lives of 15 participants who were in the midst of making

a decision regarding their future college choice. The emphasis of this study was to

understand the progression and decision-making process in the lived experience of the

individuals. Through a careful analysis of iterative, phenomenological, and hermeneutical

elements of the interview transcriptions, seven themes emerged related to participants'

lived experiences of college choice: (1) who to consider, (2) a college of comfort or a

college of adventure, (3) factors changing the choice set, (4) personal marketing matters,

(5) the visualization of college life, (6) an overwhelming journey, and (7) SM as

affirmation. Table 10 provides an overview of the superordinate themes and subthemes

for this study.

Table 10

Master Superordinate Themes

Themes	
1. Who to Consider	4. Personal Marketing Matters
1.1 College Major	4.1 Verbal and Personal
1.2 Reputation	4.2 Written and Personal
1.3 Location	4.3 Traditional Print
2. A College of Comfort or a College of Adventure	4.4. Online
2.1 The Dream School	5. A Visualization of College Life
2.2 The Fallback School	5.1 Perceived Fit
2.3 The College of Adventure	5.2 My Choice
3. Factors Changing the Choice Set	6. An Overwhelming Process
3.1 Debt is a Burden	7. SM is Affirmation
3.2 The search or recognition of Authenticity	
3.3 The emergence of the Small College	
3.4 Parents	

Theme 1: Who to consider

The participants often knew internally that college was the right path for them; however, they rarely recalled making this conscious choice. When presented with a question that asked if they ever thought about alternatives, responses emphasized the question's preposterousness. Many of the participants responded with an emphatic "No" or even laughed directly after the question. Others, such as David, provided a statement emphasizing that this choice has been a part of him for a long time: "I don't think so. I think I've always kind of had the drive to go to college" (David, 16:89). Edward even mentioned that he was "really not open to not going to college because I feel like it's a necessity at this point in society. Personally, I feel like I need to get a degree" (Edward, 8:77). It was evident from the discussion that the college decision was viewed as one that was internal, and none of them recalled specific events that made them verbally acknowledge their desire to attend college.

Even without direct mention of an influence to attend college, or a moment where they verbalized their decision to go to college, each of them did recall a specific family member or close friend who attended college and influenced their major or even their college choice set. A family member or friend generally was recalled early on in the formation of the participant's consideration set. Mary recalled adding Campbell University to the list because of her relationship with her aunt: "My aunt is actually a pharmacist, and she went to Campbell for pharmacy . . . she really liked it there [and] she knows I want to be in the medical field so she was telling me about that program" (Mary,

6:84). Dorothy was interested in an environmental science major, and she spoke with her aunt, who is involved in forestry: "My aunt talked to me about a lot of different colleges and the way I could help by doing a volunteer program and get hands-on learning" (Dorothy, 6:408). It was evident that the recalling of the specific person or a friend was vital in participants' determining their college major and visualizing their life outside of college. Thirteen of the fifteen participants' parents were college graduates as well, which reinforced the participants' desires to attend college, indicating it was just the family thing to do.

Casting the net: Searching for school types. As students began to decide which type of schools they would consider, a few important factors surfaced. First, their major was an important driver of the colleges they placed in their consideration set. Most of the participants had decided on a major they were interested in and that they would ultimately pursue in their college career. Second, the reputation of the school was important to the participants. Third, the location of the school also played a factor in determining which schools would form their initial consideration set. In addition to the "dream school," these three things seemed to act like heuristics in the determination of colleges to consider.

College major. College major was something that was important to all participants. After all, many of them could not even recall a time when they did not consider going to college. Therefore, they often visualized their future jobs and knew those jobs required specific majors. The specificity of their future plans was critical in allowing the participants to decide which schools they should consider. For example, Sharon performed extensive research on which colleges offered her desired major:

marine biology. Sharon identified early on that both the University of Southern Mississippi and Louisiana State University offered programs that were near her in marine biology: "They had a college fair at my school last year, and I went and asked every school I was interested in if they had a marine biology program" (Sharon, 8:85). She eliminated schools from consideration if they did not have her major, even if close friends went there: "I have a few friends that go there, and I've heard really good stuff, but they don't really have what I want to go for, so it's not an option" (Sharon, 9:85). David also eliminated schools for consideration because "they don't have a teacher education program that leads to certification" (David, 1:76). Ironically, David was really hoping to consider these schools but was unable to do so. His response illustrates the power of this heuristic in decision making and consideration set formation. David recalled his feelings about the letdown of two of his schools, including his dream school, not having his major: "Yeah, that really sucks because I was really hoping to look into it more, but those just kind of got shot down" (David, 2:77). Donna included the University of South Alabama in her initial consideration set because it offers both of the majors she was interested in: "They offer both engineering and like pharmacy and stuff so I added [it] to the list" (Donna 1:81). Other participants mentioned the importance of having particular majors. Debroah desired to have a school that "has a great major, like a great program for my major" (Debroah 3:3). She also discussed the power of a major in determining the schools she would consider: "[The] academics are good, too. I think I really want to go into engineering and [it has] a really good program for that" (Dorothy, 3:3). College major had power early on with the ability to place schools into or out of consideration based on what the participants' desired futures looked like.

School reputation. As students formed their consideration sets, the reputations of the schools they were looking at were important to them. They seemed to want to attend a school that had a decent reputation for the major in which they held interest. Most of the reputation information was derived from family, close friends, or even staff they spoke with at career fairs. Charles recalled his choice to rank the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) number one in his consideration set: "Ole Miss, number one because it's a good university for finance majors, and it's affordable" (Charles, 4:84). Charles even mentioned the two most important factors for him included both a cost component and a quality component. David also reiterated this thinking, saying he would consider "anything that has a good program for what I'm studying" (David, 15:84). Edward's thought process behind his number one school in his consideration set was directly related to reputation: "Vanderbilt, it's really popular as far as like the pre-med program. And not only just it[s], for, it[s] being, prestigious with academics" (Edward, 9:82).

As mentioned, school reputation was generally a result of direct communication with someone who was familiar with the school itself: "I have a few friends that go there, and I've heard it's a really good school" (Sharon, 9:85). Robert reaffirmed the use of friends or people who are directly connected to formulate an idea of the reputation or quality of an institution: "Yeah, because a degree from Millsaps is helpful anywhere in the country. I talked to people who were in the business program and people who graduated from there so that kind of shored up my decision up a little" (Robert, 2:58). Charles faced a similar decision when his friend brought up the idea of attending UW: "I was talking with a middle school friend, and he was just talking about it. It's a top-ranked finance program, and he said if you are serious about getting a job in the field, you should

consider Wisconsin" (Charles, 7:69). David also considered schools with a perceived

good reputation. When explaining his reasons for considering Chadron State College, he

said because "[it has] a really good teaching program" (David, 17:66). David went on to

say that he knows this about Chadron because of "what he has heard about it and what

people think about it" (David, 21:70). James also spoke with someone who discussed the

reputation of his top college's business program: "She told me that Southern Miss has

just as good of a business program as Ole Miss" (James, 3:10).

Parents were also involved in determining the reputation or quality of a college:

"[I] and my mom got online and researched a degree I could get for coaching. And they

said the best opportunity or the best degree that was offered was sports studies from

Mississippi State" (Robert, 11:80). David's father also assisted in looking through college

information and immediately removing some colleges from David's consideration set.

David said his father mentioned "they were not taught by doctors or professors so he

didn't want me going there. And so, he really knew how good some of these schools

were" (David, 9:21). While parents were not always consulted, their input regarding

reputation was very influential in determining consideration sets.

The reputation of colleges and universities also helped some of the participants

decide it was probably not the right school for them. Linda described Northeastern as "if

you're going into business, or if you want to be like, you know, a business leader and do

something with technology, that would be a good school and a good fit" (Linda, 1:86).

When weighing the pros and cons of pursuing her intended major at two of the schools in

her developed consideration set, Laura discussed the difference in rankings:

From what I've researched and from what people tell me from all different

schools, Mississippi State just doesn't have this high ranking of a program, and I

feel like it will be harder to get into medical school because of that. (Laura, 11:89)

Sharon often referred to Mississippi State University as an agricultural school and said

that its reputation had nothing to do with marine biology. She said it was hard to consider

Mississippi State because "[it's] so land locked. I wanted to go for marine biology, and

[it] really [doesn't] offer a good program for that" (Sharon, 7:82).

   Location. As participants decided which schools would make their final choice

set, location was a factor in determining which schools to research further. Regarding

location, participants' default to choosing colleges, at least initially, was the following:

(1) Are they closer to home? (2) Do I have some family tie? (3) Are they located in a

place that I desire to live or have dreamed about living?

   The school's distance away from home was important to both participants and

their parents. Mary admitted, "Location is a big choice for why I decided to choose these

colleges" (Mary, 8:85). Donna considered the University of Southern Mississippi because

"it's closer to home, and it's not like I have to drive forever to get there" (Donna, 6:70).

As Edward was approaching the end of his senior year, he mentioned that "I used to be,

get as far away as I can, I but I don't know, just as I've gotten further in high school, I've

realized that it doesn't really bother me if I'm closer to home, and, you know, maybe

would be better" (Edward, 9:59). Debroah also struggled with the decision to go far or

stay close: "I don't know. A lot of my family members want me to stay kind of close to

home and not too far away, and I'm a family person so I'll probably consider not to be

too far away" (Debroah, 7:75). James declared the importance of family as part of his

decision to stay close: "I don't know. I come from a good family. I love my family, and I don't really want to go too far away" (James, 6:52).

Participants' parents and close family members seemed to share the sentiment: "I think they like the idea of [my] being a little closer" (Laura, 3:91). Charles even mentioned telling his mother that he was considering a school that was far away from home. His mother said no because "she can't visit me enough" (Charles, 8:67). David said he received advice on choosing a college that was closer to home. He went on to say, "I think my parents would like for me to be close to home, and my girlfriend would like me to be close to home, too" (David, 15:84). Participants did consider schools that are a little further away if other family members lived in the area: "My parents don't mind me living in Jackson since my grandparents live there" (Laura, 7:86). "Mississippi State because it was close to family and I had family that went there. My great uncle even coaches there" (Paul, 6:75). David has family nearby in Montana and decided to consider looking into school there: "I do have family that live about four hours away from Montana State, so I would be able to have some family connection" (David, 6:56).

If there was no family around, participants seemed to be okay with considering schools in areas they viewed as desirable: "Well, I really like the campus a lot; it's so pretty, right by the beach, and I love the beach" (Mary, 11:82). Other participants, such as David, were fascinated with the northwest region and verbally admitted to choosing colleges because of the desire to be in that location: "I would also like to go to college in the northwest region, or by Washington or Oregon. I didn't grow up in Seattle, but I lived in Seattle. Dad always talks about how much he loved Seattle, so I've always wanted go to there" (David, 17:60). David even added schools to his consideration set that are from

that area: "Well, University of Washington, just that it's in the northwest area, so it's on that list" (David, 22:81). He was also drawn to Rocky Mountain College and Montana State University because of their geographical location, and he liked that they were "near ski slopes. I just thought that was a fun thing" (David, 4:65). David also alluded to considering a school a little farther away but rationalized it by reaffirming that his family stays there: "I live about four hours away from Montana State, but I have family near there, and I would be able to go and say hi there to some people that I actually know every once in a while if I get homesick" (David, 4:65). Most participants did factor in location as something that was important to them. When they considered schools that were farther away, family members and friends who lived close by helped to justify the potential school's place in the participant's consideration set.

Edward also had a fascination with desirable geographic locations. His first was with the city of San Francisco; he explained, "I like San Francisco a lot; the location is a plus" (Edward, 12:84). In addition, he admitted to considering Reed College because "of the location." He added, "I'm trying to get away from the whole location thing. I don't know. I guess with the college, I want a really good experience, I like Portland, Oregon, and that's where Reed College is" (Edward, 9:85). Edward admitted to first liking Portland after a visit to see his aunt and cousins: "I fell in love with the city and the atmosphere of it. Oregon is beautiful, and I also like the location because you can do so much activity outside" (Edward, 10:75). As Edward progressed in his search, he mentioned the fact that he had become "more confident and I guess in having a wider span of options as far as like locations and things." He concluded, "I just want to open as many doors as I can and see where I can get accepted" (Edward, 3:3).

Theme 2: A college of comfort or a college of adventure.

As participants were moving from consideration sets to choice sets, they were looking for a school that was either (1) comfortable for them or (2) offered them the traditional college experience. Interestingly, this decision seemed to play a big role in determining the type of school participants were looking for, the final distance from home of the school the participants desired, and the identification of what participants labeled as a "fallback" school.

College choice sets reflected the participants' personalities and even their closeness to and importance of their family dynamic. Laura's search for a college of comfort was rooted deeply in her home interactions with her parents: "My parents helped me so much. They keep me on track. I really haven't had any problems . . . I got side tracked and stuff, and my mom has been just so important to me like with these past few months" (Laura, 4:15). Not only is Laura's relationship with her parents strong, but also she recalls the boundaries they placed on her during her childhood: "I was never allowed to have a Facebook growing up. My parents just didn't feel like it was very safe" (Laura, 5:14). These boundaries were present in her search for a college fit for her: "My parents like the idea of the Christian university. The fact that they feel it is a little stricter and they think I will stay more in line there. I think they feel a little more comfortable with [my] going there" (Laura, 6:88). Laura even went a step further than safety and seemed to desire the boundaries set forth by Mississippi College: "I like how Mississippi College is so strict that you cannot really do much wrong there. I like the boundaries that it

provides" (Laura, 6:15). Other participants were also aware of boundaries that schools provided. Sharon was avoiding larger campuses because she felt safer at smaller schools. She stressed that safety was "a huge benefit of Southern Miss" (Sharon 3:45). If participants were concerned with comfort or searching for a college that reminded them of their home life, they would often place more emphasis on the location component and tend to stay closer to home than those who searched for what they referred to as their "dream school."

        The dream school. Comfort was more than simply a desire to have a school that provided boundaries, was safe, or was near family or friends; it also was present in the form of a "dream school" for many of the participants. The dream school was often formed from their childhood and teenage experiences with family. Most of the time, participants' families were highly connected with that school either as sports fans or as an alma mater or both. The dream school and the participant grew up together and supported one another. While the dream school was comfortable to them, it was very different from the comfort school. Its characteristics were ultimately unique to the desired social atmosphere and upbringing of the participants. Some dream schools were small; some were large. Others were dream schools for some of the participants while being comfort schools for others. The dream school could be any type or kind of college, but it was well connected to the individual.

        Some good examples of identification with a dream school came from the cases of David, Charles, Donna, and Mary. David's dream school was the University of Oregon. When asked about the inclusion of Oregon in his choice set, David shared his family's history with the school: "I love [the] football team. My room is actually painted

in Oregon. Oregon is just kind of part of the family" (David, 23:32). David's comments

shaped Oregon as an integral part of his family dynamic, something with which he was

extremely familiar. He admitted his excitement when a letter arrived from Oregon after

he requested information: "I got a letter today from Oregon and that really excited me

just because it's Oregon" (David, 14:15). The pattern is similar in Charles's case. He

admitted to including Louisiana State University on his list of potential schools because

he was a fan and it was also his father's dream school. Charles explained, "I like LSU

just because, you know, I grew up cheering for LSU" (Charles, 11:37). Donna had similar

sentiments about Mississippi State University: "It's always been a school that I dreamed

of going to since I was really little. I have always said that I was going to go to

Mississippi State" (Donna, 8:7). "I've always cheered for state in everything and I've just

been going there longer" (Donna, 8:9). Mary's dream school was North Carolina State

University and she even described it as her "dream school." Once again, the desire to

attend the "dream school" began early on and was tied deeply to family interactions and

social events: "NC State is the main school that we go to and we attend all of the sports

games and I am very used to the campus" (Mary 3:17). Edward's dream school was

Harvard University, yet he had written off consideration of this school until he found out

that the financial burden of the school could actually be overcome.

> A representative from Harvard came to visit and she used to attend Biloxi High
>
> School, near [my] high school, and she came and talked to us about Harvard and
>
> the experience and she started talking about financial aid, which previously, I had
>
> never thought of financial aid at least for me, because considering that my family
>
> is well off, but she said even with my financial situation I could get some money

at Harvard. And Harvard is almost kind of a dream school of mine, and so now I

really want to try [to] get in and see if I can actually afford it. (Edward, 3:3)

The "dream school" was present in many other cases with the emergence of the desire to

attend being primarily family related and based on the early development of a fan-based

following for the school. This school was comfortable and exciting for the participants

and remained ingrained in the top five through their entire college choice process.

The fallback school. In addition to the "dream school," participants had what

many of them referred to as a "fallback school." This school was generally one that met

their basic requirements, had easier admissions requirements than those of other

selections, and included some of their friends from high school who often attended in

large numbers. Donna summarized the idea of the fallback school in the following way:

"If everything else falls through, there is always Southern Miss" (Donna, 4:71). The

fallback school was often associated with the "13th grade" or a conglomerate of high

school colleagues who took an easy route to the particular school. Mary describes Eastern

Carolina University as this type of school:

ECU is only 30 to 40 minutes away, and a lot of my friends and people form high

school go to ECU. I just kind of want something knew, not where everyone else

goes. If ECU was my only option, I would go there; I just don't want to be like

everybody else though. (Mary, 7:7)

Even though Mary referred somewhat negatively to Eastern Carolina University, it was a

school she was comfortable with and appreciative of being accepted to early on in her

search process:

I already have one in my hand, you know; I already have one in my pocket and if

none of the other ones work out, I'll be able to go to ECU. It's exciting but it's

not, you know, the one that I really want to go to. It's my last choice of the ones

that I applied to, but it's good that I have one there. (Mary, 14:567)

The "fallback school" was not necessarily a choice that participants do not want

to attend; it is an acceptable option that they seem confident in being able to gain

acceptance into and attend. David, whose college search was wide, also included a

fallback school. Chadron State College had become the default option for David. He

earned a 30 on his ACT, and with his current GPA, he had earned a full ride there;

however, it was not his first choice. His search included other schools, but it was

definitely one that David considered as a possibility. Edward's fallback school was

Millsaps College. He referred to it as his worst-case scenario option: "Like if nothing else

works out, that'll be the school that I know I can go to" (Edward, 3:3). Edward did follow

up his statement by saying, "It's like my fallback and to me, I think that's a great fallback

school" (Edward 3:3). Schools were not the only fallback; both James and Robert

mentioned alternatives to colleges as a fallback: "If I don't get accepted into Southern

Miss, then I'll join the Air Force and then go to college through the Air Force, but if I get

accepted into Southern Miss, I will most definitely go to college first" (James, 2:301).

Robert said, "I thought about the Coast Guard, and it's still an option, but I think right

now, it's just my fallback" (Robert, 8:80). The fallback school was a reoccurring theme

that provided some level of comfort in the minds of the participants during their college

choice experience.

The college of adventure. Rather than a search for something comfortable, some participants were looking for an experience that was the opposite. The search for a college experience created a heuristic that often eliminated smaller schools that did not offer a "traditional college experience." According to participants, the traditional college experience seemed to be a larger school where participants stay on campus, meet new people, and are actively involved in social and sporting events. Even the word *college* was described by some of the participants as a "large school." Sharon elaborated on her thoughts of the word *college*: "When you think of college, I think of just a bunch of people, so I'm not saying I'm against a small college, that is just what I think about" (Sharon, 7:217). Sharon viewed large schools as more connected: "Northeastern and FSU [are] a little more connected" (Sharon, 7:225). The idea of a larger-sized school, when thinking about it early on in the participant's consideration set, relates to a desire to be a part of the full "college experience." Once the desire to search for and participate in the college experience has been established, small schools do not receive as much attention, nor do the participants exhibit extensive search behavior toward them. When discussing Charles's consideration set, he admitted that a part of him desired to have the full college experience: "I guess because part of me wants to go to that big university and have that experience. I think I would kind of enjoy the atmosphere" (Charles, 8:327). He went on to mention that he "likes to try new things" (Charles, 8:348). It is definitely a picture of what the college experience should look like, possibly defined by social and media exposure.

The opportunity to meet new people was an integral part of the college experience for which these participants actively looked. Debroah said, "I didn't just want to be with

people inside the state or local people; I wanted to, you know, interact with people from

different cultures and different religions, from different areas of the world" (Debroah,

9:401). In addition, Debroah mentioned that she desired a bigger college saying, "I want

to have the chance to meet more people. It's just that I want to meet people and have

more opportunities, and a bigger university or campus can do that" (Debroah, 9:407).

Mary described her reasoning in desiring a true college experience: "An opportunity to

meet a lot of new people, and I just like the big games and having a whole bunch of

people there and having a big stadium and all that stuff" (Mary, 14:378). Dorothy

discussed the opportunity and desire to meet people:

> It's an opportunity to meet so many more people, and once you're in something
>
> like that, you really don't know a whole lot of people from back home so it's
>
> almost like a new opportunity. A small college is not very different from high
>
> school. (Dorothy, 3:62)

Debroah agreed with Dorothy saying that "Millsaps is pretty much not an option for me

because there's only 800 students there, and I just want a bigger, bigger group; that's

smaller than my high school, so I don't think I could handle that" (Debroah, 3:3). When

determining schools to place in their choice set, the three schools that were most present

and most difficult for the participants to move were the dream school, the fallback school,

and either the comfortable school or a school that offered the traditional experience.

Characteristically, these four school types and schools that closely resemble or offer

similar features made up the majority of the participants' consideration and choice sets.

Theme 3: Factors changing the choice set

Even after participants were leaning in one direction or another, toward a college of adventure or one of comfort, many key factors were present that could make significant changes in their choice sets. The factors are best illustrated in the following superordinate themes: (1) debt as a burden, (2) the search for or recognition of authenticity, (3) the attack of the small college, and (4) parents as drivers in college choice.

Debt as a burden. All participants in this study mentioned the word *cost* or discussed the concept of affordability in one way or another during their search process. The idea of paying for college was something that weighed heavily on many of them and was not something they wanted to do for a long time after graduation.

> One of my goals when I entered high school was to get my college paid for so my parents wouldn't have to like go through all of that. (Mark 1:79|510)

> I mean, I'm limited to what I can afford, and I also don't want to worry about having ridiculous amounts of student loans, so it's definitely, kind of, based on the financial part. (Edward 7:71|211)

> I just want to be able to afford school. (Linda 7:83|224)

It's a lot cheaper to stay in state, and that played a part in deciding what college I

wanted to go to. (Linda 2:84/422)

I wouldn't mind going to a four-year college whether public or private or

wherever it's at. The main factor's cost. (Charles 4:85|515)

I consider Ole Miss because it's affordable. I would graduate with roughly

$20,000 to $30,000 in debt, which is manageable. (Charles 5:84|644)

I'm trying to avoid a school that will put me into debt after college. (David

16:68|472)

I'm trying to not get payments after college, so that way I don't have that burden

to carry for the rest of my life. (David 16:69|311)

As the participants illustrated, debt was seen as a burden and they were aware of the costs

of attending college. Many of them expressed sentiments about carrying debt after school

and having to pay back loans when they graduated. They looked positively on college,

but viewed a college degree with high debt as a burden to avoid.

Not only was the concern an internal one, but also many of the participants'

parents were encouraging the choice of a college that had a low cost of attendance for

their child: "In terms of money, they want me to go someplace where it's more

affordable" (Laura, 8:87). When Sharon was pretty sure of her decision to attend a

particular school, she discussed her mother's thoughts on the cost: "Well, any school is expensive, but my mom looked into it, and she was saying, 'It's still expensive, but it's not as expensive as say . . . a bigger university such as Ole Miss or something like that" (Sharon, 4:85). Charles and James also had family members who were pushing them to choose schools that offered savings to them: "My dad is just dead set on me going somewhere for cheap because he said that graduating with no debt really helped him in life" (Charles, 8:69). James's family said, "If you want to save money, you might as well just go to a community college to get the basics so it'll be cheaper and then just go to a university to finish our your degrees" (James 6:84). In addition to parents, guidance counselors provided advice related to costs of college to participants: "They want me to pick a college that is financially smart, too, where I'm not burdened with lots of debt when I graduate" (Charles, 3:63). Edward recollected a conversation with a guidance counselor where he was "advised to look for a college that maybe might give more money as far as scholarships go" (Edward, 7:71).

Because of the desire to stay relatively debt free, participants were very interested in scholarship opportunities offered by the colleges in their choice set. Laura discussed the idea of scholarships and her net cost of tuition, which allowed her to choose a private college:

> I'm going to have to pay wherever I go. I would welcome a full ride to college, but, I don't know, I hope to get at least half scholarship. I guess because of the competition at the other universities, it's harder to get the bigger scholarships. But financially, I'm about in the same position I would be if I went to another college or university. (Laura, 10:793)

It was evident in Laura's statements that she understood not only the net cost of the school she was planning on attending but also the way it related to other schools in her choice set indicating a period of evaluation where costs were featured and rationalized with her ideal cost of attendance. Other participants held similar sentiments regarding scholarships, as that seemed to allow them to consider schools they would not normally attend: "If I get a scholarship anywhere, I'm definitely going to take it. But if not, I'll probably end up going, you know, to junior college first for my basics" (Munger, 8:77). Scholarships could even narrow down a choice set rather quickly. Mary found out she was nominated for the Park Scholarship, which would allow her to go to school for free. In the middle of her search, she admitted, "If I get that Park Scholarship, which is a full ride to NC State, I would definitely go there for sure" (Mary, 9:84).

Debt remained a factor participants wanted to avoid, which may be in relation to the inability of their parents or themselves to pay for school. Even when the offer was there to have college paid for, the participants were still adamant about avoiding large amounts of debt and paying for school on their own. They seemed to want an active part in the process. Donna admitted that while her parents said they would help pay for any school she wanted to go to, this was something on which she did not want to have to rely:

> I have researched scholarships because like personally that matters to me. Like I don't want to state that I'm going to school and my parents are paying for all of it. Like I want to be able to say yeah I got a scholarship to go to school not like my parents are coming out of pocket for everything. (Donna, 5:75)

Charles also received an offer by a family member to pay for school, but once again downplayed the idea and instead wanted to focus on paying for school himself or receiving scholarships:

> I'm not sure I'll take the offer, but I told my grandmother I was strongly considering junior college, and she was appalled to say the least. … She offered to pay for everything no matter where I go. But I don't think I'd take her up on the offer, like I would feel bad about accepting that from her, so I really don't see that coming into play. (Charles, 3:68)

Because of this desire, scholarships became powerful choice factors. Schools were even eliminated from consideration because of the bleak outlook on scholarships. David and his father spent some time going through all of the letters and brochures that he received from colleges and eliminated schools that "were too expensive, or scholarships, they didn't have a [sufficient] scholarship" (David, 1:61). Charles evaluated costs through research in the same manner:

> I did some research into the Texas colleges, and I discovered how extremely hard it is for out-of-state students to get scholarship money because of the, um, they have a program for every student in the top 3% and Texas gets automatic admission. So they don't really need a lot of out-of-state students. I knew it was expensive so I dropped it off the list. (Charles, 1:66)

For several of the participants, cost was the ultimate heuristic used in the decision-making process. When asked if he would consider a dream school of his, Mark defaulted back to his main goal: "I'd still consider it probably, but mainly, just like I told you before, my main goal is just to go to college for free. So that's my main thing" (Mark,

9:85). This sentiment was also illustrated in Mary's final evaluation criteria for her top two choices: "If I get more money, I'll go to NC State. If I get more money from Chapel Hill, I'll go there" (Mary, 10:81). Charles admitted, "I am pretty open to anything, it just depends on, my financial, it just depends on like, my scholarships and things like that" (Charles, 7:48). Edward even stated that "it might be better to consider somewhere nearby, just because I can get a better, a better scholarship. I don't know, I realized that I may be better off" (Edward, 12:67). Cost was a powerful factor in evaluative criteria.

The search or recognition of authenticity. During the formation of a choice set, participants were bombarded with all types of information. Many of them seemed to process the information received from people whom they viewed as authentic as the most critical to determining the potential fit with a school and an understanding of just how the college truly operates.

Participants appreciated talking to students who attended the school and were not staff members. These individuals provided information that many of the participants felt was unbiased. Sharon felt "that it was good to get information from a student's viewpoint instead of just a worker, someone who never went there" (Sharon, 2:85). Sharon explained her statement further:

> Yeah, it's not like I wouldn't have believed someone who didn't go there; it's just a fact that you know they're currently going there, they were students enrolled there and you know they were going to tell you the truth and how it really was because they experienced it. (Sharon 2:85)

Sharon also believed the information was more useful for her: "They had a lot of good information that was actually useful; they weren't just blabbing about anything. It

sounded like they were really trying to help you out" (Sharon, 3:84). Dorothy spoke with a person from her high school who attended a small college she was considering: "He was coming from the area like this; he said it was a really good place to be, kind of the atmosphere was good like a good learning environment" (2:63).

As Laura was collecting information about one of the colleges in her choice set, she seemed to appreciate how similar mentions of Mississippi College were. Her initial information was from her three cousins and a person she met who was at Mississippi College and knew her cousins:

> I met this guy there, and he happened to know my cousins, and so they talked about [it], and he told me a bunch of stories about their experience and that kind of thing. It was the exact same way that my cousins described it. I was like, wow, that's more than one story. You know it's not one story; everybody I talked to after that kind of confirmed that the school was the way they described it. (Laura 8:2278)

Laura seemed to be drawn to the fact that stories of Mississippi College were consistent and the people with whom she spoke had similar, positive experiences there. This collection of information helped Laura picture herself as a student at Mississippi College. Others turned to family members or close acquaintance in an attempt to get information about specific colleges. Mary, in particular, was searching for information about the University of North Carolina at Wilmington; she knew that one of her grandfather's doctors went to medical school there, so she talked with him about the school. From that discussion, Mary said, "So he said [UNCW has] a really good pre-med program" (Mary, 15:72).

Edward was interested in the University of San Francisco and happened to run into a waiter while in the city who was able to provide him with some information about the school that eventually led to him visiting. Edward described the experience as follows:

> We were at a restaurant. . . . We had this waiter, and he was really good. He was really social with us, and he was attending the University of San Francisco, . . . so he kind of talked with me about it, and it drew me in a little bit. We actually ended up going to the university after that, and we walked around campus.
>
> (Edward 12:691)

Charles, who felt unsettled about attending schools in Mississippi, searched for information about his top choice, UW, through a very close friend. He did not know much about the school and collected information from his friend who attended there. Because Charles was concerned about finances, his initial search for information focused on those issues: "I have a friend who has a similar major, and he's been up at Wisconsin for a couple of years. . . . He says they're very generous with scholarship money" (Charles, 6:203). Charles gathered all of this information through his friend and the only call to admissions at the university was to get clarification on one of the essay questions: "I just talked to the admissions people about the prompt because it is very confusing" (Charles, 6:1029).

Each of these participants was searching for authentic information to determine how to narrow down his or her consideration set. It seems family, friends, and even people who attended the school were good sources of information. The participants trusted them and never mentioned double-checking any of the information they provided.

All of the information was crucial in formulating a picture of what attending their prospective colleges of choice would look like.

The emergence of the small college. Throughout the process, participants wrestled with the thought of the small college versus the big college experience. Even if they were determined to attend a large college and get the full college experience, there was a point in their searches where a small college was introduced to them, and they entertained the idea of attendance. The barrier to small colleges seemed to be the financial burden they would face; however, this was usually presented differently when they spoke directly with representatives. Most of the interactions occurred at career or college fairs, but many of the participants actually considered a small college in their choice set even if it was not initially there. There were many reoccurring perceptions about large colleges and small colleges. The sentiment seemed to be that the participants liked the idea of small colleges. Dorothy said it best in the following statement:

> I really like the idea of small colleges. Just to be able to know that even in the first couple years, I will still be good, that I won't be overwhelmed with people and everything. But I also like the idea of big. (Dorothy, 2:63)

Just as Dorothy seemed to struggle with weighing the benefits of a small college and a large college, other participants did as well. A small college was seen as a place where participants would not be lost in a crowd and would be in a better learning environment because of small class sizes. Laura said, "I like the idea of a smaller college. A place where I can just, I'm not so lost, I'm not so, thrown into a mass crowd" (Laura, 6:88). She elaborated by saying the following:

I like the idea of a smaller atmosphere, the smaller classes; I really want smaller

classes

because I really get involved with my teachers and things so I want to have the

ability to just be close with them and be able to ask questions and be known.

(Laura, 8:86)

Edward had similar and more extensive comments about small colleges:

I do like the private aspect because a lot of times those school have smaller

classes so that's sometimes more beneficial for students. . . . They have . . . more

time with the teacher and more individual focus so I like that aspect about small

colleges. (Edward, 6:83)

I think the smaller setting . . . smaller [number] of students at a school is actually

better probably just because you get more one-on-one time with faculty, and I feel

like the professors would be able to help you more with making you a better

student or help you more with understanding the material that you're trying to

learn, compared with going to a big university where you're sitting in a big

auditorium. (Edward, 3:65)

With the positive outflow of comments regarding small colleges, it would not be

unexpected to see more choices going toward these type of schools; however, it seems

participants did not really like the following two things about small colleges: (1) the cost

and (2) the idea of its being like their high school. "The only thing with private and

public is the public colleges seem to be a whole lot bigger but would be the only thing I

would not like. I would like smaller classes but at the same time but I want something

that is affordable" (Dorothy, 4:80). The sentiment about a small college being too much

like high school was also alive and well:

 I'd always ask student enrollment, and some would say, we have a thousand

students, or we have thirteen hundred students, see I don't really know if I like

that just because that's how many I have in my high school. (Mark, 8:85)

The only thing about smaller colleges is that it is not much different [from] high

school. I guess there are ups and downs to the small college because you're

learning more at the same time and you just want to know a lot of people in a

bigger college and just not be everybody on top of each other like in a smaller

college. (Dorothy, 4:84)

I also know like high school is kind of cool because everybody knows everybody.

I kind of want it bigger. I live in small town. . . . I know I want a bigger [school]. I

want to meet more people. I want to meet more people and have more

opportunities and that's like a bigger university or campus can do that. (Debroah,

9:81)

In the end, participants were weighing these concerns regarding college size. The draw of

large colleges seemed to be the people and the college experience: "I like people, so I

don't mind it[s] being a lot of people; I love getting to meet new people, and I just like

the big games and having a whole bunch of people there and having the big stadiums and

stuff" (Mary, 4:82). As seen above, the small college attraction was class size and

learning; however, participants had to weigh that with the idea of small schools' being

too similar to high school. Therefore, what the participant deemed as most important, a college of comfort or one offering the college experience, determined their considerations in college size.

Parents as drivers in college choice. Parents played an important role in most of the participants' college search processes. One of the first things uncovered was the fact that parents were often the initiators in the beginning of the search process and remained active until the end:

> They started me applying early. They've had me doing all kinds of financial stuff like the scholarships and just looking into the schools. They helped me look into every aspect of the school, like where I want to go, and what I'm planning on pursuing. They really pushed me with finding more out about schools and stuff like researching them, seeing just everything they had to offer. (Laura, 2:86)

Some parents were even directly involved in researching initial schools to consider: "[I] and my mom got online and researched, you know, the degree that I could get for coaching and stuff. And they said the best opportunity or best degree they offered was sports studies from Mississippi State" (Robert, 11:80). David's father also initiated the college search process: "For the most part, I haven't looked too much into colleges; it's mainly my dad looking at it. I plan to start looking but I just haven't been too interested in looking at colleges at the moment . . . My dad is really passionate about [my] going to college, so I usually look to him when it comes to school things" (David, 26:61). Edward admitted that his father assisted in helping him decide what schools to consider and tour: "My dad . . . gives me advice for what I should do and how I should prepare with

applying to colleges and also you know touring them and things like that" (Edward, 4:80).

In addition to the initiation of the college choice set, some parents played a role in determining which schools should be added or removed. On several occasions, David mentioned his father's adding or taking away schools in his choice set: "One of the colleges we were looking at was Drake. And one of the initial reasons it wasn't higher is because my dad said it was an expensive school" (David, 2:85). David's father helped not only to visualize where these schools fell on David's choice set but also to determine if they should be considered: "I added the University of Alabama and the reason for that is, my dad's kind of looked at [it] because [it has] this special program. I think if you get a 3.5 and a 32 on your ACT or higher then you get a full ride" (David, 3:62). David's father also added schools because of the programs they offered: "Warner Pacific has a program where you get your bachelor's degree and master's degree in four years, and six months" (David, 7:57). He also eliminated some schools from consideration. When going through brochures and letters from schools, David mentioned that "there were some that we just threw away instantly because my dad didn't want me going there" (David, 1:51).

Other participants experienced similar instances of parental influence changing consideration sets. On two different occasions, Charles mentioned his father's making changes to his choice set as well: "One of my dad's friends works at the University of Arkansas so he wants me to consider that school so I applied . . . I added the University of Maryland to my list, nagging dad was the influence" (Charles 9:279). David also received recommendations from his father: "My dad has always kind of looked at the University of Alabama because of [its] special program . . . My dad also added the

University of Maryland because of a special program [it has] where you can earn your

master's in 4 years" (David 7:173). Linda's father was also important in her consideration

of schools in the state of Florida: "My dad was kind of saying that the schools in Florida

are really good and that I should consider them" (Linda, 8:83).

Theme 4: Personal Marketing Matters

Participants in this study faced various types of courting activities by colleges and

universities. These can be grouped into the following communication categories: (1)

verbal and personal, (2) written and personal, (3) traditional print, and (4) online.

Verbal and personal. Admissions counselors and key college staff members

played various roles in the college search process. For a majority of the participants, the

information provided by these institutional workers was taken as truthful and processed

in that manner. Furthermore, relationships with admissions counselors or staff members

that were viewed as positive could alter the ranking of their college in the choice set of

the participant or even get their college added to the participant's choice set. David

recalled a visit to a career fair where he was evaluating recruiters based on their ability to

answer questions about their specific colleges in a helpful manner: "Like Alabama, we

could ask the girl a question and she could answer immediately. She didn't have to think

about it or anything. Other colleges like the University of Colorado at Boulder, the guy

had no idea" (David, 6:82). David made a judgment on the school based on its

representative: "The guy wasn't very informed, which I feel like kind of says something

about the school, you know" (David, 8:77). Edward also recognized when he felt like the

admissions counselors were able to answer all of the questions he had for them: "Springhill, when I went to go talk to that representative, he was very helpful. He was very informative about, like the different programs, and he also talked about like his own story and how he ended up going to college there" (Edward, 4:67). The Springhill counselor also was determined to get Edward to visit campus: "He was very true about the fact that you know you need to go visit the college to see if it's where you want to be" (Edward, 4:71). Debroah also had a very interesting conversation with some of the admissions counselors at a small school at the college fair: "We had a college fair at my school and there was a very interesting school; it's called Cottey or something" (Debroah, 1:54). "Cottey was [an] all women['s] college of like 350 students. The women at the table were basically owners and they paid for the college and they even had cookies . . . I still think it's in my top 5" (Debroah, 2:81/3:63).

Laura recalled her relationship with Michelle, her admissions counselor at Mississippi College, as vastly different from what she experienced at other schools:

> I have the admissions counselor's personal phone number, kind of thing. She has been wonderful, and she comes to our school and talked to our school and stuff on multiple occasions. And she has been very helpful with me trying to figure out things financially or just where I want to go with things even if I don't want to go to MC. She has been helpful with other college stuff as well. It was wonderful. I've been in contact with other schools, and none of them have been quite as personal as Michelle. She knows my name, and she made sure that I knew everything about the school, both good and bad. She really seems to care. (Laura, 9:87)

Specifically, Laura mentioned the relationship with Michelle versus what she was used to with Mississippi State University: "I talk to a different person. I don't really make a connection with their admissions at all" (Laura, 11:87).

Participants also noticed when admissions counselors were not as helpful: "I mean it was just kind of like the admissions counselor wasn't as offering as the other schools, was not talkative . . . Sometimes their admissions counselors aren't as social. So I mean, they had all of the information that you can look through but it's not like the people were just talking to you or trying to help you out" (Dorothy, 4:66/5:58). Edward recalled a similar moment at a career fair where he felt like he was unable to get all of the information he desired: "I wish she was more informative about certain things" (Edward, 4:67). Each of these interactions with key admissions personnel shaped the participants' consideration sets, and judgments were based off their knowledge and friendly demeanors.

Written and personal. Laura mentioned the only traditional marketing materials that stood out to her were "all the handwritten letters from the students and everything was really good. I think that's really cool" (Laura, 3:62). Other participants were also enamored with the handwritten mail they received: "I got a handwritten letter from Ole Miss. It was in recognition of my high-test scores. It made me feel like [the admissions officers] actually really noticed me, and it's kind of what makes me want to go there" (Sharon, 9:82). Even regarding athletic recruiting, Mark received some advice from his coach about what to make of handwritten letters: "If it's just a typed up thing with your name on it, then they could've sent that to ten thousand players across the country and just changed the name" (Mark, 6:85). David also received a handwritten letter from one

of his schools after a visit: "I got a handwritten letter from Chadron that said, thanks for coming, and so that was kind of cool" (David, 3:66). With the amount of traditional mail the participants were receiving, it was apparent that handwritten letters really stood out, as they were mentioned frequently during the interview process.

      Traditional print. Participants were very well acquainted with traditional mailings and were used to receiving large numbers of them on a regular basis. Charles recalled a typical action when he received a postcard or flyer from a college or university: "It was a generic, come up and visit letter. So I just threw it in a pile" (Charles, 4:69). He also commonly referred to the mailings as "generic" and "junk." The word *general* was also used to describe the mailings Dorothy received: "You know it was here's our college. We have students from these states; we have our study abroad, like I don't know, just your kind of general information, application information, that kind of stuff" (Dorothy, 3:63). David's actions were similar to those of Charles when recalling his experience with the mailings he received: "I just kind of throw them into a drawer. So we'll probably look through those at some point" (Charles, 16:78).

      When asked about the usefulness of these types of mailings, there were mixed reviews: "Um, not particularly. They let me know on like scholarship days, but that's about it" (Laura, 89:1). "I know it seems kind of pointless, but those little flyers, they really help me to know the dates and know that I have my options" (Sharon, 7:83). Edward also said they were helpful because "they break everything down pretty well, like the tuition and scholarships and what you need to get this, and all of that" (Edward, 5:63). Even with their mixed reviews, it seemed persistence worked in some cases in getting the participants on campus to visit: "They were very persistent, they kept sending me stuff on

their Black and Gold Day, and finally I was like . . . well I think I'm going to explore it,

you know" (Sharon, 7:88).

Mary received a packet from the University of Virginia that she thought was very

different:

I got a big packet in the mail form the University of Virginia. I mean it was a big

deal. I was like wow. It felt like I was getting an acceptance letter right now. It

looked like the real day. I mean I haven't applied there. It was just saying how

[the school's] interested in [my] applying, so I've been looking at [the school]

because [it is] a big medical school but [it is] out of state. (Mary, 15:87)

The packet even made her consider including the University of Virginia in her

consideration set: "I am thinking more about that, maybe applying to that one, but I'm

not too sure yet" (Mary, 15:87).

The size of the packet, or booklet as David referred to it, caught his attention:

"From Alabama, I got like a booklet. Like not just a little pamphlet but like a whole

book" (David, 26:86). He also recalled the big packets that he received from Montana

State University: "One cool thing that I saw, [the school] sent me a couple like really big

packets. Most schools that we looked through sent like a just a little postcard . . .

Montana State really stood out to me because [the school] sent me a couple of those

really big packets" (David 3:30/4:68). David described the different results of the two

(the packets and the postcards): "The majority of the postcards we ended up throwing

away; they weren't really sticking out. We ended up throwing them away. That might just

be a coincidence" (David, 3:30). He made reference here to the difference between the

nature of his large, personalized packets and the postcard reminders he received from

various colleges. It seemed in his search that he believed the larger packets or booklet

information he received usually coincided with the inclusion of a school on his

consideration set.

Online. A school's Web site was used frequently in college search and was often

viewed as very valuable. Mary said, "I just look at the university's Web site, and it tells

me everything I need really . . . It has the most information and that's helpful to me"

(Mary, 13:80/14:83). Some of the main things participants were searching for revolved

around cost, majors, and involvement on campus: "The only thing I have done with them

is I have actually gone to [the] Web site and looked at the different programs that [it

offers and] then looked into seeing what kind of degrees [it offers] and things like that"

(Donna, 13:77). "I did go by the Web site to look at what [it's] all about and tuition and

things like that" (Edward, 10:84). Other participants went straight to look up issues

related to student life. Charles mentioned the first items he looked at on the Ole Miss

Web site were "student life, some of the organizations [it has] and cost of attendance"

(Charles, 5:86).

The organization of the Web sites was something that seemed to frustrate

participants. David said it best: "You can tell a lot of time by how well the Web site was

organized and how good the letters were and stuff like that, about how good the college

really is" (David, 10:21). Other students expressed frustrations: "The Web site, it was

kind of confusing at first, because I was trying to find out about student housing, and it

was under kind of an odd tab, but other than that, it was helpful" (Sharon, 7:539). Donna

expressed her reaction when she visited some college Web sites as follows: "I just look at

them and I'm like: What is this?" (Donna, 10:78). Mary, when searching for virtual tours,

described how she found them: "I typed in the search box virtual tour and it popped up" (Mary, 8:82). She recalled doing this a few times and viewed it as the most efficient way to find the information she wanted. Mary used this search box tactic with other desired information she was looking for: "I went up to the search box and typed in 'admissions deadlines' and they'll tell me when everything is due, and when I will receive my decision" (Mary, 14:84). The virtual tour was also something Deborah tried to watch as well, though without much luck: "I actually tried taking the virtual tour but my computer was really slow and didn't want to do it" (Debroah, 11:75).

Theme 5: A Visualization of College Life

As participants began narrowing down their choices and ultimately making a selection, the visualization of life at college became important to them. Ultimately, they were attempting to get an idea of what it would be like to live on campus and in the surrounding area during their time of attendance. This visualization was dependent on emotion and common phrases that it just "feels right" to be there and it was a good fit. Often it was the culmination of all of their desired factors of college choice. The ultimate choice, though influenced by many factors and individuals, must come from them. Even with outside influences, the participants were adamant that the final decision was theirs and often refused to communicate influences or failed to take notice of what they were.

Perceived fit (it feels right). As participants began visualizing themselves at particular schools, they rationalized the fit with their desired factors and the offerings of their potential schools in the choice set. The campus visit was one of the activities

participants engaged in when nearing their decision point; it was critical in understanding

the idea of perceived fit. The idea of perceived fit uncovered during the campus visit was

very visual and related heavily to the reoccurring campus theme of "beauty":

> I saw the campus when the sun was setting, and it just looked so beautiful there.
>
> We drove up there and we got there at like seven o'clock, and it was just so nice
>
> there. . . . It's a college campus and it was really, really great, and I could just
>
> really see myself there. (Linda, 2:76)

> It was really beautiful there, and they kind of have seasons, and it's really nice.
>
> (Linda, 8:86)

> The campus is gorgeous. (Robert, 5:55)

> It's just a beautiful campus very nice and neat, and very pretty buildings. (Mary,
>
> 13:83)

> It's just gorgeous over there; the campus is amazing. (David, 5:48)

> From the visit on, I was just set on finding a way to go there because, I don't
>
> know, I   just fell in love with the school once I got there. (Robert, 6:31)

Atmosphere and social life were other factors that emerged as participants were

beginning to get an idea of how they would fit at their institutions of choice:

I had a great time. It was a lot of fun and I really like the atmosphere of it. It still

had the college atmosphere, but it was still really laid back and that's what I kind

of liked about it. (Sharon, 1:85)

It really made a difference seeing campus life, and I think that was good that they

invited you to that because I really enjoyed that. It wasn't too crazy but it wasn't

old people laidback either. (Sharon, 4:76)

We had a tour around campus once we got there, ate lunch, with, you know, all

the students there. Pretty much they just told us the stats and the process and all

that, and how daily life is. . . . I just really fell in love with how it is over there.

(Robert, 4:35)

Well the campus life took a big part of my decision, too, but in the end it was

probably just the major because the other ones didn't offer that. (Sharon,

7:78|187)

While comments of beauty, atmosphere, and the introduction of student life were

attractive to the participants, it was this formation of their visual identity with the college

of their choice as participants began this matching process.

Participants matched their values and what they were looking for directly with the

people who attended the school. Laura described her reaction to her visit to Mississippi

State University and thoughts behind possible attendance there: "They're happier

(referring to the people) than [students at] other schools I have been to. They are more

open and receiving of you and stuff. I think it is really true and says a lot that there [are] friendlier people at Mississippi State" (Laura, 10:86). She also described the people she saw at the institution as those she wanted to "model herself after," as she felt like they were "a better group of people to kind of grow up with" (Laura 7:80). People also helped her realize that other schools were not a good fit for her: "Most people I met there are a little more artsy, a little more liberal. . . . I mean not that there is anything wrong with that, they're just a little different than most of the people I generally hang out with" (Laura, 12:87). Mary described the people at her desired institution as "more related. Everybody is nice" (Mary, 11:86). Sharon also made comments regarding people at the institution as providing her with an idea of perceived fit:

> Well, it was away from home but not too far away and just the people had really good attitudes there and they were really friendly. . . . It wasn't a giant university but it wasn't really small either so the size is really good for me. So that really drew me in, too. (Sharon, 2:71)

Robert described the perceived fit as one of the most important factors to his decision: "Once I got there, I felt like I was at home, you know. Everyone treated me like family" (Robert. 6:31).

Matching factors were only part of the equation of fit, and many of the participants could not really communicate their complete reasoning for being drawn to a college. Laura had a hard time explaining why she was so drawn to her number one choice: "I don't know what it is exactly about the campus, but I just kind of like it. I don't know how to explain it" (Laura, 13:86). "It was just set in mind. I thought about it more and, it's like, you know, once I get it in my head, I just like more and more settled. I just

haven't found another school that I like as much as Mississippi College. It just feels

right" (Laura 2:85). An emotional connection was made with the college and a perception

of just "feeling right" to be there.

I want the choice to be mine. When nearing the end of the process, the

participants communicated that even though there were many influences, it was their

decision about which college they would like to attend. When referring to her parents'

role in the decision process, Laura described their process as follows:

> They were very excited about my decision. My dad from day one, he came home
>
> and he was like, I really want you to go to MC. I was like, ok dad, sure whatever.
>
> Just kind of blew him off, you know, thinking, I'll make my own decision. But
>
> he's really happy that I've decided to do that. (Laura, 5:69)

Sharon also reiterated the final aspect of her decision as follows: "It's pretty much my

decision, you know. My parents aren't really forcing me to go anywhere. It's more of a

thing, you know, if I want to do it, they support me" (Sharon, 5:90). Sharon went on to

describe that her mother's role was more advisory rather than influential in nature:

> My mom didn't influence me. [My parents] were letting me make my decision
>
> however I wanted; but she likes the idea. My family is not forcing me or
>
> influencing me. I have the choice to go wherever I want. It just seems like a good
>
> decision from everybody. (Sharon, 3:83)

Interestingly, Sharon admitted that her mother had already decided that Sharon would

attend the University of Southern Mississippi: "Well, I'm still doing a little bit of other

research but [I] and my mom are pretty dead set on me going to Southern" (Sharon,

3:84). Linda's parents also had some role in the visualization in her choice. She recalled a

time when she refused to consider Florida colleges. She admitted to ignoring her father's

and family's recommendations regarding Florida schools because she really wanted to go

to Boston: "I kind of ignored it, and was like, no I really, really want to go to Boston. I

had my mind set on Boston, and then just taking all these college tours in Florida, I kind

of realized they were right" (Linda, 8:83).

Theme 6: An Overwhelming Process

The search process for college choice was not viewed as an experience that was

ultimately fun for participants. Many of them expressed difficulties and described the

process as overwhelming and harder than expected. Participants who were ready to make

a decision were frustrated because of their acceptances being "wait-listed" or their ACT

scores not being high enough to qualify for scholarships to the schools of their choice.

Rejections and surprises popped up along the way, and it was evident the process itself

was emotionally and physically exhausting.

As Laura was approaching the end of her search, she began to consider her final

choice of Mississippi College. She was hoping to be in the running for a Presidential

Scholarship, but was frustrated to find out her ACT score was not high enough. She

mentioned early on in the process that "academics are really important to me" but that her

"ACT kind of sucks. I'm not the best test taker" (Laura, 1:85). She voiced her frustration

about the Presidential Scholarship shortfall as follows:

> My ACT score is one point away from being eligible for the Presidential Schola
>
> so that's upsetting. Like I'm involved and I do a lot of stuff and I know that's

something I could be capable of achieving (referring to the Presidential

Scholarship requirements), but I can't because of my ACT, so if I were giving

advice to someone (starting the college search process), really work on your ACT,

practice even if it is a standardized test. (Laura, 8:66)

Mary also was not a fan of her SAT score: "I mean it wasn't too bad, but it's always, I'm

kind of stressing about it. I feel like I have a good profile, so, like, I have a good chance

of getting in, but my SAT, I'm always pretty nervous about it" (Mary, 11:76). Her mind

was at ease when she found out some of her friends were getting accepted with lower test

scores and grades than her own: "I asked them about test grades and stuff and their

SAT's, one of them was actually lower than mine, and one was around the same. So that

made me feel better about that. These people are getting accepted, and they have lower

grades than I do" (Mary, 13:79). Other participants were also aware of the importance of

their ACT scores. Robert said, "Once I get a 26, I can get a full ride to go to PRCC, and

[PRCC will] pay for me to go to school" (Robert, 1:82). Edward discussed the advice he

received about his ACT score: "Yeah it's just the ACT that really sticks with me, you

know, telling me to, take the test as many times as you can cause it's important"

(Edward, 5:86).

Overall, Mary described the stressful nature of the college search process in her

following statement:

Well it's stressful, all of it is stressful. I and my dad were just talking about it

yesterday. It's like you want to enjoy your senior year, but you have to figure out

what you want to do, and all the time do you think you'll get accepted or you have

to do this, this, and this on the application list. (Mary, 15:154).

She also commented about the amount of information she has had to process regarding college choice: "Yes, it can get overwhelming at times, but, I mean, it really is an exciting process" (Mary, 15:154). Linda also communicated her thoughts on the process: "Yes, it was stressful. I'm glad it's over. Just worrying about getting into college, I was scared I wasn't going to get into college. I wanted to go somewhere that I wanted to go to, and I didn't want to not get into any schools and end up going to my last choice or to a community college. So that was a little bit stressful" (Linda, 5:86). Debroah expressed similar sentiments regarding stress levels, except that her focus was on choosing the wrong college fit: "For me, picking my major and what I want to do with the rest of my life is stressful. I don't want to end up picking a certain major and going to a school that I could've gone to a better school for. It really stresses me out" (Debroah, 3:3).

One of the most vocal examples of the stress of the college choice process came from Donna. She said, "I realized that, it's not really what I thought it was, kind of like a bigger deal than I thought it was, but I don't know, I've been thinking just about going to a community college for the first two years" (Donna, 3:3). Donna went on to describe her frustration: "I don't know. I started researching it, and then I was like, do I really want to be here, like, I kind of started feeling like I didn't even know what I wanted to do anymore" (Donna, 3:3). She seemed to want to have her major completely figured out before she decided on a college, and this was something she was struggling with: "I feel like I am just going to get there and change my major" (Donna, 3:3).

Mary, also verbally expressing the stress of the college choice process, was very set on attending her dream school. She began to receive decisions from all of the colleges

to which she applied. Mary found out early on that the third college on her list, the

University of North Carolina at Wilmington, waitlisted her:

> I got a letter . . . and it said that, it wasn't like in a big packet or anything, so I was
>
> like, crap, I probably didn't get in. Usually when you get accepted, it's like a big
>
> packet with a pretty sticker. So I was like dang what's up? So I opened the letter
>
> and it said that I had gotten deferred until the end of April so I will have to wait
>
> and find out then. (Mary, 3:3)

In addition, she received word from her number one school stating that they had also

deferred her acceptance. She said, "Hopefully it will work out in the end" (Mary 3:3).

Both Mary and her parents seemed to be a little upset. "Since my dad went to North

Carolina State (NC State), he was a lot more upset about that, because he went there"

(Mary, 3:3). Mary's frustrations were compounded when she began seeing stuff from

friends on SM:

> People were sending me stuff, like hey I got accepted and I was seeing stuff on
>
> Facebook. There was one girl that got accepted into UNCW, and she messaged
>
> me on Twitter, and she asked if I had gotten into UNCW and I said no, I got
>
> deferred. . . . It kind of stinks but it's ok. Especially since her GPA and SAT
>
> scores were lower than mine. (Mary 3:3)

She was even more frustrated thinking about the academic performance of herself and

another student saying, "She has like a 60 in calculus and I have like an 80 something,

and I was like oh my goodness this is killing me" (Mary, 3:3).

Theme 7: Social Media as Affirmation

Participants indicated their use of SM was focused on staying connected with friends and family and keeping up with their social circle. Edward echoed the reasoning for the use of SM that many of the participants held: "It's usually just to stay connected, to be familiar with what's going on in the world, and to keep up with what my friends are up to" (Edward, 5:72). Many of the participants did not use SM to directly research college and university information; however, they did consume information that was pushed out to them and used SM to verbalize their final decisions.

Laura developed a pretty close relationship with her admissions counselor, Michelle. She did mention that she followed Michelle's personal Instagram and Mississippi College pages. She found it helpful: It "let[-] me know about preview days and stuff like that. When I see something that was posted on Instagram or something, it will remind me that I can check on that or it would remind me if I forgot to do something" (Laura, 10:87). Edward also mentioned that he appreciated it when universities communicated on SM about events: "[It's good] when they put out information on when they are having, like, a day for people to come and meet up and tour the college" (Edward, 6:83). Laura also mentioned that by following her admissions counselor and the Mississippi College pages, she was able to get a more authentic look at what was going on:

I got to see a lot of more personal MC stuff, just what goes on, and her view of it

and that kind of thing, which is cool. I loved seeing all the stuff on the clubs and

tribes, I think that's really cool, they seem to have a lot of fun (Laura, 5:88).

For Sharon, it wasn't the SM account specifically that was important at the University of

Southern Mississippi, but she did download the social app, which included a map: "I got

lost, so I downloaded [the] app, [which has] a map and you could type in what center you

need to go to or whatever, and it [tells you] how [to get there] walking and by bicycle. So

that helped me and I did post some pictures of Southern Miss while I was there on the

visit" (Sharon, 6:78). Mary also followed the Twitter pages of her top two schools and

mentioned that she had seen where you can "ask admissions questions" (Mary 9:73).

Mary admitted that she might not ask a question but that "I wouldn't tweet or anything

like that but I might go and look what people are saying" (Mary, 9:73).

After Laura decided to attend Mississippi College, she decided to post a picture of

herself with a friend who was going: "I posted a picture of me and a friend who's going

to Mississippi College, too, and I said, we're excited about next year" (Laura, 4:68).

Linda also received a text from a friend the night after her post to Facebook regarding her

choice of Florida State University: "I think I posted on Facebook, I got into FSU and she

saw it and said I got accepted, too. Just to be with people that I know is comforting"

(Linda, 2:76). Robert actually received a tweet from his college of choice after he posted

his excitement to attend there on Twitter: "I did get a tweet from Millsaps … [the

admissions officers] shouted me out, said a shout out to a future 'major' (college

mascot)" (Robert, 7:17). So while SM interaction during the college search and choice

process was limited, once a decision was made, participants posted about their college of

choice.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter presents a discussion of the themes uncovered in chapter four. The focus of this chapter will be to address the research questions, to examine implications for further research, and to review the conclusions reached in this study.

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of the college choice process among 17- to 18-year-old high school students with a desire to attend college after graduation. The following research questions were proposed:

Primary Research Question

- How do 16- to 17-year-olds understand and make sense of their lived experiences of college choice?

Secondary Questions

- To what extent do key factors − economic (e.g., family income, tuition, and financial aid), sociological (e.g., family background, academic experience, and location), and psychological (e.g., perceived institutional fit) − at each stage of the college choice process (predisposition, search, and choice) help to understand how the millennial generation makes a college choice decision?

- To what extent do forms of higher education marketing (e.g., campus visits, print advertisements, SM, brochures, billboards, and viewbooks) influence students' lived experiences during their personal college choice process?

Each question will be examined sequentially with reference to the literature put forth on college choice theory and the marketing efforts of colleges and universities. The primary research question will present a high-level overview of the college choice process of the participants. Specific discussions of factors in decision making and marketing efforts of colleges and universities and ways in which they affect the process will be covered in subsequent secondary questions.

Primary Research Question

How do 16- to 17-year-olds understand and make sense of their lived experiences of college choice?

Participants who were engaged in college choice were involved in a process that was full of motion and constantly changing. While often a stressful progression, participants began with the formation of a list of colleges they were familiar with and then made adjustments as various sociological and economic factors gave way to psychological factors, which had more weight in the final decision-making process.

Early formation of the college consideration set by the participant included a dream school and a fallback school. Expectations of college experience was derived from interactions and understanding of these two types of schools. The dream school was a school with a great reputation and strong family influences from continued athletic support or previous family attendance. The fallback school was one that was close to home and affordable, with easy admissions standards and a somewhat questionable, but acceptable, reputation for the participant. In addition to the dream and fallback schools,

participants' lists also included schools focused on the type of experience the participant was looking for: (1) the college of comfort or (2) the college of adventure. A college of comfort was a school that was both close to home and smaller in size than their larger college of adventure considerations and provided elements of boundaries and safety. The college of adventure was a larger school, generally with Division I athletic teams, that offered the traditional college experience. It was usually a school that was somewhat farther from home, but had all of the pop culture elements of the college experience. These schools remained fixed in participants' consideration sets and were adjusted in ranking based on various important factors.

During the predisposition and search stages, economic and sociological factors represented the dominant reasons participants made changes to their list. Factors such as SES, family influence, educational background, and college affordability were important early on in participants' decision-making process. As participants moved to final choice, economic and sociological factors were less important and psychological factors of perceived fit and visualization of future attendance were critical in the final decision of participants. Participants chose an institution they felt represented their values and matched their personalities.

Four additions or deviations from the traditional college choice model proposed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) were uncovered in this study. First, participants visualized their career and future very early. Each of them had a strong idea of what he or she wanted to do and to accomplish after college graduation. From that point, each participant then matched sociological factors related to aptitude and the organizational factors of the institution (major offerings) to determine initial college options. This

development was largely missing from models of college choice and could be attributed

to the millennial characteristics of achievement and optimism. Second, participants in this

study did not give much consideration to college alternatives; however, they did

formulate a fallback school as an alternative to going to their top college choices. The

development of the fallback school is missing from Hossler and Gallagher's (1987)

model of college choice, though fallback characteristics are consistent with college

attractiveness as proposed by Paulsen (1990). Third, in predisposition, the formation of

preliminary college values was based on individual and organizational (high school)

factors. No mention of early formation of college values based on previous experiences

with colleges or universities was present. Each of the participants in this study had a

dream school, and an idea of college life was partially derived from the connectedness to

this school. Finally, in Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, some heavy reliance on

viewbooks and traditional college publications as key sources of information exists;

however, that was replaced by more in-depth conversations with admissions personnel

and the very popular college Web site. This is likely a result of the tech savvy

characteristics of the millennial population and is consistent with Geyer and Merker's

(2011) findings on the desire for more technological consumption of information by

prospective students.

Secondary Research Question 1

To what extent do key factors − economic (e.g., family income, tuition, and financial

aid), sociological (e.g., family background, academic experience, and location), and

psychological (perceived institutional fit) − at each stage of the college choice process (i.e., predisposition, search, choice) help to understand how the millennial generation makes a college choice decision?

According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), students who are making a choice about which college they would like to attend typically advance through three phases of the decision-making process: (1) predisposition, (2) search, and (3) choice. It is in these three phases that individual factors and characteristics comingle with organizational factors and college characteristics to help participants ultimately select a college or university of their choosing. While Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model is the most widely used, it was conducted and tested prior to the rise of the millennial generation. Overall, in this study, millennials behaved as expected with their factors of importance in evaluative criteria grouped into three categories in a choice set: economic, sociological, and psychological. Economic and sociological factors have more weight in predisposition and search. In choice, these factors give way to psychological factors as final choice decisions are made.

Economic factors are based on models that propose consumers are rational. These models suggest that individuals calculate cost based on the perceived benefits of an institution, thus resulting in the choice of college that offers the highest value to the participant (Simoes & Soares, 2010). Economic factors of college choice were present during each phase of the college choice process for participants. Furthermore, not only were these factors present, but also they played a large role in the ultimate selection of colleges by individual participants, as indicated by previous studies of college choice (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Paulsen 1990). Jackson's

model (1982) focused heavily on economic factors of college choice and stressed family income, college cost, and financial aid opportunities as important in a student's decision to apply and subsequently enroll in an institution.

Sociological factors in college choice suggest that a "student's desire to attend college are influenced by socioeconomic status, student academic ability, high school context, gender and the views of significant others" (Kinzie et al., 2004, p. 26). Models of college choice, which focus on sociological aspects, propose that students will base their college decisions on the interactions between sociological factors of academic performance and student background (Simoes & Soares, 2010). Psychological factors in college choice are based on the idea of perceived institutional fit, which is the idea that participants' values and institutional characteristics determine how attractive an institution is for a participant engaging in the college choice process (Tinto, 1993). Psychological factors of college choice were most vividly seen in the choice phase; however, hints of their progressing development were present through all phases. Each of these factors and their prominence in each stage are further discussed.

Predisposition

In predisposition, the most widely used factors of deciding if college was right for the participant were economic and sociological. Economic factors in predisposition included the SES (combination of sociological and economic) of the participants and the concern of carrying debt after college. During predisposition, participants in this study worried their family income was not adequate to be able to afford college. The biggest

find regarding economic factors was that even though their parents could afford to send

them to college, participants were very driven to illustrate they contributed to college

costs in some manner. This drive and contribution associates very well with millennial

characteristics of debt avoidance (Howe & Strauss, 2006). Their concern was not only the

initial cost but also the dangers of having debt once they graduated. They did not want to

carry that burden after college, possibly because of news and information regarding their

older millennial counterparts being overwhelmed by debt (Ellis, 2014; Wells Fargo,

2014). Though none of them vocalized an inability to pay for school, many of them

remarked that between their parents and themselves, they would do what was needed to

obtain a college degree because they were optimistic and saw value in obtaining a degree.

This is consistent with characteristics of their generation (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Sociological factors found in this stage included the desire to achieve, family

background, and location. First, the desire to achieve was ingrained for quite some time

in millennial participants. As previously mentioned, no exact moment when participants

decided college was right for them was apparent. Most of them always believed they

would go to college. In addition, participants in this study quickly matched their

characteristics with potential organizational characteristics to formulate their initial

consideration sets of college options, and many of them did not consider any alternatives.

It was evident participants were driven, confident, and optimistic about their futures

(Howe & Strauss, 2000).

In this study, participants' desired attendance rate was higher than their millennial

counterparts, of which 59% pursued college education (Donegan, 2013). Nevertheless,

many of the participants had very high career goals with intended majors in pre-medicine,

pre-pharmacy, engineering, and pre-physical therapy. Millennials are typically more

interested in pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering, and medicine (STEM);

this was also seen in a different study with high numbers of participants showing interest

in these fields (Howe & Strauss, 2006). Because of this, participants were very aware of

their abilities. Many participants in this study were high performing with a constant

comparison of academic ability to that of friends and classmates. Furthermore,

participants were aware of the importance of standardized test scores in their college

admissions decisions and even recognized when colleges were unattainable or out of their

reach. Moreover, many of them were very involved in high school and took several

advanced placement and dual enrollment classes to make them more competitive for the

college admissions process. These developments are consistent with both millennial

characteristics and academic aptitude and achievement as predictors of the decision to go

to college (Chapman, 1981; Jackson, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Paulsen 1990).

Second, in each of the cases, participants had at least one parent who had attended

college in the past and many family members who did provide some influence and advice

when determining college consideration and future choice of major. Participants' parents

and family members held college attendance in high regard. This parental educational

background and family encouragement was consistent with Paulsen's (1990) likelihood

of college attendance, which indicates the higher the attainment of the parents, the more

likely their student is to attend college. These findings are also consistent with other

models and conclusions of college choice studies (Chapman, 1981; Jackson, 1982;

Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Finally, regarding location, the participants initially looked at colleges they were either familiar with via family ties or that were close by. This is in line with Chapman's (1986) findings of distance and eventual college selection. Furthermore, ideas of college reputation were formulated based on knowledge obtained from their social environments or through discussions with friends or family members. The exploration of reputation had not fully begun; therefore, perception was formulated through their environments rather than collected information.

According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), in predisposition, students should match their individual factors with organizational factors to formulate their college options and possible alternatives. Therefore, as seen with participants' economic and social factors (e.g., family history, academic ability, and location), initial formation of choices of college attractiveness will increase (Paulsen, 1990). Though the economic factor of cost was key in determining the eventual selection of college, in the predisposition stage, it was not as widely mentioned, possibly because participants were just beginning to formulate and understand cost differences in college choices.

Search

Search is the longest and most complex stage of the college choice process. Economic, sociological, and psychological factors all mattered, but the most important factors in this stage were sociological and economic. Economic factors were focused on the idea of affordability and were mentioned most frequently by all participants in the study. Affordability was defined by participants as determining the net cost of attendance

of colleges they were considering and avoiding debt after graduation. Many of the

participants found the idea of paying back loans for extended periods of time as a burden.

Therefore, they evaluated tuition and scholarship opportunities to determine their net

costs. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) proposed that many of the students who are involved

in the search process do not understand the net cost of attendance. While this was seen

initially in the participants' interviews, as the progression through search occurred, they

were very much aware of the final cost of attending schools. Many of them ruled out

private schools but did reconsider once they recognized the scholarship opportunities and

the "true" net cost of attendance. As evidenced in previous studies of college choice,

scholarships were seen as a powerful factor in the participants' ultimate evaluation and

narrowing down of their consideration sets (Chapman, 1981; Jackson, 1982; Hossler &

Gallagher, 1987; Paulsen 1990). Many examples from participants illustrated cost as their

top heuristic and the deciding factor behind the narrowing down from their consideration

sets to choice sets. Furthermore, parents also desired that their children attend school and

avoid as much debt as possible. Still as the study progressed, parents did offer assistance

and reassurance that paying for college should not be a large factor in their choice.

The search phase began with the formation of what Hossler and Gallagher (1987)

referred to as student preliminary college values. Participants used limited information to

form a list of colleges they would attend based on their preliminary college values carried

over from predisposition. Participants included their dream schools on their lists because

they knew a great deal about these schools, often having attended athletic events, sports

camps, or other activities at the institutions, and could easily visualize their life at this

particular school. Therefore, the dream school was one of the first schools considered and

remained fixed in their top five throughout their college choice processes. The dream school also matched many of the characteristics of college attractiveness put forth by Paulsen (1990).

Participants' sociological and psychological factors mingled with institutional characteristics to determine the evaluative criteria used to keep or to remove colleges in consideration. One way to view this stage of the process for the participants was to break it down to search for their types of colleges: (1) a college that offered the full college experience, the college of adventure and (2) a college that offered something comfortable, the college of comfort. Some participants had multiple colleges that offered the full experience and multiple colleges that offered some form of comfort while others simply had just one type of college with multiple options. When they were reaching this point, they began to look more intently at school characteristics, and the sociological factors that represented their backgrounds emerged as important to match with characteristics of the institution.

As mentioned previously, though dream and fallback colleges were somewhat different, they tended to have characteristics of one or both of these types of schools. Hoyt and Brown (2004) identified factors that determine if a college is likely to be the top choice for students. These factors can be placed under the comfort and experience types as indicated in Table 11.

Table 11

Factors and College Type

	The Search for the College of Adventure	**The Search for the College of Comfort**
1	AR	Location
2	Location	Availability of programs
3	Quality of instruction	Quality of faculty
4	Availability of programs	Costs
5	Costs	Financial Aid
6	Reputable programs	
7	Financial Aid	

If participants were searching for colleges of adventure, they relied heavily on

sociological factors related to their overall academic and previous social backgrounds.

Therefore, college characteristics that were desirable for them included a college that had

their major, a decent reputation, and a good social life or interesting surrounding town. If

participants were searching for a college of comfort, social factors such as family income,

proximity to home, and a positive view by their significant others were important.

Therefore, college characteristics that were desirable included having family members

nearby, offering their college majors, having high-quality faculty, and offering a more comfortable, smaller classroom environment.

As students began to narrow down their choices in this phase, the lines between the sociological and psychological became somewhat blurry. While characteristics they were searching for in colleges of choice tended to be related to their sociological background, it was evident there were psychological factors at play. For some participants the college of adventure fit well with their personalities. They were looking for the ability to experience something different and to be part of something greater than themselves. While their home life may have been positive, the college of adventure was not intimidating; rather, they welcomed the opportunity to venture out because they felt it fit with their personalities.

For the college of comfort, the sociological background of the participants led them to appreciate attributes of their colleges such as boundaries, safety, lower admissions requirements, closer proximity to home, and a positive small classroom experience, similar to high school. The college of comfort was reflective of their sociological upbringings, and they felt psychologically that it fit with their personalities. It resembled home and felt right. Whether the college was one that matched their desired experience or one that was comfortable, reputation and cost ultimately mattered; participants had to be content with the collective offerings of these schools that remained in their consideration sets. The emerging factors and the focus on reputation were consistent with other findings that reiterated the growing importance of AR and campus life attributes (Acker, Hughes, & Fendley, 2004; Desjardins et al., 1999; Cho et al., 2008;

Conrad & Conrad, 2000; Joseph et al., 2012; Judson et al., 2006; Klein & Washburn,

2012; Rood, 2009; Rosen et al., 1998).

The search phase was the longest and by far the most complex phase for the

participants. While individual factors and organizational factors were being evaluated

together, the goal of this phase was the formation of a choice set. Evaluative criteria were

used to reach this point, and many of the participants seemed to be making selections

based on their intuition and then wrestled internally with their decisions. Perceived fit,

the idea that the personalities of the college and the participant are congruent, was being

formed. Therefore, as the choice set was finalized, the psychological aspects were

beginning to emerge as critical to their ultimate decisions.

Choice

According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), the outcome of the choice stage is the

evaluation and selection of an institution for enrollment for the student. The major factors

present in this stage were economic and psychological. As participants had reached the

final point in the process, economic and sociological factors gave way to psychological

factors, which mingled with college characteristics to help participants make sense of

their colleges of choice. For participants, this selection came down to a choice between a

college that offered them a high-quality, economical college experience or a college that

was comfortable for them in relation to cost, quality, size, location, and distance from

home. Paulsen (1990) found that the likelihood of student enrollment was based on the

following: (1) programs, (2) size, (3) location (4) social atmosphere, (5) athletics, and (6) quality.

First, regarding programs, the participants in the study rarely veered from their ideas that a college should include the programs that they wanted to study. In the choice phase, all of the participants' final choices included colleges that had their intended majors. Second, the size of the institution was generally based on if they wanted the full college experience or something more comfortable. The top ranges of their choice sets included comfort colleges with fallback schools listed toward the bottom or vice versa for participants who wanted adventure. The selection of a college was ultimately between the same types of colleges forcing participants to default to other factors to use as top evaluative criteria. Fourth, in the final choice set, location had already been fleshed out from search, and the top choices of participants generally included a location that was comfortable to them, whether close to home or in a town that offered the college experience. Finally, the factors of social atmosphere, athletics, and quality were evaluated based on a visualization of their lives at college.

It would be expected that participants would choose their dream school; however, many did not. Interestingly, when the dream school was not selected or did not select them, participants still felt connected and pledged their continued support. A denial of admission to the dream school often made the fallback school look more appealing to the participant. The fallback school was viewed as a way to remain close to home and fulfill the basic needs of their college education or was viewed as an acceptable alternative to the dream school. On the rare occasion that participants visited their fallback school

campus, perceptions were often changed, and comments related to the fallback school resembled characteristics of the dream school.

The most compelling development in this stage seemed to be the psychological factor of visualization of life at the school: picturing themselves living at the institution, interacting with the community, graduating from a program that provided a quality education for their major, and being involved socially on campus. Comments of "It just feels right" and "I could really see myself here" were present in the final choice selection. Even participants who were being courted for athletics mentioned the importance of this visualizing process. Still scholarship offers and college-courting activities of the institutions could persuade participants to make a choice. The decision of enrollment was a complicated one that seemed to rest on whether participants could see themselves attending the school in an affordable manner. Therefore, the visualization of college life was focused on how their personalities and attitudes reflected the perceived social environments and economic realities of the institutions. Thus, the personality of the participant was a leading contributor in deciding which college was ultimately a better fit. Participants' personalities had to match up well with the social environments of economically attainable colleges. In addition, their attitudes on achievement and their outlooks on life were important in determining whether the colleges of comfort or the colleges of adventure best matched their characteristics and their understandings of perceived institutional fit.

While participants were using sociological and economic factors to get an understanding of colleges in their choice sets, it was the perceived fit that exhibited the most influence on decision making; this discovery fits with previous studies that revealed

that psychological factors were critically important in this stage (Cho et al., 2008). The

perceived institutional fit was based on the participants' identifying economic and

sociological factors that were important to them and then formulating those values to be

used in some evaluative criteria to determine if colleges on their lists were right for them.

While they are determining final evaluative criteria, colleges and universities were also

engaging in what Hossler and Gallagher (1987) referred to as "courtship procedures" to

attract potential students to their institutions. Perceived institution fit occurs when these

values and search activities line up.

       The alignment of these values and search activities generally occurred through the

collection of authentic information by the participants in the study. This authentic

information went beyond simply cost and programs offered, providing a picture of what it

would be like to be a student at the particular college or university of choice. Perceived

fit evaluations occurred from courtship activities at college fairs, through admissions

counselor contacts, and from students who actually attended the college or university.

While the factors of ultimate choice varied from participant to participant, findings were

consistent with Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model, which indicates that students

make a selection based on a combination of individual and organizational factors

comingling during each phase of the college choice process. In this particular study, the

psychological factor of visualization was important, as students had to be able to picture

themselves attending and living at their college or university of choice, which was based

on a combination of economic and sociological factors as well as university

characteristics.

Participants whose life at home was very structured and more conservative tended to choose school personalities that provided boundaries. Participants who were high achievers paid very close attention to the reputation of majors at their selected institutions. Their desire for high achievement was manifested in the rigorous program offerings of the institution of choice. Other matches in personality occurred regarding a participant's attachment to location or desire to be at a certain location, which showcased his or her personality. While remaining close to home was often a cost issue, some participants simply desired to do this to stay close to their families. Their attachment to their parents was stronger than others. On the other hand, when participants were searching for locations that they felt matched their personalities, this generated excitement and fully reflected participant goals of the college experience with less focus on parental proximity.

Other psychological factors that seemed to surface in the process were based on irrationality. As recalled, participants processed information without regard to verifying accuracy and formulated their perceived fit based on what was communicated in terms of school personality (on-campus visits) and their own psychological desires. In addition, the process itself was overwhelmingly personal for some students, often putting pressure on their psychological well-being, resulting in heuristics that removed the pressure from their final college decision and forcing them to settle on their fallback school.

Secondary Research Question 2

To what extent do forms of higher education marketing (e.g., campus visits, print advertisements, SM, brochures, billboards, and viewbooks) influence students' lived experiences during their personal college choice process?

Canterbury (1999) proposed that the product of an institution should be the opportunities students would receive by attending. For participants, the opportunity most of them were aware of was related to major and being able to secure a good job after graduation. In this study, colleges and universities were engaging in market differentiation perspectives. The most common market differentiation perspectives communicated by institutions through their staff were as follows: (1) we are a better product, (2) we are a good value, and (3) we are convenient (Anctil, 2008). While the participants in this study considered all three of these market differentiation perspectives, some characteristics involved the types of schools they were considering.

The dream school could represent any one of these three market differentiation factors, none of these perspectives, or all three of these perspectives. For the participants, it ultimately did not matter because their perceptions of the schools had been formed early on in their childhoods and included deep emotional connections. Thus, a particular market differentiation perspective was adopted by colleges and universities and communicated to the participants as they engaged in the search process.

An important characteristic of the market differentiation approach was the ability of colleges to communicate one of the perspectives (i.e., better product, good value, or

convenience) well. Most colleges used traditional mailings to do this. Participants seemed

to process this information much differently from the way colleges probably expected.

Traditional mailings and brochures proved unhelpful in providing information about the

college of their choice. They did find them helpful in providing reminders of upcoming

events. For participants to take notice of mailings, the visual appeal had to be unique. For

example, if students were to receive a packet of information that was large or presented

differently, it was viewed as something important for them. On two specific occasions,

David and Mary actually gave serious consideration to schools that sent them large

packets, even though they had not previously considered them. In addition to receiving

large and unique packets, the emergence of handwritten letters made participants

seriously consider particular colleges and universities. The thought by participants was

that handwritten letters were more personal and communicated that colleges really

wanted them as students. Even the athletes in the study, who were being highly recruited

by an array of colleges and universities, knew that handwritten letters were legitimate and

required consideration. The majority of traditional mailings were pretty standard, but

when differences were present, participants took notice.

The personal, one-on-one marketing was seen not only in personal handwritten

letters but also through relationships with the admissions counselors and university staff.

Participants in the study made market differentiation judgments based solely on their

contacts with admissions counselors and other college representatives. A strong

connection with admissions counselors strengthened trust levels with institutional

information and fortified the market differentiation perspective of the institution.

Nonetheless, if admissions counselors or staff members were viewed unfavorably,

participants associated their performance with other aspects of the colleges' or

universities' market differentiation factors. The judgment by participants was lasting and

affected schools' positions "in" or "out" of the top five lists for the remainder of the

study.

Participants began to recognize the market differentiation perspective of "we are a

better product" and started evaluating reputation, though communicated heavily by

schools, somewhat inconsistently. According to Altbach (2012), the *US News and World*

Report Ranking is used as a heuristic for students to select and consider institutions.

While reputation was a constant theme by participants in the study, none of them

mentioned the *US News and World Report Rankings* directly; however, many of them

knew the reputation of their colleges of choice from communication with significant

others, college staff, Web sites, and brochures. Participants never once mentioned

challenging or checking the assumptions of reputation, but rather simply took them at

face value. Reputation was not based on rankings; it was far more arbitrary. Perceptions

of reputation and quality were developed through their social environments rather than a

reliance on ranking communication. In the end of the participants' college decision,

reputation and quality were mentioned; however, it was not formally tied to one specific

piece of information, and no direct recall of where reputation was formed or what their

sole purpose of determining quality was existed.

The importance of the campus visit was very pronounced in this study. Capararo

et al. (2004) found that perceived social life, characteristics of the student body, and the

experiences at the institution were all factors of attractiveness. Participants saw each of

these in the visualization of life at the college as they progressed through the college

choice process and entered the choice phase. This visualization was focused on how they

would (1) interact and fit in with other students, (2) integrate into the social life, and (3)

live in the town or area around the university. Each of these findings was consistent with

Capararo et al.'s (2004) perspective on the importance of social life in determining

selection. Therefore, the campus visit was critical in the selection process, and university

communication to entice participants to visit the school was very much warranted. All of

the participants engaged in a campus tour prior to selecting the institutions of their

choice. In the end, it was difficult for participants to communicate the "why" behind their

selections based on these factors. Communication of selection was based on a feeling or

comments of "feeling right"; however, the determination was usually solidified through a

visit to campus and a judgment on social factors as proposed by Capararo et al. (2004).

Athletic programs are often viewed as one of the best forms of advertising that a

school's money can buy (Anctil, 2008). Participants in this study were very aware of a

college's athletic program. When discussing and thinking about their dream school,

participants' first perceptions were defined through athletic programs. Even during the

study, as the athletic program of participants' top choice performed well, they would

mention how neat it was to be considering the school. In addition, a few participants

would only consider schools with Division 1 athletic programs. While no direct mentions

of the halo effect (Beckwith et al., 1978; Leuthesser et al., 1995) existed, schools with

successful Division 1 athletic programs were always viewed favorably in their choice

sets.

One of the biggest differences in the marketing efforts of colleges and universities

is the rise of Web site and SM efforts. According to Geyer and Merker (2011), Web sites

are taking the place of college viewbooks and other publications to deliver information to

the student. Participants in this study relied heavily on schools' Web sites as their sources

of information for decisions to enroll. Though some frustration did arise as Geyer and

Merker (2011) predicted with Web site layout, information on the Web sites was

perceived as true. Also, SM was used sparingly in the college choice process. During

periods of search and eventual choice, mentions of SM and activities occurring at

colleges popped up from time to time. For example, helpful activities included reminders

of upcoming events and admissions chats on Twitter, though none of the participants

engaged in any of these. Mangold and Faulds (2009) described this as a hybrid element of

the promotional mix because of lack of control. Participants just were not using it to get

or process information from colleges, but rather as a form of closure in their search.

Many participants who made a selection posted their final decisions on SM; some of

them even received mentions or responses from their final choice schools, which they

thought was "very cool."

Participant Profiles

The following two profiles provide a picture of the lived experiences of

participants engaging in the college choice process. These profiles will demonstrate the

progression of the participants through the three stages of the college choice. These

profiles demonstrate the use of economic and sociological factors during early stages of

the college choice process with psychological factors becoming more critical in later

stages as participants created evaluative criteria and determined their college of choice. In

addition, these profiles will display the prominence of both the dream and fallback schools in participants' progressions through the choice process. Further, the profiles will highlight participant perceptions of the college-courting process, significant other involvement, and inclinations of their desire for stronger more authentic visualization processes. Overall, it is evident the college choice process was time consuming, reflective, and deeply personal for each of them. Their stories reflect this internal frustration and illustrate the success of their lived experiences. At the end of each of the participant narratives, remarks on the intersection of their stories and findings of this research are presented.

Laura

Laura's narrative was chosen to highlight a college choice process that resembled many other participants in terms of collecting information and deciding on a college based on sociological, economic, and psychological factors. While Laura had a dream school, she ultimately chose a college of comfort and relied heavily on the idea of perceived fit to do so. Her story illustrates how personal marketing by universities can influence the idea of perceived fit and the ultimate choice of an individual.

Laura's home life was described as "close," "tight knit," "simple," and "100% Christian." She grew up in her childhood home with both of her parents and two younger sisters. Laura described her college-educated parents as "wonderful" and their relationship as "close." As she reflected on her parents' involvement in her high school life, she described them as her "rock." They helped to keep her on track and often

intervened in situations where she may have gotten side tracked in her educational

endeavors. Furthermore, Laura's parents established some significant boundaries in her

life as she was growing up. She was not allowed to have a Twitter account, and she could

not get on Facebook until she was in middle school. Instead of having a resentful attitude,

she seemed to appreciate the boundaries provided by her parents. Furthermore, she

proudly called her sisters her best friends. Laura is a self-professed Christian and

brazenly described God as an important part of her life. Her commitment to her Christian

identity was manifested in her commitment to attending church every Sunday and

Wednesday and volunteering as the children's minister on Wednesday nights. Laura's

achievement-oriented personality did not end with church; it was also present at her high

school.

        Laura described herself as a hard worker and a student who tried hard. Though

she mentioned her frustration with test taking and her poor ACT score, she reiterated her

determination to maintain acceptable grades in school. Not only was Laura determined to

earn good grades, but also she exuded determination in extracurricular activities.

Historically, Laura had secured positions in student government, serving as the president

of her freshman, sophomore, and junior classes. As a senior, she was the student body

secretary. When reflecting on her involvement, Laura told of two clubs at school she felt

most connected to. The first was the Beta Club, a club with active community service

involvement, and the second was Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD), which

Laura actually helped revitalize. She said the organization in the past was floundering and

not very active. She found a new sponsor and reorganized the club to be something Laura

referred to as "vibrant" and "really up and going." Her involvement in high school also

reflected her commitment as a Christian. She was involved in the Fellowship of Christian

Athletes (FCA), where she led events such as prayer at the poll and global day of prayer.

She recalled moments in FCA when they prayed a lot with students and held assemblies

to talk about their faith. At the end of her junior year, Laura began thinking more about

her life outside of high school, and she had a good idea of what she wanted to do. Her

hope was to specialize in neurology aligning with her love of "learning about the brain

and nervous system." She further elaborated on this hope admitting she wanted to be a

pediatric surgeon because of her love of children. Because of these things, she believed a

major in pre-medicine or biology would be a good fit for her.

As Laura began to consider which colleges she would like to attend, she collected

advice from her parents, who pushed her to apply early and research key financial

information on the cost of attendance. Early on in Laura's search, it was evident that her

parents placed emphasis on the cost of attendance. Laura's parents also encouraged her to

look at major offerings for different colleges to make sure it fit with what she wanted for

her life outside of college. In addition, the idea that a school should prepare her

adequately to pursue medicine was deepened. As she began to consider her future, she

collected advice from guidance counselors and coaches, who emphasized the importance

of getting started early and applying before deadlines.

When Laura first began researching colleges, she admitted that she was leaning

toward two very different experiences: Mississippi State University, a 4-year public

institution, and Mississippi College, a 4-year private, Christian institution. At the

beginning of her search, she was leaning toward Mississippi College because it was a

smaller school where she would be less likely to be thrown into a mass crowd.

Furthermore, Mississippi College was a Christian school, which was important to her. She described the people she met there as "on fire for Christ" and the institution as pretty strict with the boundaries it set. She thought this school would be good for her and mentioned that her parents ultimately wanted her to attend a great college. Though she admitted that her mother attended Mississippi State University, they seemed to be leaning toward Mississippi College because it was a smaller institution that provided consistent boundaries. The only hesitation seemed to be the idea that her parents would like her to attend an institution that was affordable; Laura admitted cost was not the "driving force" in her ultimate choice.

Laura's initial top-five institutions were as follows: (1) Mississippi College, (2) Mississippi State University, (3) the University of South Alabama, (4) the University of Mississippi, and (5) Louisiana State University. Each of these institutions was within a 3-hour drive from her home. Interestingly, the only institution that was private was Mississippi College, which began in her top spot. As she reflected on that placement, she described the campus atmosphere she expected, one that was "small" and "cozy." She visualized a campus environment where she attended small classes with involved teachers and was involved in campus life activities with the opportunity to "be known." Furthermore, she emphasized her desire to be in a Christian environment where she could see herself associating with other individuals like herself. In addition, she foresaw opportunities to get involved on campus in many of the social organizations with "non-judgmental" students. Her picture of campus life at Mississippi College was one of boundaries. She emphasized how she felt good about the policies of the school, as they could keep her from hanging around the wrong type of people. When Laura was asked

about how this picture of Mississippi College was first developed, she recalled

conversations with her three cousins who all attended there; these conversations got her

excited about the school. She also mentioned speaking with someone at a college fair

about his experience with Mississippi College. As she was collecting information and

listening to stories, she could not help but notice how their stories were so similar. She

wanted a college experience similar to theirs, and she appreciated how consistent they

were. She had begun to visualize what her life would be like at Mississippi College and it

excited her.

Additionally, as Laura continued to collect information about Mississippi College,

she reflected on her personal relationship with her admissions counselor, Michelle. Laura

originally met Michelle through a phone call after she requested information about

Mississippi College. Michelle left a message on Laura's voicemail, and it was actually

Laura's parents who encouraged her to call her back. From that point, their relationship

strengthened. Michelle sent Laura some personal letters, and Laura set up a visit to stay

on campus with a student. She iterated how helpful Michelle was and described their

contact as frequent. Laura had Michelle's personal phone number, and they were friends

on Facebook and Instagram. Laura admitted that no other school even came close to that

level of personal relationship, and it was something she appreciated about Mississippi

College. She really believed Michelle cared about her.

Even though it seemed like the bond with Mississippi College was very strong,

Laura admitted that she couldn't yet discount Mississippi State University, an institution

that had a rich history with her family. Her mother attended there, and her family

followed the school athletic programs her entire life. It even leaned toward the

characteristics of the dream school. She admitted that Mississippi State University was a contradiction to her number one choice, calling it a school that was large and exciting, much different from Mississippi College. She loved the people she met from Mississippi State University, and she believed they were happier than people at other schools. Even though the school was exciting to Laura, she discovered that their pre-medicine program was not as great as Mississippi College's program. The reputation of Mississippi State University's program did not bode well for a future career in medicine because it was not one of the main focuses, whereas Mississippi College had a history of producing graduates who successfully made the transition into medical school. Also, Laura did not make a connection with a counselor like she did with Michelle at Mississippi College. She said she spoke with a different admissions counselor each time.

The remainder of Laura's list included schools local to the area: (1) the University of Mississippi, (2) the University of South Alabama, and (3) Louisiana State University. At this stage in her process, Laura said she had not collected additional information about these institutions besides the fact that they had her program. She seemed pretty set on either Mississippi College or Mississippi State University. Shortly after our initial interview, Laura sent a message and short journal entry stating she still had not finished submitting all of her application materials to Mississippi College, but that she had officially applied. She was in the process of sending transcripts. This was the only school to which she applied. After our last conversation and her official application was submitted, Laura described in detail more about her relationship with Michelle, her admissions counselor at Mississippi College. Michelle had visited Laura's high school once over the past month and talked with Laura while she was there. Laura had kept close

contact with her, and whenever she visited Jackson, Mississippi, the location of the college, she stopped by just to talk with Michelle.

When asked if Mississippi College was Laura's college of choice, she said that she had some time to let it "set in her mind," admitting that she had not found another college that she liked as much. She followed up with the fact that Mississippi State University was not looking solid academically and she remained unsure of her true desire to attend a large university, thinking the appeal of the school was due to only family history. Even her parents stated that they wanted her to go to Mississippi College because they felt she would get a better education there and they liked the school's boundaries believing she would stay "more in line" and be "more comfortable there." After Laura applied to Mississippi College, she started following their admissions Facebook page, where Laura secured information related to preview days and other deadlines. Through this, Laura felt like she had really been getting to see the day-to-day social life of Mississippi College, reiterating her love for the clubs and sporting events, though jokingly saying that she would still go to football games and other athletic events at her dream school, Mississippi State University.

At this stage in Laura's process, she had pretty much narrowed her college choice down to Mississippi College. As she made that more verbally known, she started finalizing the idea of living on campus and was even asked by a few friends to room with them. She communicated excitedly how when she started thinking about living there, the idea became far more concrete. She also emphasized her reason for choosing Mississippi College centered on the people and values of the university, stating she could really see herself at the institution and found a lot of the people there to be who she would like to

model herself after. She truly believed they would help her grow and the size of the

institution would help her flourish and meet others like herself.

Shortly after our conversation, Laura sent a journal entry stating that unless

something drastic changed, she was 100% sure she was going to go to Mississippi

College. As I followed up with an interview, Laura had already paid her housing fee and

completed everything to get accepted. As Laura described the end of her college choice

process, she mentioned that it "just felt right all along." She was putting it off because of

the difficulty and magnitude of the decision, but it came down to the idea that she could

see herself attending the institution, fitting in on campus, and being confident in the AR

of their pre-medicine program. She also recalled how important it was to visit and talk

with current students and people who went there to get a good understanding of what life

would be like on campus for her. As Laura reflected on the influence of the institution's

marketing efforts, she mentioned how important the personal connection was with the

institution. She received numerous communication materials from Michelle, her

admissions counselor, and even handwritten letters from students after her visits and

applications were completed. Once Laura made her decision, she decided to post some

messages on SM. She was also happy that her parents liked her decision and mentioned

that her father really wanted her to go to Mississippi College from day one. Laura, of

course, hated to admit that he was right.

Remarks. As Laura's narrative demonstrates, she was very confident and knew

exactly what she wanted from a college. In predisposition, Laura's sociological factors

provided a glimpse into her preliminary college values and demonstrated that she never

had any other thoughts of non-college options. Laura's parents were very involved in her

life and established boundaries in their household. They were a very active family in

church, and Laura was very involved academically. So it was not surprising that Laura

solicited advice directly from her parents when deciding on types of schools for

consideration; they recommended that she choose a college based on reputation, offering

of her particular major, and affordability. The factors at play early on in Laura's search

were sociological and economic.

As Laura formulated her initial consideration set, she immediately included two

schools she knew: Mississippi College and Mississippi State University. Mississippi

College was a school where other family members had attended. Therefore, she obtained

preliminary information about the school through those individuals. On the other hand,

Mississippi State University met all of the characteristics of the dream school. Her

mother attended this school, and her family members were avid followers of the athletic

programs of the institution. Also, during the search phase, Laura made comments about

the people and social life at both schools, providing a glimpse into psychological factors

of perceived fit early on. In addition, Laura had been to campus many times and was very

much aware of the personality and identity of the school.

Laura also included three other schools on her list that were relatively close to

home. As she began to collect information, she continued to discuss the positive

characteristics of Mississippi College. She liked how the school was small and cozy and

that it had boundaries and good people. More importantly, Laura developed a personal

relationship with the admissions counselor at Mississippi College, who sent personal

handwritten letters, spoke frequently with Laura, and truly cared about her decision.

While it seemed Mississippi College was the choice for Laura, she was not willing to

give up on Mississippi State University. She reiterated that it was the family school, that it had a strong athletic program, and that she liked it, but its reputation in her major was questionable. When collecting this information, Laura's sociological factors were center stage. It seemed Laura had decided to choose a school that matched what she valued: relationships, stability, boundaries, and involvement. At the end of search, Laura narrowed down her choice of college based on these sociological factors. She decided to apply to Mississippi College, but did keep Mississippi State University on this list.

During her final choice, Laura's psychological factors manifested from her sociological values. The idea of perceived fit was seen vividly as Laura discussed why she decided to choose Mississippi College. She felt the school was authentic, and she could see herself attending there. She determined perceived fit based on the campus visit, her talks with Michelle and others, and even at the end of the process, the SM sites of the college. While she liked Mississippi State University, she said she could not picture herself at a large school and was worried about its academic quality in her desired major. Interestingly, the idea of economic factors did not seem to play a role in Laura's final evaluative criteria.

Communication by colleges in Laura's story indicated the importance of one-on-one relationships and targeted marketing efforts. Furthermore, reputation became very important in terms of the performance of the school in her particular major. Laura determined that Mississippi College had a stronger reputation for medicine than Mississippi State University through communication with others, not necessarily ranking information. Whether data supported this perception, the fact was it was a present and key factor in her decision-making process. Either way, the process of choice was based

on visualization of attendance, and Mississippi College did provide many ways to communicate its visual identity to Laura.

Mary

Mary's narrative reflects an agonizing and heart-wrenching experience that tells the story of a girl who was so in love with her dream school that she barely considered other schools. However, as her journey progressed, Mary was denied immediate admission to her dream institution. This information led her to pursue other schools that were not as high on her list. As she approached the end of her process, her fallback school actually emerged as her school of choice; she did not initially consider it but ultimately found that it did offer an acceptable experience. It surprised her as she made the campus visit and visualized her life there. This narrative was chosen to demonstrate the complexity of the college choice decision and the potential rise of the fallback school.

Mary was a senior in high school who grew up in North Carolina. Mary lived with her mother, father, and a younger sister. Her immediate family was close, and her extended family lived in the area as well. Mary's parents were both college educated. Her father, a biologist, attended North Carolina State (NC State), and her mother, an accountant, went to East Carolina University (ECU).

Mary talked very positively about her high school experience. She was involved in various sports including basketball and softball. She loved the game of softball but had no desire to continue playing in college. Regarding academics, Mary seemed to like her classes and teachers and was enrolled in many advanced placement courses. Overall, she

described herself as "being very happy" with her high school. Mary was hoping to major in biological sciences in college. She had been speaking with an advisor in high school who was talking to her about how to prepare for medical school. Her family was also very supportive of her desire to go to medical school. She first became aware of her interest in medicine from her aunt, who was a pharmacist. Her aunt shared a great deal about what life would be like as a pharmacist, and Mary grew a desire to attend medical school or work in the medical field.

As Mary began to consider which college she would like to attend, she discussed her desire to go to a large college and believed location was a big factor in where she wanted to go. Mary's top five choices were in the following order: (1) NC State, (2) the University of North Carolina at Wilmington (UNCW), (3) Campbell University, (4) ECU, and (5) the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC). She mentioned her main sources of information in the research process were official university Web sites, friends, and family. Most of her family grew up in North Carolina, and she mentioned that she had a friend or family member who attended almost every college on her list.

Mary reiterated her desire to attend a larger college and admitted that location pretty much drove her college interests, since she wanted to stay in the state of North Carolina. As she began discussing the rationale behind her rankings, it was apparent that her number one choice, NC State, was Mary's dream school. She liked it because it was close to her home, her father was an alumnus and even had an office on campus, and she was really comfortable with the campus layout, having attended sporting events and other on-campus activities. Mary recalled watching games with her father and buying sweatshirts and other apparel. She loved the mascot, colors, stadium, and atmosphere at

the institution, which made it her "favorite college for sure." As she worked her way

through her list, she discussed her number four college, ECU, as a college that her mother

attended but one that Mary looked at as a fallback school. In a journal entry, she

reiterated her notion that ECU was a college where a good number of her friends attended

after high school, and she "didn't want to go to a college that has so many people there

that she was familiar with." In addition, she did not like the reputation of ECU, the "party

school" of the state.

During a follow-up interview, Mary discussed why she felt ECU was not a perfect

fit for her, stating that ECU was easy to get into and a lot of people from her school and

close friends went to ECU. It was also a familiar school, one that was only 30 to 40

minutes from home. But Mary desired to have something new, to meet new people, and

to do new things. She did admit that she would still go to ECU if that were her only

option but reiterated that NC State was her number one choice. She applied to four of the

five colleges on her list. During that process, an interesting development in her college

choice journey occurred when she received a huge packet from the University of

Virginia. She sent a journal entry message describing how it felt different than other

college marketing materials, and she felt like she was "getting an acceptance letter right

now." The package contained a letter, information about the school, and a note that they

were interested in her applying. Mary knew the University of Virginia and believed they

had a good medical school, but they were out of state and she was somewhat worried

about the cost. Mary followed up in a later journal entry with a picture of the packet from

the University of Virginia. Though the college had not jumped into her top five yet, the

package did make her feel important and definitely got her attention.

Once Mary submitted all of her applications, she discussed how difficult it was to be in the waiting stage. Her desire was to attend NC State, and she was hoping she would get accepted to her program of choice. She did mention that another college on her list, UNC, had a great reputation and it would be a difficult decision if she got accepted into both; however, she would more than likely go with her dream school, NC State. While speaking with Mary about the waiting process, she did state that more and more of her friends were trying to get her to consider ECU, but she was not interested at that point. In addition, she mentioned she had decided to eliminate Campbell University from her top five because of the high cost of attendance. She felt it was different from what she wanted for her college experience (being a smaller private school), and she could not picture herself attending there.

As Mary was waiting on her decisions from the other four colleges in late December and early January, she reached out in a text message journal entry talking about how difficult it was to wait but that she was excited to receive news from ECU that she was accepted. As I followed up with her, she mentioned that it was "pretty cool" and it felt good to already have one acceptance down as a possible fallback if other schools did not work out for her. Mary also mentioned that, during her down time, she did some virtual campus tours for all of the schools to which she applied. She found out through a friend that colleges offered this feature and explained how to find these tours: go to the search bar for the college and type in "virtual tour." She liked how cool it was to go on a virtual tour, as it helped to visualize life there, as if she were really walking down a sidewalk and looking at the buildings. Other than the ECU news, December and January were very stressful and anxious times for Mary with all of the applications and

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scholarships she was submitting. She was trying to calm her nerves by talking to other friends who had gotten accepted into the schools last year. These people had lower grades then she did and did not have test scores as high as hers, so she felt confident in her ability to get into the colleges of her choice.

In a short journal entry message, Mary mentioned she had some good and bad news to share and told me of when a letter came in the mail from UNCW. She pulled the letter out of the mailbox and was immediately disappointed, as she knew an acceptance letter was probably not simply a letter; it should be a packet like the one she received from ECU. As she opened the letter, she realized she had been granted deferred admission to UNCW. This was the first communication she had received from any of her other schools since her acceptance into ECU. Seven days later, the date to check her acceptance status for her dream school, NC State, she nervously logged in and looked at her status; that school had deferred her as well. She discussed her shock. It was basically the same scenario as UNCW; she had to wait until April to hear back from them, so the waiting game continued. NC State communicated that 35% of the students who were deferred last year eventually got accepted, so there was some hope. The school also gave her some instructions on what was needed to update her official grades from her last semester of high school, so Mary set out to do that, as well as to take her SAT once again to improve her score, in hopes that both of those would help her get accepted in April. She was trying not to think about the fact that some other people she knew actually got accepted with lower scores and grades than her own. That seemed to be a point of contention for her. She also mentioned that her parents were upset, as her father was an

NC State graduate and a part of the alumni group. Furthermore, his office was on campus, so it was hard for him to know that Mary was deferred.

It was evident Mary was a little disappointed about the news. Her next important date was coming up at the end of the month when she would find out if she got accepted into UNC. She was thinking she would not get into this school because the admissions standards were much higher than those of other schools on her list. As accurately predicted, UNC denied her application. Mary was reflecting on this whole process and mentioned that while her top four had not changed, she was trying to be more positive about ECU, her fallback school. She communicated that ECU did have some positive characteristics, including the fact that it had a medical school, which would allow her to move into that field easier if she attended for her undergraduate work.

The month of April came, and Mary sent a text message that included a picture of an acceptance letter and a car sticker from UNCW. In this letter, she received an invitation to visit campus, which she decided to do. A few days later, Mary received a letter from NC State, which was another unfortunate deferral until June. Frustrated with the process, she decided that in addition to her visit to UNCW, she would also visit ECU to tour their campus as well.

A text message journal entry a few days later described how much she loved ECU and how frustrated she was with NC State. She decided to pay her deposit to ECU. She said that even if she got into NC State, she was unlikely to go. This was a big change in Mary's decision-making process. In a follow-up phone call, Mary was recalling her campus visits. She told herself before each visit that she would more than likely go to UNCW since ECU was so far down on her list prior. Surprisingly, she fell in the love

with the ECU campus. Through the conversation, she reiterated how surprised she was that she liked the school. She recalled specific buildings she liked, such as the recreation center and stadium. She felt the campus was not as big as she expected and really felt the design fit her well. The campus was in the shape of an oval with easy access to buildings. She was surprised at how different campus life was compared to the stories she had heard. As Mary was leaning more and more toward ECU, she said her mother was getting excited, as she had always wanted Mary to either attend ECU or NC State because they were closer to home. When it came down to why she had chosen ECU, she felt like it just fit her. From the people to the atmosphere to just the right "feel" in terms of size, ECU was the college for her. Interestingly, ECU was a fallback college that had suddenly become Mary's school of choice.

Remarks. Mary's process in predisposition began with strong sociological factors, economic factors, and the immediate inclusion of two schools on her consideration set. Mary's sociological factors were seen in her desire to choose an affordable college to stay close to home to be near family. She was very much aware of the cost of education and therefore chose to consider in-state colleges. She decided on a college major based on conversations with her family. As she began to think about college, two schools immediately surfaced: NC State and ECU, representing her dream school and fallback schools, respectively. Economic factors present in predisposition were centered on her limited geographic consideration as she chose in-state colleges for affordability reasons.

As Mary progressed through search, her list included her dream school, her fallback school, and other colleges of experience. Once she eliminated Campbell

University, all of the colleges on her list lined up with her preliminary college values. Mary was pretty much set on attending NC State and believed it most adequately matched her values. Interestingly, during the search process, she received a packet from the University of Virginia. It was much different from other packets she had received, and this sparked her interest, demonstrating the power of using unique traditional mailings to recruit students. Though Mary did not add this school to her list, she did give it consideration simply because of the packet. Mary applied to four schools, thus formulating her choice set.

Once applications were in and Mary entered the choice phase, she still communicated her desire to go to NC State because of family history and other sociological factors. In Mary's situation, she had very little control of her overall choice. She was waitlisted for her number one and number two choices: NC State and UNCW. She was denied admission to UNC but was granted admission to her fallback school: ECU. This produced a mixed set of emotions; early on in the process, Mary's communication was always about how well she believed she fit at NC State. She eventually was accepted to UNCW; however, she was once again waitlisted at NC State. Voicing her frustration with the process, she was ready to consider schools that desired to have her there, so she went on a campus tour. The ECU campus tour showcased the development of perceived fit for Mary. While she did not really want to consider this school at first, she was surprised during her campus visit as she visualized her life at her fallback school. Her surprise choice showcased how even the fallback school can become the school of choice; sometimes it just requires a change of perception.

Limitations

The sample was selected for this study through purposeful efforts and was based on convenience; therefore, the study itself cannot be generalized to the entire population. However, it can serve as a basis for further work in uncovering student perceptions of college choice. Also, researcher bias could have been a limitation of the study. The background of the researcher shaped the interpretations of these findings. While all intentional efforts to bracket preconceived ideas where appropriate were made, as put forth through Smith et al. (2009), researcher bias could still be present.

Other limitations were related to the sample majors of the participants being STEM and to the location of the participants. It is widely known that millennials are more interested in pursuing STEM degrees; however, participants with different majors may not rely so much on reputation and major offerings or be as cognizant of test scores as STEM participants. Furthermore, STEM majors may be more future focused than other majors because of the high standards and academic aptitude of careers in those fields. This is reflective of the participant scores in this study. Also, location would be a limitation as well. This study reflects the lived experience of the participant in the regions in which each lived, which vary widely with demographic and socioeconomic factors, surrounding college reputations, family values, and aptitude.

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how juniors and seniors in high school make sense of their lived experiences with college choice. While extensive quantitative studies addressing the college choice process exist, few qualitative studies on the process are available (Cooper, 2009; Gruber, 2004; Klein & Washburn, 2012). In addition, none of the qualitative studies looked directly at participants engaged in the process of college choice. Therefore, this study's approach was unique in the way in which it approached the understanding of participants' college choice selections during the process rather than a reflection after selection. Furthermore, the study focused on a sample of the millennial generation, which were not of college age during the formation and acceptance of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice. This study is significant in that it provides avenues for colleges to target students based on the types of colleges they represent, and it further strengthens understanding of the most predominant factors used in processing information. Furthermore, the study reiterates the use of Hossler and Gallagher's three-stage process while confirming what was foretold regarding Web sites and more technologically based consumption of information in college selection.

The study has implications for parents of high school students looking to attend college to understand some of the obstacles and challenges for their children. First, parents can assist with managing the stressful and overwhelming nature of college selection. High school students are placing a great deal of pressure on themselves to

obtain higher standardized scores to get into a better college; however, parents could steer

their students to schools that meet their academic ability and goals. Second, parents are

influential in the process and final selection of a college. Even though their children want

to make sure the ultimate decision is their own, parents can provide input, to which their

children do pay attention. Finally, parents can help in the search and choice phases of the

process when students seem to be the most overwhelmed. It is difficult for the students to

make good judgments and truly consider all types of communication they receive from

their institutions of choice. Assistance in the development of ranking criteria and the

matching of student and university values to help with the elimination process could help

the student make a more thoughtful and informed decision.

The study also has implications for students. First, students were often quick in

deciding the type of school they wanted to go to without considering notions of fit. In the

study, many students were surprised when they were approached by a different type of

school that had many of the characteristics they liked and included a net cost that was not

much different than their top choices. This tended to open up their searches to include

schools in which they did not think they would even consider once affordability questions

were addressed. A realization of the net cost of private schools may help in gathering

correct information on potential fit. Second, this study shows that students should

develop some evaluative criteria early on and stick to them. The goal is to get into a

college that is a good fit, and students must constantly understand what is important to

them. Often one particular college feature lures them in, and this could be in the complete

other direction from what they initially wanted. Third, students should double-check

ranking and reputation information. Many of the students took communication directly

from the college and its alumni without double-checking the information. Students should

make sure the ranking information communicated is actually correct. Lastly, students

should direct more questions to their admissions counselors. In some instances in the

study, students did not even find out about key information related to the application

process until halfway through their choice processes. They should use the admissions

counselors and staff to understand the full admissions process at colleges of choice.

This study also has significance for college administrators and marketing

professionals in higher education. First, the formation of different types of consideration

sets by the participants offers an opportunity for personalized marketing. If college

administrators could determine which type of college they are in the eyes of their

applicants, they could tailor their marketing efforts to reflect this. For example, a fallback

school may market to particular students in a certain way to entice them into

consideration. Marketing focuses could remind them of convenience, cost savings, and

location to family. In addition, the fallback school may advertise the various

"experiences" offered so the applicant develops a different opinion of the school itself.

The idea of more personalized marketing efforts by colleges and universities

could also be used in the entire process of college choice. It is apparent that the search

phase of college choice is the most critical for colleges and universities. Participants are

relying heavily on sociological and economic factors and are even starting to consider

psychological factors to narrow down schools in this phase. Therefore, colleges and

universities should communicate characteristics that are important to the participants

within this stage. For sociological factors, this could be a communication of the values of

the school, academic data for students who are successful by field, and some examples of

high school courses that have been helpful to students. This information could help participants make better decisions and improve retention by attracting students who have statistically been successful at their institution. For economic factors, the importance of affordability must be known and clear to participants. This is important for private schools that want to remain a consideration in this stage. Therefore, communicating net cost and providing realistic estimates of scholarship offers early on will help students to truly consider private schools that they previously believed would be out of reach. Communicating these sociological and economic factors will help the student to begin visualizing psychologically what attending the college would be like.

Personalized marketing efforts also could be used in the choice phase of the process. Participants in this study relied heavily on the idea of perceived fit. They wanted to see visually that their values and college values aligned. In addition, they wanted to know they would enjoy campus life and life off of campus. While it is obvious the campus visit will provide the most authentic information in this stage, colleges should also make every effort to help visualize life at their school prior to the visit. Participants in this study often only visited one to two schools, especially if they began the search in their senior year; therefore, as colleges are communicating their values to students, this should be done visually as much as possible. It should go beyond a virtual tour, which participants found hard to find, and include insights into campus life, classroom life, and surrounding town life. It should be authentic and real. This could be helpful for students and the colleges recruiting them to encourage official visits and matriculate to enrollment.

As mentioned, the campus visit is still important. College administrators and marketing professionals should move toward models that allow a complete visualization for the prospective student on campus and off. While many of the participants were able to get a sense of student life while on campus, many of them made a conscious effort to see themselves living there without direct assistance from college personnel. It may be helpful to approach campus visits as a day in the life of different types of students (the freshman all the way through the senior) and to allow prospective students to stay in the residence halls and to engage in activities with people who would be able to show them what it is like to live at their college or university of choice. This should go beyond the campus visit and should include an orientation of the city or town that surrounds the college as well.

Higher education administrators and marketing professionals of private colleges need to make the net cost of the school clearly known. Many of the participants in this study did not even consider private schools initially because they did not view them as a good fit, even if many of the characteristics matched their desired values and what they wanted in their college experiences. Millennials care a great deal about debt after graduation, but they also want a high-quality education so communicating the true cost of attendance will increase the applicant funnel and possibly attract more students. Another frustration faced by the participants in this study was traditional mailings and the college Web sites. Many of the participants were not thrilled with the postcards and paper letters they received; however, they were enamored with large packets and handwritten notes. These seemed to generate interest, even if a participant was not considering a school highly in the first place. Rather than send out a plethora of postcards and notes, colleges

and universities may reevaluate their approach and possibly send out mail more purposefully.

The admissions counselor relationship matters everywhere. Participants who mentioned having a strong connection with admissions counselors kept those colleges at the top of their lists. In addition, quick judgments were made of the counselors at career fairs and events; therefore, it is important that admissions counselors and other staff be trained to understand how perceptions influence their place in the student's choice set. Furthermore, as participants in the study gravitated toward more of a personalized marketing experience, an admissions counselor who remains with the applicant through the entire process could increase conversion rates. These millennial participants were eager to develop these relationships.

While more and more colleges and universities are using SM in an effort to communicate and attract prospective students, the participants in this study were not very active on SM during the search and part of the choice process. This could be that they did not view this information as official or colleges and universities are doing a poor job communicating and reaching students. One caveat of SM occurred at the end of the study when participants were likely to post about their college selections. This could be an opportunity for engagement; however, only one participant mentioned a college actually responding to his public posting.

Future Research

One of the big outcomes of this study was to uncover data from the participants that would be helpful in formulating a quantitative study on the meaning making that occurs during the college choice process. The complexity of college choice is evident from this study, but future quantitative research on the relationship between search efforts of colleges by type (i.e., college of comfort, college of adventure, fallback, and dream school) and economic, psychological, and sociological evaluative criteria used by individuals could uncover results that could be generalized throughout the millennial population. A conjoint analysis could be conducted in partnership with a college to see how participants in various stages of the college decision-making process evaluate different featured attributes of marketing communication by colleges they are considering. Other quantitative research could focus on matriculation decisions based on types of marketing communication methods, such as handwritten letters or personal admissions counselor directives, to determine a cost-effective way to attract potential students. In addition, because of the important role of parents in the admissions process, future qualitative research could be conducted on the progression of students through the college process from the perspective of the parents.

While this study did not directly look at athletes, many of the athletes showed similar progression through the college choice process even with multiple scholarship offers from colleges and universities. A qualitative study could be conducted to look at how athletes who are being recruited make decisions regarding their colleges of choice.

Also, various perceptions of specific colleges and universities were uncovered from participants. A study that looks at perceptions of particular colleges and universities by proximity may be appropriate for identifying who views the college as a fallback school or dream school and from where these views surface. Future research could also be done on personalized marketing efforts of colleges and universities to attract prospective applicants. Finally, while SM did not come up as that influential in the process, that could be due to a lack of activity by colleges and universities. Millennials use SM constantly, and it is surprising it is not used more in the college search process. Therefore, a study looking at a college or university that engages in SM well or that has a dedicated SM strategy and the way applicants become enrolled may be helpful in determining potential investment in this media strategy.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Permission for Participation

Parental Permission for Participation of a Child in a Research Study
George Fox University

The Lived Experience of College Choice

Description of the research and your child's participation
Your child is invited to participate in a research study conducted by Ryan Ladner, doctoral student at George Fox University. The purpose of this research is to explore how junior and senior high school students decide which college they will attend.
Your child's participation will involve keeping a journal for six months listing their top five colleges they are thinking about attending. In this journal, if your child changes the top five (eliminates, adds, narrows them down etc…) then he or she will describe their reasons for doing so. In addition, on a monthly basis, Ryan Ladner will either call or Skype your child in order to talk about their journal entries.
The amount of time required for your child's participation will be 1 hour to 1.5 hours per month.

Risks and discomforts
The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your child's involvement in this study (that is, no risks beyond the risks associated with everyday life).

Potential benefits
Potential benefits in this study include (1) keeping the thought of college choice in the mind of the participant; (2) understanding how the participant is making their decision regarding college choice. This research will also help colleges and universities understand how to provide information that is beneficial to students and parents attempting to decide on college attendance in the future.

Protection of confidentiality
Your child's privacy will be protected by enacting the following: (1) a private email address for all journal entries with parental access for auditing purposes; (2) data that remains anonymous and password protected. In addition, your child's identity will not be revealed in any publications resulting from this study. The data resulting from your child's participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate it with your child, or with your child's participation in any study.

Voluntary participation
Participation in this research study is voluntary. You may refuse to allow your child to participate or withdraw your child from the study at any time. Furthermore, your child may also refuse to participate or withdraw at any time.

Contact information
If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Ryan Ladner (228) 342-7800.

Parental Auditing (place a check or "x" in the appropriate box)
___ I would like a copy of all journal entries my child writes.

___ I would not like a copy of all journal entries my child writes.

Consent
I have read this parental permission form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give my permission for my child to participate in this study.

Parent/Guardian signature_____ Date:_____

Parent/Guardian email address _____

Child's Name:_____

Participant Consent
Research Participant Information and Consent Form

1. **Explanation of the research and what you will do**
   - You are being asked to participate in a research study about your college choice decision.
   - First, demographic and lifestyle data will be collected. Then, in the study, you will be asked questions regarding the potential colleges that you want to attend.
   - If you are under the age of 18, you will also need parent/legal guardian consent in order to participate

2. **Your Rights to Participate, Say No, or Withdraw**
   - Participation in this research project is completely voluntary. You have the right to say no. you may change your mind at any time and withdraw. You may choose not to answer specific questions or stop participating at any time.

3. **Contact Information for Questions and Concerns**
   - If you have concerns about the study or would like to know ask questions or inform the researcher about concerns during the process you can contact me at:
       - Ryan Ladner. 2560 South Ocean BLVD Apt #315 Palm Beach, FL 33480. 228-342-7800. rladner10@georgefox.edu

4. **Documentation and Informed Consent**
   - Your name or other identifying information will be anonymous in the research report. All personal information, interview data, and other data received through any means of communication to the researcher in relation to this study will be kept confidential, unless you agree in writing that your identify may be revealed in a specific manner by the researcher.
   - Your signature below means that you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study

_____   _____
Signature   **Date**
_____
Print Name

_____
Email used for Journal

Appendix II: Initial Interview Questions

The Initial Interview

In this interview, the researcher will attempt to collect background information from the participant as well as understand which phase of the college search process the participant is currently in (pre-disposition, search, choice). This interview will take place prior to beginning any journal entries by the participant. The following schedule will be followed for the initial interview:

Administrative procedures

1. **Research Introduction (explanation of initial interview to participant):** This study is related to understanding how you are deciding on which college you want to attend in the future. In this initial interview, I will be collecting some background information from you. This information will help to identify how your past experiences may be related to your college choice process. In addition, I will discuss with you your current college choice process up to this point to get an idea of where you are currently are in your search process.

Demographic Info
1. Where do you live?
2. Junior/Senior   Age?

General Background Questions
We are going to discuss a little bit about your background, your current high school experience and the current advice you have received about your future college education.

1. Tell me about your general background.
   Possible prompts: (a) Where did you grow up or whom do you consider as part of your immediate family? (b) How do you keep in touch with family? (c) What does your parents do for a living?

2. Tell me about your high school experience.
   Possible prompts: (a) What do you like best about school? (b) What subjects do you like best? Do you know what you want to study in college? (c) Why did you choose that major?(d) What extra curricular programs are you involved in? (e) What is your parent(s) role during your high school? (c) Does your high school have a college preparatory program? If so, do you think this program influenced your decision to attend college? (d) What about your friends? Are they planning to go to college as well?

3. Did anyone else in your family go to college? Where did they go? What did they study? Have they given any advice to you about college?
Possible Prompts: What about guidance counselors, mentors, coaches? Have they provided advice to you regarding college?

Social Media Use (SMS)
This study is also examining social media use as a tool used in the college choice process. I am going to ask you some general background information regarding your social media use.

1. What social media sites (SMS) do you use most frequently?
Possible prompt: What would you say are your main reasons for using each of the sites?

2. What are your most frequent social media activities?
Possible prompt: Who do you communicate with the most on social media?

3. Tell me about your most recent memorable social media activity.

Identifying current phase of the college choice process
I want to take a second and determine where you are on your college choice journey by asking you a few questions (*in this section, only the pre-disposition and search phases are used, a student who has already made a choice will not be part of the study*).

1. Have you determined what schools you would consider (public/private; 4yr/2yr; religious/not) [**predisposition**]?
Possible Prompts: (a) Were you advised to choose a college based on location, size, cost, religious emphasis, athletics, or academic reputation? If so, by who? (b) Did any 'top choices' emerge from this advice? (c) Did you ever consider other options besides college?

2. Have you contacted any schools that meet your current criteria **[search]?**
Possible Prompts: (a) How have you contacted them? (b) Have you visited any of the campuses? (c) How far have you narrowed down your potential college lists?

The Top 5 List
In this section, I want you to discuss the top 5 colleges you are considering attending. Once you have named the top 5, I am going to ask you questions about each one.

1. What is your current top 5 colleges that you are considering attending?

Number 1 College _____
(a) Explain why this college is currently in that particular position. (b) Have you had any communication or interaction with these institutions? (c) Have you gathered any information from this institution?

Number 2 College _____
(a) Explain why this college is currently in that particular position. (b) Have you had any communication or interaction with these institutions? (c) Have you gathered any information from this institution?

Number 3 College _____
(a) Explain why this college is currently in that particular position. (b) Have you had any communication or interaction with these institutions? (c) Have you gathered any information from this institution?

Number 4 College _____
(a) Explain why this college is currently in that particular position. (b) Have you had any communication or interaction with these institutions? (c) Have you gathered any information from this institution?

Number 5 College _____
(a) Explain why this college is currently in that particular position. (b) Have you had any communication or interaction with these institutions? (c) Have you gathered any information from this institution?

Conclusion of initial interview

This interview is the beginning phase of this study. For the next six months, I want you to keep a journal of your top 5 colleges. If at any time, you make a change to your top 5 list (rearrange the order, add a college, delete a college), I would like you to journal about your reasoning for doing so. You can complete as many journal entries as you like. Journal entries will be written and recorded using your website I set up. Each month, I will contact you on a specified day that we agree upon to discuss your journal entries, your current top 5, and I will ask you some additional questions. I will send various reminders via email/text to you regarding your journal entries.

Monthly Agreed Upon Contact Date _____

Monthly Agreed Upon Contact Time _____

Best number for contact _____

Appendix III: Monthly Interview Guidelines

Monthly Interviews
This interview will occur each month for the participants. I will discuss each of the journal entries and ask additional questions related to the top 5 college choices.

Participant Name _____   Interview Month_____

Introduction
In this interview, I want to discuss each of the journal entries you have sent as well ask some additional questions related to your current top 5 colleges. Currently I have your top 5 as (list the participants top 5).

Search Phase
These questions will focus on your current top 5 and how they have changed and how you are searching for information for them.

1. Tell me about each of the changes that occurred this month?
   Possible Prompts: (a) Review each of the journal entries of the participants and walk through each one making sure they are able to recall their change and reasoning for them.

2. How did you gather information about your top 5 colleges during this month?
   Possible prompts: (a) Did you visit any schools during this month? ? What information were you able to gather? Was it helpful? (b) Did you research costs, financial aid options, and scholarship opportunities? (c) Did you research any of the schools athletic program, academic reputation, or religious emphasis? (d) Did you evaluate any of the schools' social atmosphere? (e) Did you look at the fields of study the schools offered? (f) Did you look at their academic standards? (g) Did you visit any of the schools' websites? If so, what information did you find? Was it helpful?

3. Do you remember using any forms of traditional marketing (ads, brochures, billboards or view books) to gather information about the schools this month?
   Possible Prompts: Do you believe any of these were influential? Were the helpful?

4. Tell me about your interactions with college representatives from your top 5 schools this month?
   Possible Prompts: Whom did you speak with? How did you speak with them? Were they helpful?

5. Did you use SMS to connect with any of the schools this month?
   Possible prompts: (a) Which sites did you use? (b) Did you find information on the sites helpful? (c) What information were you able to find? (d) Which sites do you believe had the most impact?

6. From the information you gathered, what influenced your top 5 colleges the most this month?

Choice Phase (if participant has made a choice)
These questions will only be used in the monthly interview if participants have made a choice about college selection.

1. Tell me about the way your final choice courted you?
   Possible prompts: (a) What specific methods did they use to entice you to choose their school? (b) How did these methods assist you in making your final choice? (c) How did you finalize your decision?

2. Why was this school you final choice?
   Possible prompts: (a) What is the brand positioning or promise of your chosen college? (b) What was the most significant factor that influenced you to choose this school (e.g. personal influences, family, friends etc., cost, location, size, price, religious emphasis, athletics, social atmosphere)? (c) Do you believe marketing influenced this decision? What about SMS?

Appendix IV: Journaling Instructions

Journaling Process

This journal will be kept by the participant over a 6-month time frame. The instructions to the participant are as follows: As you make changes to your top 5 (rearrange the order, add one, delete one), you will record a journal entry on your website and explain why you made these changes. If you arrive at the end of the month and do not make any changes for particular, you will write an entry and describe *why you kept the order the same*. You can have as many entries as you want. At the end of each month, I will contact you via phone or through Skype to discuss the changes you made and ask additional questions regarding your current college choice process.

Participant Name _____

Participant Email _____

Participant Contact Information _____

Website URL _____

Website Password_____

Appendix V: Coding & Exploratory Notes Examples

Data analysis was completed as follows.

Once the monthly interviews were complete, the data was transcribed. On this transcription, the researcher created two margins; one with the participant information and a right hand margin for exploratory notes:

> **P:** Yes, definitely, I want to specialize in neurology. I really love just learning a lot of brain and the nervous system and the process that it has. If I could, I want to be a surgeon; I don't know exactly where I stand on that right now. But, my dream right now is to be a pediatric neurosurgeon. I love kids and I really want to work with kids. And somewhere whether with my job or outside of my job, but, I think I'll try and get on, I'm not sure exactly now or change or if I get to see more into it and that kind of thing but that's my plan.
>
> **I:** What's your parent's role during your high school years?
>
> **P:** Oh, my gosh! Everything. [laughter] My parents helped me so much. They keep me on track. I really I haven't I had social problems, I got side tracked and stuff and my mom has been just so important to me like with these past few months and stuff right now, <u>I'm taking some harder classes, and she's sits down with me and keeps me focused and I don't know what I will do when I get to college but they keep me focused, they keep me on track and they help me with everything which is really amazing and I couldn't ask for better parents when it comes to that kind of thing.</u> They help me in that, they help me study and stuff like that but they also kind of tell me what I'm doing wrong what I'm doing right, the things I could fix in my life and just when it comes to school and everything. But, I don't know they really keeping focused, that's probably one of the main things.
>
> **I:** Okay. Tell me about your friends. What are they planning to do?
>
> **P:** A lot of my friends have dream that, they're all very different actually. Like we've been friends since we were little but everybody's planning on going different directions. I have one friend he wants to be a horse trainer, and one friend that wants to be I have a lot of friends that want to be nurses. I know lot of people; everybody seems to want to be nurse now. But I have a lot of friends who want to go to they

The researcher underlined key phrases of the transcript and wrote exploratory notes on the right column of the transcript.

I: You mentioned pre-med, is that what you want to study in college?

P: Yes, definitely, I want to specialize in neurology. I really love just learning a lot of brain and the nervous system and the process that it has. If I could, I want to be a surgeon; I don't know exactly where I stand on that right now. But, my dream right now is to be a pediatric neurosurgeon. I love kids and I really want to work with kids. And somewhere whether with my job or outside of my job, but, I think I'll try and get on, I'm not sure exactly now or change or if I get to see more into it and that kind of thing but that's my plan.

I: What's your parent's role during your high school years?

P: Oh, my gosh! Everything. [laughter] My parents helped me so much. They keep me on track. I really I haven't I had social problems, I got side tracked and stuff and my mom has been just so important to me like with these past few months and stuff right now, I'm taking some harder classes, and she's sits down with me and keeps me focused and I don't know what I will do when I get to college but they keep me focused, they keep me on track and they help me with everything which is really amazing and I couldn't ask for better parents when it comes to that kind of thing. They help me in that, they help me study and stuff like that but they also kind of tell me what I'm doing wrong, what I'm doing right, the things I could fix in my life and just when it comes to school and everything. But, I don't know they really keeping focused, that's probably one of the main things.

I: Okay. Tell me about your friends. What are they planning to do?

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Mentions love of learning once again.

She has merged her love for kids and science (says her favorite part of the body to learn about was the nervous system), and learning into a dream job of pediatric neurosurgeon.

Realizes she may change her major. Referencing "this is her plan now" however, it could be changed. This is good because her parents may be sensing the same thing (hinting why they asked her to look at more than one particular major).

A mention of Parent's and their help once again.

A reliance on parents and how they keep her focused especially for difficult classes.

A mention of parents being amazing and helpful in her high school years.

█████ mentions she isn't going to be sure what she will do without them in college.

Parents are very active in school life. A reoccurring mention of keeping her focused.

Once the exploratory notes were written, the researcher uploaded the document into a qualitative software called MaxQDA11. The transcript was then coded (in the left hand column) where initial themes were identified.

...Positive View of Le

...Parents as Mentor

want to study in college?

: Yes, definitely, I want to specialize in neurology. I really love just learning a lot of brain and the nervous system and the process that it has. If I could, I want to be a surgeon; I don't know exactly where I stand on that right now. But, my dream right now is to be a pediatric neurosurgeon. I love kids and I really want to work with kids. And somewhere whether with my job or outside of my job, but, I think I'll try and get on, I'm not sure exactly now or change or if I get to see more into it and that kind of thing but that's my plan.

Gotcha. What's your parent's role during your high school years?

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A mention of parents being amazing and helpful in her high school years.

mentions she isn't going to be sure what she will do without them in college.

Parents are very active in school life. A reoccurring mention of keeping her focused.

All codes from all transcripts were organized using the code system of the software program.

```
Code System
  Evident Theme
  College Search Process (Evaluation-Choice etc.)
  College Attributes
      The Fallback School
      A Sports INfluence
      Diversity of experience at school
      Campus Safety or Stay out of Trouble
      Admissions Standards Too High or not Favorable
      Campus (Visit, Beauty)
      Perceived Reputation of School
      College Courting Activities
      Personal Relationship with Admissions Staff
      Small College v.s. Large College
      Social life, People at College, Facilities
      Fields of Study
      Desire to be Known (not just a #)
      Religious Affiliation of School (Rules also)
      Location of College - Distance from Home
      Location of College - Family Tie
      Location of College - Drawn to Area/Cool Area
      Financial
  Social Media Use
      Social Media as a way to keep in contact and/or follow College
      Social media as a way to keep up with society
      Education use of Social Media by H.S. Influencer
  Key Factors of College Choice (ECO, SOC, PSY)
      Economic Factors
          Disadvantaged due to where I grew up
      Psychological Factors
          Perceived institutional fit (student & college)
      Social Factors
          H.S. life = Sports
          Minoritiy opportunities
          Parents mainly hands off
          College Prep in H.S.
          Parents Alma Mater of Strong Family Tie to School
          Significant Others
          Comfort or Desire for Location(s)
          Christian Faith & Values
```

Once all the transcripts were coded, each code was reviewed separately and participant data was compiled to search for commonalities among themes. A code sheet was created for each participant to summarize his or her particular lived experience:

Theme	Key Quotes from Interview
1. A search for trust and quality	
1.1. The Importance of Authentic and Trustworthy information in framing Laura's Ideal College	"I met this guy at the career fair and he told me a bunch of stories about what they experienced at Mississippi college. It was the exact same way my cousins described their experience. Their story was exactly what I wanted mine to be and I was just like wow that's more than one story, you know it's not one story, everybody I talked to after that has kind of confirmed that the school was the just the way everyone had previously described it"
1.2 Perceived reputation matters	"As for Mississippi State, the programs they offer seem wonderful. I can't really speak for it because I haven't taken any classes or done anything there. However, one of the reasons I'm not really excited about going there, I know their pre-med program is not quite as great as other schools."
	"My parents think that I will get a better education at

	Mississippi College"
1.3 Perception of school created from interactions with related people	
2. A search for boundaries	
2.1 A nurturing home with boundaries = search for a school that meets the same criteria	
2.2 Parent's comfort level with top choice reassures with Laura	"They like Jackson because it is closer than Starkville and my grandparents live in Jackson so I think I will like being able to go to their house. It's a little more comfortable for me."
2.3 Strong religious faith desires boundaries	"FCA is very important to me. We do a lot. We have devotion every Tuesday morning and we do a lot of see you at the poll, global day of prayer, and praying with students. We have a little assembly and we just talk to people and really try to spread the word".
	"I am 100% a Christian. God is a very important part of my life and we have a church every Sunday and Wednesday. I am the children's minister. On Wednesday night I do children's classes."
	"I like Mississippi College being a Christian university so yes religious is important to me. I love how on fire they are for Christ and how they're pretty strict which I kind of like the boundaries of that. I think that will be good for me."
3. Personal relationships are key to determining institutional fit	
3.1 Personal Admissions Counselor Relationship	"It was wonderful. I've been in contact with other schools and none of them have been quite as personal. "
	"I have been in contact with other schools and none of them have been quite as personal as my counselor at MC.
	"I really like that the Admissions Counselor knows my name, and makes sure that I knew everything about the school both good and bad"
3.2 Making it personal by encouraging a visit	
3.3 A handwritten letter	" I mean you get flyers and the things on the websites and emails and everything. You see that all the time with a bunch of colleges" (speaking about what makes handwritten letters different)
4. Academic pressures	

4.1 The ACT	"I'm one point away, one point away from the eligibility for the presidential scholarship because of my ACT so that's upsetting in my point of view. Like I'm involved and I do a lot of stuff and I know that's something I could be capable of achieving (the presidential scholarship), but I can't because of my ACT. I recommend that people work on your ACT."
5. Parents as Drivers in College Search	
5.1 Initiating contact with desired college of choice	"The AC called me and she left me a voice mail message on my house phone, so my parents were like Laura did you listen to this? You really need to pay attention to this. And they finally got me to call her back."
5.2 Pressuring to look up college information	"They've had me doing all kinds of financial stuff like scholarships and just looking into the schools. They helped me with every aspect of school, like where I want to go, and what I'm planning on pursuing and identifying what the school has to offer in terms of majors and stuff like that."
6. College size is a reflection of her personality	
6.1 Opposite desires	"I'm very much sure that between, kind of opposites, Mississippi State or Mississippi College. Mississippi State is a major university and Mississippi College is a small private school. I'm leaning towards Mississippi College right now. I've always liked the idea of a major university but I also like the Idea of a smaller college. A place where I won't get so lost. At a big school, I am afraid I will get lost in the crowd. I like the idea of the smaller school, the smaller atmosphere"
	"I love how big Mississippi State is and I love how it's kind of the opposite. Like it is both sides with my personality (as compared to MC)."
7. Social Media is authentic	
7.1 Content is authentic	Talking about following her AC on social media: "I get to see a lot of personal MC stuff, just what goes on and her view of it and that kind of thing which is cool".
7.2 What I share means committed	"I posted a picture of me and a friend on My Instagram and said that I was excited for next year"

From these theme sheets, themes were analyzed across each case and common themes for the study were uncovered.