In search of the "right place": Institutional image, person-environment fit and college choice

Amy Stuart Greenough
William & Mary - School of Education

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IN SEARCH OF THE "RIGHT PLACE":
INSTITUTIONAL IMAGE, PERSON-ENVIRONMENT FIT AND COLLEGE
CHOICE

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the School of Education
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial fulfillment
Of the Requirement for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Amy Stuart Greenough
December 2003
IN SEARCH OF THE “RIGHT PLACE”:

INSTITUTIONAL IMAGE, PERSON-ENVIRONMENT FIT AND COLLEGE

CHOICE

by

Amy S. Greenough

Approved November 2003 by

Dorothy E. Finnegan, Ph.D.
Chair of Doctoral Committee

David W. Leslie, Ed.D.

Michael F. DiPaola, Ed.D.
DEDICATION

For their tireless support and encouragement, this dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Jesse S. and Linda H. Greenough. The lessons they taught me about persistence, patience, and hard work made this endeavor possible.
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ABSTRACT

IN SEARCH OF THE “RIGHT PLACE”: INSTITUTIONAL IMAGE, PERSON-ENVIRONMENT FIT AND COLLEGE CHOICE


Chair: Associate Professor Dorothy E. Finnegan

This qualitative case study was designed to advance current understandings of college choice by utilizing person-environment fit theory, and to elucidate the relationship between image and the development of fit appraisals that impact students’ college selections. This research focused explicitly on the impact of student’s affective fit assessments upon their final college decision.

Open-ended interviews were conducted with twenty eight applicants to the College of William and Mary. These participants were high school seniors from across the country that had applied and were admitted to the College. Both those planning to attend the college and those planning to attend other institutions were interviewed.

The findings suggest that students form images of the institutions they are considering as a result of exposure (both formal and informal) to the institution and its associates. Throughout the selection process, the students use their self-constructed images to formulate cognitive and affective fit appraisals, or estimates of their congruence with the campus environment, to guide their enrollment decisions.

As a complement to cognitive choice factors noted in the literature, this study offers an alternative model of college selection that highlights the affective domain as an
informant in decision-making. More specifically, the study’s findings identify the interplay between self and environment as a critical nexus where personality and individual dilemmas of self impact college choices. Through the mechanism of fit, this study reveals that image and institutional exposure are important factors in students’ choice processes. Recommendations for further research as well as implication of this study for professional practice are provided.
IN SEARCH OF THE "RIGHT PLACE": INSTITUTIONAL IMAGE, PERSON-ENVIRONMENT FIT AND COLLEGE CHOICE
CHAPTER I

COLLEGE CHOICE AS A FIELD OF INQUIRY

In the mid 1970’s, American higher education was transformed due to national economic crises, demographic changes in the population of traditional college-aged students, and reduced federal aid to students and institutions. These changes dramatically impacted the environment for college admissions and higher education was transformed into a marketplace where intense inter-institutional competition and student consumerism flourished (Dixon, 1995). Recognizing that enrollment declines would not be curtailed through increased recruitment alone, many college administrators began to focus their attention towards more systematic, quasi-experimental enrollment management programs designed to compel their institutions to become more strategic (Wilson, 1990). “Enrollment management” emerged as the term used to describe the systematic conceptualization of admissions activities, which included attention to market demands as a means of optimizing student enrollments.

Enrollment management is defined as a group of activities designed to equip higher educational institutions with the ability to exert more influence over their enrollments (Hossler & Bean, 1990). Conceptualizations of enrollment management suggest that it is both an organizational concept and an institutional process. In theory, enrollment management is simultaneously concerned with both the attraction and retention of students whom an institution defines as preferable and appropriate (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995). In practice, enrollment management is an institutionally-based, holistic procedure that unites all disparate university functions surrounding the process of recruiting and retaining students (Dixon, 1995) including: clarification of institutional
mission, program development, marketing, recruiting, admissions, financial aid, orientation, and retention (Kemerer, Baldrige, and Green, 1982).

Since the inception of enrollment management models, colleges have explicitly sought to plan and forecast their enrollments and to strategically influence the decision-making process of prospective students (Paulsen, 1990). To meet these goals, the objectives of typical enrollment management programs are (a) to define the institution’s nature and characteristics through objective and subjective techniques, and to market the school appropriately and aggressively; (b) to incorporate into marketing plans and activities all relevant campus sectors and ensuring that parties understand and serve institutional goals; (c) to make strategic decisions about financial aid as a recruitment tool; and (d) to make the appropriate commitment of human, financial and technological resources to the endeavor of attracting and retaining students (Dixon, 1995; Hossler, Bean, & Associates, 1990). Due to the complexity of the environment and the large scope of its goals, enrollment management demands an understanding of institutional image and marketing, and an awareness of the factors that students employ when making their college selections.

College Choice

The selection of a college has been described as one of life’s most important and difficult decisions (Miller, 1990). Each year in America, this process involves more than two million students, along with their families and school personnel, in the expenditure of vast amounts of time, energy, and money. College and university personnel also spend tremendous resources trying to understand the college choice process in order to facilitate recruitment and retention initiatives. For those colleges and universities faced with
declining enrollments, understanding the college selection process has taken on considerable importance, thus resulting in increased interest in the topic.

The study of college choice is essentially an exploration of three central questions— who goes to college, where do they go, and why do they select a particular institution? These fundamental questions are of considerable interest largely because the consequences of college decision-making are great for both student and institution. As a result, college choice has evolved into a prominent field of study in higher education with studies conducted by educational researchers in disciplines including sociology, economics, and psychology (Paulsen, 1990). Although college choice studies have traditionally been sorted into three categories of models (i.e., econometric, sociological, and combined) that specify both the factors leading to college choice and the relationship among the factors (Hossler et al., Jackson, 1982; Paulsen, 1990), the discussion of college choice in this study will be framed by the third question—how do students come to chose a particular institution? More specifically, using Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-phase model of college choice, this study examines how students negotiate the college selection dilemma to arrive at a final institution of choice.

Results of research on college choice reveal a number of important implications for enrollment management programs, principally in the areas of marketing, recruitment and retention. Hossler et al. (1996) suggest that research on college selection provides institutional policy-makers with a reverse lens that enables institutions to see themselves as students see them. This perspective is important in targeting and recruiting appropriate groups of perspective students while also allowing administrators to observe and project
their institution’s image in a way that ensures that the school will attract students who will be retained until graduation.

Beyond the obvious institutional benefits, a number of compelling reasons drive the exploration of college choice. From the perspective of market researchers, college selection is defined as a “high-risk purchase” because it is costly (in terms of time, money, and energy) and is of high personal importance with long-term consequences. Moreover, the college decision is uncertain. The student usually has no previous personal experience with such a decision. Furthermore, the variation in quality among schools may be difficult to judge (Guseman, 1981). In 1976, image and marketing scholar, Phillip Kotler, asserted that students often apply to and enroll in institutions for which they are not well-suited; this occurred largely as a result of the uncertainty involved in the matriculation decision where, as price and uncertainty increase, decision complexity is multiplied. Lewis and Morrison (1975) concurred, arguing that students often have only a vague idea of what important institutional attributes lead to a good choice and that many simply did not know what they “ought” to be looking for when assessing a college.

Although current college-bound students appear to be more market-savvy than their predecessors a generation ago, the college selection process is still one that involves a fair amount of uncertainty and doubt. To deal with inherent ambiguities of the choice process, students utilize several safety mechanisms. Conservatism or reliance on well-known brands, as evidenced through the use of rankings guides and general dependence on assessments of academic reputation and institutional popularity, is one such mechanism (Litten, 1986). The current popularity of college rankings guides like those...
produced by *U.S. News and World Report* suggests that students need some tools to help them determine what facets of institutional life make a difference. These guides, while hotly debated, provide students, particularly those who are high-ability, upper-middle and upper class students, with a rubric for determining institutional quality. Students also rely on testimonials from current students, peers, siblings, alumni, and others who have experience with the institution. When quality is difficult to ascertain, students also look to indirect physical indicators, such as campus appearance and facilities, as a gauge. Finally, students also use price as a proxy for quality where high tuition price is assumed to equate with excellence (Litten, 1986).

All of these safety mechanisms rely, to some degree, on images of the institution held by various publics. Students and their families must depend on these and other sources of information to guide their decisions. In the mind of each individual, this information takes the form of images of an institution. Consequently, the content of students' institutional images has great import for their college selection.

**Institutional Image**

Due to the impact of large-scale forces in the 1970's, a “buyer’s market” in higher education developed. The same mode exists today. However, while challenging, this competitive environment has forced individual institutions to define their distinctiveness and to develop new methods to attract eager students through an increased understanding of institutional image and student college choice (Maguire, 1986).

Students, as higher education consumers, have never been offered so many post-secondary educational choices in terms of quality, size, price, location, and format, and never before have their choices been so critical to the sustenance (and sometimes

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survival) of institutions. As competition for students intensifies, the individual college needs to identify its position within the marketplace and to understand more clearly student demand for their particular brand of undergraduate education (Kotler, 1976). Consequently, prospective students' images of a college or university are often the linchpin in designing effective marketing and recruitment programs. Further, the ability of the campus community to define and communicate its distinctiveness is fundamental to the recruitment and retention of students (Milligan, 1982). Colleges can define and market their distinctiveness through a comprehensive understanding of the role of institutional image in enrollment management and student college choice.

Drawing from various conceptualizations of image, this study defines image as an abstract, complex, multidimensional, and fluid conception created by the individual as a result of communication and information processing about an entity, considering that individual's organizational, cultural, historical and personal contexts (Alvesson, 1990; Enis, 1967; Moffitt, 1994). This definition of image privileges the role of the perceiver and suggests that because images are real in the mind of the individual, they impact behavior in very important and somewhat predictable ways. Applied to college choice, this conceptualization of image suggests that a student's image of a college creates, for that student, a notion of the institution as a particular kind of place. This image may not resemble what the institution is in actuality but, nevertheless, an individual's perceptions affect their college choices.

Beyond the impact on student decision-making and college choice, this principle of image as a driver of behavior has important consequences for the institution. From an enrollment management perspective, retaining students is much preferable to replacing
those who depart before graduation. Consequently, the most beneficial methods of recruitment should focus on attracting students who will "fit" and who will be satisfied by the institution and retained to graduation.

Person-Environment Fit

Institutional image can be best understood as an important factor in attracting prospective students through the mechanism of person-environment fit (PE fit). Based on theories of person-environment interaction, fit theory explores the compatibility between organizations and individuals. In fit theory, the person-environment nexus is the context for all behavior; individual behavior is considered to be a result of the interplay between personal characteristics and the environment. As applied to the college selection dilemma, fit theory suggests that students choose their institutions based largely upon their assumptions about how well they will fit within the context of an institution. Although empirical studies about the direct applications of PE fit theory to college selection are absent in the literature, the potential existence of a relationship between student-institution fit and college choice has received support by higher education scholars (Hayes, 1989; Kuh, 1991; Litten, 1991) and warrants further investigation.

The use of the fit construct is not new in college admissions. For years, admissions officers have been concerned with fitting or matching students with institutional characteristics, believing that a good match will result in satisfied students and ultimately, productive graduates (Williams, 1986). Although the matching notion was eventually abandoned due to its narrow scope, researchers from the campus ecology perspective have urged administrators to reconsider the impact of student-institution fit using a broader interactive framework. These conceptions suggest that just as students are
shaped by their institutions, in return, the students also help to shape their institutions. Thus, fit can be viewed as an interactive process that affects both institutional inputs and outputs.

Statement of the Problem

The increasing cost of a college education severely impacts most family budgets. The ever-expanding variety of institutional choices dizzies even the most discerning consumer. Indeed, the career impact of the choice of a particular collegiate institution can be immense. Thus, the selection of an institution may be a stressful experience for students and their families. By helping prospective students know what to ask and what to look for in an institution, applied research on the college selection phenomenon aids students and their families in making more-informed choices. As well, by highlighting the mechanisms of the choice process, such research helps institutions understand what students need to know in order to make this important choice.

Although the need for applied research on image, choice, and fit is great, very few researchers have analyzed these issues in relation to one another. Support for interrelationships between and among the three concepts has been suggested by several researchers (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Maguire & Lay, 1981; Milligan, 1982; Morey, 1970; Sevier, 1996); however, these concepts have yet to be united in a robust theoretical framework. Thus, the relationship between prospective students' images of the institution and the impact of these images on their college choices is only partially understood.

Where they exist, studies on image and college choice have either tended to treat the later as a singular process or have analyzed image formation or decision making without explicitly comparing the two (Maguire & Lay, 1981). In addition, the bulk of the
studies relating these topics are largely quantitative and based on participants’ responses to surveys and questionnaires. While these studies have succeeded in identifying image factors that impact college choice, qualitative investigations of college selection (Hayes, 1989) reveal that student motivation for choosing a particular school is often more complex than those described. Thus, additional research is needed to explore in greater detail the complex and nuanced relationship between image and choice.

Considering empirical investigations of fit, most existing studies emphasize the impact of fit on student retention and satisfaction (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995; Brockway, 1997; Tracey & Sherry, 1984; Wiese, 1994). The findings of these studies highlight some consequences of fit; however, since the fit factors in these investigations have been derived from students who are already members of the college population, the factors identified therein lack direct relevance to the fit assessments constructed by prospective college students. A relatively smaller number of studies (Clark et al., 1972; Hayes, 1989; Kuh, 1991; Williams, 1986) implicate prospective student assessments of fit as a factor in college selection. However, where researchers have operationalized the concept of fit in college choice studies, they have fallen short of identifying what personal and institutional attributes comprise students’ fit appraisals. As well, these studies have all but ignored the fundamental role of image in the creation of students’ fit assessments.

To address these gaps in our knowledge, this study clarifies the link between image and choice through the application of person-environment fit theory. With admitted applicants to the College of William and Mary as the unit of analysis, this study applied the student-college fit model, an interpretation of Kristof’s (1996) person-
organization fit model, to the problem of college selection. Additionally, this study explores how applicants' image appraisals impact their perceptions of fit and their subsequent choice decisions. Using a qualitative case study design guided by an interpretative worldview, this study (a) advances current understandings of college choice by utilizing person-environment fit theory to (b) elucidates the relationship between students' institutional images and the development of the individual fit appraisals that impact their college selection decisions. In order to address the problem statement, this study investigated four research questions:

1) What images of the College of William and Mary do participants hold?
2) What image factors seem to contribute to students' perceptions of fit/misfit at a particular institution?
3) What impact does perceived fit have on selection decisions?
4) Is there a relationship between image, fit and choice?

Significance

Conceptually, enrollment management links college choice, student-institution fit, and student attrition (Hossler & Kemerer, 1986). Thus, institutions that utilize and conduct marketing, image, and college choice research are better able to understand their image and their competition. College choice and image research allows campuses to identify their market segments, or those groups of students they are most likely to attract. As well, research on image and choice provides administrators and decisions makers with an external perspective, which can be an invaluable tool for those who are responsible for articulating the essence of the institution to outsiders. Overall, research that unites the concepts of college choice and institutional image assists both institutions and students.
Schools prosper by attracting quality students who will likely persist until graduation, and students profit through an increased understanding of their options and the environments which best fit their needs and preferences.

Considering the role of the student and the institutional environment, a good fit (not match) between student and institution enhances student satisfaction, academic achievement and personal growth (Williams, 1986). Fit is significant for both students and institutions; students succeed when they are satisfied by an environment that promotes growth and achievement and institutions prosper when they are able to retain contented students who will become proud alumni. Moreover, fit research has policy implications that extend beyond the institution. When carefully applied, fit research has the potential to help students and their families develop more useful rubrics for evaluating institutions and assessing their own needs and expectations. Instead of viewing their institutional options in a hierarchy based on objective institutional qualities (size, student to faculty ratios), fit research may help to legitimize students’ subjective feelings about an institution and about their potential place within that environment.

Through the Student-College Fit Model, this study sought to identify the personal and institutional factors students assess during their college selection process. These factors could be utilized to develop resources, counseling protocols, and admissions programming that will help guide students, parents, guidance counselors, and institutions in making mutually beneficial selection decisions. Additionally, by exploring the relationship between fit and institutional image and their impact on college selection, this study’s findings provide general insights for enrollment management, marketing, and recruitment efforts.
For the College of William and Mary in particular, the results of this study help identify image factors that are attractive and unattractive to prospective students. As well, this study provides an image and choice factor profile of matriculants and nonmatriculants, which may help to further define institutional market position and attractive attributes of the College’s main competitors. These findings may certainly have implications for marketing and recruitment efforts at the College.

Limitations and Delimitations

As with any study, this research maintains certain limitations that are beyond the control of the researcher. A primary limitation of this research was the inability to clearly trace the development of students’ images of the college. Images are complex and are made up of multiple messages the perceiver receives about the institution. Many of these messages are even sub-conscious and the student may not be fully aware of the impact of these messages on their own image formation. As such, it was impossible to fully define and describe the process of image formation because all image-related messages and sources could not be identified.

Additionally, this research was limited in that additional data sources beyond the participant interviews were not available. Traditional case studies generally utilize a variety of data sources including document analysis and observation. However, document analysis could not be conducted because no such documents exist to help the researcher understand the development of the students’ impressions about the institutions they are considering. Moreover, participant observations could not be conducted because there was no venue conducive to this activity. Observing students on a campus tour does not necessarily reveal students internal messages and impressions of the campus. In fact,
since students may believe that they are being evaluated on these tours, they may not feel free to discuss their real feelings about the school. Furthermore, any such attempt by the researcher to contact prospective students before they have made their college choice might have contaminated the students’ decisions making process, and therefore would have been unethical.

The delimitations of this study are determined largely by the researcher’s approach to the problem and the lack available resources. Due to resource constraints, the researcher was unable to travel to meet with individual participants in person. In order to conduct in-person interviews, participants would have to be drawn from a sample of local students. Indeed, preliminary research for this project suggested that due to their personal familiarity with the College, students who live close to the institution have unique images about the College that are not widely shared among applicants from other geographical areas. As this research seeks a representative sample of prospective student images, phone interviews were the only method that allows for outreach to students beyond the local population. Phone interviews unfortunately limit the amount of nonverbal information that can be collected.

Additionally, this study dealt only with those students who were actually accepted to the institution, but who may not necessarily have accepted that invitation. While this does not reveal the images held by all prospective students, focusing on this group helped to identify the impressions held by those whom the institution deems appropriate additions to the campus community. This is advantageous in that the participants will represent those students with whom the institution’s marketing and recruitment efforts are most likely to succeed.
Lastly, this study makes several assumptions about the students being investigated. Namely, since this research was conducted with accepted applicants to the College of William and Mary, the typical demographics of this group suggest that most of the participants are high-ability students from middle- to upper-middle class backgrounds. Since these participants were talented and hailed from families with the financial means to send them to the college of their choice, most of the participants had a number of options for baccalaureate education. Thus, these students had a choice between William and Mary and a number of other suitable alternatives. Although this research revealed patterns about students who have a choice among colleges without generating any knowledge about the college choices of students with fewer or no alternatives, this was the ideal context to conduct inquiries about how students make college choices when faced with a variety of attractive institutional alternatives.

Organization of the Dissertation

This study is divided into five chapters. The present chapter provides an argument for the study of college choice in the context of institutional image and person-environment fit and delineates the research questions for the investigation. Chapter II provides a review and synthesis of the literature on college choice, institutional image, and person-environment fit theory. This chapter also provides a background for the development of the theoretical model used in this study. Chapter III describes the theoretical framework for the study and offers a rationale for the use of the qualitative case study as the research method to be used to collect and analyze the data. Chapter IV displays the study’s findings and answers the research questions presented in Chapter I.
Lastly, Chapter V provides an interpretation and discussion of the study’s findings and their implications for further research and practice.
CHAPTER II

WHAT IS KNOWN?

College Choice

Who Goes to College?

The study of college choice is essentially an exploration of three fundamental questions—who goes to college, where do they go, and why do they select a particular institution? Although conceptual approaches describing the college choice process have typically been categorized into broad theoretical frameworks (Hossler et. al., 1996,) at the crux of these frames lays one or more of these essential questions.

As a research question, determining “who goes to college” has been a popular issue. These macro-level studies of college choice behavior, also known as enrollment demand studies, often describe how changes in environmental factors beyond institutional control (e.g., financial aid regulations, affirmative action regulations) and institutional characteristics (e.g., tuition, admissions policies) can affect an institution’s total enrollment (Paulsen, 1990). Studies of this nature, such as those conducted by the Carnegie Foundation (1975, 1980), help forecast enrollment trends and describe and explore changes in general enrollment patterns across institutions.

Econometric college choice theories also address the question of who attends college from an investment-oriented perspective. Economic models suggest that students weigh various factors as they compute an individual cost-benefit analysis and then elect to attend a particular institution if the perceived benefits of attendance at that institution
outweigh the perceived benefit offered by other institutions or by non-college alternatives (Fuller, Manski, & Wise, 1982; Hossler et al., 1996).

At the macro-level, econometric research seeks to predict enrollments in institutions, or with states or the nation as the unit of analysis. Thus, economic “college going models” describe factors that influence the choice between college and non-college alternatives. Such factors include expected costs of attendance (tuition, room and board, forgone earnings), expected earnings, student background characteristics (parental education, income, and occupation), and high school characteristics. Considering these factors, econometrists suggest that students estimate the most attractive alternative given their particular situation (Hossler et al., 1996).

Through their work on status attainment, sociologists (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Sewell & Shah, 1979, Sewell, Haller, & Portes, 1969) have focused on the earliest stages of the college choice process in order to identify and describe relationships among factors that influence aspirations for college attendance. In this vein, family socioeconomic background and student academic ability are predicted to have a positive effect on aspirations for college. Additional factors include parental encouragement, high school academic performance, and the views of significant others (parents, teachers, and peers). Significant others form perceptions of the student’s academic ability, family socioeconomic status and high school performance. They in turn influence student aspirations by communicating behavioral expectations and by serving as models (Sewell et al, 1969). Since sociologists explore college aspirations in the generic, as in the questions of college versus non-college, and in the specific, as in the question of which
Combined models of college choice that unite the most powerful indicators from the econometric and sociological models present the college decision-making process as one that occurs in sequential stages (Chapman, 1984; Hanson and Litten, 1982; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Kotler, 1976; Litten, 1982). In these models, such as the one offered by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), the college choice process is distilled into three stages: (1) predisposition, the developmental phase when students determine whether or not they will seek postsecondary education; (2) search, where students identifying attributes and values which characterize postsecondary alternatives and determine what attributes to consider when reviewing institutions; and (3) choice, where students first formulate an application set and later make the final college selection decision.

According to the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, students wrestle with the question of whether or not to attend college in the predisposition phase. Socioeconomic status, student ability and achievement, race, parental education and encouragement, and peer support are strong indicators of college attendance (see Hossler, et. al., 1996). Not only do these indicators help determine attendance, often they also aid researchers in understanding what drives students’ decisions about what college they will attend.

Who Goes to College Where and Why?

The second and third essential questions underlying examinations of college choice revolve around issues that pertain to institutional selection. More specifically, inquiries in this vein can be condensed to examinations of who goes to college where and
why. Considered micro-level studies of college choice, these studies describe how individual, environmental, institutional characteristics affect a student’s decision about which college to attend (Paulsen, 1990).

“Choice among colleges” refers to an econometric notion which suggests that students select a particular institution from a set of institutions to which he or she was admitted based on the relative perceived costs and benefits of each institution. With respect to institutional choice, the status attainment theorists findings have much in common with the econometricists because many of the student variable that impact econometric analyses are also implicated in sociological models. Findings from these two camps suggest that factors that impact institutional selection include costs, student background characteristics, student academic ability, and institutional characteristics (e.g., admissions selectivity/institutional quality, academic reputation, size, ruralness, technical/fine arts orientation, graduate orientation, and liberalism) (Kohn, Manski & Mundel, 1976; Radner & Miller, 1970).

Alternatively, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) suggest that institutional selection questions are answered during the search and choice phases of their combined model. In the search phase, students develop very basic criteria and they begin exploring the types of schools where they will most likely gain admittance. The search phase is said to have ended when students begin developing a list of schools to which they intend to apply. At this point, students enter the choice phase, which includes two stages: (1) the selection of an application set of institutions, or the application set phase, and (2) the final matriculation decision, or the selection phase. Although the model combines both the development of the application set and the matriculation decision into one stage, these
two phases are discrete and unique. However, the majority of existing choice stage research address this stage generically because the factors involved in this stage are fluid and fluctuate in salience according to the decision-making situation (either deciding where to apply or actually selecting a school).

Overall, few researchers have concentrated explicitly on the selection phase of the college choice process (Chapman & Jackson, 1987; Lewis & Morrison, 1975; Maguire & Lay, 1981). Inquiries that consider this phase exclusively are generally single-institution, micro-level studies that typically examine the factors influencing a student's decision to matriculate at a particular institution. Using primarily multiple regression and complex statistical analyses, the goal of these studies is to identify the environmental, institutional, and student characteristics that influence the probability that a particular option will be chosen and to subsequently estimate the probability that an individual student will choose a particular institution (Paulsen, 1990). Studies on the selection phase are typically conducted as part of the market research component of the institution's enrollment management program and utilize institution-specific data.

Taken as a whole, the choice stage literature advances several student correlates of choice. These correlates, or choice factors, relate to both individual student attributes and institutional attributes and the strength of their relative associations with the choice process varies. Individual student-related attributes highlighted in the literature include: socioeconomic status (Chapman, 1979; Maguire & Lay, 1981; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983), ability (Dahl, 1982; Jackson, 1978; Maguire & Lay, 1981; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983), parental levels of education (Lewis & Morrison, 1975; Litten, 1983), family residence

While student attributes of choice have received the greatest attention, institutional attributes are important determinants of where students enroll (Hossler, et al., 1996). Institutional attributes include financial features such as net tuition costs and financial aid, (Hossler et al., 1996) and non-financial institutional aspects including academic offerings, location, financial aid availability, academic reputation/quality, size, and social atmosphere (Chapman & Jackson, 1978; Lewis & Morrison, 1975; Litten, 1983; Maguire & Lay, 1981; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983).

After students have applied and been admitted, they must evaluate the colleges to which they were accepted based on individual estimates of institutional attractiveness (Paulsen, 1990). As Hossler (1984) notes, the selection decision “is interactional, depending on both the attributes of the student and the characteristics of the institutions...in his or her choice set” (p. 32). This interaction between student and institutional characteristics “play[s] a role in students’ rating schemes, largely by serving as a criteria for evaluating” the appropriateness of the institution for the individual student (p. 32). Paulsen (1990) suggests that for the students in his study, the majority of the personal attributes “influenced and interacted significantly with institutional characteristics, almost to the point of pre-selection, in determining student college choices” (p. 59).

Combined models, guided largely by institutional and market research, have contributed to the literature in unique ways. By identifying differences between student perceptions of institutional characteristics and objective institutional indicators, these
types of studies depict the impact of institutional actions like recruitment and financial aid on students' college choices (Zemsky & Oedel, 1983). Through use of demographic and other forms of biographical data, market researchers have developed profiles of characteristics of students entering individual institutions. Reviews of market research by Hossler and colleagues (1996) expose:

homogeneity that seemingly cuts across all variables: that is, the personal characteristics of the student—religious, and political preferences, levels of sophistication and readiness for college—relate significantly to the existing student body of the college to which she or he enrolls. (p. 21)

Hossler et al. (1996) posit that “students seek their set of colleges based on their perception of the college community; that is, they seek a college that most closely fits their social preference” (p. 21). In so much as students seek institutions that offer the best counterpart for their personal attributes, Astin (1965) noted that the interactionalist perspective also has implications for the institution in that, “the characteristics of the students enrolled by an institution are highly related to measures of the psychological environment or ‘climate’ of the institution...the college environment is determined to a large extent by the kinds of students at the institution” (p. 3). In this way, just as the students select the institutions that best match their attributes and expectations, so too is the nature and identity of these institutions remade as new students matriculate.

Institutional Image

Throughout the college choice process, as they search for “the right place,” prospective students are exposed to a wide range of information sources from formal messages controlled by the institution like viewbooks and admissions personnel to
informal communications through extra-institutional sources including parents and peers. All of these messages help to compose the individual student’s image of the institution (Maguire and Lay, 1981). Prospective students’ images of an institution have important implications for college selection (Alfred & Weissman, 1987; Clark et al., 1972; Goodman and Feldman, 1975; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Maguire & Lay, 1981; Milligan, 1982; Morey, 1970; Sevier, 1994), the process of image formation and the ways in which it impacts college choice is still not thoroughly understood.

Conceptualizations of Image

The maxim, “image is everything” reflects the complexities inherent in developing and studying this elusive, amorphous, and speculative concept. For these reasons, Meyers (1990, p.1) suggests that “understanding image is a difficult task” and thus, the concept of image is often viewed simplistically or erroneously by scholars and practitioners. Currently, image as phenomenon is viewed from two main perspectives, the cognitive and the communicative.

Image as Cognition

The cognitive conception of image emphasizes the role of beliefs and perceptions associated with institutions (Sevier, 1994). This perspective has predominated higher education research and is best represented in Kotler and Fox’s (1995) view of image as, “the sum of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that a person has about an object” (p. 231). Torpor (1986) extends the cognitive view of image as an “aggregate or sum of the feelings, beliefs, attitudes, impressions, thoughts, perceptions, ideas, recollections, conclusions, and mindsets people have of an institution” (p. 1). However, cognitive
conceptualizations of image are insufficient since they define image as singular, static, and as residing within the organization (Wilson, 1999).

Image and Communication

Based on a marketing and public relations perspective, image creation is a communicative process whereby images are formed exclusively through audience exposure to information about the entity (Alfred & Weissman, 1987; Treadwell & Harrison, 1994; Yavas & Shemwell, 1996). Contrary to the widespread notion that external image can be produced and disseminated through persuasive communication initiated solely by the entity, current image-as-communication scholars emphasize the role of interaction between the individual and the institution in image development. Alfred and Weissman propose that “image beliefs are formed as individuals gain information about a college through the media, interpersonal exchanges, and direct experience” (p. 107). Extending this view, Yavas and Shemwell (1996) assert that image is a “total perception of an object which is formed by processing information from various sources over time... includ[ing] word-of-mouth, past experiences and marketing communications” (p. 76).

Similar to notions of relationship or service marketing, Treadwell and Harrison (1994) regard image as an individual’s “subjective responses to an organization emerging from any interaction, planned or unplanned, persuasive or non-persuasive, mediated or interpersonal” (p. 66). These image-as-communication models highlight the consequences of unintentional, informal, and unofficial information sources (beyond the deliberate institutional messages) in the development of institutional image. Thus, prospective students’ interactions with campus representatives and any other parties who
express messages about the institution directly impact students’ subsequent images of the institution (Wilson, 1999).

The Transitional View: Image as Sense-Making

Perched between the purely cognitive view of image as a set of beliefs, and the alternative perspective of image as a communicative process, lies Enis’ (1967) and Bormann’s (1983) transitional view of image as sense-making phenomena. Here, image is abstract, complex, multidimensional, and variable. Image represents the composite of an individual’s past experiences, value systems, mental and physical states during perception, the actions of the institution and others, and the perceiver’s own expectations for the future. In this model, the imaging process individuals experience facilitates their ability to make sense of their organizational reality (Alvesson, 1990).

Diverging from purely cognitive models, the representation of image as both cognitive and communicative stresses the role of the receiver in image formation (Wilson, 1999). While these early transitional models (Bormann, 1983; Enis, 1967) make an important contribution by acknowledging the perceiver as the locus of image, Wilson suggests that these models fail to explicate the dynamics of how perceivers deal with and integrate external information about the entity.

Alvesson (1990) addresses the weakness of the early sense-making models by providing an integrated representation of image development that that emphasizes the communicative aspect of image creation and reception. Further, he suggests that image resides “in between the communicator and the audience” where image is a “holistic and vivid impression held by a particular group towards [an institution] partly as a result of information processing” of the group and “partly by the aggregated communication of the
Alvesson argues that image is a two-dimensional construct comprised of an “inner picture,” or sense-making component, and “fabrication,” or the more formalized image of the entity communicated by the institution (p. 376). His acknowledgment of the implications of the fabricated or communicated image as important in image formation separates his work from that of early transitionalists.

Extending the transitionalists’ hypotheses, Moffitt’s (1994) receiver/public image model suggests that image is (a) a cognitive set of beliefs, and (b) a communicative process influenced by receiver attributes and determined by audience/public perceptions and institutional messages. Moffitt’s model suggests that the individual is the locus of image. Building on Hall’s (1986) cultural articulation model of meaning, Moffitt’s (1994) constructionist representation of image carefully distinguishes image as an impression developed under the influence of an individual’s social, political, and historical contexts.

Since images are contextualized and constructed by the receiver, they are fluid and sometimes contradictory. As applied to the admissions context, this suggests, for example, that a student may feel that College X has a good image because it has a strong academic reputation while simultaneously, the student may also feel that College X has a poor image because a friend said that the students are unfriendly. In the mind of this prospective student, College X generates both good and bad images which the individual must reconcile. Moreover, because the images are created and maintained by perceivers, the institution may have little direct control over some of the images that exist as a result of informal, unofficial messages about the school communicated by various sources.
Moffitt’s (1994) work differs significantly from the early sense-making models in the view that a perceiver’s images of an institution are fluid, dynamic, multidimensional, and sometimes contradictory. Although loosely based on Alvesson’s model, Moffitt’s image theory calls into question assumptions about meaning and audience and stresses the importance of the perceiver’s view in image creation.

**Image Defined**

Drawing on definitions offered by Enis (1967), Alvesson (1990) and Moffitt (1994), I will employ an original interpretation of the transitionalist definition of image. Accordingly, I define image as an abstract, complex, multidimensional, and fluid conception created by the individual as a result of communication (both formal and informal) and information processing about an entity, considering that individual’s organizational, cultural, historical and personal contexts. This operationalization suggests that image is the product of individual cognitive sense-making based on communication between the individual and the entity. Extending the transitionalist view, my definition suggests that institutional image is constructed by and resides in the individual and can be multiple, dynamic, fluid, and even contradictory.

**Image Formation**

The roots of image theory may be traced back to the 1918 work of Thomas and Znaniecki (as cited in Milligan, 1982) who demonstrated that the effect of a phenomenon on an individual depended on objective content and, more importantly, on the subjective standpoint taken by the individual towards the phenomenon. In short, image is seen to be an interaction between the objective characteristics of the entity and the subjective
characteristics and contextual lenses of the perceiver; the image of a place is a blending of what it is and what it is perceived to be in the mind of the perceiver. Thomas and Znaniecki’s work popularized the common notion that perception is reality. This idea serves as the theoretical basis for much of the current work on image.

As abstractions, images are formed by the perceiver through multiple associations of messages about the institution (Baskin & Aronoff, 1988). A pioneer in early image research, Boulding (1961) suggested that images are made up of small pieces of information, or messages, and as such, they are transferable and fluid. As a mechanism for influencing institutional image, messages interact with perceiver factors to form/modify images. Since images are the result of the interplay between messages and the audience (as filtered through individual perceiver factors) they are multidimensional and variable among individuals and groups.

Due to their subjective composition, Boulding (1961) asserts that images have “a certain dimension or quality of certainty or uncertainty, clarity or vagueness” (p. 10). The messages themselves also have several qualities that give images their variable quality. Messages sent by an entity can be: (a) formal, consisting of information over which the institution has control including annual reports, speeches, and institutional publications, or (b) informal, consisting of information over which the institution has no control. Informal messages can be conveyed by conversations between perspective students, media reports and other non-sanctioned communications. Messages can also be (c) factual, containing verifiable information, or the can be (d) qualitative, or evaluative communication about the institution that is based on opinion and are not verifiable. Institutional messages exist in every institutional action, symbol, gesture or
communication whether formal or informal. In most cases, messages sent by the institution are largely unintentional but not necessarily less influential in the mind of the perceiver (Baskin and Aronoff, 1988).

Boulding (1961) suggests that the multidimensionality of image can best be understood through an analogy where an institution has a phenotype, or what a student can see such as campus buildings and ceremonies. Also, the institution simultaneously maintains a genotype, where the image serves as a piece of the institution’s hereditary constitution that can be passed from one generation to the next while also being modified by the perceiver. Boulding’s assertion that an organization possesses “personality traits” that are distinctive and can be manipulated holds significance for the marketing activities of an institution.

Throughout the image formation process, audience members attempt to reconcile messages of various types (Boulding, 1961; Kotler, 1976). However, where an image already exists, individuals become selective perceivers of future data in order to reduce cognitive dissonance, selecting messages and parts of messages that best fit into their cognitive structures. If necessary, perceivers will even misinterpret messages to make them more consistent with their perceptual needs or biases. This tendency towards selective perception illustrates why an image can take quite a while to change and why image can actually lag behind institutional reality, resulting in a phenomenon called image lag (Sevier, 1994).

Similarly, Reynolds (1965) highlights several cognitive tendencies impacting individuals’ image formation including the halo effect. The halo effect occurs when an individual or group generalizes their impressions about particular aspects or instances of
the institution to other less familiar aspects in order to form an overall image of the institution. As applied to higher education, a student may perceive College Y's psychology department to be good, not from direct assessment but because College Y is strong in sociology. Additionally, based on the reputation of a single department at the college, a student may perceive College Y as being academically strong overall. This image halo scenario illustrates the concept of micro and macro images where the micro image, such as that of the strong sociology department, becomes laminated over the entire institution (College Y), creating the potentially erroneous notion that the school is academically strong in general, which may or may not be the case. This scenario is similar to Sevier's (1994) concept of vertical images where, "[a]n image's verticality means that if people encounter one [smaller] element of a college, such as a poor publication or an obnoxious faculty member, they are inclined to project that one small negative image to the entire college or university" (p. 62). Alternatively, the horizontal component of image involves comparisons of specific institutional characteristics. Nevertheless, it should be noted that these cognitive tendencies spring from work in the image-as-cognition perspective and as such, they do not view image as multiple.

*The Loci of Image*

In higher education, many objected to early marketing and image sharpening efforts (Litten, 1980). However, these objections stem from the misconception that image is the sole product of persuasive organizational communication, with manipulation as its goal. It is true that 1970's conceptualizations of image largely privileged the organization as the seat of image formation (Moffitt, 1994). However, this perspective has slowly been
replaced. The imaging process may be more accurately viewed as a dialogic exchange between the entity and the perceiver.

Foundational work on the phenomenon of image such as that conducted by Boulding (1961) and Thomas and Znaniecki (as cited in Milligan, 1982) suggests that for the perceiver, image (or perception) is reality. Moreover, because images are real in the mind of the perceiver, they impact behavior in some important and predictable ways. Wilson (1999) suggests that the influence of image on behavior is proportionate to the values associated with the image and the weighted significance an audience member attributes to such values. Similarity, an image must be attached to a need or perception that is valued by targeted publics in order to be useful (Torpor, 1986). As a result, two people may hold the same image of an institution but place different personal values on their perceptions; one individual may view a particular image element as an asset while another may consider it to be a liability. In this way, an institution is not simply a product, but it is what people believe it to be. Thus, the value perceivers attach to the image of an institution probably has an impact on their college choice decisions.

Beyond individual consequences for the prospective student, Sevier (1996) contends that images have consequences for the institution as well. “More students chose a college because of its image or reputation than almost any other factor” (p. 11) and if students are not familiar with an institution, or if they perceive of it in a negative way, they will not respond to marketing and recruitment efforts. Thus, while research on the direct impacts of image on decision-making is largely equivocal, image and behavior have at least a tenuous correlation that warrants further exploration (Kotler & Fox, 1995).
In 1972, Clark, Heist, McConnell, Trow, and Yonge conducted a landmark study on institutional image and admissions in higher education. The researchers investigated eight institutions which they believed had distinct images. Their findings revealed that for each of the eight colleges examined, the image of the institution tended to attract students with similar attitudes regardless of the effect of family and background variables. Prospective students in this study tended to perceive colleges not only in terms of its formal requirements but also as a “kind of place” (p. 1). Based on these findings, Clark and his colleagues asserted that image served as a central, intangible thread that permeated the process of student college choice and that image may “link the very identity of a college to the process of attracting and admitting students” (p.163).

Drawing upon the notion of image potency developed by Clark (1970) in his work, *The Distinctive College*, Morey (1970) found that the relative importance of institutional image for students’ college choices depended on the way in which the awareness of the student intersected with the potency and character of the image. Potent institutional images tended to play a more prominent role in the college choice of students who actually perceived the image of the institution. Thus, the degree of potency an institution’s image possesses may have critical implication for enrollment management.

Goodman and Feldman (1975) revealed that student perceptions of their chosen institution had greater yield predictability than did students’ perceptions of their ideal institution or the factors they reported as influential in their college choice. The findings of these authors were later augmented by Milligan’s work (1982) which suggests that
images and perceptions are most salient in determining the matriculation decision within a given applicant pool.

From a cognitive perspective, Maguire and Lay (1981) suggest that institutional image affects choice in the way that applicants assimilate information during the college search phase. More specifically, they contend that image messages used to form initial college impressions continued to condition appraisals (through selective perception) throughout the choice process. Thus, these processes must be viewed as reciprocal where images inform decision-making and decision-making provides feedback that modifies images. Maguire and Lay's cognitive conceptualization of image clearly refutes Moffitt's suggestion that individuals can have multiple and contradictory institutional images.

The two processes of image formation and decision-making are analytically distinct but as Maguire and Lay (1981) suggest, “are probably related in a mutually casual way” (p. 123). Although a number of studies have been conducted on college choice, and to a lesser extent on institutional image, very few researchers have analyzed these issues in conjunction with one another. Past studies of image and college selection have either tended to treat the later as a singular process or have analyzed image formation or decision making without explicitly comparing the two (Maguire & Lay). However, Maguire and Lay suggest that an attempt to explore the two processes as separate and to describe possible relationships between them may be fruitful. Thus, although students form images of institutions, which they incorporate into their college selection process, the relationship between these complex processes remains uncertain.
Person-Environment Fit

The impact of institutional image is an important factor in attracting prospective students through the mechanism of person-environment fit (PE fit) theory. Grounded in the interactionalist notion that the individual and the environment work together in a dynamic relationship, PE fit research illustrates a worldview shared by some researchers in the area of person-environment psychology. As one of the prominent perspectives in the debate over the nature of the relationship between the individual and the environment (Pervin, 1992), the theory of person-environment psychology posits that individual behavior is the result of the interplay between personal characteristics and the environment.

Considered by some to be the ideal approach to understanding individual development and predicting behavior (Lewin, 1936; Schneider, 1987), the theory of person-environment fit is a useful concept for the college administrator concerned with enrollment management. However, this concept is not new to higher education. For many years, admissions officers have been using homespun versions of the fit concept as they worked to match or fit student and institutional characteristics (Brockway, 1997). More recently, the theory of PE fit has assumed greater importance as systematic enrollment management procedures have evolved that demand a more sophisticated understanding of why students chose to enroll at a particular institution (Williams, 1986).

The interactional framework of PE fit postulates that the behavior of people is a joint function of their personal characteristics, and the characteristics of the environment in which they function, in interaction (Schneider, Smith, & Goldstein, 2000). This interactional framework is the generic model in which the more explicit concept of
person-environment fit resides. The PE fit framework extends the interactional framework’s prediction by suggesting that behavior is understood essentially as a function of the “fit” of person to environment.

*History of Person-Environment Fit Theory*

While its roots are in the discipline of psychology, person-environment fit theory has been widely applied in fields including career counseling, medicine, epidemiology (Brockway, 1997) and in contexts from corrections (Moos, 1975) to business and industry (Holland, 1966; O’Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991) to academia (Brockway, 1997; Williams, 1986). Due to its widespread use, the concept is known by a variety of names. Depending on the discipline and theoretical orientation, PE fit is often referred to as congruence (Eagan & Walsh, 1995; Pervin, 1989), correspondence (Rounds, Dawis, & Lofquist, 1987), profile similarity (e.g. Edwards, 1993), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1982), goodness of fit (Kulka, Kingel, and Mann, 1980), perceived discrepancy (Tracey & Sherry, 1984), the ecosystem perspective (Treadway, 1979), and the similarity-satisfaction hypothesis (Pervin, 1967).

Regardless of the term used, most fit models can be traced to Gestalt psychology, which suggests that how one perceives an object is influenced by the total context in which the object is embedded (Moos, 1987). Thus, instead of examining personal and environmental variables independently, PE fit researchers operate under the assumption that behavior is best understood by “mapping the conditions under which [personal and environmental variables together] result in selected outcomes” (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987, p. 286), where the outcome of interest may be a physical or mental response depending on the discipline of the investigator.
Drawing on early Gestalt psychology, Kurt Lewin’s (1936) seminal argument that behavior (B) is a function both personal characteristics (P) and environmental factors (E) \( B = f(P, E) \) provided the backbone for modern inquiries of PE fit. Lewin applied these principles to social environments. He suggested that people possess needs, while environments possess valences; both factors simultaneously influence one another. When individuals and their environments are in equilibrium, Lewin believed that a desirable, balanced conglomeration of psychological benefits would result. Compared to other PE research (Moos, 1987; Pervin, 1967), Lewin’s notion of fit is considered to be phenomenologically-based because he conceptualized environments in terms of subjective perceptions rather than actual features (Brockway, 1997).

While Lewin (1936) was developing his fit model, personality psychologist, Henry Murray (1938), focused his investigation of fit on the simultaneous interaction of personal “needs” and environmental “presses.” Murray’s model suggested that when individuals have unmet needs, they seek out contexts that possess the corresponding pressures. Thus, the act of selecting and occupying a particular environment signaled the content of an individual’s internal drivers. In an attempt to clarify the relationship between the actual environment and the individual’s perception of it, Murray suggested that perceptions influenced behavior more than real environmental attributes in much the same way as Lewin’s phenomenologically-based fit theory did (Brockway, 1997).

*Person-Environment Fit Defined*

In general, fit theorists hypothesize that not only do person and environment function to influence behavior, but the fit between these two concepts is critical for understanding behavior. These theorists define fit as “some index of the degree of
similarity, overlap, or convergence between a particular set of person-related attributes and a set of environment-related attributes” (Schneider et al., 2000, p. 63-64). Put simply, PE fit is the compatibility between organizations and individuals. This compatibility, however, has been conceived in a variety of ways, but can be distilled to two basic conceptualizations (Kristof, 1996). The first distinction is between supplementary and complementary fit. Supplementary fit exists when an individual “supplements, embellishes, or possesses characteristics which are similar to other individuals” in the environment (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987, p. 269). This type of congruence can be contrasted with complementary fit, which occurs when an individual’s characteristics add something to the environment which was lacking.

An alternative conception of PE fit is offered by advocates of the needs-supplies and demands-abilities distinction. From the needs-supplies standpoint, fit occurs when an organization satisfies the individual’s needs, desires, or preferences. Alternatively, the demands-abilities perspective suggests that fit occurs when an individual has the abilities required to meet organizational demands (Kristof, 1996).

Although these two distinctions have been discussed frequently, few attempts to integrate them were made until 1996 when Kristof introduced a comprehensive model of PE fit that reconciled complementary and supplementary conceptualizations as well as the need-supplies perspective (see Figure 1). In the Kristof model, supplementary fit (as represented by arrow “A”) is depicted as the relationship between fundamental characteristics of a person and an organization. For the organization, these characteristics typically include culture (Chatman, 1991; O’Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell, 1991; Friedman & Rosenman, 1974; Schein, 1992), climate (Burke & Deszca, 1982; Friedman
& Rosenman, 1974; Moos, 1975, 1979, 1987), values (Chatman, 1991, Schein, 1992) and goals (Schneider, 1987). With respect to the individual, the characteristics most frequently studied in relation to this type of congruence are values (Chatman, 1991, Schein, 1992), goals (Schneider, 1987), and personality (Burke & Deszca, 1982, Friedman & Rosenman, 1974; Turban & Keon, 1993). When correspondence exists between the organization and the individual on these characteristics, supplementary fit is said to exist (Kristof, 1996).

Organizations can also be characterized by what they supply to and demand from their members (Kristof, 1996). As with most PE fit models, this conceptualization is often utilized when analyzing employment situations, but it applies also to the relationship that exists between individuals and members in voluntary membership organizations. In the supplies-demands relationship, what is sought/demanded and what is supplied is likely to be influenced by the underlying characteristics of both entities (Schein, 1992). However, this dimension (represented by the dotted line in Figure 1) highlights distinct sectors where fit or misfit can occur.

Organizations supply certain generally agreed upon commodities that are demanded by employees such as financial, physical, and psychological resources as well as the task-related, interpersonal, and growth opportunities (e.g., Kristof, 1996; Murray, 1938; Turban & Keon, 1993). When an organization meets the members’ demands, supplies-demands fit is accomplished (as depicted by arrow “B” in Figure 1). Just as employees make demands on organizations, so too do organizations make demands on their employees/members. Organizations typically expect members to make contributions of time, effort, commitment, knowledge, skills, and abilities (Kristof, 1996; Murray,
Figure 1. Kristof's PE Fit Model
Demands-abilities fit is realized when employees/member meet organizational demands (arrow "C" in Figure 1). Although the literature tends to view complementary and supplementary models as conceptually distinct from the needs-supplies perspective, both of these models can be described by expanding Muchinsky and Monahan’s (1987) definition of complementary fit as Kristof illustrates in her fit model. Based on Kristof’s (1996) comprehensive definition and fit model that recognizes the multiple conceptualizations of congruence previously discussed, I define PE fit in this study as “the compatibility between people and organizations that occurs when: (a) at least one entity provides what the other needs, or (b) they share similar fundamental characteristics, or (c) both” (p. 3). This definition suggests that instead of being contradictory, these two conceptualizations of fit are actually complementary. Taken together, this view of congruence suggests that optimum PE fit “may be achieve when each entity’s needs are fulfilled by the other and they share similar fundamental characteristics” (p. 5).

Operationalizing PE Fit

Much of the early research on PE fit, particularly in education, focused either on the person or the environmental variables, thereby neglecting the ostensibly important “fit” between them (Tracey & Sherry, 1984). This tendency resulted largely from the fact that person and environmental variables are often assessed using separate conceptual schemes, and when they are considered together, little conceptual overlap occurs (McReynolds, 1979). Moreover, few researchers specify their underlying conceptualization of fit. As a result, the reader is often left to determine which congruence perspective provides the foundation for their model.
In her comprehensive review of the fit literature, Kristof (1996) redresses this omission by categorizing the multiple conceptualizations of fit into four main categories. Kristof suggests that two of the primary congruence conceptualizations are derived from the supplementary model and one stems from the supplies-demands conceptualization. The fourth conceptualization may be interpreted using either of these two frames.

As an extension of the supplementary model, fit is often conceptualized in terms of value congruence between the individual and the organization (Chatman, 1991). Also called person-culture fit (O’Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991), this view of congruence suggests that as a fundamental and enduring quality, values are facets of organizational culture that guide employee’s behaviors (Chatman, 1991; Schein, 1992). Alternatively, but still within the supplementary model are fit conceptualizations concerned with individual goal congruence with organizational leaders/peers (Schneider, et al., 2000). Schneider and colleagues’ (2000) attraction-selection-attrition framework is one such model predicated on the notion that similar people are attracted to and selected by organizations whose goals are similar to their own, or the individual perceives the organization as a place where personal goals will be facilitated.

The third operationalization of fit is strongly wedded to the supplies-demands perspective and defines fit as the match between individual preferences and organizational systems or structures (Tracey & Sherry, 1984; Turban & Keon, 1993). Rooted in Murray’s (1938) needs-press theory, where environmental presses facilitate or hinder the satisfying of an individual’s needs, this conception of fit suggests that a person will be satisfied if his or her needs are met by the environment. The last common operationalization of congruence, which has a foot in both the
complementary/supplementary and the supplies-demands perspectives, describes PE fit as a match between the characteristics of the individual personality and organizational climate (or organizational personality) (Burke & Deszca, 1982; Friedman & Rosenman, 1974; Pace & Stern, 1958; Pervin, 1968; Turban & Keon, 1993). This model represents supplementary fit because it describes congruence between the two entities. However, its measurement often suggests a supplies-demands perspective in that climate is often operationalized as an organizational supply (e.g., reward systems, communication patterns). This hypothesis, which predicts a match between personality and climate, was tested on college students by Friedman and Rosenman (1974). Investigating type “A” and “B” personality students, they found that the students preferred organizational climates that reflected commensurate characteristics. Type "A" students (characterized by ambition, competitiveness, impatience, high achievement motivations, and hostility) preferred Type "A" organizations that exhibit high performance standards, spontaneity, ambiguity, and toughness.

Measuring PE Fit

As is the case when multiple viewpoints of a construct exist, researchers exploring PE fit disagree on how best to measure the phenomenon. The disagreement is further complicated by the fact that commensurate measurement techniques to describe both person and organization with the same content dimensions are scarce (Kristof, 1996; McReynolds, 1979). Since person-environment fit is a concept grounded in psychology, most of the research has been conducted with quantitative methods and rely on the use of scales and other self-report survey instruments, thus elevating the importance of commensurate measures.
As an additional complexity, researchers also disagree on whether fit should be measured directly or indirectly. Posner, Kouzes, & Schmidt (1985) suggest that direct measures (also known as subjective measures), which involve asking people explicitly whether they believe that a good fit exists, are most beneficial, particularly if the construct under investigation is perceived fit not actual fit. Put simply, if the researchers desire to assess not the actual level of fit but the individual’s perceptions of fit, direct measures are recommended. Alternatively, some researchers (French, Rogers, & Cobb, 1974) prefer indirect or objective measures, to assess actual objective fit. These indirect measures involve an explicit comparison between separately rated individual and organizational characteristics. Kristof (1996) suggests that whether actual and perceive PE fit are the same constructs measure differently or whether they are two distinct constructs remains to be determined. Whatever the case, logic dictates that the research questions will ultimately determine the types of measures used in fit studies.

*PE Adjustment*

Most PE fit scholars concur that congruence is not a static condition but a fluid, dynamic process (Brockway, 1997). Today, fit is more often considered a person-environment system that thrives off the interaction relationship between person and environment (Moos, 1987). By focusing on the dynamic, reciprocal relationship between environmental characteristics and personal attributes, constructs related to fit, such as adjustment, adaptation, and degrees of fit, have finally emerged in fit research (French, Rodgers, & Cobb, 1974).

Unlike fit forefathers, Lewin (1936) and Murray (1938), who stressed the notion of equilibrium and achieving perfect fit, modern interactionalist-based fit researchers
claim that some kinds of congruence may be more beneficial than total person-environment congruence (Brockway, 1997). Schneider and colleagues (2000) are among those scholars who suggest that perfect fit may result in less than ideal consequences. In the attraction-selection-attrition model (ASA), Schneider et al. suggest:

Certain types of people are attracted to, and prefer, particular types of organizations; organizations formally and informally select certain types of people to join...and attrition occurs when people who do not fit a particular organization leave. Those people who become part of the organization and stay based on these processes, in turn, define the nature of the organization and its structure, processes, and culture (p. 67).

Schneider and associates argue that due to the self-selection that naturally occurs in organizations, fit is achieved, but at the expense of conformity which, leads ultimately to unproductive “ingrowth.”

As applied to higher education, the A-S-A hypothesis has strong implications for institutions and the health of their student bodies. Undoubtedly, the admissions process is one of academic self-selection where participants “place much emphasis on a match between student and an institution, on fitting in...Such a preoccupation [with fitting in] can sacrifice possible ‘stretching’ or the productive disjunction between a student’s background and the collegiate environment” (Litten, 1991, p. 67).

This notion of “stretching” (Litten, 1991), or the idea that some PE incongruence results in personal growth and maturation, has received some support among scholars (Astin & Panos, 1969; Holland, 1962; Moos, 1987) and led, in part to the demise of admissions programs that sought to match the student and the institution according to
pre-selected characteristics. Amongst student development practitioners, who have termed the slight misfit between students and institutions as “challenge and support,” seem to agree that some degree of disequilibrium results in productive growth for students so long as adequate resources exist to support them as they adapt. However, too much incongruence may have adverse consequences (Moos, 1987; Tracey & Sherry, 1984). Persons who must make extensive adaptations to their environment may be less satisfied than those who need only to make minor modifications in their behaviors and perceptions to achieve congruence.

This notion of fit and satisfaction relates to Braxton and colleagues’ (1995) findings which suggest that students who form false or unrealistic images of the institution may become disenchanted with the real institution and may ultimately leave. In the aggregate, these hypotheses suggest that students who possess unrealistic images of a particular institution may, upon matriculation, find that the adjustment they must make to achieve congruence with their environment is simply too overwhelming.

Considering this, if the self-selection process that transpires between individuals and their environments occurs in the way that Schneider et al. (2000) describe (and with the same dubious consequences), the ASA framework and other fit research could help explain why many diversity efforts fail. Additionally, by identifying the mechanisms that promote this failure, such fit studies have the potential to highlight alternative designs for promoting diversity that have the potential for greater success.

**Person-Environment Fit in Education Settings**

Person-environment interactions have been used to examine academic and educational issues for almost four decades (Brockway, 1997). During this time, fit
models have been used to examine student variables such as academic and social competency (Janosik, Creamer, & Cross, 1988), satisfaction (Pervin, 1967), academic achievement (Reuterfors, Schneider, & Overton, 1979), dimensions of student emotional distress (Tracey & Sherry, 1984), choice of major (Astin & Holland, 1961), retention (Brockway, 1997; Pervin & Rubin, 1967), and willingness to recommend their college to perspective students (Treadway, 1979).

Pace and Stern (1958) were the first to conduct PE fit research in the academic arena. Extending Murray's (1938) model of individual needs and organizational presses, Pace and Stern developed instruments to describe and assess different types of college environments. They also developed the College and University Environment Scales (CUES) which measure congruence in five social climate dimensions (practicality, community, awareness, propriety, and scholarship). These authors argued that their congruence measures could predict academic success and failure more accurately than traditional methods like standardized test scores and grade point averages (Brockway, 1997).

Pervin (1967) was also another early researcher in the area of fit and college students. He hypothesized that a good fit between students and their academic environments would lead to better performance and satisfaction. Pervin utilized semantic differential scales in his fit instruments like the Transactional Analysis of Personality and Environment (TAPE) questionnaire. Using polar adjectives, the TAPE asked students to compare their college to their ideal institution on several dimensions. Pervin and Rubin (1967) found that for non-academic factors, student who reported more congruence were also more satisfied with their experience and were less likely to transfer.
Holland’s (1966) theory of vocational choice, which attempts to match personality and environment types, is perhaps one of the most well-known uses of PE fit in higher education. Although the model has most frequently been used in vocational psychology to assess career preferences, Holland adapted his model to examine students’ choice of college major. In his work, he defined congruence as the extent to which an individual’s interests match that of the majority.

Moss (1979) extended Holland’s definition of congruence to include both social and physical features of a setting. Through his work on PE fit in schools, correctional facilities, and in employment settings, Moos and his colleague (Moos & Gerst, 1974) devised several fit instruments including the University Residence Environment Scale, which has been widely used in congruence research.

A number of studies (Clark, et al. 1972; Hayes, 1989; Kuh, 1991; Williams, 1986) implicate student assessments of fit, generally conceived, as a factor in college selection. However, these studies operationalize fit in very vague terms and most fall short of identifying the specific personal and institutional attributes that comprise students’ fit appraisals. More studies recognize the role of fit in retention decisions and overall student satisfaction (Braxton, et al., 1995; Brockway, 1997; Tracey & Sherry, 1984) but the fit factors in these studies are derived from students who are members of the college population, not prospective members.

Taken as a whole, over-reliance on quantitative studies is a distinct shortcoming of the PE fit literature in higher education. The majority of the “landmark” fit research in education (and otherwise) was propagated under the assumption that fit can best be
assessed and described through the use of quantitative instruments. This seems somewhat counter-intuitive to the notion that fit is a very subjective and individual experience.

Additionally, PE fit researchers have tended to concentrate on the consequences of congruence rather than the antecedents of individuals’ fit assessments during organizational attraction (Kristof, 1996). In higher education, examples of research that favors the results of fit commonly take the form of inquiries on student satisfaction (Pervin, 1967) and retention (Brockway, 1997; Pervin & Rubin, 1967). However, no empirical work has investigated fit as a mechanism for student selection.

To date, fit theories in higher education have helped scholars and practitioners understand why students leave, but very few studies have helped identify how fit operates as a mechanism to attract students. With such an emphasis on enrollment management and the cycle of entry, retention, and graduation/departure, it stands to reason that the use of fit in attracting students is a logical linkage that is ripe with possibilities (Williams, 1986).

The Interplay of Fit and College Choice

The notion that students select institutions where they perceive a match between the attributes of the institution and their own personal preferences suggests that students are evaluating more than tangible institutional attributes. Considering the impact of these somewhat intangible facets of the selection decision, Litten (1991) suggests that “participants in the search process appear to be influenced by two kinds of considerations: academic/intellectual (e.g., academic program, financial considerations) and pragmatic (e.g., considerations of career, social status, and happiness)” (p. 62). Since academic considerations have been the focus of much of the college choice literature,
researchers have neglected the role that social considerations may play in college choice and particularly in the final college selection. Litten argues that the final college selection decision appears to be grounded in a sort of “holistic pragmatism,” where the selection of an institution is based “as much on a feeling of well-being...as on any rational calculation of costs and benefits or systematic ratings of institutional characteristics” (p. 63).

Similarly, Reynolds (1980-81) proposes that the college selection process includes a rational or cognitive component followed by more affective considerations about the prospects of life as a student at a particular school. This combination of “head and heart and reason and intuition” (p. 26) reflects a tendency to evaluate institutions in a two phase process which seems to parallel the application set phase and the selection phase of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model. In the first phase of college selection, students evaluate institutions according to reasoned criteria of generally quantifiable measures, such as reputation, physical size, curriculum, location, and cost. This process of assessment is followed by the ultimate choice of a college “based on an “emotional, gut reaction” to the campus visit (Hayes, 1989, p. 23). During the college visits the students attempt to determine “how well they fit in at the institution...[by looking for] enthusiasm, friendliness, and personal attention [from] admissions officers, faculty, and the college’s own students” (p. 23). As an independent college counselor, Reynolds noted that the students she counsels seemed to typify this dichotomous decision-making process of cognitive and the affective considerations:

Choosing college can be viewed as a balancing act. On one side of the scale is the student as thinker: rational, seeking information, eventually becoming well-informed. This is the student as the reader of catalogs and viewbooks, the maker
of lists... On the other side of the scale is the student... as the intuitive decider seeking vibes, tensions, feelings that “this must be the right place” (p. 26).
CHAPTER III

A MEANS OF DISCOVERY

In the current higher education market, inter-institutional competition for students is enormous and commonplace. For the student, the critical choice of where to go to college remains a difficult decision with few clear guidelines. While the complex college choice process is still not fully understood, the research suggests that in general, students follow a predictable decision path from predisposition to attend to a final selection/non-selection decision. For students who eventually matriculate at an institution of higher education, this path includes rational assessments of various personal and institutional attributes as well as more affective considerations of personal fit (Litten, 1991). Although Litten (1991) and Reynolds (1981) suggest that students' cognitive and affective assessments are pivotal in college choice decisions, the mechanisms underlying the formation of these appraisals have not been clearly articulated. This study redresses current omissions in our understanding of the relationship between image and college choice through the application of an original interpretation of Kristof's (1996) person-organization fit model (see Table 1) to the problem of college selection.

Conceptual Model for the Study

The basic premise underlying this study postulates that as students work through the various stages of the college choice process, they gather information and form images of the institutions they are considering (Maguire & Lay, 1981) (see Figure 2). The students' individual institutional images are their way of considering and comparing the institution. As they begin the first phase of the choice stage when they are developing
their application set, the students are concerned with more academic/intellectual or rational choice factors, such as location, cost, and academic programs. At this point, fit is a more objective match between students’ subjective images of what the institution offers and what they prefer. As they enter into the second stage of the choice phase when they will make their final college selection, these choice factors shift to more subjective assessments about pragmatic fit concerns. Social atmosphere, fitting in, and feeling comfortable are more apposite.

Put simply, students consider an institution in terms of the images they have developed about the place over time. They make determinations about the degree of fit between themselves and the institution based on their images of the institution and their perceptions about what they desire in an institution (choice factors). The fit determinations then form the criteria for their enrollment decisions. In essence, this study suggests that students’ images are the fodder for their fit appraisals, and these fit appraisals form the basis for their enrollment decisions.

The conceptual model that undergirds this study extends beyond the process of selecting a college to depict the process of transitioning from an organizational outsider to a member (see Figure 2). The model suggests that students begin their association with the institution as outsiders. As they engage in the choice process and matriculate at an institution, the anticipatory socialization process formally begins at new student orientation and continues as they start the school year. The new member socialization process alters their institutional images to the extent that after becoming members, they have developed an understanding of institutional identity.
Figure 2. Preliminary Conceptual Model of the Study

External Audience

College Choice Stage
P-E Fit

Application Set
Cognitive

Choice factors

College Selection

Selection Phase
Affective

Socialization

Internal Members
Identity

Attendance
Integration
The Student-College Fit Model

Embedded in the conceptual model of the study is the concept of person-environment fit. PE fit is, in simple terms, the compatibility between organizations and individuals. While a number of competing fit frameworks exist, the Kristof (1996) model reconciles complementary and supplementary fit conceptualizations as well as variations on the supplies-demands perspective (see Figure 1) into one robust fit model that supports the major threads identified in the congruence literature. Based on Kristof's comprehensive definition and her accompanying fit model, I define PE fit in this study as "the compatibility between people and organizations that occurs when: (a) at least one entity provides what the other needs, or (b) they share similar fundamental characteristics, or (c) both" (p. 3). This definition recognizes that these two conceptualizations of fit are actually complementary and not mutually exclusive.

Whereas previous fit models have restricted fit to supplementary, complementary, or some variation on the needs-supplies dynamic, the Kristof model incorporates all these and provides a view of fit that is much more comprehensive and far more useful for situations involving complex human thought and action.

College choice theory suggests that the college selection decision is one complicated by many factors; it is a complex and highly personal decision that involves rational and subjective factors. To accurately describe this phenomenon, an equally
Kristof model lends itself to the exploration of fit as a driver of human thought and action; thus, it seemed the ideal model to serve as the basis for my investigations.

In applying the Kristof (1996) model to college choice, I maintain the author’s original framework and concepts and use them to derive an original frame, or the **Student-College Fit Model** (see Table 1). Whereas the Kristof model looks at the organization and the person in a vocational context, my student-college fit model is structured in a parallel way, with the institution and the student as the entities of interest. This adaptation was necessary since Kristof’s model was derived from research on employees in a vocational setting. While many of the same dimensions are relevant for both students and employees, such as the need for safety and fulfillment of basic hygiene needs, the student-institution relationship is unique. Students (particularly those in a residential institution) typically seek a more holistic academic and social environment that is conducive to both intellectual and personal development. While employees may seek some of these same benefits, the job does not comprise the bulk of the employees’ life in the way that life on a campus environment generally does. This adaptation of the model to reflect the context of the higher education and the critical nexus between student and institution is the main alteration to Kristof’s original work.

As in the Kristof (1996) model, the supplementary/complementary characteristics of both entities are reviewed as are the supplies and demands (see Table 1). Respecting
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Complementary/Supplementary</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Culture/Identity</strong></td>
<td>Public/private, classification, reputation/quality*, size*, location (town atmosphere), religious/secular influences, social atmosphere*, curricular focus (liberal arts), student makeup/demographics</td>
<td><strong>Personality</strong> - achievement motivation, self-concept, ethnicity*, local/cosmopolitan (study near home or away)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Norms/Values</strong></td>
<td>W&amp;M (tradition, excellence, selectivity, persistence, honor, balance, competition, teaching-focused)</td>
<td><strong>Values</strong> - liberal/conservative, honor/integrity, competitive/collective,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goals</strong></td>
<td>W&amp;M (excellence, diversity, increased prestige)</td>
<td><strong>Goals</strong> - educational, career, personal growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supplies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resources</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial</strong></td>
<td>Financial aid availability*, expenditures/student</td>
<td>Time - 4+ years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical</strong></td>
<td>Location* (distance from home), size, hygiene factors (campus safety, attractive buildings, residence hall atmosphere), facilities</td>
<td>Effort - attend courses, meet requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Psychological</strong></td>
<td>Identity/membership status, environment, respect/self-esteem, challenge/support</td>
<td>Commitment - academic/social involvement, financial, honor code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opportunities/KSAs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Task-related</strong></td>
<td>Academics, job/grad. school opportunities, faculty quality</td>
<td><strong>Task</strong> - academic ability*/efficacy, achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal</strong></td>
<td>Personal development (clubs/orgs, athletics), status confirmation/enhancement</td>
<td><strong>Interpersonal</strong> - openness to academic experience, basic acceptance of campus norms/values, civility/respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demands</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resources</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial</strong></td>
<td>Cost to attend (tuition, fees, room/board, misc.)</td>
<td><strong>Financial</strong> - financial aid*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Time</strong></td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td><strong>Physical</strong> - location (distance from home &amp; town atmosphere), size, hygiene factors (campus safety, attractive buildings, residence hall atmosphere), facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Effort/Commitment</strong></td>
<td>Institutional expectations, graduation requirements, major requirements</td>
<td><strong>Psychological</strong> - personal development, status confirmation/enhancement, membership/belongingness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>KSAs/Oportunities</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Task</strong></td>
<td>Admissions requirements</td>
<td><strong>Task-related</strong> - academics, job/grad. school opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal</strong></td>
<td>Contribution to campus life, res. life expectations</td>
<td><strong>Interpersonal</strong> - personal development opportunities (clubs/orgs, athletics), experimentation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
institution used in Table 1 is The College of William and Mary (W&M). W&M is a medium-sized, distinctive, public, doctoral university located in a mid-Atlantic state. As such, the factors I used to populate the matrix are relevant to that particular institution. The student variables in Table 1, some of which are person-specific and some of which are aggregated characteristics of W&M applicants, are choice factors that have either been previously identified in the literature review or are factors that I gleaned from personal experience and through pilot interviews conducted for this study. This Student-College Fit Model also served as the basis for my data collection.

Explicating the Model: Supplementary and Complementary Fit

As an adaptation of Kristof’s (1996) fit model, the student-college fit model (see Table 1) depicts the institution and the student both as having characteristics, resources, opportunities, knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) that may serve to facilitate (or hamper) fit with the other. The student-college fit model suggests that students have characteristics including personality, values, goals and attitudes that may or may not mesh with the predominant culture/identity, values, and goals of the institution. This notion that both the institution and the student possess characteristics that support a sense of fit or misfit are derived from conceptions of PE fit as a product of supplementary and complementary congruence. As applied, supplementary fit exists between student and institution when both share the same characteristics. Complementary fit is said to occur when either the student or the institution or the individual’s characteristics add something that was lacking.
Explicating the Model: Supplies-Demands Congruence

The idea that a person or the organization can provide something for the other is also related to the conception of fit as defined by the supplies-demands nexus. More complicated than complementary/supplementary models, the supplies-demands perspective applied to college choice suggests that the institution provides certain resources (i.e., financial, physical, and psychological) to the student. As well, the institution facilitates certain opportunities for its students that are both task-related and interpersonal. Alternatively, the institution also demands resources from the student such as financial compensation for services, minimum time spent towards obtaining degree, and an expected level of effort or commitment to obtaining the degree. Among these demands, the institution also expects that students will possess certain knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs). These KSAs, which are both task-related and interpersonal, may be assessed by admission staff during the application process or through traditional course grades and other campus life requirements. In much the same way, the student supplies certain personal resources to the institution including time (usually four or more years), effort, commitment, and financial compensation in the form of tuition and fees. To meet institutional demands, the student, as a potential member of the institution, demonstrated intent to provide certain KSAs that are both task-related, such as demonstrated academic ability, as well as interpersonal skills and abilities including a desire to participate in the academic experience, a willingness to adhere to institutional regulations and openness to new experiences.

As a consumer, the student also demands certain institutional resources that may be financial, in the form of aid, physical, as in factors related to personal safety and
comfort, and psychological, including opportunities for status confirmation or enhancement. Lastly, the student demands that the institution provide certain opportunities that are task related, like academic programs, opportunities for post-college employment, and preparation for graduate programs, as well as opportunities for interpersonal growth and development.

The Student-College Fit Model as Applied to College Selection

Kristof's (1996) original model suggests that complementary/supplementary congruence and supplies-demands fit, as traditionally conceived, can be integrated into one holistic conceptualization of fit. Whereas these conceptualizations are generally considered mutually exclusive, the Kristof model provides a means for incorporating and reconciling these perspectives into one coherent framework depicted in the student-college fit model. Due to its comprehensiveness, the Student-College Fit Model has the capacity to describe the college selection process as the result of both academic/intellectual considerations, such as course offerings and financial aid, and more pragmatic considerations students have about campus social life. This incorporation of multiple considerations about academic and pragmatic concerns reflects the assertions of several authors who advocate for a dual-sphere choice model (Hays, 1989, Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Litten, 1991; Reynolds, 1980-81).

Since the proposed Student-College Fit Model incorporates both academic/task-related concerns as well as more intangible pragmatic concerns, it is an ideal framework for reconciling the multitude of decision factors presented in the college choice literature. Put simply, the Student-College Fit Model helps merge students' academic and interpersonal expectations for college into one inclusive scheme that depicts that ways
that the various choice factors impact one another. In this model, the concept of fit is considered holistically and can describe the student’s total experience of seeking a place that meets both intellectual and interpersonal needs; however, the model can also be deconstructed to highlight specific factors that lead to sense of fit or misfit.

Armed with a conceptual framework that defines image and the resulting student-institution fit as key informants in the college selection process, the remainder of this chapter will be devoted to explaining the purpose and rational for the methods selected for this study. The conceptual framework and the college-student fit model it supports provide the foundation for this inquiry; however, the research questions demand empirical techniques that will reveal the students’ perceptions from their own vantage point. Thus, to truly respect and comprehend the participants’ viewpoints, this research will be conducted as a qualitative case study.

The Qualitative Case Study Method

The qualitative case study method is defined by Merriam (1988), as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” (p. 21). This method is preferred when (a) how or why questions are pursued, (b) the examiner has little control over events, and (c) the focus is a phenomenon in a real life setting (Yin, 1984). Thus, the qualitative case study method seems particularly relevant for this study because it will allow me to investigate the phenomenon of college choice as experienced by students using a single, information-rich example.

More specifically, I chose the single-case, descriptive case study as a vehicle for this research because inquiries on college selection are best conducted at the institutional, or micro-level, “by analyzing college choice for one school, with a set population of
accepted applicants and at a single point in time, the time of the final college choice” (Maguire and Lay, 1981, p. 124). However, unlike most micro-level college choice studies, the current research sought to address the college selection decision from the prospective of the individual student. To accomplish this, a qualitative, descriptive case study research design was preferred over hypothesis testing in order to query the perceptual nature students’ attitudes and images in rich descriptive form.

The Research Context

Stake (1995) suggests that a case study may be examined in terms of its context, or how the case is situated within its setting, where the setting may be a physical, social, historical and/or economic. The focus of the case may be on the case itself, as in the intrinsic case study where investigation is warranted because the case itself is unique and compelling. Alternatively, in the instrumental case study, the focus of the case is on an issue or issues and the case is used to illustrate a problem or concern (Creswell, 1998). This instrumental case study is bounded by time, in that the study occurred during the spring semester of 2003, and also by place, in that the study focused only on applicants to W&M. Consistent with qualitative inquiry, this study incorporated the paradigm assumptions of an emerging design, a context-dependent inquiry, and an inductive data analysis.

Statement of Bias

As a student currently studying higher education at the College, a previous employee of the College and a lifetime resident of the area, I have had intimate contact with the institution and its students. This close connection necessarily engenders certain
biases and expectations about W&M and the participants of the study that must be acknowledged. While these biases could be considered a threat to the study, Wong (2000) suggests that personal bias, when properly acknowledged, can actually enrich a researcher's perspective. As potential tools, my awareness of campus culture, knowledge of institutional image, and experiences with the Office of Admissions bring a valuable perspective to the current study. Additionally, my personal experience and similarity to the participants assisted me in establishing rapport with respondents. With these biases in mind, I used personal knowledge and experience to inform data collection and analysis, all the while relying heavily on the voices of the respondents to form the basis for research analyses and conclusions.

Setting and Participants

Setting

This study was conducted at the College of William and Mary, a state-assisted institution in Williamsburg, Virginia. With 5,506 undergraduates from 50 states and a number of foreign countries, most of whom (79%) graduated in the top tenth of their high school class, W&M appeals to the academically gifted student looking for a school with rigorous academics and a strong liberal arts tradition. Only 16% minority, this "public ivy" struggles to attract bright students from diverse backgrounds while still maintaining its commitment to residents of W&M's home state. Called the "best small public university in America" by U.S. News and World Report, this highly-ranked public institution has as its goal to become the best small public college in the world.
For many, William and Mary has long been known as a distinctive college with an extensive history and unique culture. Located directly next to Virginia's historic Colonial Williamsburg, W&M still retains much of the old world flavor, history and traditions of its colonial roots. As the second oldest college in the nation, this adherence to history and tradition is evident by the colonial landscape and architecture of the buildings, the numerous statues of historic figures that grace the 1,200 acre campus, as well as the historic environment full of relics of colonial life.

In 2002-03, W&M received 8,917 completed applications for undergraduate admissions from first-time freshmen. Of these, 3,089, or 34%, of the applicants in that year were granted admission. Of that group 1,320, or 43%, of those admitted enrolled for Fall 2003. Although the College's yield rate (ratio of those accepted to those enrolled) is considered good compared to its peer institutions, this yield rate is less than that of its major in-state competitor institution, which maintains a yield rate that hovers around 50% annually. As such, W&M has a critical interest in uncovering the reasons that compel admitted students to enroll elsewhere.

The College of William and Mary was chosen as the focus of this investigation because it was convenient to the researcher, but more importantly, because it represents the type of school Burton Clark (1972) termed "distinctive." This distinctiveness, which Clark suggests is related to image potency, grants the College an undeniable sense of place that is unique and discernable. Thus, one would expect that W&M's images would be more salient and perhaps even more influential to prospective students than institutions with less prominent images. This potency factor makes William and Mary an ideal place for the study of institutional image.
In as much as this institutional distinctiveness, achieved and nurtured through references to institutional history and tradition, helps to propel the College in the minds of some students, this image of W&M as linked to the past is also a liability for others (K. Cottrell, personal communication, February 13, 2002). As W&M seeks to redefine itself in the modern liberal arts tradition, as a place where all things are possible (Ragan & McMillian, 1989), it faces the dilemma of being true to its own distinctive history without falling victim to it. This too suggests that W&M provides an appropriate and intriguing context for the study of an institutional image and college choice.

Participants

Pilot Study

A pilot study on the topic of college choice and image was conducted with twenty-four W&M freshmen in the Spring of 2002. The pilot study revealed that these W&M students found it difficult to identify institutional images they held as perspectives due to the passage of time and the transition from outsider to college student. Research (Ahme, 1994) that supports this postulates that once individuals become members of an organization, the socialization they engage in as part of the new member integration process alters their perspective of the organization. This suggests that matriculating W&M students cannot truly remember how they felt as perspectives and their retrospective reflections are contaminated by their experiences as organizational members.

Although the students interviewed for the pilot study were more than six months removed from their college selection process, the results of the twelve pilot interviews helped me refine the interview questions. As a result of the pilot study, I decided to
interview high school seniors who had just completed the college selection process. It is expected that this group of students, more than current freshmen, will be able to articulate the choice experience more clearly. Additionally, since the high school students are still organizational outsiders to a college or university, they are a more appropriate unit of analysis for investigating the images of the institution held by prospective students.

Participant Recruitment

This study investigated the college choice decisions of the applicants to the College of William and Mary seeking admission to the freshman class of Fall 2003, with one notable exception: those students who applied for admission to the 2003 class under the “Early Decision” program. With the exception of early decision applicants, students of interest to this study were applicants whose candidacies were reviewed for admission in winter of 2003 and were subsequently accepted to W&M.

Participants were a random sample of approximately 30 students selected from two groups: (a) entrants, or those who accepted the College’s offer of admission signified by the submission of a housing deposit, and (b) non-entrants, or those who enrolled elsewhere, signified by the failure to submit a deposit. An attempt was made to ensure an equal number of respondents from the two groups, entrants and non-entrants. A random selection was conducted for each group, entrant and non-entrant, to ensure that there was no researcher bias involved in the selection of the participants. Additionally, it was expected that this random selection would result in obtaining groups that were most similar to the larger body of successful applicants to the College.

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1 A student applying to the College under this arrangement agrees to attend the College if accepted and, on that basis, may apply only to one institution.
2 Students who were admitted to W&M but chose not to enroll in any institution of higher education were not included in the study.
Morey (1970) suggests that studies on college choice are best conducted as close temporally to the choice process as possible while students’ memories of their choice experience are still fresh. Additionally, since this study sought to determine the images of prospective students, interviews with students had to be conducted while they were still relative outsiders to their respective institution. This required that the students be interviewed shortly after making their college choice but also before they have had the opportunity to attend freshman orientation sessions or other campus welcome programs.

Consequently, shortly after May 1, 2003, the College’s deadline for registering intent to enroll, I obtained a data file of admitted applicants to the College for Fall 2003. Two admission staff persons, the Database Specialist and the Executive Assistant to the Vice President for Enrollment Management, helped prepare the data file for my use by filtering out all early decision applicants and by performing a random sample of all admitted students resulting in a data file of 150 students, 75 from the entrant group and 75 from the non-entrant group.

A packet containing a cover letter\(^3\) describing the project (Appendix A and B), an informed consent form for the student and parent and a brief survey for the student (Appendix C) with return envelope was mailed to these 150 students to solicit their participation in the study.\(^4\) In the cover letter, participants were introduced to the study and were asked to complete and return the consent form and the survey in the self-addressed, stamped envelope by May 30, 2003 if they wish to participate in the research project. On May 21, 2003, an email was sent to all students who had not returned a survey to encourage them to participate (Appendix F).

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\(^3\) Specific cover letters were designed for entrants and non-entrants
\(^4\) One hundred fifty students will initially be contacted to allow for the likelihood that some students will not participate.
Procedures

Data Collection

Patton (1980) suggests that qualitative interviews allow the interviewees to express their understandings in their own terms. In particular, the semi-structured interview is a good method to learn about the perceptions of participants (Stainback & Stainback, 1980), particularly when researchers are studying “how” questions, which require answers that provide depth and detail (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Since this research project investigated participants’ perspectives and experiences with the college selection process, semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data.

For the current research project, individual interviews were preferable to traditional group interviewing methods, where group influences can contaminate individual responses. As this study was conducted with students who hold different institutional images and who made different college choices (entrants and non-entrants), the individuality and uniqueness of each participant’s responses had to be maintained and external influences minimized. Moreover, because the phenomenon of person-environment fit is a very individual experience, group interviews may mask students’ feelings of fit or misfit. Thus, the semi-structured interview allowed me to obtain the participants’ thoughts and feelings in as pure a format as possible.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol used in this study was designed by the researcher. The interview questions were developed based on the Student-College Fit Model described previously (see Table 1) as well as other concepts implicit in the study’s research
questions. As with an emergent design, the protocol provided a basic template for the structure of the interviews while also allowing enough flexibility to pursue student thoughts and comments that were pertinent to the study.

*Interview Methods*

A total of forty students returned the survey/consent form. Upon receipt, I reviewed all returned surveys/consent forms to ensure that the interested participants met the following criteria: (a) that they had declared their intent to enroll at one accredited institution of higher education for the Fall of 2003, (b) that they had applied to W&M as a regular decision applicant (not early decision), (c) and that they were willing and able to participate in a 30-minute phone interview with the researcher that was recorded. These criteria were established to ensure that interviews would be maximally informative. Students who were not enrolling at any institution of higher education were omitted because they essentially did not choose to attend any institution. Conversely, early decision applicants did not engage in a traditional choice situation because by applying to institutions with binding early decision programs, they clearly had a preference for a particular institution to the extent that they would attend that school if admitted.

Of the forty students who returned their survey, eight students declined to be interviewed and two students replied three weeks or more after the deadline. Thus, thirty students were contacted to set up an appointment for a phone interview by email (Appendix E) or by phone. During the initial call, I briefly identified the purpose of the study and its relationship to the College as a doctoral dissertation project. I answered any questions the student had and secured an appointment for a telephone interview. If the student had a valid and current email address, a written confirmation of the interview
appointment was sent to the student via email the day before the appointment. In some cases, I telephoned the students to remind them of the interview appointment a day in advance of the scheduled call.

Before the scheduled interview, I reviewed the participant’s survey and made note of any particular responses that warranted further exploration. This helped me become familiar with the student’s background and their college choice preferences, which also helped me build rapport with the students. Then, at the time of the scheduled interview, I contacted the student by telephone at the contact number they indicated on their survey. I identified myself and asked if the student was still willing to be interviewed. If the student agreed, I started the pre-interview briefing according to the interview protocol (Appendix D) where I identified the estimated length of the interview and the nature of the questions, explained the confidentiality procedures, and asked the student for permission to tape the interview for transcription purposes (and was granted such permission in every case). To maintain confidentiality, students’ names were not used during the interviews. For record keeping purposes, I assigned each participant an identification number, which was written on the microcasette recording of the interview. The interviews were recorded using a wireless phone, a standard recording controller, and a standard microcasette recorder with microphone jack.

Of the original group of thirty respondents with whom I had scheduled appointments, I was only able to conduct interviews with twenty-eight of these students. The remaining two students could not be interviewed as one was out of the country for the month and the other repeatedly failed to make himself available for the call at the scheduled time. Consequently, I ejected these two students from the interviewee pool.
I conducted the interviews according to the interview protocol (Appendix D), adapting the questions as necessary to probe relevant responses and avoid redundancy. The individual interview sessions averaged thirty minutes in length and were audio recorded for transcription. The audio tapes were then transcribed so as to create a permanent record of the interview. Within one month of the interview date, the researcher provided the participants with a transcript of the interview (via email) for verification and clarification of the data. After verifying the content with the respective participants, the data was organized and managed electronically through a qualitative software package known as *The Ethnograph*.

**Data Analysis**

Interview data was analyzed through the process of analytic induction, where the researcher moves from specific facts to general conclusions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in order to generate a new understanding of a phenomenon. By using an analytic induction approach (Stake, 1995), I created a detailed description of the case and its setting. Then, I coded, deconstructed and examined the data through categorical aggregation. After a preliminary reading of the interview transcripts, I used the *Student-College Fit Model* (Table 1), to devise some basic codes (see Appendix G). The interviews were coded once and the code system was revised slightly. The interviews were read and recoded a second time to ensure accuracy and consistency in coding.

Using the data analysis software, *The Ethnograph*, I was able to classify segments of the interviews using my code structure (see Appendix G). This software also allowed me to search by code structure in order to mine the data for patterns in the codes. This preliminary analysis revealed that students’ responses seemed to begin at a superficial
level and become increasingly more introspective during the interview. More specifically, when I asked students, for example, why they chose a particular school, their initial answer generally reflected a more topical consideration such as financial aid or location. However, when I read the transcripts individually in their entirety, I began to notice that at the end of the interview the students would give much richer explanations of choice that reflected a more personal motives and considerations. In short, the students’ narratives revealed very personal stories about how they came to terms with this decision and in every story the students talked about how they interacted with the place and what role this interaction played in their decision. At this point, the individual codes I had previously devised were categorized into three essential aspects of this research: students’ perceptions of the institutions under consideration (institution), students’ perceptions of self (self), and students’ perceptions of the degree of fit (fit) that exists between themselves and the institutions under consideration. Based on these relationships between three main resulting themes, I developed naturalistic generalizations about the case. As is the case with qualitative inquiry, these generalizations have limitations and the findings from one case cannot be explicitly “generalized” to other situations. However, findings from the current case study can inform other situations or cases.

Data Verification

Creswell (1998) suggest that data verification is an on-going process made possible by time spent in the field, and rich, thick description. He offers eight data verification procedures, two of which I employed in my research including member or informant checking and peer review and debriefing (see Creswell, 1998). More specifically, I engaged in member checking with participants who were asked to review
the interview transcripts and correct any errors or misunderstandings. I also engaged in peer review and debriefing sessions with the chair of my dissertation committee, an individual who has extensive experience in qualitative methods.

Ethical Safeguards

This study received approval from the Human Subjects Committee at the College of William and Mary. In accordance with the prescribed procedure for conducting research at W&M, I obtained written informed consent from the participants and their parents in the case of students who are minors (Appendix C). Consent forms addressed the following: (a) participation is voluntary and students may withdraw from the study at any point, (b) information and student responses would be held in strict confidence, (c) participants names will not be associated with the research findings, (d) all participants will receive a copy of their interview transcript and, upon request, a copy of the study findings. Regarding confidentiality, all participants’ identities were protected so that study data would not harm or embarrass them in any way. Participants were identified and referred to by participant number or pseudonyms and the information they provided was be used in the aggregate.
CHAPTER IV

CHOOSING A COLLEGE

A Profile of the Students

Individual student-related attributes that have been shown in the literature to impact college choice include: socioeconomic status (Chapman, 1979; Maguire & Lay, 1981; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983), ability (Dahl, 1982; Jackson, 1978; Maguire & Lay, 1981; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983), parental levels of education (Lewis & Morrison, 1975; Litten, 1983), family residence characteristics (Chapman, 1979; Lewis & Morrison, 1975; Litten, 1983; Maguire & Lay, 1981), parental encouragement (Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Litten, 1983). Based upon previous work, I asked the twenty-eight students a series of demographic questions to help contextualize their responses to the interview questions. These questions probed the demographic variables listed above. As an extension, this study investigated other demographic variables that I felt were influential in the college selection including religious preference, high school type, ethnicity, family residence characteristics and residency status (in-state versus out-of-state). After compiling the demographic profiles of each student, I was able to craft an overall picture of my participants. This overall picture revealed that the students were surprisingly similar in almost all categories except residency status.

Residency Status

Residency status pertains to the classification of a person as an in-state student, one who resides in Virginia, or an out-of-state student who is a resident of a state other than Virginia. Thirteen participants composed the in-state group and fifteen were out-of-staters. Of the in-state cohort, nine planned to attend W&M (entrants) and four planned to
attend another institution (non-entrants). For the out-of-staters, eight planned to attend the College (entrants) and seven chose other colleges (non-entrants). As expected, the respondent rate was higher in the entrant group as these students were likely more motivated to participate in a study affiliated with their chosen institution. Interestingly, more out-of-state students agreed to participate than did in-state students. Of particular note is the comparatively lower level of non-entrant in-state participants.

Aside from their participation levels, the in-state and out-of-state students possessed other distinct differences including the types of institutions they sought and the way they approached their college selection process. While these differences will be explored throughout this chapter, overall, out-of-state students most frequently applied to selective, private liberal arts institutions in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic. In-state students tended to apply to other selective public institutions in Virginia (namely the University of Virginia); when they did apply outside the state, it was to other selective, liberal arts schools.

Entrants and Non-entrants

Non-entrants tended to apply to and attend selective, private liberal arts schools. With respect to the entrant group, the preferences were more varied. This group demonstrated partiality towards selective, private, liberal arts schools. They also seriously considered, and in some cases elected to attend, selective public schools with only slightly less frequency.

Perhaps as an artifact of the influence of in-state versus out-of-state choice patterns, in-state entrants typically chose between W&M and other selective public institutions in the Commonwealth. Alternatively, relatively fewer in-state non-entrants
participated in the study as compared to the somewhat larger group of out-of-state non-entrants. Thus, the student acceptance rate was lower for out-of-state students. When these out-of-staters elected to attend another institution, they most often chose a selective private institution. Beyond these general patterns of preference by institutional type, the entrants and non-entrants were not markedly different in their demographic factors.

_Student and Family of Residence Attributes_

Not surprisingly, the students hail from homes with well-educated parents. With one exception, all were raised in a home where at least one, but usually both, parents had the benefit of a college education or some sort of post-secondary training. Only one student was a first generation college student. All of the students had taken advanced coursework in high school and they reported having strong grades and SAT scores, which made them competitive for admission to selective institutions. Thus, unlike many college applicants, these students had a number of attractive college options. In addition, most were raised in fairly affluent homes where the financial situation allowed the students to consider most schools without respect to tuition cost. The few students who needed aid received offers sufficient to permit latitude in their choice.

Since these students are academically strong, many received offers of admission from other well-respected institutions. Thus, the process of choosing a college was made more salient because this group had the opportunity and the freedom to make a choice based more on their own preferences than did students with more restricted options.

One of the goals of this research was to determine how these students, when faced with several viable options, ultimately chose one institution. Overall, the informants’ responses to this essential question coalesced around three specific spheres: self,
institution, and fit as facets of the decision-making process. As such, the specific findings of this study will be presented in terms of these three areas.

Self

Personological variables that impact college selection decisions are rarely discussed in the literature. The few explorations conducted (Chapman, 1979; Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Dahl, 1982; Jackson, 1978; Lewis & Morrison, 1975; Litten, 1983; Maguire & Lay, 1981; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983), were primarily quantitative studies in which a deeper investigation of the impact of self and personality on choice is not possible. Probing personal and affective aspects of choice is not possible in traditional quantitative designs. Thus, we know little about how an individual’s personality, motives, drives, and emotional needs impact their college choices. The findings of this study help to substantiate student personality as a significant dimension of the choice puzzle, thereby extending what is known about this complex dilemma.

In this study, the general theme of self as it relates to college choice is largely a function of personality, or characteristics of the individual that impact the student’s perceptions of world and his/herself. Since a student’s personality relates to both how the student views him/herself and how he/she views the world, this composite impacts both self-perceptions and institutional image development. Personality establishes its relevance first at the level of the individual and then forms a lens through which the individual views the world. This lens conditions how the individual thinks, acts, interprets and responds to his/her world. As personality drives an individual’s wants, needs and preferences, it is not surprising that it was a driver in the college choices of these participants.
Security and Self-Definition

In a fundamental way, personality asserted itself by influencing the students’ needs for security and self-definition. For many of the students, these developmental dilemmas affected their ultimate choice of which college to attend. Choosing a school was, in some very real ways, an act of self-definition for the student where he/she was faced with the questions “who am I” and “who do I want to be?” At the core of this self-definition debate are the issues of security and risk-taking. At each point in the choice process, the student engaged in a process of self-negotiation about how much risk he/she was willing to assume as a part of the self-definition process.

Security

As applied to college choice, student concerns over security permutated into two main issues: whether to attend college close to home or farther away (propinquity/scope); and preference for a high-touch environment where one would find lots of personal contact (enclave-seekers).

Propinquity/scope

For many of these students, the security debate was couched in the question of whether or not to go to a college located several or more hours away from home. This distinction, which I will call the propinquity/scope dichotomy, appears to be directly related to the student’s need for independence. As part of this issue, the student had to determine if it were more important to move away from home and gain independence or to remain closer to home in the event that they required support from family and/or the opportunity to return to familiar surroundings on a regular basis. As this in-state entrant explained:
It was difficult for me because I wanted somewhere that wasn’t too far away from home, but at the same time, I wanted a place that was far enough so that I felt like I would be on my own, and I really get the feel for how it feels to be independent.

In some cases, issues of propinquity / scope were intertwined with the student’s beliefs about what a college education should offer. As in the case of this female student from Virginia, staying close to home promised security but the limited opportunities for growth she believed existed in this familiar environment were unsatisfying to her:

It was always in the back of my mind, like, what if I don’t like it there [W&M], and what if something goes wrong, and then I’m so far away from home. ...So, for a while I was pretty nervous about going away from home so I figured I’d just stay at Tech where I’d know people and just live at home and it would be easier. But, when I thought about going to Tech, it just seemed like – it was kind of like high school, part two… there are people that graduated from my high school who go to Tech. You see them all the time and they see all their high school friends all the time, and half the time they even room together. So it just seemed like it wouldn’t really be that much of a change, and I thought college is kind of supposed to be a change.

Ultimately, this student chose to attend William and Mary and give up the comforts of familiar surroundings in order to find the new opportunities she felt were an important part of the college experience:

[At W&M] I can meet people from a variety of places, and meet some new people that had different interests, and try out some new things, and just see what it was like in a different area in Williamsburg...I like the environment, and it’s a change
in environment. It seems like more of what I want in the college experience: new people, and a different area. I think that’s what it is...I need a change, and going all the way across the state is kind of a big change.

**Enclave-seekers**

Other students displayed a preference for institutions that were similar to their high school environments. In many cases, these students matriculated at small high schools in which they enjoyed close, personal relations with both faculty and fellow students. By seeking a college environment similar to their high school, these *enclave-seekers* clearly preferred a place that was a known commodity as opposed to the unfamiliar choice. As a male student from a private high school in Virginia reported, the small, high-touch environment he enjoyed in high school encouraged him to look for a familiar and secure environment:

So mostly what I was looking at was the small, private, liberal arts schools. Because I felt those might be the ones that would be the best match for me.

...Going to a smaller school like I have, I’ve become used to sort of the ability to have a close relationship with the various faculty and administration which would be somewhat possible at a smaller college, but certainly more than it would at a large university. Also, the familiarity that develops between you and the rest of the students is something that I actually do enjoy. I’m not the kind of person who would really get a whole lot of pleasure out of seeing different people every single day.

A woman from Virginia described how her tendencies to be shy in social situations encouraged her to seek a small, secure college community:
I don’t want to be in a class with like a hundred people and I never really get a
change to interact with my professors. So that was very important to me. I tend
to be a little shy, so when you go to a big school it’s kind of hard to really make
friends, whereas in a small environment I think it’s a lot easier. I knew that based
on my personality I needed a smaller environment where I would feel more
relaxed, more comfortable.

Students who chose smaller institutions were not always merely the product of small high
schools. Another student who had experienced both a small and a large high school knew
the impact that size had on his experiences as a student. This led him to seek out smaller
colleges:

I looked at some big schools, too, like the University of Virginia, but I felt like I’d
just kind of be more like a number.... The school I’m at right now is sort of like a
medium to small sized school and I moved here from a large school, and like the
environment at the small school much better. I just kind of felt more secure and
kind of happier where I am now, so I kind of didn’t want to change that
environment, going back to a huge program.

Generally, these *enclave-seeking* students preferred admission tactics that assured
them a level of personal attention during and beyond the application process. As this
student explains, personal attention during the college search process made her feel as
though she would receive more personal attention once she became a student:

One thing that one school did was to write me a letter and they congratulated me
on some award I’d won that I had listed on my application. I guess it made me
feel like they took the time to give me some personal attention. I guess I was use
to that kind of attention at my high school and that made me feel like I might get that kind of attention in college too.

Self-Definition

The successful resolution of security issues was driven by an even greater need for self-definition. As a part of the self-definition process, these students were forced to consider both their current identity and the identity they hoped to achieve in their future. This significant question, “who do I want to be?” urged students to confront their college selection as an opportunity to set a course for their non-academic futures as well. As a part of this negotiation of self, three critical streams emerged that depict the student as a validation-seeker, a disparity-seeker, or a re-definer. Each of these three streams differed in the degree of risk required as well as the amount of personal growth dictated by the goal. Put simply, the more a student sought to redefine his/herself, the more the student sought an environment that would be different from their current disposition. Thus, greater levels of difference between student and environment paralleled greater levels of personal risk for the student.

Validation-Seekers.

The validation-seeker profiles a student who was generally satisfied with his/her current self and wished to continue to develop in a similar way within a relatively homogeneous environment full of “people like me.” For these students, personality and the self-definition debate exerted itself in the search for an environment that would provide validation. Quite often, the validation-seeking students mentioned that finding an institution where there would be “people like me” was of primary importance to them. Such is the case of one student, who was clearly looking for an institution where he
would be similar to the other students. In his case, finding others who were similar seemed to override all other issues with respect to his college decision:

I wanted people to be like me, I wanted to have things in common with other people and just that kind of thing. I mean, it wasn’t like a whole big list for me of things that I just had to have in a school. Mostly it was more or less the size and the type of person I was going to meet there. …I definitely think [fitting in] played a big role [in my college decision], just because, you know like, I’ve gone places before – like there’s a school down here where I knew I wouldn’t have fit in very well just because we are very – things that are important to us are prioritized differently. And I wanted to have that, because I see how difficult it would be if you met someone like, that was completely different, had their priorities very different from you, and their values were different. I just know how difficult that is to deal with and so, like, it was something that was important to me.

It is also interesting to note that in terms of “people like me,” this student, like others interviewed, referenced the significance of personal priorities and the values held by other students as significant in his assessments of similarity.

Disparity-Seekers.

Students seeking increased opportunities for personal growth and change often sought an institution with enough diversity to provide a variety of new experiences and opportunities for personal growth (disparity-seekers). As opposed to the “people like me” mentality of the validation-seekers, the following out-of-state disparity-seeker sought a place where she could find people who were different from her:
I didn’t want to go to a place where everyone was cookie-cutter, looked just like me, and that’s kind of – at Boston College, that’s what it kind of looked like. You know, a lot of East coast kids, a lot of prep school kids, kind of that upper middle class type, and I wanted to go to a place where people were going to be different from me.

*Disparity-seeking* students were closer to the risk-seeking end of the spectrum and were willing to forego a comfortable and secure environment for a more stimulating experience. However, these students seemed keenly aware that there was an optimum amount of difference and that too much dissimilarity was neither conducive nor preferable. The following male student from the North East explained:

I was sort of concerned about the climate of the schools in the sense that I wanted an environment where I would be accepted and would be similar to other students but not one where I felt as though we were all the same. I felt that at Reed - I just wasn’t sure about the climate of the school. The students were bright and I’m sure I would have fit in there but...I almost felt that because they were just like me, I would be too similar to the rest of the student body and I wanted to kind of rise above the fray and be more of an individual. I really wanted a place where there would be a diversity of opinion. I didn’t want everyone to be so likeminded even if they did agree with me and how I see the world. I guess I wanted my views to be challenged.... And what really drew me in the end to William & Mary was there was the diversity of opinion. ...At the same time though, I ran from [University of] Richmond...I think I would have been the only person there with colored hair. I wouldn’t have fit there at all. I would have been way out of my
comfort zone, which I don’t mind mostly but, um, there are limits, you know?
And I would have pushed them there and I didn’t get the sense that that my views
would have been appreciated by anyone there.

*Re-definers.*

Some students viewed the college selection decision as an opportunity to re-
define or reinvent themselves. Although they may have believed that one institution was
a better fit for their personality, their desire to be someone new—as in someone more like
the students who attend their chosen school—pushed them to look beyond the familiar for
an environment in which they could redefine themselves. As one student noted:

In high school, I managed to get myself attached to the greater nerd body of the
school just by having a lot of expertise with audiovisual equipment…but it means
that I have been part of that group, and part of looking at Reed, honestly, was
seeing those kids, kids like myself, throwing parties. And they were parties,
great, but there’s a lot to be said for the social decorum that a real college in the –
you know, the college you see in the movies. I guess I wanted to kind of
disassociate myself from that group and sort of shake that image and start again…
but nevertheless, I want to be in a place that has the greater breadth of social
opportunity so I don’t have to be part of that group.

Consumer behavior research (Miller & Berry, 1998) suggests that purchasing
decisions are often related to self-image where consumers will purchase things that they
believe reflect their personalities. In much the same way, these consumers will also
purchase things that they believe either represent the persona of someone they would like
to become, or that symbolize the qualities of a group with which they would like to be
associated. The students in this study seemed to identify the institutions they considered according to the brand of student at that college. Thus, *validation-seeking* students choose institutions with a brand image that they felt was also representative of their own current identity. In the case of the *re-definers*, these students aspired to become more like the “brand” of student who attends the institution they selected under the assumption that being associated with this school and its students would make them more similar to this desired image. The following female student from Virginia explained why she chose Tulane over William and Mary. Her attraction to Tulane was based largely on her belief about the desirability of the Tulane brand of student which, for her, represented a chance to become someone different:

> With William & Mary, I visited and I thought it was just a gorgeous campus and it felt like it was very me, and the way that I explain my decision is that William & Mary felt like me, and Tulane felt like the me that I want to become, more like, so that was kind of a chance to kind of be someone different... Tulane seemed like it had a lot more cultural opportunities because it’s in New Orleans and there’s so much culture there, it is the kind of place I want to be a part of and William & Mary is also like a lot of northern Virginia kids and it’s just kind of like the same old thing that I’m used to from high school... like one of my main concerns, is that [W&M] would be a little bit too much like now... I figured I wouldn’t really grow or become very different if I just went there to school with the same people I already know... [Tulane students] seemed more like the kind of people I want to spend time with and I though I could kind of become different just by being in a place that was different like that.
Similarly, the following female student from Virginia explains that going to W&M appeared to her as an opportunity to redefine herself apart from who she had been in high school:

It came down to between [W&M] and [University of] Virginia, and it was really hard to decide, because I had adults telling me one thing [to go to W&M], my peers telling me another [to go to UVA]...our high school -- kind of stereotypically, everyone goes [to UVA], and so — and everyone’s dying to go there, and a lot of people didn’t get in, and so when they heard that I’d gotten in and might not go, they just thought that was absurd. But, I kind of take pride that I could get into some place like that and not have to go. That was a big part of my vision, like being able to decide for myself and not what my peers had kind of wanted me to do. I wanted a place where I could get away from kind of stereotypic place of my high school scene and kind of be different from those people even though they are my friends.

Choosing a college seems, to some degree, to be an act of self-definition wherein students negotiated the developmental issues that are so common to their age group. However, in many cases the students interviewed did not seem to directly perceive their college choice as a deliberate act of self-definition. Nevertheless, they seemed to tie their views of themselves, both who they are and who they want to be, to their college selection.

*College Aspirations*

Considerations of self as they pertain to college choice are easily seen by examining the impact of personality on the development of college aspirations. At this
early stage in the college choice process, students considered themselves within the context of various schools, that is, as actors in both the academic and social arenas of the campus. Although students’ descriptions of their college aspirations were given retrospectively (as the participants had already chosen a college and spent many months considering this choice) their narratives suggested that their college aspirations were born through considerations of self-concept and perceptions of college life.

At this fundamental level, a student’s preferences and suppositions of self interacted with basic institutional factors. As is the case with highly-motivated students from college-educated families, many of these students were very self-aware and had a keen sense of their personal preferences and the impact that these preferences had on their college alternatives. In short, students considered their own needs and preferences within the context of a particular institution. This process helped the students to distill the list of available college options down to several viable institutions that appealed to them at this most basic level:

I was looking for a small to medium sized school...because I really wanted class sizes to be small. I really value that, that’s important to me. I wanted to be able to have a more personal relationship with my professors, I wanted a school where there were things to do on the weekends, where people were involved and there were always things going on, but not necessarily Greek life. I needed a social environment that fit with what I like to do. That was a major aspect and why I eliminated some schools even before I applied to them, and the type of student life there. I wanted a school, obviously, with a really good academic reputation. I’m very into my academic performance and I wanted a school that would support
that kind of atmosphere where it was okay to study on a weekend, it was okay to
go to lectures or pursue more intellectual activities, and I really wanted a school,
as I mentioned earlier, with a community feel...a real campus life, and not just
buildings in the middle of a city.

Apart from specific individual preferences, several students talked about viewing
their personalities in the abstract and they considered how their individual attributes and
preferences would fit with the climate of the school. As applied, PE fit theory suggests
that these students considered the complementary and supplementary aspects of student-
institution fit. As a part of these considerations, they attempted to picture themselves in
various environments in an effort to predict what they believed they could both gain from
and contribute to these potential colleges. A William and Mary entrant explained:

It was hard at first to imagine myself different but it was also exciting to see what
I could take from those different places and different schools, and what I could
add to that, just being in not a totally different culture, but a different type of
lifestyle, and I did, and it was exciting – to each place I visited, to imagine myself
there, and being immersed in the different lives of those campuses. A big part of it
was thinking about these schools and about how it would be for me to be a part of
each place.

As these students considered their own personalities and preferences, they developed an
awareness of the ways that these personal attributes intersected with the institutional
attributes of the various institutions under consideration. Thus, as a part of examining the
choice process, it is important to consider how the entity of self intersects with the entity
of the institution.
Institution

Although student attributes of choice have received the greatest attention, institutional attributes are also important determinants of where students enroll (Hossler, et al., 1996). Institutional attributes include financial features such as net tuition costs and financial aid, (Hossler et al., 1996) and non-financial institutional aspects including academic offerings, location, financial aid availability, academic reputation/quality, size, and social atmosphere (Chapman & Jackson, 1978; Lewis & Morrison, 1975; Litten, 1983; Maguire & Lay, 1981; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983).

Our understanding of students’ choices related to these types of institutional factors is largely the result of statistical studies, since the responses are easily quantifiable. That approach, however, lacks the capacity to probe interactions between self and institution in great detail. Focusing on the affective domain of college choice, this study endeavored to uncover other facets of self and place that impact students’ emotional response to an institution in an effort to reveal additional significant institutional attributes.

For the students in this study, these extrinsic, institution-specific factors previously cited in the literature were considered as part of the decision process. However, these factors served primarily as filters that students used to reduce their choice set to a smaller number of viable alternatives. More specifically, issues such as cost, location and academic offerings were generally factors that ranked highly on students’ initial search criteria. As the comments of this first-generation student indicate, the initial filtering criteria were based almost exclusively on cognitive/task-related aspects of the institution:
It was really difficult just because of the wide range of colleges, you know, I wanted to have a variety of schools that I was applying to, some that were obviously really challenging, some that I wouldn’t get into, and at the same time, some that would essentially be safe schools so that I wouldn’t have to worry if I didn’t get into any of the reach schools. We didn’t look at money too much when applying to colleges, my parents and I, though, I mean, there were one or two schools that I glanced at and decided I didn’t want to bother trying those because they were at a particularly high price range. I didn’t look much at specific academic programs, such as what majors they had or anything like that, but I looked a lot at overall academic reputation, and other things about the school just to get a feel for the college rather than look at a lot of specifics. I knew I didn’t want a school that was really at either extreme - I didn’t want a tiny school or like a gigantic one. But I looked at location some. I though about the impression I got from the school, from just my first encounters with it in the brochures they sent me and from their websites. Also what I heard about it from friends and family. Those things kind of helped me form an initial impression of the places I was considering. So, my initial list was based a lot on what I had heard about the place or what I could get out of reading the materials the schools sent me.

However, these extrinsic, institution-specific factors were less relevant in the final college decision made by the students. The utility of these commonly-cited institutional attributes is skewed towards the initial and intermediate phases of the college choice process. As an alternative to these factors, the students in this study condensed many of the aspects of institutional life into an overall view of the “personality” of the school.
The students personified the schools under consideration as individual entities, each with its own characteristics and personality. Just as one might think of a person as having qualities or characteristics that are either attractive or unattractive, these students considered potential schools in much the same way. Most of the respondents’ considerations of campus personality stemmed from their observations of students currently attending the schools. For the respondents in this study, the students are the school; the institution’s personality was simply a reflection of the overall personality of the student body of the institution. As this male student suggested:

[When I saw William & Mary I realized that it had what I was looking for but more importantly, it seemed like the personality of the campus was a lot different than most of the schools that I saw...I guess what I mean is each school kind of had a different feeling to it. Like each school kind of had, well, a personality. I don’t know that I can describe how exactly. I guess the school kind if just reflected the personality of the students mainly. With William and Mary, it just seemed more friendly than some of the other schools I looked at. The personality of William and Mary was more welcoming and more like my own personality I guess you could say. Anyway, when I was on campus, I just wanted to go back. It seemed like I belonged there. So, those were a lot of the factors that played in.

For these students, the task of considering a school was simplified by condensing images of a school into archetypal considerations of campus personality. The students described schools by adjectives such as “laid-back,” “studious,” “up-tight,” “fun,” “casual,” “stressful,” “elitist,” “conservative,” “liberal,” and other such terms that one
might use to define an individual. However, these initial considerations of campus personality often helped form a filter that the students used to eliminate schools when the personality of the college did not meet the student’s needs:

“[A]fter I started visiting the schools I started to see differences in them, you know, differences in the students and, kind of, you know, what people spend time doing...I guess each place kind of had its own kind of personality to me and I think that was kind of related to what I though about the students at each place too. I guess I think each school kind of attracted a different sort of person and so the school kind of had that same feel to it, depending on who went there...So, some places were like really serious and lots of time on studies and all, like W&M, or maybe more fun and casual feeling like I kind of felt about Tulane and Tech, or maybe more kind of stuck-up like Washington and Lee. I guess it helped me to kind of think of it in those terms because for me it was kind of about what kinds of students I’d be surrounding myself with and what kind of personality the school had. I guess I figured if I didn’t like the overall feel of the school and it wasn’t a good match with my personality, I didn’t really consider the detailed stuff like majors and all. So, that’s how I weeded some out of my list.

In keeping with considerations of campus personality, most students believed that the campus social life was a major contributor to the overall personality of the institution. Although the students had varying social preferences, the social life of the school was clearly an important consideration for almost every student interviewed. One student summarized the impact that the campus social life had on her college choice. Similar to
several of her peers, this student focused on the importance of balance between the academic and social aspects of college life:

I definitely gave [the campus social life] a lot of attention, maybe too much. It was pretty important to me and I thought about it at every point- when I was looking at schools to apply to and when I was thinking and trying to decide where to go. But I wanted to make sure that I was going to be having a good time and that it wasn’t going to be all studying...I wanted to make sure it was going to be something well-rounded, where I would get to know a bunch of different people and not just be labeled in one group and be stuck there...When I was visiting all these places, always some of the first questions on my mind were like...what is the student life really like and that sort of stuff. I think it was part of my curiosity about what college social life is like...but I felt like the questions I should be asking would be ones about academics and academics were part of it but I wanted to know what my life there would be like outside the classroom, what these kids would be like to live with for four years. I mean, that’s what I think really matters for how well you like a school.

The students saw each school as a kind of place with enduring and definite characteristics that contributed to an overall institutional personality. However, in order to form impressions about the personality of a place, the student must have had some contact with information about the institution upon which to base his/her conclusions. I refer to incidences that allow the student to gain information (and subsequently to form images) about an institution as exposure. Such exposure points proved to be directly
influential in the image development process and consequently, also influential in the choice process.

*Exposure*

Image development is an on-going process. It occurs continuously from the first moment when an individual is exposed to information about the entity until new information about the entity ceases to be relayed. As applied to college choice, exposure is a process through which the prospective student comes to know and gain an image of an institution. Exposure can include both first-hand observations as well as information gathered from second-hand sources. Exposure can occur when a student visits a campus for a tour or summer program or simply when he sees someone in a college sweatshirt. Even informal references to the institution can help to create images that remain in the mind of the perceiver. Such is the case for this student who was exposed to W&M at a young age:

> When I was in the fourth grade, and we took a trip to Williamsburg – a field trip – and we drove by [W&M] and it was a really nice school that we saw out the window of the bus. And the teachers were like, “Maybe one day you can be smart enough to go to William & Mary.” And everyone was impressed, and everyone wanted to go to William & Mary, because we were like seven. So I always thought about that in the back of my mind ever since then. Also because I’m in Virginia, where the only two schools obviously are UVA and William & Mary, because that’s all that they tell you about...so you’re forced to believe that those are the only two schools at which you’ll achieve anything in life and so you try to get into either of those. And yeah, so I felt like applying to William & Mary
because I thought I would have a chance of getting in, and it was a really nice school that I had liked and that I knew others thought was a good school.

At its very core, exposure is any encounter with a message about an entity (in this case, a college). It is the stimulus for image formation. However, as one might presume, some types of exposure are better than others but every kind of exposure has implications for the college choices students make.

*Campus Visits as Exposure*

An old adage used by college admissions counselors suggests that if you can get students on your campus for a visit, you can get them to enroll. In the college choice process, the campus tour functions as the lynchpin by allowing prospective students a first-hand glimpse at the lived experience of students on a particular campus. As mentioned previously, campus character, or the personality of the place, was perhaps the most important institutional attribute students considered. The campus visit, whether formal or informal, was the students’ best opportunity to learn about and observe the essence of each place they were considering. As this out-of-state applicant to W&M noted about his campus tour experiences:

I guess it was a matter of taking the guided tours and stuff, just seeing the different buildings and stuff, and you really could not acquire a full sense for the school by perusing its websites. And just by walking around the school, you could actually get a feel for where places are, who the people are, the demographics of it, I guess just what it looks like. To actually be there in person really helps to further your views of that school.
Beyond the significance of the campus tour as a tool to foster knowledge and understanding of a place, visiting multiple campuses allows students to make important comparisons between the schools they were considering. As well, multiple visits to a variety of campuses helped students to witness the immense variety of institutional alternatives. These visitation experiences assisted students to develop meaningful institutional comparisons, which were vital during the initial stages of the college choice process. For example, one woman explained:

I guess being able to start with my college search, I started actually looking around the beginning of my junior year, made a huge difference. I was able to visit around twenty schools combined with my parents and my friends so I got to see what things were like at a lot of different places. And so I think actually being able to be on the campuses and experience what it was like to be a student there, made a huge difference because I was able to really get to know the place and to see what it was all about…. So, after seeing all these schools and what they all had that was different, it helped me kind of think about what I liked and didn’t like and to kind of compare them.

For the prospective student, visits provide an opportunity to view the campus and perhaps meet other current and prospective students. However, for some students, the prepackaged campus tour was not enough to satisfy their desire for information. Many of these marketing-savvy students had a keen understanding of the admissions process and knew that schools tend to present themselves in the most positive light. In many cases, these students were skeptical of the admission’s office perspective so they sought a more complete view of the school by making an overnight visit. As a male applicant noted:
The most important thing is the visit and what you see there and talking to the students, and that was the most important part of the college process for me...I mean – I guess [what you learn during a visit is] just that sort of feel – like when you walk on to some place, you see kids out on the lawn playing Frisbees, laughing, having a good time, or you walk through the library, kids are quiet or playing video games on the computers, or things like that, or just kind of see beer cans out in front of the dorm room, you kind of get a sense of what that college is like. The overnight really is probably the best part of doing the college visit because it’s – I mean, you get to stay one night over, you get to see what everyone does, how late they stay up to, get to go to some of the parties with the people, kind of meet other kids around the campus, ask them questions. The books only go so far as to present the best image that the college wants to present, so you obviously have that huge bias. So you’ve got to kind of get past that and see the truth behind it, and I mean kids aren’t going to be biased about their school. They’re just going to tell you what’s up, what they like, what they don’t like, and that’s what the visit is all about.

Opportunities to meet other current and prospective students during the visit also allowed prospective students an opportunity to assess how well the college and its students meshed with their expectations and preferences. As this female student from Virginia reported, her visit to W&M helped increase her comfort level, which facilitated her college choice:

I spent two weekends up at William & Mary staying on campus with a cousin and then a friend that went to school there. And so that was great, because it gave me
such a better – it gave me the ability to meet people and talk to people outside of
the admissions office group, because I’ve learned so much more through actual
students and living with them than what the admissions would show me… so I
think my having spent time with the William & Mary people and hearing what
they have to say, and hearing them all say, oh please come, it’s so much fun, that
made a big difference…. [On my visit] I learned the down sides of the college, you
know, what people thought of the administration that sometimes wasn’t pleasant,
and how – maybe housing situations, and how people liked where they were
living, if people liked the dining, things like that, and then a lot about the social
life, too – about who people were hanging out with, how they got to know each
other, and what the Greek life was like. Nothing made me change my mind. If
anything, it helped solidify the choice in my mind and it helped me feel more
comfortable because I could know what things would be like and how I would fit
in there.

Visits also helped students form more concrete and reliable images of the
institutions they were considering. In cases where students already had reasonably well-
conceived images of the school, the visit helped affirm previously held images. In other
cases, the visit helped to clarify assumptions and/or debunk myths as was the case for this
male student from Florida:

Well, obviously, my mom went to William and Mary and so I – growing up, I’d
always had this is kind of the stereotype. I always heard that it was just kind of a
nerdy school where you go there and you’re in the library on Saturdays while a
football game is going on, and so I didn’t really think about it much at first. But, I
have a friend going there this year, and I went up and talked to him, and I walked around with him, and he said that all those myths – they’re just myths. And so it just kind of died all that old stuff that I thought about the school just went away because I saw it wasn’t really like that. It wasn’t what I had thought.

Overall, campus visits helped the students come to know the campus in a more personal way. Additionally, these visits helped students hypothesize about their future lives at the various campuses they considered:

I was just overall impressed with the type of people I saw at [W&M]. ...I just felt that it was a better fit for me than all the other schools, socially, academically, and otherwise... I just thought that people were more like myself and I could fit in better...I think visiting at the campus and actually looking at the type of students that were here and seeing what they did was better than just reading about it in a book. That’s when I was really able to get a feel for things and to see if I could see myself there or not.

Campus visitations proved particularly important for the minority students in the study. As the following African American student from Virginia explains, the visitation helped her determine her fit and comfort level on a predominately white campus:

In November, my guidance counselor gave me – like, recommended me for this interdisciplinary studies weekend in November held at William & Mary. I went in, I was like, wow, I love this campus, I love these people! And it was such a great program, so I just totally abandoned all my other preferences and I was like, I want to go to this school.... [The visitation weekend] made me feel more comfortable because I had gotten a change to get to know some students and I
discovered that it wasn’t as hard to get into as I originally though. Also, I guess as a minority student I also needed to see what it was like for Black students. This program was geared towards minority students so they were kind of like showcased I guess you could say. I don’t know how much different things really are from that but it did give me a chance to see what minorities thought about the school and how they fit into the campus life.

As a part of informal the fit assessments students conducted during their visits, many said they left the prospective campuses feeling more confident and more comfortable. Some had such a strong reaction to the visit that they made their college choice during their visitation. For others, the visit was not quite as remarkable; however, the experience did help them to understand (by virtue of comparison) which environments they enjoyed and which ones they felt were uncomfortable or simply less appealing.

*Salience and quality of the college visit.*

The college visitation experience was also more salient at particular times in the admissions process. As the following student explains, visiting the University of Pennsylvania on Admitted Students’ Day made the process seem more real for her because the visit was temporally close to the time for her final decision:

All of the sudden, I thought, wow, I really do like this place! Maybe I was just saying I didn’t like it and my mind was saying I didn’t like it because I was scared to go somewhere else, I really don’t know. I mean, the Admitted Students Weekend was for the two schools that I’m going in to, and so pretty much their whole departments were there welcoming prospective students, and trying to
encourage them to come, and they were absolutely so welcoming and so friendly and so helpful that I just thought, you know what, this is perfect, and it might not be as scary as I think it is...[The visit was helpful because] I was that much closer to leaving for college, and I was more considering who I'd be working with, and the atmosphere there and the just the opportunities, and all that, so by that point [when visited on Admitted Students' Day] I was ready to make the decision and that day helped kind of calm some of my fears and get me excited about the change instead of scared of it.

Alternatively, as this out-of-state applicant suggested, campus visits during summers or holiday breaks (when school was not in session) were less meaningful:

The tours I took in the summer were considerably less helpful than the ones that I took during the school year, because the campuses were generally empty, and I only got the guide book repeated at me instead of actually being able to see what students do. What really helped me was being able to see the students and see the activity on campus, as opposed to just sort of seeing it – I guess the way it is in the guide book.

Indeed, the opportunity to observe current students engaging in the daily activities of the campus was a critical aspect of the campus visit.

Exposure, in the form of campus visits and other incidents of contact between the student and the institution, impacted students at different points throughout the college choice process. While it assisted these students in making their final decision, exposure also played a role in the early stages of their college selection process, as students conducted their college search and application procedures. The issue of exposure as it
relates to the application process was particularly noteworthy for out-of-state students. As a group, out-of-state students generally applied to a greater number of schools and invested more time in their college search. I observed that compared to their in-state counterparts, these out-of-staters also had to make a more concerted effort to learn about many of the schools to which they applied.

**Exposure and the Out-of-state Applicant**

As a more academically competitive and mobile group, out-of-state students generally applied to more selective schools located outside their home state. More often than their in-state peers, these out-of-state students applied to a number of schools with only a very basic and superficial understanding of the schools and their reputations. As they learned more about each school, they shortened their list of serious contenders, which they then visited. From this point, the visit became a critical element in their decision. One out-of-state woman explained how her distance from both the decision itself and the schools she was considering made her process originally seem very abstract:

I had this list of 15 schools that most of them I'd visited and most were well known but some of them I'd never even heard of. I think I was just pretty much scared about the whole process, so I applied to them all and said, you know what, I'll make the decision later, and I'll see what comes, and senior year was a huge change for me, the way I thought about college and stuff... I was just talking about this with my friends, and we were all saying that as we were applying to colleges we were basically juniors. I mean, we had just finished junior year of high school a couple of months ago, and like the thought of leaving home, it was still kind of
far away, like yeah, that’s down the road, so I don’t think we really thought necessarily about colleges, how we would like them once we were there. At the time, I was filling out the applications and there were a bunch of schools that I’ve always heard of and thought you know, I don’t know that much about them, but why don’t I apply, and I’ll get to know them, and a lot of those, they all had the things that I wanted in colleges, and there were so many out there that all had something of what I wanted, so if figured, you know, if worse comes to worse, once I get all my acceptance and rejection letters, the places that I really want to go to will jump out at me, and I can go on that. Plus, most of the places I was considering were far from my home and were places I’d never been so the whole thing seemed kind of unreal to me.

To combat their lack of knowledge about the institutions they were considering, out-of-state students generally had to commit themselves to gathering additional information about the schools in their choice set. As in the case of the following out-of-state student, more information was required to determine if a visit was warranted:

[W&M] really was kind of in the back of my mind – I had it – until it came closer, until after I had applied and got accepted, then it really started to stand out. So, it really wasn’t one of my top choices when I had first started because I didn’t know as much about it. I hadn’t visited, I hadn’t had the time to really look into it as much...I spent a lot of time on the Internet, so I guess since really going on there, and getting lost in their website and looking at different things, and seeing different activities and different classes, and that made it more real for me, I guess, to really find out a lot of information. I felt the more I could look into it,
the more I had a feeling about what it was like -- life was like on campus. I felt
like I really had to spend some time doing that to see if it was a place that I
wanted to bother to visit. And, I guess I liked what I learned about it so I decided I
wanted to visit. And I guess just even going there and hearing about the
academics, the -- it really grabbed me, I think, and I felt that it was really a place
that I would thrive in.

The distinction between in-state and out-of-state students with respect to the issue
of exposure is important in several respects. Comparing the comments of the two groups,
more often than not, the out-of-state students who applied to W&M were less committed
to choosing the College than were their in-state peers. This appeared so for several
reasons: 1) the out-of-state group applied to more schools and they were relatively less
familiar with W&M than were their in-state peers; 2) consequently, the out-of-state
students generally had a number of institutional options that required further
investigation. Many out-of-state students simply did not have enough time to fully
investigate all of the various options so some of the schools they applied to (including
W&M) were dropped from their preliminary short list out of necessity. Thus, 3) of those
schools that did make their final decision list, many students simply were not able to
make that critical visit to campus; if they did visit, it was often only once or the visit
occurred at a time when it was less informative, that is summer or during the holiday
break. Thus, through the college search process, out-of-state students had a greater
number of exit points at which an institution could simply fall out of consideration due
primarily to constraints of time and distance. Thus, out of-state students had more
institutional choices and less familiarity with W&M, which resulted in a lower yield rate for this group of applicants.

Clearly, exposure is essential in the image formation process because it provides students with an opportunity to learn more about the institution. The concept of exposure demonstrates that image-making is an ongoing process and as students collect new information about an institution, their perceptions are (in most cases) modified. Participants’ comments revealed that images, in the form of multiple messages, helped to create perception and subsequently, individual reality. This suggests that institutional image is important in developing an understanding of students’ enrollment decisions. Considering this, the current study investigated prospective students’ images of W&M in order to trace the impact of these images on their college choices.

Institutional Images of William and Mary

Ragan and McMillan (1989) suggest that at the heart of the rhetoric circulated by small liberal arts schools is the notion that these schools can be “all things to all people” (p. 689). Their research suggests that small liberal arts colleges engage in a sort of rhetorical antithesis whereby the institutions posit themselves as balanced places that are intimate yet worldly, exclusive but inclusive, academically excellent but socially compelling, have faculty who are accomplished yet available, and academics that are rigorous but manageable. Indeed, the participants’ observations of W&M (and the other liberal arts schools they considered) seemed to personify this very conundrum. Similar to Ragan and McMillan’s description, nearly half of the respondents identified W&M as a place that offered the best of both worlds, as a place of balance and moderation:
Balance is important to me and I think W&M really stressed that a lot. And that’s – that was kind of the biggest criteria. I wanted to find that happy medium between you know, killing myself [due to an overwhelming academic workload] and just going to a party school and I think William and Mary will offer me that [balance].

Indeed, for many high-achieving students, the notion of balance that W&M projects in its admissions literature was tremendously appealing:

[The most attractive aspect of W&M is] the emphasis they place on balance in your life. [O]ne thing that you learn at William & Mary is how to balance schoolwork with extracurricular activities, and what you want with what you need, that kind of thing. And I feel like that’s something that I definitely need to learn wherever I go, but [I think] that people actually learn it, and they practice it at William & Mary.

Interestingly, W&M promotes the theme of “a life in balance” in their admission literature suggesting that the College offers students an opportunity to growth both academically and socially through classroom experiences and extracurricular endeavors. This portrayal of the College as promoting a balanced life was well-received by those interviewed, and was particularly salient for entrants to the College.

W&M appeared as balanced in other ways as well. Participants saw it as both intimate and worldly and as a place large enough to accommodate variety and difference yet also small enough to foster an intimate and nurturing community:

[W&M] seemed very open, all different types of activities as well, cultural and musical and athletic as well, and even just seeing how the school spirit with
sports… it really seemed that it was united as a campus, but also diverse. It felt like everyone was kind of different in some ways and that was really good to see but everyone kind of came together to do things too.

Although the great majority of the respondents felt well-prepared academically, two students felt that the academics at W&M were overly-rigorous and this impression proved detrimental to their feelings regarding the College:

[I]t seemed like when I talked to more people [I got the impression that] everyone really worked hard [at W&M]…. I don’t want to say it was necessarily a bad thing, but it was just something where I probably wouldn’t have felt as comfortable going [to W&M] under those academic circumstances.

Conversely, for four of the students, the College’s strenuous academics proved attractive:

One thing that sort of scared me is they emphasize a certain point: rigorous academics… but it as much as this scared me, it was the thing that drew me there because I wanted a place like that where I would be really challenged.

In several cases, students were drawn to W&M because they perceived it to have a campus social life that involved activities outside of the typical college party scene. Several students even described W&M as a sort of refuge where they could focus on academics and would be somewhat isolated from certain social pressures:

People kind of told me William & Mary is, you know, the place where no one stops studying, and all that stuff. And the students are like, oh, Sunday’s our holy day, you know, that’s when everyone’s inside studying. So I like what I heard more about William & Mary not being a school where there were a lot of parties.
and stuff like that, and trouble making, and they place a great emphasis on academics. I really like that. ... I just don’t agree with the stuff that goes on at other places with drinking and all and I was happy that William and Mary is a place where that stuff isn’t really going on a lot and where it’s OK to study and you won’t be ostracized if you chose not to do those things.

For a handful of participants, W&M’s academically-focused campus life gave rise to subsequent assumptions of W&M as having a less than fulfilling social environment:

I kind of got a lot of grief for applying there, because my friends said, “Oh, that’s just a nerd school; you’re not going to have any fun.”

These varied images of W&M’s campus social life clearly illustrate Wilson’s (1999) notion that, depending on the perspective of the viewer, an image can be both an asset and a liability. More specifically, some who viewed W&M as having a more somber campus life felt that the environment was less stimulating than they would have preferred. For others, this same image of a studious institution was attractive to students seeking a school with a less prominent party atmosphere.

The multidimensional aspect of image is also illustrated in the participants’ responses to the College’s relationship with Colonial Williamsburg. Typically, W&M’s rich history and heritage were attractive features:

I just remember it [W&M] had a lot of history to it. ...[W]e walked through Colonial Williamsburg to get to it... and I was just, you know, wow, this is really a really neat place, and I mean, it would be a special place to go to.

However, for a very small group of students, such as this in-state non-entrant, the College’s connection with Colonial Williamsburg was viewed as a deterrent:
[W&M] seems like it’s too close to the tourism industry, because like you have the campus and then you have Duke of Gloucester Street and the major tourism facets down there. … So, I guess the tourism was the biggest deterrence for me. …[Y]ou have these tourists just walking around the campus, it just seemed like it was too public. I mean, you really couldn’t have that much privacy down there in your dormitory.

At the macro-level, William and Mary seems to attract a certain segment of the college-aged population, and for this group the College meets a variety of seemingly contradictory needs. For some, W&M represented a major change in location, culture, and social atmosphere, particularly for out-of-state students from the Northeast. Not unremarkably, some of these out-of-staters come to W&M seeking a well-respected, academically rigorous school that is more collegial and less competitive than the Ivy League schools.

William and Mary seems like a well-respected school where my degree will mean something…but I think above all I liked it because it also seemed less intense to me than the other schools I was looking at. I looked at some of the Ivies and I just though that was too much pressure for me…like I wouldn’t have time to do anything else. [W&M] seemed like it would be prestigious without the intensity I felt at like Yale.

Alternatively, for in-state students, William and Mary was often described as “a safe bet” because these students were generally familiar with the school and they type of student it attracts. As well, it was generally closer to home and offered attractive tuition rates for Virginia residents.
William and Mary is a prestigious school and I like that. It was good for me too because I knew a fair amount about the place and the kinds of kids who go there. ...My parents liked it because it was affordable. ...I guess I felt like I couldn’t go wrong by going there.

One school that appeals to different types of students makes for an interesting conglomeration of perspectives and personalities. Overall, the out-of-state students were generally risk-taking disparity-seekers who sought opportunities for growth in a high-touch environment. Alternatively, the in-state students generally preferred safer, high-touch environments where there would be other students who were similar to them. However, when considered as a whole, both groups of entrants to W&M shared a common interest in a small, high-touch environment. As this student explains, W&M appears to be a place full of community spirit and mutuality that was enticing to all applicants:

[W&M] seemed like, more personal. ...It seems like everyone really gets along there... it’s a nice college community. Everybody just seemed really nice and happy to be there, and it was just kind of a nice place to be. ...I really liked the sense of community spirit there. I felt like I could share something with people like that.

For one woman, W&M’s strong sense of community spirit became the benchmark by which she measured all other institutions:

I always felt that a sense of community was there [at W&M]. ... [T]hat was important and so that was the model college for me, and everything else I kind of based off of that.
Above all, this notion of community seemed to reverberate through my conversations with the students. Aside from its academic reputation, overwhelmingly, students seemed to find this “small town feeling” to be W&M’s greatest asset.

Overall, the students in this study felt that W&M was a prestigious, well-respected, academically challenging place full of well-rounded students who are generally open-minded, friendly and concerned with their campus community and the world around them. In general, respondents were very positive about the College and its students. In fact, many who did not choose the College still felt that W&M was an excellent school and that it was, if not the best option for them, still a very attractive choice:

I really think that William & Mary was really, it was a special place, and I think the people there were special, and I – you’ve got to say no to someplace and you’ve got to say yes to one, and it’s a hard decision. …there wasn’t anything I didn’t like about William and Mary. There was just something about Notre Dame that fit with me a little better. It was just one of those tough choices that you have to make.

As this student explained, W&M was a very fine choice but perhaps not the best choice for him. His comments reflect the predicament of many of the study participants in that most had several attractive options and their task was to determine which one would be the best choice overall. This begs the question, how did these students come to understand the differences in the schools they considered? Put simply, in order to make active choices, the students in this study had to interact with the institutions they were considering in some real and meaningful way. These interactions, or exposures, were
critical to their image formation and subsequently, to their college choices. Thus, exposure emerged as important in the image formation process because it was the vehicle by which students came to know the institution and to form or modify their images. However, the student narratives also suggest that exposure was important because it allowed the student to assess his/her potential fit within the institution.

Fit

As applied to the college selection dilemma, person-environment fit theory suggests that students choose their institutions based largely upon their assumptions about how well they will fit within the context of an institution. More specifically, this application suggests that students will ultimately select institutions where they perceive a match between the attributes of the institution and their own personal attributes and preferences. However, many of these personal and institutional attributes are intangible and can not be definitively assessed or measured. Many times these illusive and hidden attributes of institutional life are only revealed when the individual is immersed in the environment. Thus, while aspects of self and place are often difficult to observe, these intangible attributes are what make a place distinctive and unique.

For the student in this study, exposure, or the intersection of self and place, allowed these intangibles to be revealed. As these students were exposed to the institution, they learned about it-- about its values, its preferences, its people and its history. These elements of campus character are the things students used to help them to construct an image of the place and, more importantly, to conduct fit assessments to gage their fit within this place. When asked about the cues that allowed him to determine if he
would fit in at a school, this student explained that he focused on the current student body:

I’d probably say the people, just who they are, what they’re like, whether or not it’s a party atmosphere, although I guess it’s kind of hard to discern that in the middle of the day on a weekday, but – I guess the people is the main thing. Just looking at them and seeing if they look like people I’d like to be around. I guess by watching them you can kind of see what they’re into, what they like to do, what they care about. I guess that was mainly what I looked at because I figured the school would be kind of like a representation of the students who go there. Also, just looking at the buildings and the campus and mostly just seeing if I would really feel comfortable at a place like this. If I though I would fit in there.

The term fit is used in this study to describe an individual’s perceived level of correspondence with the environment. In this sense, fit is an adjective that describes the student’s own self-constructed response to an environment. As fit is an entirely subjective construct that is created and defined by the perceiver, it can have multiple meanings. As applied, what one student needs in order to feel a sense of fit with his or her environment may be very different from what another student may need.

_Cognitive versus Affective Fit_

Litten (1991) suggests that “participants in the search process appear to be influenced by two kinds of considerations: academic/intellectual (e.g., academic program, financial considerations) and pragmatic (e.g., considerations of career, social status, and happiness)” (p. 62). Moreover, Reynolds (1980-81) asserts that the college selection process includes a rational or cognitive component followed by more affective
considerations about the prospects of life as a student at a particular school. This parallels the college choice model of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) whereby students first evaluate institutions according to reasoned criteria of generally quantifiable measures. This process of assessment is then followed by the ultimate choice of a college “based on an “emotional, gut reaction” to the campus visit (Hayes, 1989, p. 23). Mirroring this concept of cognitive and academic/intellectual fit assessments followed by affective or pragmatic evaluations, I have adopted the terms cognitive fit and affective fit to describe the various types of fit these students experienced.

As the term fit can be applied in a number of ways, it was important to be specific about the type of fit described by the participants. Thus, cognitive fit in this study is used to describe instances when an institution met the student’s academic, or task oriented needs, such as the case when a school provides a student with financial aid or offers a specific academic program. Alternatively, affective fit describes the more subjective response a student had to a campus. In this dimension, fit pertained to the degree to which the institution matches the psychological needs of the student (i.e., safety, risk, growth, feeling comfortable, feeling at home).

Affective Fit

Litten (1991) suggests that the final college selection decision appears to be grounded in a sort of “holistic pragmatism,” where the selection of an institution is based “as much on a feeling of well-being...as on any rational calculation of costs and benefits or systematic ratings of institutional characteristics” (p. 63). The students whom I interviewed described a number of important factors they considered when making their decision but, as this African American female planning to attend Williams College
explained, feeling comfortable and fitting in on their chosen campus was almost always near the top of their lists:

I guess the first thing I was looking for was where I would get the best education... that was definitely number one for me. But afterwards, I also - it was also important for me to pick a place that I would be happy in... It’s about am I going to be really happy here and am I going to feel comfortable? So, that also was part of my decision, and I felt that at Williams, I would have both of those things.

The students approached the college choice process with varying degrees of knowledge about the institutions they were considering. Most crafted a preliminary list of potential schools with which they were familiar and that met their basic criteria. At this point, their fit factors were cognitive and based largely on academic/intellectual considerations such as the existence of potential programs of study, cost, admissions requirements, and academic reputation. However, as the search process continued, their criteria became more discriminative and they began to consider more pragmatic, affective concerns such as the quality of life on a particular campus.

As mentioned previously, affective fit pertains largely to the student’s subjective response to the institution. In this study, affective fit encompasses two main threads: 1) the perception that a particular environment will meet a student’s psychological needs, or the evaluative emotional thread and 2) the subjective, emotional response a student has (or fails to have) when visiting a particular campus, or the sentimental thread. Although these two threads may seem very different, upon closer examination, they are closely related. As this student’s comments demonstrate, when a student feels that an institution
can meet his or her psychological needs (the *evaluative emotional thread*), he or she is more likely to feel comfortable or at home on a particular campus (*the sentimental thread*).

I guess with William and Mary, I just kind of felt like it was a good school for me on a couple if different levels. It was a good school and close to home which was important to me. I knew other people going there and I was pretty familiar with the school and the area from having been there before. So, it kind of met all the things I was looking for in terms of size and academics and location. Plus, I thought the school and the students there were really like me. I could see myself with these people, going around town in Williamsburg, sitting in the Sunken Gardens -- I guess it all felt comfortable. I guess you could say William and Mary felt like it was my home and at other places, I felt kind of more like an outsider.

The fit assessment, which incorporates the students' subjective, or sentimental response, to the place, is based largely on the student's impressions of how well he/she will fit in with the other students at the school. Exposure is critical to the student's ability to conduct such fit assessments. This male student from Virginia described his sentimental response while visiting the University of Richmond:

[W]hat made me decide is when I went up [to University of Richmond] for the scholarship interviews, and I was able to meet with some of the various people that were up there, the faculty and students and such...It wasn’t really anything specific that they told me, but it’s more of the general feeling I just had from interacting with some of the students and the faculty... and looking around the
campus at the other people there and what they were interested in. I guess mainly
I just felt like there was a good fit for me. I felt like I could be a part of this place
and these people. I guess it’s one of the things I can’t quite explain because it
wasn’t something objective; it’s something very subjective that, um --I’m not
to entirely sure why. But it was an overall feeling I got from the entire interview
experience that helped solidify the University of Richmond.

This sentimental thread of affective fit encompasses two distinct emotional
responses. The first, which I termed *visceral synergy*, describes an intense, highly-tactile,
physical and emotional response to a place. Some students described this feeling of
visceral synergy as a “moment of revelation” when they knew that a particular school
was the “right place.” This feeling can be positive, as this student describes:

I guess it’s just the feeling I got when I was down there [at W&M]. It just felt like
the school for me. It was like, where I was supposed to be...it was just a feeling
that overcame me and I knew this was it.

Conversely, visceral synergy can also describe a negative emotional reaction to a place as
in the case of this student:

I don’t exactly know how to put it in words... but it’s just that sort of internal
feeling... I visited Harvard, and I walked on campus, and an hour later, I said,
Dad, I want to leave, I hate this place. It was just a gut feeling inside that you
can’t let go...I just knew this wasn’t the place and I couldn’t get away fast
enough.

Some sort of visceral synergy between person and place, whether positive or negative,
was identified by two-thirds of the participants.
However, not all students experienced a strong emotional reaction to a place. In fact, the second type of emotional response that resides in the sentimental thread is an experience that I have termed the *positive accord*. Compared to *visceral synergy*, the *positive accord* is a less intense emotional response to a place. With *positive accord*, students simply felt “good” or “comfortable” at a particular school, without necessarily feeling a strong physical reaction:

I don’t think I did have’ that feeling’ anywhere. I remember listening to student panels and stuff, and people would ask them why did you end up coming, a lot of them said, well, I just had this feeling, and everyone would nod. And I always kind of felt left out because I never had the feeling...I did feel good about the place and I felt good that I was going there even though I didn’t necessarily have that moment where I knew it was right.

*Fit and Misfit*

A goal of this research was to determine the impact of perceived fit on students’ selection decisions. Since person-environment interactions are complex, it was not surprising that student narratives depicted fit as occurring on a number of levels. Typically, the cognitive fit component was the first consideration. Cognitive fit considerations are usually based on factual aspects of the school and the student’s own objective criteria. When a school did not meet the academic/task-related needs of the student, it was generally removed from consideration at one of many exit points in the initial phases of the choice process. For example, students who desire a school with an engineering program would not have considered W&M past the initial search phase because the College does not offer this program of study.

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Cognitive fit serves as a primary means by which students identify and filter their institutional options. As such, cognitive fit considerations remain important throughout the college choice process but they are most significant during the first half of the decision phase, but arise again in the selection process once admissions offers have been extended. As such, cognitive fit seems to be the *a priori* consideration in college choice because it provides an initial filter as well as an objective selection criteria based on the academic and task-oriented objectives of the student.

Once the campus visits begin, students have a greater opportunity to gage their affective fit with the institutions under consideration. As discussed previously, affective fit has two components, evaluative-emotional and the sentimental thread, which form more coherently during and after visits to the campus. Cognitive and affective fit are both significant elements in the choice process and they complement one another in important ways. The rational criteria derived from cognitive considerations helped students winnow down their list of schools throughout the choice process. After such cognitive filtering, many students, like this non-entrant, relied on affective fit to help them make their final decision:

> Just when I – after going around, I was like, I can completely imagine myself comfortable here for four years. … [I]t was just something that I felt and I was like, this is where I want to go. …It [my final decision] was definitely a balance of both [logic and emotion] because one came before the other. Because when I first was trying to decide, I had no idea like what I was going to do. So I made lists of like pros and cons, and then once I visited the schools, then it was more on like a feeling. Because I narrowed down my visits to schools, basically to the
schools that fit the criteria so then I visited those schools that met my criteria but after the visits, I went on fit and when I was at UVA and I knew it felt right. So, I guess my final decision was based on what felt right.

Affective fit was particularly important for students who were forced to choose from among several attractive options, all of which met their cognitive fit criteria. Having exhausted objective differentiators, many students simply chose the institution where they felt the most comfortable or had experienced the best affective fit. As this student suggests, the *visceral-synergy* he experienced at Notre Dame helped to offset the delicate balance between the two institutions she was considering:

A lot of it [my decision] was kind of logic and looking down and going through strengths and weaknesses of all the places, so I’d say logic probably played the biggest role initially, but then there was the part of the heart. … [T]he majority of it when it came to getting it down to two schools was logic, but what really pushed me over the edge was probably the feeling of the heart, you know, because that’s what’s probably going to be more meaningful – you know, you go through all the numbers and everything, but if you really don’t feel good at a place, then that’s not – you’re not going to be happy for four years. So that’s – I’d say you know, logic took me as far as William & Mary and Notre Dame, and then the feeling was kind of what pushed me over towards Notre Dame.

As the following student reports, even when a strong sense of affective feeling of fit complements other cognitive fit components, the decision can still be difficult. Interestingly, this student, like several others, seemed to somewhat distrust his own intuition. Thus, for some students who feel that one school is a better choice, they may
still doubt that their affective response is sufficient evidence upon which to base their
decision:

Well, I visited both schools back in the fall, just looking at them. And then, this
spring I wanted to go back up to William & Mary... and I was there for a couple
of days, I just kind of knew that this was the place. It wasn’t like any big huge
event, I just kind of knew in my gut this is where I was supposed to be... I would
definitely say [I made my final decision] more with my heart. When I went up
there [W&M], we stayed there for I guess a day and a half. And by the time we
left, I knew that this was probably the place. But I wanted to kind of sleep on it
for a while, and I didn’t want to make the decision based solely on the fact that
that was where I felt the best... I came back [from W&M], and I tried to think of
every reason possible not to go there, and why I should go to Virginia Tech
instead. I came up with a bunch of reasons but it still felt like, in my gut, that I
was supposed to go to William & Mary. So I think I tried to convince myself not
to go there, and I still wanted to go there, so that feeling must have meant
something to me...[My final decision] all boils down to just my heart, I guess.
Because everyone has been telling me, you know, don’t think about it too much,
just let your heart guide you, and I eventually did that, and I think it definitely
turned out for the best. It was hard to trust that though because it kind of, once it
all shook out like, that it seemed almost too easy to just go with a feeling when
there were other reasons why another place might have been better in some ways.

Clearly, affective fit was an important factor in the students’ decision process;
however, the ways that it exerts its efforts on college choice is particularly curious. For
students who experienced a sentimental response to a campus, affective fit was an easily recognizable and overt experience. However, for some (those who fall into the evaluative-emotional category), the affective fit was less evident. Since it relates to personal needs and motivators, which are often subconscious, evaluative-emotional affective fit often influenced admissions decisions in subconscious ways. For example, many students explained that they were seeking an institution where they would find "people like me." Beyond this, most of them did not recognize their need for validation as a discrete driver in their college choice process. In fact, sometimes they only recognized it when they found themselves at a place very dissimilar from themselves:

You know, with [Washington and Lee University], I really liked the school on paper. It seemed like everything I was looking for. But when I visited it kind of all changed in terms of what I thought about it. I guess I just felt like that school, the students there weren't people I would want to spend time with. I didn't really think I was very similar to them. I didn't think that was the kind of place, just based on the students who I saw there, that that was the kind of place where I would feel comfortable. And really, when I visited, I felt really kind of out of place there. I just felt like I couldn't get away from there fast enough. It wasn't a good experience but at the same time, it helped me because when I did visit William and Mary, I was able to appreciate it even more because it felt so different to me from the way W&L felt.

The students' narratives were filled with tales about the search for a place where they felt that they "fit in" with the rest of the student body. As this group of students was particularly talented, it was not surprising to learn that only two students expressed
concerns about fitting in academically. Most were not concerned about fitting in academically since they generally felt well-prepared for college-level work. Somewhat typical of the other students interviewed, this male, out-of-stater demonstrated the strong sense of academic self-efficacy that characterizes many of these students:

It [fitting in academically at W&M] was never much of a concern for me. …I know I can cut it there. I worry more about how I’ll do socially.

However, social fit was of primary importance. Social fit was particularly influential in decision-making when other aspects of the institutions under consideration were equivocal. One Virginian, who struggled to decide between UVA and W&M, found no significant difference between the two schools but he experienced better social fit at W&M:

I got really frustrated, because on paper, there’s really not a whole lot of difference between the two [UVA and W&M] except the population size and the social differences. So I kept looking for more differences between the two… there were plenty of differentiators. It just – I was searching for one that was significant enough to make a large difference in my decision… I found a lot of the little differences, it just they stacked up on both sides of the coin, apples and oranges almost equally attractive. So, I decided that William and Mary would be a better fit socially and since that was the only difference that seemed at all significant to me, I went that direction.

In the social sense, “fitting in” included being similar to the other students, or at least similar enough that growth would still be possible; however, at a deeper level, social fit was also a reflection of students’ personal values. Although very few students
explicitly discussed values as a factor in their college choices, it became clear that where *misfit* occurred between student and institution, significant discrepancies between the values of the prospective student and those of the student body at the school were apparent. One Virginia student who clearly experienced misfit with the University of Richmond explained:

Richmond was a beautiful school, and I knew that they had an excellent reputation, but being on campus, I just did not feel like I fit in, and I thought, these people – I can’t be friends with these people. I just didn’t feel like we really had the same values or we cared about the same things. And I’m sorry, if I had decided to go there, it might have would have worked out fine, but it was just the feeling I had while I was there, that I just wasn’t like the people there. That was a huge contrast to when we visited William & Mary the next day, and I remember, that made it all, you know, all that much better because I had been at Richmond where I felt like I stuck out, and then I was there and I felt like I fit in. Richmond was a perfect example. I thought on paper, it looked so great, and I was like, this is going to be great. And I knew a girl that went there, and she was raving about it, but then after being on campus, it was like, I could never go here. So, visiting the school does make a huge difference.

Generally, misfit evidenced itself to students during their tours or visits to campus. Students who experienced misfit reported having felt “uncomfortable” without really being able to identify specifically why they felt this way. In most cases, when probed, they would report that they felt that they did not “fit in” with the other students—
they felt like an “outsider”. Some did not agree with the views and/or behaviors of the students.

While misfit is the result of values incongruence, the roots of poor fit were even harder to divine. In the case of poor fit, students reported that they did not feel a sense of misfit as much as they simply did not have any emotional reaction to the campus at all; they did not feel like an outsider on the campus nor did they feel “at home” or “comfortable” in the way that they thought they should. Poor fit is different from positive accord in that positive accord implies that while no strong emotional reaction occurred, the student did experience a general sense of well-being and comfort on the campus. With poor fit, there was no emotional reaction, either positive or negative. Ambivalence defined the interaction between the student and the institution. In such cases, students generally decided not to consider the institution further.

Originally, I wanted to identify image factors that contribute to students’ perceptions of fit/misfit at a particular institution. At the outset of this project, I assumed particular image factors of an institution existed that might contribute to a sense of fit/misfit. What I failed to realize is that this violated the very nature of the notion of fit as a self-constructed concept. Since fit is constructed by the perceiver, no definitive list of institutional factors can be constructed that could apply to all. If such a list could be created, this would indicate that there are archetypal institutions and archetypal students that could simply be paired up. The proper type of environment would beg an instant fit. However, because human behavior is complex, such a simple pairing is not possible. Thus, although no set list of institutional attributes that contribute to fit/misfit exists, the
findings suggest that at the very least, personal and institutional values must be similar in order for fit to be realized.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Relationship Among Image, Fit and Choice

Hossler (1984) suggests that the choice of a college is "is interactional, depending on both the attributes of the student and the characteristics of the institutions...in his or her choice set" (p. 32). This interaction between student and institutional characteristics "play[s] a role in students' rating schemes, largely by serving as a criteria for evaluating" the appropriateness of the institution for the individual student (p. 32). Thus, college choice is a function of both self and institution, and is essentially the end result of interactions between these two entities. With such a complicated array of actors (self and institution) and influences (image development and fit), it is important to consider each aspect in relation to the whole so that we may better understand the comprehensive associations between and among these factors (see figure 3). Therefore, this chapter focuses on integrating the various components previous discussed in an effort to answer the final research question—is there a relationship among image, fit, and choice?

Image as Context

Throughout the college search process, students are continually engaged in an image-formation process as they gather and evaluate information about institutions. Since image formation drives the acquaintance process between student and institution, it provides the context for interactions between self and institution; thus, any consideration of self or institution must be viewed as nested against the backdrop of image formation.
Figure 3. Conceptual Map of the Findings

Primary Exposure

Cognitive Domain
- **Knowledge**: Student has basic awareness of institutions & their attributes

Affective Domain
- **Reception**: Student's images are stereotypical and one-dimensional, preference for name brand institutions

Primary Exposure

Self

Institution

Comprehension:
- Student begins to understand attributes of institution & self, preferences emerge

Differentiation:
- Student begins to assign value to institutional attributes, intra-institutional comparisons are made

Secondary Exposure

Application & Analysis:
- Student begins to internalize preferences, interactions between self & institution help refine preferences

Projection:
- Student begins to consider self in institutional context

Secondary Exposure

Synthesis:
- Student develops fit assessments based on his/her perception of the interaction between institution & self

Sensation:
- Fit assessments give rise to sentimental responses

Secondary Exposure

Evaluation:
- Student weighs cognitive attributes related to choice

Intuition:
- Student considers sentimental cues and affective fit

College Selection

Fit

- Good fit
- Best fit

Fit

Yes

No
Drawing upon various conceptualizations, this study defines image as an abstract, complex, multidimensional, and fluid conception created by the individual as a result of communication and information processing about an entity, considering that individual’s organizational, cultural, historical and personal contexts (Alvesson, 1990; Enis, 1967; Moffitt, 1994). To begin to depict the relationship among image, fit and choice, one must begin with the basic assumption that image constrains choice to the extent that the perceiver’s image of a college is his/her reality; the institution is what the perceiver understands it to be. In the mind of the perceiver, these institutional images coalesce (to a greater or lesser extent) and yield an impression of a school as a particular kind of place.

Thus, image-making is important on several levels. First, image allows the perceiver to interpret and understand a place according to his/her own perceptual lens. Yet, at a deeper level, this institutional image crafted by the perceiver also interacts with what the perceiver thinks about his or herself.

*Self*

With image as a backdrop, we turn our focus to the sphere of the self. In this study, the general theme of *self* as it relates to college choice is largely a function of personality that impacts both how the student views him/herself and how he/she views the world. During my analysis, I uncovered several prominent factors related to self including students’ college aspirations, social and academic self-efficacy, values, and needs for security and self-definition. More specifically, the students sought places that they imagined would be consistent with their aspirations, abilities, and values as well as places that they felt would meet their needs for security and self-definition. Student narratives revealed that the students’ images of the schools they considered were
conditioned both by their worldview and by their own interpersonal needs and preferences.

The current study suggests that the search for an institution is not as externally-focused as one might imagine. As opposed to simply looking outward to find a school that met their criteria, these students engaged in varying degrees of personal introspection in order to better understand their own needs and desires with respect to their choices. In some ways, the search for a college became a sort of a silent internal dialogue in which each student considered what he/she needed and what they believed the institution would provide. As these students considered their own personalities and preferences, they developed an awareness of the ways that their personal attributes intersected with the institutional attributes of the various institutions under consideration.

_Institution_

With a focus on the affective component of college choice, my questions searched beyond the traditional institutional attributes commonly offered in the literature to uncover other facets of self and place that impacted students’ college choices. This investigation reveals that while traditional institutional attributes are still central to the decision (particularly in the early and middle stages of the choice process), students’ affective responses to the places they considered are a significant influence during the final college decision.

Students came to understand the institutions to which they applied and were accepted through various types of exposure. This exposure allowed them to craft and refine their images of the places. Interestingly, these students often distilled their images of each school into archetypal considerations of campus personality, or campus character.
These initial considerations of campus personality as well as the explicit affective responses they had throughout the choice process interacted with their own self-images, needs and preferences at the end of the college selection process. This interaction between self and institution forms the basis for the third and final sphere, fit.

**Fit**

In this study, I use the term *fit* to describe correspondence between the individual and the environment and more specifically, the intersection of self and institution. As applied, fit describes congruence (or the lack thereof) between student and institution in both the cognitive and the affective domain. In each of these domains, fit functions largely as a gauge whereby students identify poor choices (in which student and institution were incongruent) while also highlighting compatibility.

My analysis of the student-institution fit reveals intricate arrays of interactions that can be traced back on one hand to the role of institutional image (see figure 3). Since students are outsiders to the schools they are considering, they must rely on their own self-constructed images of the schools. Throughout the choice process, students use and revise these images as they are exposed to new information about the institution.

Concomitantly, the interactional nature of the college decision process encourages the student to consider their images of the institution in relation to their self-images. At this nexus of institutional image and self image, is the issue of fit. As students consider themselves in the context of potential institutions, they construct fit assessments, or informal measures of how well the school meets their cognitive and affective needs. These subsequent fit assessments guide students in their final decision.
Each part of this triad of image, fit and choice is significant to the final outcome. Image is important because it represents a conglomeration of the student’s perceptions of the institution. The student then utilizes these images to craft fit assessments, which reflect the individual’s considerations of both self and place. The fit assessments are directly related to choice because they help to identify both good and poor choices with respect to individual and institutional preferences, personalities and values. As well, these fit assessments provide clues as to which institutions may be best for a particular student. Put simply, image forms the content of the knowledge about the institution and fit is the evaluation process whereby this information is judged according to individual needs. The end result of this process is the final college selection.

Figure 3 illustrates the relationship among the various components explored in the current study. I chose spherical cones to depict self, institution and fit in order to convey the progression of students’ thoughts from broad considerations about place and self to a specific college decision. The affective fit cone is layered on top to indicate that the fit determination begins to occur at the nexus of person and place. Exposure is depicted at various points in the process but it should not be viewed as occurring at discrete moments. Rather, exposure is an on-going process that cooperates with the perpetual action of image formation.

At the point when the final college selection is made, the end result is a “yes” to one institution and a “no” to all others. The current research suggests that students choose institutions where they feel that they fit, at least at to some degree. Student narratives suggest that varying degrees of positive fit contribute to an affirmative decision and thus, this is depicted by the three concentric circles of best, good and (plain) fit.
To illustrate how the cognitive and affective domains interact to support decision-making, their development is depicted in dialogue boxes at the right of the diagram. These phases reflect the same basic stages represented in the conceptual framework for this study (see figure 2) only the findings reveal that the process is more complex than depicted in the conceptual framework. Figure 3 presents a modified view of the conceptual framework, which focuses on the application set and choice phases of the college choice process without regard for the activities that occur after the decision is made.

The dialogue boxes at the right on Figure 3 depict that at the first level, the student has a basic awareness of institutions and their attributes (knowledge) but he/she has not yet begun to consider institutions beyond stereotypical images (reception). At this point, the student thinks about colleges in a very one-dimensional way and evidences a preference for name brand institutions because he/she does not perceive institutional uniqueness.

At the second stage, the student begins to understand institutions as complex entities with individual characteristics. Subsequently, the student begins to develop his/her own preferences and criteria (comprehension) and begins to evaluate institutions according to these preferences. At this point, the student also begins to make comparisons between potential institutions based on her/her criteria (differentiation). Stages one and two are characteristic of a student who is engaged in crafting his/her application set. Here, fit issues are still largely cognitive.

In stage three, the student evidences a more advanced understanding of the interplay between self and place. Here, the student begins to internalize his/her
understandings of self and place. The student’s preferences become more refined to reflect this deeper understanding (application and analysis). Concomitantly, the student begins to imagine him/herself as a part of a college community (projection). This level represents the early stages of fit in which the student begins to consider him/herself in the context of the institution. Typically, these projections occur as the result of a campus visit or other exposure whereupon the student had an opportunity to learn a great deal about the institution. This stage brings us into the selection phase depicted in the conceptual framework where the student is considering various options. Affective considerations take on greater prominence at this juncture.

Stages three and four are very closely coupled and in some cases can occur almost simultaneously because the self-projections lead almost immediately to the creation of fit assessments, particularly if the student has a salient exposure event. These fit assessments give rise to sentimental responses (sensation) in the form of visceral synergy or positive accord. Again, these sentimental responses often, but not always, occur during exposure events.

Lastly, the student considers all of the information he/she has gathered throughout the process. Cognitive factors are considered first (evaluation) with affective fit considerations as a supplement. In the final analysis, affective fit (intuition) is important to the decision process as many students begin to fully consider how they really feel about each potential institution. At this point, the student may find that he/she is torn between two or more equally attractive alternatives. In such cases, the student will likely choose the institution where he/she experienced the strongest affective fit.
Although the cognitive and affective choice stages presented above are sequential, they can sometime take place simultaneously. In fact, some of these stages are so closely related, that the boundaries between the stages are often blurred. However, this model should be considered as a conceptual scheme for understanding students' fluid use of cognitive and affective domains as they progress through to an ultimate choice and resolution of the college choice dilemma. Additionally, in order to provide context for the investigation, this model depicts a much larger portion of the choice process than this project has adequately explored. However, this additional background helps to develop the argument more fully and displays it in the context of a much larger process.

The findings of this study help to demonstrate that the action of the college choice process is more complex than what is depicted in my original conceptual framework (see Figure 2). Conceptually, the same issues are still at work but they operate in slightly different ways than originally anticipated. More specifically, image formation remains on-going and both cognitive and affective fit components are present and fluid throughout the choice process as depicted in Figure 3. With cognitive and affective fit, one or the other does tend to exert more or less influence at various points throughout the process; however, both are always operating simultaneously, not discretely as I originally expected. Thus, the original conceptual framework for the study proved to be sound and realistic, but the factors in the model operated somewhat differently than originally anticipated, revealing a much more complex relationship.

Filling Gaps in the Literature on Image, Fit and College Choice

The existence of interrelationships between and among image, fit and choice have been suggested by several researchers (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Maguire & Lay, 1981;
Milligan, 1982; Morey, 1970; Sevier, 1996). However, these authors have not provided a theoretical framework to support their assertions. Where they exist, studies on image and college choice have either tended to treat the later as a singular process or have analyzed image formation or decision making without explicitly comparing the two (Maguire & Lay, 1981). In addition, the bulk of the studies has been largely quantitative and thus have not provided adequate depth to explore the intricate relationships between these concepts.

This study has added to what is known about image-formation, person-environment fit and the college selection decision, with some new findings being added to the knowledge base in each area. Regarding image specifically, the study reveals that exposure is essential to the image formation process because it helps students understand the place and to subsequently assess their potential place within it. Additionally, the results of the current work privilege the role of the perceiver and reemphasize the importance of the individual's perspective as an informant to decision-making.

This research depicts person-environment fit in a very broad way, with both cognitive and affective components. With respect to cognitive/task-related fit and college choice, the current study helps to confirm previous work about the importance of academic reputation, program offerings, financial aid, etc., to students' college choices. However, by focusing on the affective components of college selection, we can now recognize these task-related features of the decision process as a part of a larger scheme. Additionally, by highlighting affective fit and its contributions to the choice process, we have a more balanced way of thinking about the college choice process—one guided also
by personological variables such as self-definition, validation, growth, and personal values.

As a complement to existing research, this project expounds on the interplay between self and environment, adding another piece to the college-choice puzzle. This study clearly reveals that both image and affective fit are important factors in the college choice process. Moreover, the results of this study help us to understand that the college choice process is complex and individual. Thus, qualitative designs such as this allow us to delve more deeply into the subject matter to reveal hidden components of choice that are elusive but also critical to students' choices. By focusing on image and fit as a lens with which we may view college choice, we can see that this process is a deeply human, highly complicated task that incorporates philosophical questions of self that take us far beyond traditional considerations identified in the literature.

Implications for Further Research

As an exploratory study, this project has simply scratched the surface of these three concepts and their relationship to college choice. The current work highlights some promising areas for future research surrounding the interplay between image, fit and college decision-making. While each of these three areas alone constitutes a research specialty in itself, interdisciplinary research provides an opportunity to unify concepts from various fields so that we might piece together the various facets of understanding to create a more complete picture.

In specific, however, this study could be extended through additional interviews with participants after they have matriculated at their respective institutions to determine if they are satisfied with their choices, if their images match the reality of campus life,
and if their fit assessments were correct, etc. Alternatively, affectively-focused college choice research is particularly ripe for longitudinal studies that would follow applicants as they progressed through the choice process and beyond matriculation. Such longitudinal data could help to explain the choice process more holistically.

The findings of this study suggest that an individual's personality affects preferences and decision-making in some very real ways. Some personality traits may exert particular affects on the choice process. A number of personality assessment tools could be administered along with qualitative interviews to help draw clearer patterns between personality and complex decision-making. In particular, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Briggs & Meyers, 1998) is one such tool that could help illuminate such trends in personality and choice structure. This type of design would add an additional dimension to the interview data and might help establish a profile of student preference based on institutional characteristics and personality type.

Last, this study could be extended to include a larger group of students. While qualitative research is not intended to be generalizable beyond the population investigated, findings from a larger study conducted with applicants to a number of institutions would be robust enough to determine if there are any shared patterns among and across institutional and student types. This study revealed that in-state students' choice behavior differed from that of out-of-state students. This suggests that the current study could be conducted with other subgroups of students including first generation college students and students applying to less selective institutions to determine if the findings in this study can also be applied to other groups or if these subgroups maintain their own unique patterns. Additionally, such a study might identify demographic factors

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that significantly impact choice among specific subgroups of institutions and students. Finally, a longitudinal study that traces the development of students' perceptions of institutions would elaborate on what is known about how students form their impressions of a place and how these impressions affect their college choices.

Recommendations for Practice

The college choice decision-making process is multifaceted. Many factors play a role in an individual's choices. However, this study clearly demonstrates the importance of considering alternative factors such as congruence between institutional and individual values, goals and characteristics. Considering this, fit research like the current study has the potential to help students and their families to develop more useful rubrics for evaluating institutions and assessing their own needs and expectations. Instead of evaluating institutional options exclusively in terms of objective institutional qualities and cognitive factors (size, student to faculty ratios, etc.), affective fit research legitimizes students' subjective feelings as valid and significant inputs in the choice process. Such an emphasis on affective fit might help students and their parents to expand their search criteria to include aspects that impact students' happiness and quality of life.

For college admissions professionals, this work suggests that campus visits are crucial to the image formation process. Overnight visits are particularly influential and should be core component of an admission program. Additionally, because images begin as general and become more specific through exposure, information about the campus and its students is essential throughout the choice process, in many varied forms. Students want to know what kinds of people attend a particular institution. Bearing this in mind, schools would do well to showcase their own student bodies using photographs,
student narratives, interviews and student/prospective discussion boards. Any opportunity for a prospective student to connect with a current student provides an opportunity for enhanced understanding that leads to a more informed choice.

The institution is a reflection of it students and in this way, a college’s current student population can be its best sales force. This has implications for institutions attempting to build a critical mass from certain demographic segments of the population. Currently, many institutions are already facing the dilemma of how to attract more minority students when their existing pool is so small. This research suggests that existing minority students must play a role in the recruitment process and they must be willing to speak candidly to prospective students about the institution.

Lastly, the current study suggests that today’s applicant has a much deeper understanding of institutional marketing and they make earnest attempts to learn as much about the schools they are considering as possible. As such, institutions need to assess their marketing efforts to ensure that they are depicting the school in a sincere fashion. As well, institutions need to understand their market and what kinds of students would be interested in their particular college. Through careful market research, colleges can ensure that they are representing themselves accurately to those who will be most responsive to their message.

Lastly, the findings of this study advocate that students and their families, guidance counselors, admissions professionals, and enrollment managers should look beyond traditional criteria when seeking a good “match.” Clearly, the depths of the college choice dilemma are just beginning to be revealed and much territory remains unexplored. However, it is my sincere hope that this work will be the impetus for other
related projects in college choice theory that endeavor to look at this old problem in a new way.

Conclusion

Choosing a college is one of the most significant (and perhaps the first major) decisions a young adult faces. Considering that the majority of the advice students receive from books and ranking guides focuses on a mere handful of institutional characteristics, students have to make this difficult decision with relatively little information. Such publications do a further disservice to students by suggesting that one best school exists or that certain institutional qualities are ideal. Clearly, most students realize that beyond these lists, some aspects of the decision cannot be quantified. It is in these aspects, in these ambiguities of self and place that many students find differences that resonate in their hearts and minds. Poised between hard facts and personal intuition, students must decide what matters most to them for their present and their future.

As an independent college counselor, Reynolds (1981) noted that the students she counsels seemed continually poised between fact and feeling as they attempt to negotiate their college decision:

Choosing college can be viewed as a balancing act. On one side of the scale is the student as thinker: rational, seeking information, eventually becoming well-informed. This is the student as the reader of catalogs and viewbooks, the maker of lists... On the other side of the scale is the student... as the intuitive decider seeking vibes, tensions, feelings that “this must be the right place” (p. 26).
This passage reminds us that although research gives us guidance, the final college decision as the culmination of a lengthy, complex and personal journey that has only begun to be understood.
References


Appendix A: Cover Letter to Potential Participants Planning to Attend W&M

The College of
WILLIAM & MARY

Educational Leadership, Policy & Planning
School of Education
P.O. Box 8795
Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795

Amy S. Greenough, M. Ed.
Doctoral Candidate
E-mail: asgree@wm.edu
Voice: (804)266-8851

May 8, 2003

FIRST_NAME MIDDLE_INITIAL LAST_NAME
STREET1_LINE1
CITY1, STATE1 ZIP1

Dear FIRST_NAME:

Congratulations on completing your college search! No doubt, you are excited to be finished with the selection process and are enjoying the remaining weeks of your senior year. While I know you have lots of things to do, I write to you to ask for your assistance with an important project. My name is Amy Greenough and I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at the College of William and Mary. I am conducting research for my doctoral dissertation about how students make their college choices. I am very interested in speaking with you briefly about your college search process.

You have been randomly selected for participation in this research and your involvement is completely voluntary. However, your participation is extremely valuable and may help future students with their college search. This research project has two very simple parts – a survey (enclosed) and a short phone interview. Please complete the enclosed survey and return it in the envelope provided by May 30, 2003. On your survey, please indicate if you would like to participate in 25-30 minute phone interview with me at your convenience. If you agree to be interviewed, I will contact you to set up a time for the phone interview.

If you are less than 18 years of age, I am required to obtain your parent/guardian’s permission in order for you to participate in any part of this study. If you are currently under 18, please be sure to have your parent/guardian read and sign the blank in section two of the enclosed survey before returning it.

While the information you provide me will greatly inform my study, your identity and participation will remain anonymous. This project was approved by the College of William and Mary Protection of Human Subjects Committee (phone: 757.221.3901) on February 21, 2003 and expires on September 20, 2003. Please contact me at asgree@wm.edu or by phone at 804.266.8851 or Dr. Dorothy Finnegan, my dissertation advisor, at definn@wm.edu or by phone at 757.253.6593 if you have any questions. Thank you in advance for your participation. I look forward to the opportunity to speak with you!

Sincerely,
Amy Greenough
Primary Researcher, Doctoral Candidate

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Appendix B: Cover Letter to Potential Participants Planning to Attend another Institution

The College of

WILLIAM & MARY

Educational Leadership, Policy & Planning
Ed.
School of Education
Candidate
P.O. Box 8795
Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795

Amy S. Greenough, M.
Doctoral

E-mail: asgree@wm.edu
Voice: (804)266-8851

May 8, 2003

FIRST_NAME MIDDLE_INITIAL LAST_NAME
STREET1_LINE1
CITY1, STATE1 ZIP1

Dear FIRST_NAME:

Congratulations on completing your college search! No doubt, you are excited to be finished with the selection process and are enjoying the remaining weeks of your senior year. While I know you have lots of things to do, I write to you to ask for your assistance with an important project. My name is Amy Greenough and I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at the College of William and Mary. I am conducting research for my doctoral dissertation about how students make their college choices. I am very interested in speaking with you briefly about your college search process. Even though you aren’t planning to attend W&M, your views are very important to me because I am focusing on how you made your college decision, regardless of which school you plan to attend.

You have been randomly selected for participation in this research and your involvement is completely voluntary. However, your participation is extremely valuable and may help future students with their college search. This research project has two very simple parts – a survey (enclosed) and a short phone interview. Please complete the enclosed survey and return it in the envelope provided by May 30, 2003. On your survey, please indicate if you would like to participate in 25-30 minute phone interview with me at your convenience. If you agree to be interviewed, I will contact you to set up a time for the phone interview.

If you are less than 18 years of age, I am required to obtain your parent/guardian’s permission in order for you to participate in any part of this study. If you are currently under 18, please be sure to have your parent/guardian read and sign the blank in section two of the enclosed survey before returning it.

While the information you provide me will greatly inform my study, your identity and participation will remain anonymous. This project was approved by the College of William and Mary Protection of Human Subjects Committee (phone: 757.221.3901) on February 21, 2003 and expires on September 20, 2003. Please contact me at asgree@wm.edu or by phone at 804.266.8851 or Dr. Dorothy Finnegan, my dissertation advisor, at definn@wm.edu or by phone at 757.253.6593 if you have any questions.

Sincerely,
Amy Greenough
Primary Researcher, Doctoral Candidate
Appendix Student & Parent Consent Form & Survey

Section I - Student Consent - PLEASE READ AND SIGN BELOW BEFORE COMPLETING

The general nature of this study entitled "In Search of the "Right Place": Institutional Image, Person-Environment Fit and College Choice" conducted by doctoral candidate, Amy Greenough, has been explained to me in a letter. I understand that I will be asked to answer questions about my thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to my college selection process. I further understand that my anonymity will be preserved and that my name will not be associated with any results of this study. I know that I may refuse to answer any question asked and that I may discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

This project was approved by the College of William and Mary Protection of Human Subjects Committee (phone: 757-221-3901) on (2/21/03) and expires on (9/20/03). I am aware that I may report dissatisfaction with any aspect of this experiment to the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee, Dr. Stanton Hoegerman (757-221-2240 or sfhoeg@wm.edu). I am aware that if I am less than 18 years of age, my parent/guardian must also give permission for me to participate in this study (via the consent form below). My signature below signifies my voluntary participation.

STUDENT SIGNATURE __________________________ DATE ____________

Please keep the enclosed copy of the student and parent consent form for your records.

Section II - Parent Consent - PLEASE READ AND SIGN BELOW IF STUDENT IS A MINOR

The general nature of this study entitled "In Search of the "Right Place": Institutional Image, Person-Environment Fit and College Choice" conducted by doctoral candidate, Amy Greenough, has been explained to me and my child in a letter. I understand that as a participant, my child will be asked to answer questions about his/her thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to the college selection process. I further understand that my child's anonymity will be preserved and that his/her name will not be associated with any results of this study. My child may refuse to answer any question asked and may discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

This project was approved by the College of William and Mary Protection of Human Subjects Committee (phone: 757-221-3901) on (2/21/03) and expires on (9/20/03). I am aware that I may report dissatisfaction with any aspect of this experiment to the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee, Dr. Stanton Hoegerman (757-221-2240 or sfhoeg@wm.edu). I am aware that if my child is less than 18 years of age, I must give permission for me to participate in this study. My signature below signifies my voluntary permission for my child to participate.

PARENT/GUARDIAN SIGNATURE __________________________ DATE ____________

Please keep the enclosed copy of the student and parent consent form for your records.

Section III - Survey - TO BE COMPLETED BY STUDENT

Last Name First Nickname Birth date Sex

/ /  / Q M Q F

Preferred Mailing Address - Street City State ZIP Code Preferred Phone No. ( )

Please list all the colleges to which you applied:
1) 2) 3) 4) 5) 6) 7) 8)

Please list only the institutions you seriously considered attending at the time when you made your final college selection (list schools in rank order of preference where 1 = your first choice school, etc.):
1) 2) 3) 4) 5) 6) 7) 8)

Which institution will you attend in fall 2003?

Did you apply to any institution for early decision (either binding or non-binding)? □ Yes □ No

If yes, list any institutions that accepted you under early decision □ 1) □ 2)

If selected, are you willing and able to participate in one 25-30 minute phone interview with the researcher at your convenience (phone call made at researcher's expense)? □ Yes □ No

If Yes I can be reached by phone at (_____________) Email _______________________________________

If you wish to be interviewed, please be sure to read and sign the consent information above and return this form via the envelope provided by May 30, 2003. Please remember that if you are less than 18 years of age, your parent/guardian must also sign in the space provided above for your responses to be considered. In several days, I will be contacting you by phone or email to set up an interview appointment. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed! I look forward to talking with you soon.

If No If you do not wish to be interviewed but would like your survey responses included in the study, please read and sign the consent information above and return this form via the envelope provided by May 30, 2003. Please remember that if you are less than 18 years of age, your parent/guardian must also sign in the space provided above for your responses to be considered. Thank you for your time!
Appendix D: Participant Interview Protocol Outline

"I wanted to talk with you today about how you made your college selection. I went through this process myself a few years ago and my own experiences caused me to want to learn more about how other students chose their schools. Please know that what you tell me today is very important to me and to our knowledge about the experiences of college applicants. I really appreciate your time.

So, in the next half-hour I hope you'll feel comfortable sharing with me your honest thoughts and feelings about the college selection process. Although I'm a graduate student at W&M, this research isn't about W&M so please feel free to share whatever thoughts or feelings you may have about W&M and other colleges you considered. Remember that I am also required to keep your comments anonymous and confidential so don't be afraid to say whatever's on your mind. To keep your comments confidential, I will assign you a number that I will use on your interview transcript so your comments cannot be identified by name.

I am going to be asking you some specific questions but feel free to answer me with whatever thoughts come to your mind. In particular, I'm going to ask you how you made your college choice, and specifically about what aspects you considered while making this choice. I'll also ask you to share your general impressions of the colleges you seriously considered. You told me some of these things on the survey you completed so I am going to refer back to your answers a little as we talk. Since your comments are an important part of my research, I would like to tape our conversation so that I can refer back to it. If you allow me to tape our conversation, after we talk, I will type up what we both said and I will mail/email a copy of the transcript from our conversation to you. You can read it and let me know if there are any misunderstandings or inaccuracies. So, do I have your permission to tape this interview?"

START TAPE NOW IF PERMITTED AND STATE THAT THIS TAPE IS A CONSENTED INTERVIEW WITH

Participant Number: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________

Email Address for Receipt of Interview Transcript: ____________________________

Age (verify from survey): ________
Religious Affiliation (as described by participant): _______________________

Ethnicity (as described by participant)

____________________________________

Hometown Size/Type (rural, urban, suburban/large, medium, small):

____________________________________

Estimated household income (as described by participant):

____________________________________

Highest level of education obtained by:

Father: ____________________________  Mother: ____________________________

____________________________________

Schools to which student applied (verify from survey):

1 __________________________________________

2 __________________________________________

3 __________________________________________

4 __________________________________________

5 __________________________________________

6 __________________________________________

7 __________________________________________

8 __________________________________________

Schools at which student was accepted (verify from survey):

1 __________________________________________

2 __________________________________________

3 __________________________________________

4 __________________________________________

5 __________________________________________

6 __________________________________________

7 __________________________________________

8 __________________________________________

* Could you tell me about why you ranked the schools that way?
  - Note important elements and key image factors mentioned
  - Was first choice school the one student plans to attend- if not why?
• What was your approach to looking at colleges?
  - Probes?
  - Did you winnow down a short list of colleges to which you applied from a longer one? How? Why?
  - Important institutional elements considered?

• What kind of a college were you looking for?
  - Elements? Why were those elements important to you?
  - What factors influenced you to look for a school with those features?

• What was your overall impression of W&M when you started looking at schools?
  - What kinds of things or people helped you develop your initial impressions of W&M?

• What were your sources of information about W&M (check all that apply):
  _____ Campus tour (formal/informal) _____ Viewbook/brochure
  _____ University web site _____ Guidance counselor
  _____ Guidebooks _____ Rankings guides
  _____ W&M Alumnus _____
  Parents/siblings/relative
  _____ Other _______________________

• Of the sources above, which do you think were most influential in your decision to attend/not to attend W&M?
  1) ______________________ 2) ______________________
  3) ______________________
  - Why do you say that?

• Did your first impressions of W&M change at all during your college search process?
  - If so how/why?

• If not attending W&M, what were your initial impressions of the school you will attend?
  - What kinds of things helped you develop those first impressions?
  - Did your view of that school change at all during the selection process?
    If so, why, how?
• Tell me about how you made the final decision about which school you would attend?
  - Which schools were serious contenders at the very end?
  - What kinds of things did you consider when making this final decision?

• When you were trying to decide where to go, did you imagine what life would be like as a student at the various schools you were considering? Note image elements/factors
  - How did you imagine life would be at W&M?
  - How did you imagine life would be at the school you chose?
  - Did you see yourself fitting in or not? Why?
  - In making your final decision, how much consideration did you give to the social opportunities at each school?
  - What did you think about how you would fit in academically?

• What things really appealed to you about the school you will attend?
  - What about the school(s) that you eliminated?

• What things did not appeal to you about the school you will attend?
  - What about the school(s) that you eliminated?

• So, given everything you've told me, why do you think you choose to attend W&M/other school?
Appendix E: Follow-up Email to Interview Volunteers

Dear FIRST_NAME,

Hello! Thanks for returning the survey I sent you regarding your college choice process. I am so glad that you’re willing to talk with me!!! I’d like to set up a time to call you at your convenience. Our conversation should take about 30 minutes.

Please reply to this email and let me know when might be a good time to call you next week. It would be really great if you could give me a few choices of days/times to call you. I can call you just about any time Monday (5/19) – Thursday (5/22). If next week isn’t good for you, let me know what day and time you’d prefer on the following week. Once I hear back from you about when you’d like me to call you, I’ll email you back to confirm a day and time.

Since I don’t know how often you check your email, if I don’t hear back from you by Monday I’ll give you a call at the number you listed on the survey to set up an appointment to talk. Once we confirm an interview time and date, I’ll give you a reminder call/email that day before we’re schedule to chat.

Thanks so very much! I really appreciate your help and I look forward to talking with you.
- Amy

Amy S. Greenough
Doctoral Researcher
College of William and Mary
804.266.8851 (home)
asgreen@wm.edu
Appendix F: Email to Students who Failed to Return a Survey by May 31, 2003

Dear FIRST_NAME,

Hi! My name is Amy Greenough and I am a doctoral student at the College of William and Mary. Recently, I sent you a letter asking you to help me out with my doctoral dissertation by completing a short survey and interview. I realize you're very busy but I want you to know that your input is very important to me and I would really appreciate the opportunity to speak with you about how you made your college decision.

If you are willing to help me out, please fill out the survey and return it to me in the envelope provided by May 30th. If you indicate on your survey that you are willing to be interviewed, I will email and/or call you promptly to set up a time to talk for about 30 minutes. I know it’s the end of your senior year and you have a lot to do so I am glad to interview you at a time that is convenient for you.

If you have any questions or if you need another copy of the survey, please reply to this email. If you have already returned your survey, please disregard this email.

THANKS! - Amy

Amy S. Greenough
Doctoral Researcher
College of William and Mary
204.266.8851 (home)
ags@wm.edu
# Appendix G: Code List and Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACAD OPPS</td>
<td>Academic opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACAD CAMPUS</td>
<td>Academic campus life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFFECT EFF</td>
<td>Affective efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAMPUS CHAR</td>
<td>Campus character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHOICE</td>
<td>College choice factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COG EFFICA</td>
<td>Cognitive efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLL ASPIR</td>
<td>College aspirations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>College expectations</td>
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Appendix H: School of Education Internal Review Committee Permission Notification

From: Denise Ridley-Hinrichs <drridl@wm.edu>
To: asgree@wm.edu, Finnegan Dorothy
Subject: SOE Committee Approval of Exemption for #2003004
Copies to: Ward Thomas
Date sent: Tue, 25 Feb 2003 12:28:57 -0500

Dear Ms. Greenough and Dr. Finnegan:

Your proposal titled "In Search of the "Right Place:" Institutional Image, Person-Environment Fit and College Choice" has been exempted from formal review by the School of Education Internal Review Committee (SOE IRC) because it falls under one of five exemption categories defined by DHHS Federal Regulations 45CFR 46.101.b.

The approval to conduct this research was granted February 21, 2003 and expires September 20, 2003. You are required to notify Dr. Thomas Ward, Chair of the SOE IRC, and Dr. Stan Hoegerman, Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee, if any issues arise with the participants of this study.

Good luck with your project.
VITA

Amy Stuart Greenough

Birth date: January 14, 1976

Birthplace: Chesapeake, Virginia

Education: 2000 – 2003 The College of William and Mary

Williamsburg, Virginia

Doctorate of Philosophy


Nashville, Tennessee

Master of Education

1994 – 1998 James Madison University

Harrisonburg, Virginia

Bachelor of Science