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University Brand And The Choice Of A College: Understanding The Consumer Decision Framework

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**UNIVERSITY BRAND AND THE CHOICE OF A COLLEGE: UNDERSTANDING THE
CONSUMER DECISION FRAMEWORK**

A Dissertation

Presented to the

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

By

Byron W. Lewis

March 2024

**UNIVERSITY BRAND AND THE CHOICE OF A COLLEGE: UNDERSTANDING THE
CONSUMER DECISION FRAMEWORK**

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family who have supported me and encouraged my education since I was young. I am thankful to my parents, Gary and Nancy Lewis, who sacrificed throughout their lives to provide educational opportunities for me and fostered a love for learning. As a first-generation college student, I am hopeful that the sacrifices made for me by my parents will continue a long line of pursuit for higher education.

I am beyond grateful to my wife, Jennifer, who has supported me and served as a sounding board during my doctoral journey. I have been blessed by her love, sacrifice, and devotion to our family while I was spending many days and nights writing and studying. Thank you for carrying the load during these three years and being patient with my absence from family events. I love you!

Finally, I am thankful for my three children, Jackson, Kate, and Tucker, who regularly asked me why I would voluntarily go back to school. While I know that it seems strange to them now, I am hopeful that there will be an example that they can follow in the future of hard work and perseverance to achieve your goals, both personally and professionally. I love each one of you and am thankful for your support and encouragement during this journey.

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Abstract

As it becomes more difficult to predict enrollment outcomes and the decline in high school graduates' looms on the horizon, the ability of higher education leaders to understand what characteristics of the university brand are most compelling for prospective students is important to ensure enrollment objectives are met. This mixed-methods exploratory case study explored the college choice process of 1st-year students at a faith-based university in the United States using the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016). Through the use of a focus group, online survey, and semi-structured interviews, this study sought to answer questions about the brand characteristics of the schools in the consideration set, the brand characteristics that were most compelling to students, and the evaluation of the case university compared to the other institutions in the choice set. The study revealed that over 75% of respondents had consideration sets ranging from one to five schools, there was considerable diversity in the types of institutions included in the consideration sets, and family connections and word of mouth were identified as the most influential factors in moving from the awareness set to the consideration set. Seven important brand characteristics emerged, which included the faith-based community, affordability, close-knit community in a major city, high quality of chosen major, proximity to home, reputation for producing successful graduates, and optimal campus size. When students evaluated the case university against their choice set, they noted that it had a more authentic faith-based community, a more welcoming community, a more personalized process, a more favorable location, and it was more affordable.

**UNIVERSITY BRAND AND THE CHOICE OF A COLLEGE: UNDERSTANDING THE
CONSUMER DECISION FRAMEWORK**

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

It is common for colleges and universities to face the challenge of balancing competing priorities. At many tuition-dependent universities, competition for resources, enrollment, faculty, and charitable gifts are just a few of the areas that can pose challenges for these institutions that often have regional recognition and modest endowments (Brint, 2022; Dennis et al., 2016; Han, 2014). With stretched budgets and limited resources, institutions seeking to grow enrollment and enhance their market position are reevaluating resource allocation to sustain enrollment and weather demographic changes in uncertain times (Phillips, 2020).

Since the Great Recession of 2008, public concerns about the cost model and quality of instruction have led to questions about the effective delivery of academic programs, student completion rates, and the success of graduates (Crapo, 2021; Kelderman, 2022). As many in the public sphere question the value proposition of the entire higher educational enterprise while remaining unconvinced about the earning power of certain degrees, many institutions are often forced to compete for enrollment without a strongly differentiated value proposition (Boeckenstedt, 2022; Bowman & Bastedo, 2009; Remsburg & Clawson, 2019). For some institutions with thin budget margins and outside of the top 200 as ranked by U.S. News & World Report, this can be a recipe for financial stress (Kim, 2018; Kim & Shim, 2019).

Before the global pandemic which began in 2020, budget challenges were already present at many tuition-dependent institutions and required intense focus for university leaders (Crapo,

2021). During the pandemic, federal money allocated to higher education institutions to mitigate revenue shortfall and support student needs provided these universities a lifeline to weather the financial storm. Now that the impact of the pandemic has lessened and federal relief funds are no longer available to mitigate shortfalls in revenue, institutions that were navigating declining enrollment and demographic changes before the pandemic have returned to strained budgets, declining revenue, and increased costs without any such lifeline. As a result, many higher education institutions, emerging from the pandemic, are struggling to sustain their business models.

According to Crapo (2021), universities in financial trouble had one or more of the following traits: declining enrollment, significant reliance on tuition revenue combined with sizable tuition discounting, modest endowments and investments providing no alternative to tuition discounting for financial aid, and the expense associated with the market shift toward job-ready professional programs as well as majors that could be completed online. Another subset of institutions, looking to capitalize on potential enrollment opportunities, have taken on debt, in some cases a significant amount of debt, to enhance existing campus facilities, build new buildings, or support additional programming that would attract additional enrollment (Bauer-Wolf, 2023; Seltzer, 2021). Due to the complications arising from the pandemic, enrollment projections at some institutions did not materialize and the increased debt created less margin in operating budgets as anticipated revenue was not enough to cover expenses. As a result, institutions dealing with this challenge typically resort to budget cuts either across the board or in more targeted areas, but regardless of the strategy for cost-cutting, these decisions have the potential to significantly impact these institutions negatively (Brint, 2022).

While these difficulties pose real threats to the financial sustainability of some institutions, enrollment and marketing leaders are focused on communicating a strong value proposition to regain the respect of a public skeptical of the real value of a college degree and in particular, the perception that a private college degree is unattainable (Brint, 2022; Crapo, 2021; Hall, 2019). From the perspective of enrollment managers and marketing directors, distinction and differentiation in the marketplace are the desired goals, as they seek to clarify institutional identity and develop a strong brand. Cutting through the noise of almost every university touting groundbreaking research, wildly successful alumni, a rich tradition of excellence and strong rankings is a monumental task (Bauer-Wolf, 2022; Harris, 2009). Intense competition exists among these universities for the best and brightest students, causing some institutions to operate more like Fortune 500 organizations, focused intently on metrics and market share (Bunzel, 2007; Harrison-Walker, 2010; Remsburg & Clawson, 2019; Rose et al., 2017). To differentiate themselves in the marketplace and achieve desired enrollment goals, these institutions also face significant headwinds from flagship public universities who look to out-of-state students to generate tuition revenue along with more selective private institutions that have well-developed brands, greater selectivity, and larger endowments (Jaquette et al., 2016).

For these moderately selective institutions, a lack of sustained development in a market can cause enrollment to plateau or decline. To compound the problem, institutional competitors could have a more consistent and tested strategy for market development which can also affect the number and quality of enrolled students in the 1st-year class (Jaquette et al., 2016; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2009). As institutions seek to grow their market share, the competition for students can be difficult to overcome without a significant increase in resource allocation toward marketing and brand development.

With so many higher education institutions focused on recruiting the best and brightest students, many in the public sphere assume that the best academic institutions are the ones attracting the best academic students. This competitive enrollment environment is characterized by institutions offering attractive merit scholarships, highly regarded honors programs, the most desirable residence halls, and all the other amenities that are expected by many top academic students (Brint, 2022). Institutions seeking to grow their enrollment or increase their market share seek to differentiate themselves from competitors so that they can attract students who are better aligned with the mission, vision, and values of the university (Judson et al., 2009). Doing so in this hyper-competitive environment can often cause institutions to lose track of their brand identity, their mission, and their values.

One opportunity to improve institutional yield efforts is to evaluate the messaging coming from the university to ensure it is aligned with the mission and vision (Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Orosy & Kilgore, 2020; Toma et al., 2005). Higher education leaders tasked with communicating and messaging to potential students should become more adept at positioning the institution in the marketplace to contrast with other competitors. Brands that are indistinguishable from others can confuse the marketplace, resulting in enrollment outcomes that do not help the student or the institution. Differentiation in the market is key and it often requires creativity to achieve the right alignment. When this alignment exists, universities are more likely to attract students who fit the institution and will enroll, persist, and graduate (Morphew & Harley, 2006; Toma et al., 2005).

Statement of the Problem

Numerous studies seek to understand buyer behavior in the consumer world. Corporations large and small employ large teams that work solely on understanding buyer

behavior, helping nudge customers toward making a purchase, and selecting their brand over a competitor (Bucklin & Gupta, 1992; Erdem & Keane, 1996; Martin & Bush, 2000). Higher education has been slow, in most cases, to realize the potential benefit of this type of expertise, but even when the benefit is understood, it often comes down to a lack of resources in which to invest in both staff and strategies. Use of brand management techniques by enrollment and marketing leaders can yield positive enrollment outcomes for institutions (Orosy & Kilgore, 2020).

Given this reality, it comes as no surprise that very few studies exist in higher education contexts that focus on understanding how students make decisions about college in the final stages of the process and how the brand impacts that choice. While enrollment leaders have data from the National Student Clearinghouse that can be used to understand where their non-enrollees enrolled, they do not always have the necessary data to understand why students selected their institution over the other brands that were considered. Anecdotal information from individual students may exist and can help alert leaders to brand messages that are compelling, as well as those messages that may have led students to judge an institutional brand negatively. While helpful in providing a place to start, this information is typically not substantial enough that one could ground enrollment and marketing strategies upon it with a sufficient measure of confidence.

Some institutions have well-developed brands that are nationally known, while others have more regional brand awareness. As leaders face this increasing competition and seek to grow regional brand awareness into a national brand, they must be clear about the brand promise they are making to potential stakeholders (Harris, 2009). Questions such as: What value does the institution provide? What valued features of the institution make it distinctive from others? Why

should a prospective student/family choose this institution over the numerous other options? The answers to these questions can help institutions begin the process of differentiation. Facing a competitive environment and a need to differentiate themselves in the marketplace to effectively tell their story, institutions are allocating resources toward their brand development strategies (Judson et al., 2009).

As pressure mounts on enrollment managers to meet headcount and revenue targets, understanding how a student evaluates a college brand within the group of schools being considered has the potential to provide the institution with concrete data to evaluate the messaging strategy, learn about student perceptions as they have interacted with the brand, and understand how the brand is viewed among their constituents. Often, institutional messaging that has been successful in the past may no longer be connecting with the current graduating high school senior population. Messaging that connected with the Millennial Generation may not be connecting with Generation Z who often have different values than the previous generation (Johnson & Sveen, 2020). Knowing the enrollment pressures that many universities face, especially the tuition dependency of most private, 4-year universities with modest endowments, a study like this has the potential to help enrollment and marketing leaders understand their position in the marketplace, positively impact institutional yield rates, and capitalize on the brand themes that resonate most with their students.

The site for this case study is a faith-based institution in the United States in the 1st year of its newly formed strategic plan, looking to grow its undergraduate enrollment by an additional three hundred students. If successful, the total undergraduate enrollment would exceed three thousand students. Students come from 40 states and roughly 35% of the undergraduate population is from outside the state. The undergraduate student body is 72.2% White, 8.6%

Hispanic, 7.1% Black, 3.2% Asian, 3.2% International, and 2.6% two or more races. There are 52 countries represented in the student body and over 200 majors are offered.

The new strategic plan will chart the future growth and trajectory of the university which will include purposeful growth in both the undergraduate and graduate student populations. Planning for additional out-of-state enrollment growth is one of the reasons for this case study as the institution has identified opportunities in certain surrounding out-of-state markets. To achieve this goal over the next 3–5 years, the institution must improve the yield rate of admitted students and do this in the context of fewer graduating high school seniors as well as a continued decline in Caucasian students which has been the traditional majority ethnic demographic for the institution (Grawe, 2018). Though the last three entering 1st-year classes have exceeded 30% of the class from underrepresented populations, it is important to continue the momentum of maintaining enrollment of students from diverse backgrounds. Therefore, this exploratory case study aims to investigate the college decision-making process of high school seniors and their brand choice to positively affect enrollment.

Theoretical Framework

This study will be guided by a framework developed and improved over several years by multiple researchers, specifically, studies by Narayana and Markin (1975), Brisoux and Laroche (1980), Kotler (1994), Turley and LeBlanc (1995), and Stephenson et al. (2016). For Howard and Sheth (1969), who were one of the first teams to propose a theory of buyer behavior, three elements make up buyer brand choice: motives, alternatives, and decision mediators. When applying this theoretical framework to the college selection process, students, are motivated to make a college choice, create a list of possible college brands to consider, and select a college from a smaller group, the choice set, where they will enroll.

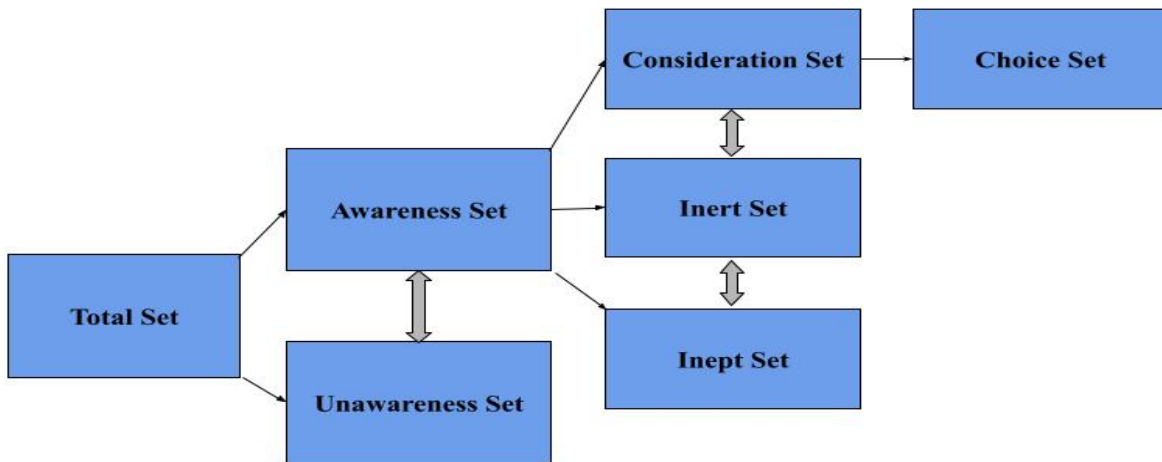
To further explain the framework used in this study and applied to brand choice in higher education, one begins with a total set of colleges. This includes all the colleges and universities that exist across the country and around the world, forming the basis from which a student begins to narrow their choices. Emerging from the total set, there are two groups of colleges. The first is a group of institutions of which the student is aware, either because they have visited or come to know of them in some other way. It may also be simply that they have heard of the name or are familiar with the brand. The second group is a collection of institutions of which the student is unaware. That is, they have no awareness of the institution and therefore are unaware that it exists as a possible choice.

Moving from the awareness set, a student places a brand into three distinct categories. The first is the inept set that exists for brands that a student has judged negatively. There can be a variety of reasons for the brand to be judged negatively, but perhaps most often, as it relates to higher education, is that they have heard something negative about the brand from someone they trust or have had a negative experience themselves. The second is the consideration set from which the student will narrow their list. This is the group of brands that the student is investigating or has already judged positively. The third is the inert set which are college brands a student has not judged and therefore is neutral toward. Institutions in the inert set can move into either the inept set or the consideration set once additional information is acquired.

In the final phase, the choice set emerges from the consideration set. Out of all the brands being considered, the choice set is a smaller group of college brands that the student has decided to consider more deeply and from which the student will make the final choice. This Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) forms the model upon which this study was based. Figure 1 illustrates the framework.

Figure 1

Consumer Decision Framework



Note. Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016). Adapted from works by Narayana and Markin (1975), Brisoux and Laroche (1980), Kotler (1994), and Turley and LeBlanc (1995).

Research Questions

In this mixed-methods, exploratory case study, I investigated how students at the case university made brand choices in the college selection process using the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016). Specifically, I sought to understand the characteristics of colleges in a student’s consideration and choice set along with the brand characteristics that were most important when making a university choice. Knowing that students are typically aware of multiple college brands in the highly connected world in which we live, especially collegiate athletics, it is more impactful to study the consideration set, and the choice set as opposed to the awareness set. It will be important to understand how a college brand moves from awareness to consideration and the final choice. Because this study was situated at a case university that has

growth enrollment goals, understanding the case university as compared to others that were in the consideration set is of particular importance so that the results can inform the messaging emanating from both enrollment and marketing areas. The study focused on three guiding research questions:

1. As first-time, 1st-year incoming freshmen reflect on their university selection process at a university selected for this study, what were the brand characteristics of the institutions in their consideration set?
2. What university brand characteristics did first-time, 1st-year incoming students identify as being most important to them when making the university brand choice?
3. How did first-time, 1st-year incoming students enrolled at the case study university evaluate the university compared to the list of institutions within their choice set?

Significance of the Study

This study addressed a lack of research that deals specifically with understanding the student decision-making process when selecting a university in a Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016). Enrollment leaders spend a sizable portion of time seeking to understand their prospective students more deeply during the application process. They work closely with their team to thoughtfully select students from the annual applicant pool that they believe will both benefit from the university experience they offer, but also significantly contribute to the institutional culture. Beyond the institutional fit, they also must produce a class that meets the financial needs of the institution, the right gender mix, the necessary enrollment in each academic unit, and a host of other institutional priorities. A deeper knowledge of what compels students to choose their institution enhances the ability to shape classes more effectively in the future.

In addition, the study added to the knowledge at the case university as to how students selected the institution from among other brands as they moved from the consideration set to the choice set. The case university is interested in enrollment growth, so attracting larger numbers of new students is one goal, and increasing existing retention rates is another. Currently, the case institution averages approximately 86% for a 1st- to 2nd-year retention rate. The university would like to see that average increase to 90% over the next 5 years. Selecting the right mix of students to admit who are more likely to enroll, retain, graduate, and be notably successful alumni is another significant reason for this study.

As Grawe (2018) noted, the number of high school graduates is expected to decline in the coming years. The decline is not expected to be as pronounced in some regions of the country and the decline in the case institution's home state is modest. Even so, the ability to increase enrollment amidst declining numbers of high school graduates and demographic changes presents a significant headwind for the institution to weather. To be successful, the ability of the case institution to better understand the decision-making process for high school seniors choosing the institution will result in better outcomes and lead to better matches between student and institution (Harvey, 2021).

Definition of Terms

Aspirant Institutions-Defined as a group of institutions selected for comparison and benchmarking by a particular university and typically have characteristics that a particular university aspires to possess at some future point.

Awareness Set-Defined as an early stage of the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016); a group of institutional brands of which the student is aware (Narayana & Markin, 1975).

Brand- Defined as “a valued and differentiating promise that a college, university, or school makes to its most important audiences to meet a need or fulfill an expectation” (Sevier, 2008, p. 4).

Brand Management-Defined as a “set of disciplined processes by which to identify target students, align marketing strategy with the overall mission and goals of the institution, build brand strategies, and activate plans and tactics” (Orosy & Kilgore, 2020, p. 4).

Choice Set-Defined as a final group of institutional brands from which a student will make a final brand decision (Kotler, 1994; Turley & LeBlanc, 1995).

Consideration Set-Defined as a group of institutional brands that a student is seriously considering and from which will come a smaller subset of brands, the choice set, from which a decision is made (Howard & Sheth, 1969).

Generation Z-Defined as those individuals born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019).

Inept Set-Defined as a group of institutional brands that a student has judged negatively and are no longer under consideration (Narayana & Markin, 1975).

Inert Set-Defined as a group of institutional brands about which a student is neutral and if more information is acquired, the brand could be moved to the inept set or consideration set (Narayana & Markin, 1975).

Millennial Generation-Defined as those individuals born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2019).

Peer Institutions-Defined as the group of institutions selected for comparison analysis and benchmarking by a particular institution that typically has common characteristics such as size, scope, and mission.

Total Set-Defined as the total number of institutional brands that exist in the world that might satisfy a student's desire to attend college (Narayana & Markin, 1975).

Unawareness Set-Defined as the early stage of the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016); a group of institutional brands that exist in the world, but the student is unaware of their existence (Narayana & Markin, 1975).

Yield Rate-Defined as a percentage of admission offers made that enrolled at the institution. This is calculated by dividing the number of enrolled students by the number of admission offers made.

Conclusion

With the challenges that are faced by many institutions to enroll the optimal number of students each year, it is important for enrollment leaders to fully understand the reasons that students are deciding to enroll at their universities. The warnings about the impending demographic cliff are also cause for concern as universities will be competing for fewer students in an already competitive marketplace. This study investigated how students perceive the university brand and what elements of the brand are compelling in the admission process. In the next chapter, I explore prior research into how students make choices about college, branding strategies outside of higher education and within higher education, and the use of the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) as applied to higher education contexts.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Several themes emerge when reviewing relevant research about consumer choice behavior related to brand perception as well as university branding and its impact on college choice. Given the intense competition among colleges and universities for a declining college-going population, and the need to understand how prospective students make enrollment-related decisions, higher education leaders often evaluate market-specific data along with enrollment numbers of peer institutions and other regional competitors to determine what level of potential there may be to further develop an existing market or open a new one (Grawe, 2018). As Boeckenstedt (2022) pointed out, most students at public 4-year colleges attend an institution less than an hour away from home, and nearly 70% attend within 2 hours. While the numbers might be slightly different for private 4-year colleges, the premise that institutions would do well to focus on market development closer to home is fundamentally sound especially as the college-going population is expected to decline overall in the coming years (Grawe, 2018; Stolzenberg et al., 2020).

When enrollment leaders determine that institutional peers are outperforming their university in enrollment within a targeted market, it is important to understand the reasons, as well as determine the appropriate resource allocation to develop greater brand awareness and compete for students at a higher level. A 2022 Inside Higher Ed and Hanover Research survey of admission directors revealed that only one-third of admission directors had met their enrollment goals by the traditional May 1 deadline and, 85% of respondents were at least moderately

concerned about meeting their enrollment targets for the year (Jaschik & Lederman, 2022). With the pressure on enrollment leaders to enroll in a 1st-year class that meets institutional goals, understanding how prospective students make decisions about their choice of university becomes an important exercise when trying to predict enrollment outcomes and meet university revenue targets. With this study, guided by the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016), I explored the decision-making behavior of high school seniors as they make their college choices, focusing on the final decision-making process. In addition, I investigated the components of the university brand that are most important to students as they make their final college decision.

This literature review is divided into five principal areas under the umbrella of brand choice in higher education institutions. The first section will examine the theories of buyer behavior in the literature outside of higher education. Until recent years, much of the research on buyer behavior and brand development existed outside higher education circles. As higher education institutions (HEIs) have become more accepting of these theories and their application to the higher education space, more studies have emerged (Dennis et al., 2016; Rutter et al., 2016; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2009). The second section will explore models within higher education related to prospective students and their college choice, followed by the third section which examines studies related to college choice. The fourth section will investigate studies within higher education that use the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) and the fifth and closing section of the literature review will critique the branding-related factors influencing college choice.

Theories of Buyer Behavior

One of the earliest models put forth to document how consumers go about making decisions was from Howard and Sheth (1969), who sought to explain and document the process that a buyer goes through when making a brand purchase decision. Their model described a series of inputs that reflected internal and external stimuli that buyers react to and outputs that ended in a purchase. The constructed model consists of several stages, including the recognition of a problem, a search for information, the evaluation of purchase alternatives, a purchase decision, and an evaluation occurring post-purchase. The authors also noted that consumer behavior is fluid, and it is common to see it change over time, especially because it is influenced by cognitive, affective, and behavioral factors (Howard & Sheth, 1969). A key limitation of the model is that it does not consider brand purchases only made occasionally, focusing instead on systematic purchase decisions.

Howard and Sheth (1969) were also some of the earliest researchers to describe what they referred to as the *evoked set*. Other studies have come to refer to it as the *consideration set*, which is the group of brands judged positively, having been narrowed from the larger group of known brands and from which a purchase decision is made (Narayana & Markin, 1975; Shocker et al., 1991; Turley & LeBlanc, 1995). Typically, a consumer filters the alternative brands using criteria considered to be simple and then more closely scrutinizes the smaller set of brands to make a purchase decision (Shocker et al., 1991).

One of the most significant findings in this study was that the alternatives considered by consumers for purchase did not necessarily belong to the same product class. When considering this from the perspective of college brand selection, it would be like students selecting from among a secular private institution, a public flagship, and a faith-based university. To extend this

to the college decision-making process, students move college brands from the consideration set, those brands being considered by the student, to a final choice of university brand (Howard & Sheth, 1969). Howard and Sheth's (1969) model was to my study of college choice because it was the first to develop and link together many of the concepts upon which the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) is built.

A few years later, Narayana and Markin (1975) built upon the research from Howard and Sheth (1969) with an empirical study that sought to explain how consumers simplified their options when a large number of brand choices exist, specifically in areas like toothpaste, beverages, and canned vegetables. A convenience sample of 74 college students from two marketing classes were asked the same questions about four common consumer product categories representing many brands. They asked them to first list all the brands of which they were aware. Next, they were asked to list all the names of the brands they would consider buying and the reasons for doing so. Finally, they asked them to list the names of the brands that they would never consider buying and the reasons for doing so. Although exploratory in nature, the study revealed that consumers simplify their decision-making by categorizing brands. They tend to consider a few, reject a few, and ignore the rest, having rational and logical reasons for this categorization (Narayana & Markin, 1975).

This concept could certainly be extended to the college choice process as there are thousands of HEIs from which to choose, causing many to struggle to understand the differences between them. Through this research by Narayana and Markin (1975), the concept of an *inert set* and *inept set* in the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) was introduced. In their model, the total set of choices represents all the brands from which to choose. This set is often vast and in need of narrowing in the mind of the consumer and so from that group, two sets

emerge, termed the unaware set and the awareness set. The *unaware set* is just what the term denotes: those brands with which the consumer is unfamiliar. Second, the *awareness set* consists of those brands the consumer holds in their consciousness. In this stage of the framework, the awareness set consists of brands that have not yet been judged positively or negatively, they are brands with which a person is familiar (Narayana & Markin, 1975).

However, from the awareness set, the framework progresses as the consumer moves brands into three categories. First, the inept set consists of those brands judged to be negative by the consumer (Narayana & Markin, 1975). There are a variety of reasons that a brand could be judged negatively, including experience, perceptions shared by trusted others, or a trivial item such as not liking the brand name. Regardless of the rationale, these brands are no longer considered and therefore eliminated. Second, the inert set consists of those brands judged to be neutral by the consumer (Narayana & Markin, 1975). If a brand exists in this category, additional information acquired by the consumer has the potential to move the brand to the inept set or the third set which is the consideration set. The consideration set consists of those few brands judged positively by the buyer and from which a purchase decision is made (Narayana & Markin, 1975).

One of the key concepts related to each of these three sets (inert, inept, and consideration) is that as new information is acquired, brands can move between these distinct categories (Narayana & Markin, 1975). For example, if a consumer encounters a marketing campaign or an endorsement from a trusted friend about a brand in their inept set, it may move in the mind of the consumer from the inept set to the inert set or even the consideration set. It is important to note the opportunity that exists here to position brands in the mind of the consumer. So, new information is constantly moving or solidifying brands in each of the areas of the awareness set.

Narayana and Markin (1975) presented a much fuller picture of the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) in their ability to articulate the various subsets of the awareness set that were worthy of more careful understanding and consideration. However, the study used only college students and limited the categories to consumer products where many brands exist, which may limit conclusions to be drawn.

To build upon these prior studies, Kotler (1994) as well as Turley and LeBlanc (1995) introduced the concept of the choice set, often referred to as the evoked set, which they defined as those very few brands that emerge from the consideration set from which a consumer makes a purchase decision (Howard & Sheth, 1969; Narayana & Markin, 1975). Kotler (1994) was one of the first to describe the choice set in his earlier text on marketing management. Turley and LeBlanc (1995) set out to examine the existing research on the evoked set and create a model that would explain this process. Further, they explained that the consumer decision-making process is a phased approach and that the literature before their study presented the consideration set as more static, whereas they argued it was dynamic. I agree with their conclusion on the dynamic nature of the consideration set as I have seen this first-hand while working with students. According to their model, Turley and LeBlanc (1995) argued that the choice set is where the purchase or non-purchase takes place within the narrowed-down consideration set. Their comprehensive dynamic process model integrated and updated the existing research at the time but did not consider changes in the evoked or choice set over time. It also did not explain what takes place when the process does not result in a purchase decision.

Within this addition to the theory of buyer behavior model, the evaluation of the purchase also takes place (Kotler, 1994; Turley & LeBlanc, 1995). As the evaluation of the purchase occurs, it has a direct impact on the subsequent behavior and the likelihood of whether a

repurchase of that brand will occur. Turley and LeBlanc (1995) expanded prior research conducted by Oliver (1980) to include post-purchase evaluation in the model. Based on his questionnaire sent to a systematic random sampling of 291 residents and 162 students about their feelings on participation in the federal flu vaccination program, Oliver (1980) argued that satisfaction evaluations had a strong influence on both attitudes and purchase behavior. His research determined that satisfaction measures could explain buyers who switch brands or repurchase the same brand. The importance of a positive evaluation of the brand choice cannot be understated as it can create loyal customers who share compelling brand stories with others, becoming positive brand ambassadors in their communities and social circles. According to Kotler (1994), the evaluation of brand choice is important because strong brands are built in this way, both in consumer products and in collegiate brands. Turley and LeBlanc's (1995) contribution to the development of the consumer choice model was to organize and extend prior research and in turn, proposed a more comprehensive Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) by identifying and refining the process consumers use when selecting a brand.

While the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) has developed over time and has been used in a variety of ways to understand consumer decision-making, it has not often been used as a framework to understand college brand choice and prospective student decision-making. Understanding the research that has occurred on consumer decision-making that has refined this framework is important as this will serve as the guiding framework for this study and fill a gap in the literature of understanding college brand choice from this perspective. Next, I will move to a review of literature that explores how students and parents make college choice decisions.

Prospective Student College Choice

Through the years, several studies have been conducted that seek to understand how students and parents make decisions about college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; D. W. Chapman, 1981; R. G. Chapman, 1986; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Kotler, 1976; Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). While most of these studies developed a specific model theorizing how college choice takes place, they each have some similarities with most building upon prior research. The proposed models range from just a few stages to as many as seven stages and most of the studies acknowledge that the various life situations that students are in directly affect how they move through the stages. While the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) that will be used in this study originates from the consumer behavior literature, it is important to examine the different models of college choice that have been proposed over the last 40 years, looking at them in order of development to understand how each sought to improve upon the earlier studies. Some of these models have been discussed in a prior study by Leigh (2019) and I will draw from some of the organization of the material in the next section.

Kotler's Seven-Stage Model of College Choice

Kotler (1976) was one of the first to propose a model of college choice and it centered around seven stages that a student progresses through in the ultimate choice of a college: (a) the decision to attend college, (b) seeking and receiving information about certain colleges, (c) inquiring about specific colleges, (d) submitting the application, (e) the process of admission, (f) choosing a college to attend, and (g) enrollment. He took the stages that most students progress through when choosing a college and developed them into a linear model that would be instructive for his audience. The model was not based on his research but proposed to outline and

describe the process in more detail. Subsequent models have sought to simplify the number of stages (D.W. Chapman, 1981; Litten, 1982). Kotler's (1976) model was very process-driven and linear, working much like a flow chart describing how one moves through the process.

D. W. Chapman's Model of College Choice

D. W. Chapman (1981) took a slightly different approach to a model of college choice by examining existing research and focusing on elements that, in his view, had not received sufficient attention. This concern was centered on the influences affecting prospective students' college choice and he argued that to understand a student's choice of which college to attend, it is necessary to consider both the background and current characteristics of the student, the student's family, and the characteristics of the college (D.W. Chapman, 1981). Within this framework, he noted the influence of the aptitude of the student, recognizing that academic achievement in high school as well as standardized testing played a role in the admission process. Because prospective students have access to data published by HEIs, he argued that it is easier for students to match themselves before the application process with institutions that enroll similarly academically prepared students (D.W. Chapman, 1981). I argue that these highlighted items still hold today, even though D.W. Chapman's (1981) article appeared over 40 years ago.

D.W. Chapman (1981) further suggested significant external factors play a role in the college choice process. Notably, family members and trusted friends assist in shaping how one thinks or feels about a particular college, often recommending an institution with which they are familiar or helping to guide the student in a direction that they believe will be beneficial in years to come (D.W. Chapman, 1981). Other external factors included the recruitment activities executed by HEIs, including marketing and communication, that colleges spend significant amounts of money each year to help enroll students that fit their institutional priorities. Finally,

campus culture, physical location, and desirable academic and extracurricular programming are three additional factors that were deemed influential to a student's choice of college (D.W. Chapman, 1981). Once again, I believe these factors still hold 40 years later, as institutions still spend significant portions of their budgets on marketing and communication and students are still concerned about the campus culture, the physical location, and academic and extracurricular programming. D.W. Chapman's (1981) contribution to the literature was to outline a model that would assist college enrollment teams to better identify pressure and influences as they develop recruitment policies.

Jackson's Three Stage Model

Jackson's (1982) three-stage model of college choice centered on three core areas: preference, exclusion, and evaluation. He reviewed existing literature in light of public policy implications, focusing on the sociological model and the economic model to put forth a combined model that would divide the student choice process into three phases. First, in the preference area of the model, he noted that one of the strongest predictors of a student's aspiration is their high school academic achievement, citing his unpublished doctoral dissertation (Jackson, 1977) that involved research into financial aid and the demand for postsecondary education. If a student has been successful academically during their high school years, they are more likely to desire higher education opportunities than a student who had poor or even modest academic success. Next, a student's socioeconomic status, including the neighborhood in which one lives, the school district where a student is zoned, and a circle of peers influence a student's preference for higher education (Jackson, 1982)

Finally, the student's family background was found to influence a preference for higher education by limiting or enhancing the ability of choices (Jackson, 1982). On the limiting side,

this is often termed undermatching, and defined as a student that may have numerous collegiate options but may be limiting those options given their family's lack of experience with higher education or even a feeling that they would not be a competitive candidate at a highly selective school, especially one where there is a perception of unaffordability. For example, a student at the top of their high school class choosing to attend a community college instead of a 4-year college or university is a classic example of undermatching.

Jackson's (1982) second stage of the model is the process of exclusion, where one begins narrowing the list of colleges to consider. He noted that geography can begin to narrow down the list of available options because of the increased costs of travel or supplemental costs related to being designated an out-of-state student at many public universities. Jackson (1982) introduced the antiquated notion that accurate information about colleges is difficult to gain and although that may have been true in 1982, that certainly would not be the case in 2023. Finally, a student's choice set is dependent on the criteria used to exclude options, which also depend on academic experience and financial circumstances (Jackson, 1982).

Jackson's (1982) final stage of the model is evaluation, where students review their choice set of college options and translate the preferences into a rating system where each option is rated, and a choice is made. He noted the important variables in this stage and the rating system which included college and job attributes, cost, academic experience, and family background. While Jackson (1982) approached this research from a policy framework and to understand public policy implications, there was a lack of data surrounding his work, as he performed more of a systematic analysis. He attempted to detail a process that could be improved by doing more weighing and balancing, with fewer ranking objectives which was different from

the research that came before (Jackson, 1982). On the heels of Jackson's (1982) model, came another model proposed by Litten (1982) that sought to improve upon prior work.

Litten's Stage Process of College Choice

Litten (1982) noted the importance of Jackson's (1982) and D.W. Chapman's (1981) work but found limitations in their models. I agree with his assessment that the model developed by D.W. Chapman (1981) was highly generalized, providing a basic model of influences on college attendance and selection, while Jackson's (1982) lack of data and use of a public policy lens left the reader with a less than solid foundation upon which to build. Litten (1982) aimed to examine existing research on the college choice process and focus on how that process is conducted. He outlined a three-stage model that began with the desire to attend college, followed closely by the decision to attend. The second stage is the investigation of potential options, and the third stage involves the admission process and enrollment. He began by looking at evidence of these aspects of the college selection process: timing of the process, number of options considered, type of information being sought, consideration of college attributes, information media used, and influential persons. After noting these factors, he analyzed group differences by race, sex, ability, parental educational attainment, and geographic location (Litten, 1982).

Notable findings from his study included: females completed college applications earlier than males, White students began the college process earlier than Black students, the timing of processes was important among the various demographic groups, and students who had performed well academically in high school started the formal application process earlier than those who were lower performing students and tended to apply to more colleges than the other groups (Litten, 1982). Although Litten (1982) focused more on the process of college selection and attempting to discern patterns between different students going through the process, his

major contribution was alerting administrators to the differences between groups, advocating against a one-size-fits-all model.

Hossler and Gallagher Three-Phase Model

Building on the work of Jackson (1982) and Litten (1982), Hossler and Gallagher (1987) conducted a review of the literature and proposed a three-stage developmental model of college choice. For them, at each phase of the college choice process, individual and organizational factors combined to produce outcomes, which in turn influenced the student college choice process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The first phase is the predisposition phase where students determine what their aspirations are beyond high school. For those who wish to continue their education beyond high school, they enter the second phase where they gather information about HEIs. At this stage, students develop their choice set, the group of institutions to which students will apply (Jackson, 1982; Kotler, 1994). The third stage is where the choice or decision is made as to which college the student will attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

For Hossler and Gallagher (1987), the importance of background characteristics such as socioeconomic status, parent attitudes, peer influences, and student achievement point to positive influences on a student's decision to attend college. They note that in the first phase of predisposition, individual colleges have little direct influence on college choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). However, I do not agree with their conclusion that colleges provide little influence on student's predisposition in the first phase. In my view, interactions with alumni, athletics, and other outreach activities that colleges and universities perform can help students begin thinking about college as an option and even encourage them at a younger age to become fans of the university, especially in athletics. This view is supported by research in athletics as Harris (2009) in a qualitative study examined the 30-second television spots of 64 institutions

that competed in bowl games during the 2006-2007 football season. Each of these institutions was working to develop their institutional brand and encourage connection to the university. History and tradition were the most common themes in the advertisements, along with showing smiling fans cheering in a football stadium on a fall Saturday (Harris, 2009). Colleges certainly can and do exert influence on a student's predisposition. Perhaps Hossler and Gallagher (1987) would see this as an indirect influence instead of a direct influence, but regardless, many HEIs spend considerable time designing activities to help students become fans at an early age.

Like Litten (1982), Hossler and Gallagher (1987) noted that both higher socioeconomic status and high student achievement promoted strong college attendance patterns. The attitudes of parents and peers likewise influenced enrollment decisions during the predisposition phase. In the second phase, the search phase, the communication strategies used by HEIs to search for prospective students strongly affect the process. Like D.W. Chapman's (1981) model of student choice, these students are searching for information on HEIs and HEIs are searching for students, as they license prospective student names from various sources that are likely to meet their institutional goals.

Finally, in the choice phase, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) noted that this final phase's interactive nature is clearly on display when examining the impact of financial aid and communication strategies. Parents and students are regularly communicating back and forth with colleges during this final stage where choices are being made. Yet, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) noted that in this stage there is a limited impact by higher education leaders as well as government agencies. Some institutions will be removed from consideration by families, leaving institutions little chance of enrolling them. Early impressions are difficult to alter during this final phase, according to Hossler and Gallagher (1987). Overall, the researchers recognized that

federal and state policymakers influence each stage of the college choice process. For example, the degree of funding for state and federal financial aid, investments in public secondary schools, and providing information about HEIs to families are all ways in which state and federal policymakers impact the search process.

Cabrera and La Nasa's Model of College Choice

Moving into the 2000s, Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) reviewed relevant literature that resulted in a three-stage model built upon Hossler and Gallagher (1987), attempting to link each stage together. They formulated the same three phases as Hossler and Gallagher (1987), (a) predisposition, (b) search, and (c) choice but sought to detail the importance of financial aspects of the college search process as well as the involvement of parents throughout the entire process. In the predisposition phase, high-achieving parents who have lofty expectations of their children encourage them toward higher education. In addition, parents who are consistently preparing financially for their child's higher education and talking openly about their preparation can impact the decision to attend in the predisposition stage (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Their contribution of financial aid considerations and socio-economic status were significant toward the college choice model development.

Toutkoushian and Paulsen Five Stage College Choice Model

Toutkoushian and Paulsen (2016) proposed a model that included five stages of college choice. From their economic frame of reference, the stages progressed through (a) predisposition, (b) initial search, (c) application process, (d) admission, and (e) enrollment. There was a very linear process as proposed, and decisions made in earlier stages directly impacted decisions made in later stages. Because their process focused on both the student and institutions involved in the process, they noted that students control the decision-making process

in Stages 1–3 and Stage 5, but that HEIs control decision-making in Stage 4 because they determine the admissibility of students (Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). Now that I have explored the major models proposed in the last 40 years, I move to studies that examine how students have navigated the college choice process and the factors that were influential in the process.

Studies Related to College Choice

Within higher education literature, several researchers have investigated how students make choices about college. Sojkin et al. (2012) examined the factors that influenced Polish business students in their college choice. They studied whether a student chose to attend college, their exploration and decision-making, and whether they were satisfied with their ultimate choice. The study found that family opinion was a principal factor in helping students determine whether to pursue college. Secondly, the search for information and ultimate college choice was influenced by the understanding of opportunities for professional advancement. Finally, social conditions were found to influence the satisfaction level of the choice made (Sojkin et al., 2012). While this study added to the research base, the study of Polish business students was a very narrowly defined group, and therefore difficult to gain significant insight into how prospective undergraduate students in the United States might choose a college. Their findings noted the grim economic conditions and high unemployment that existed during their research and therefore found that Polish students were not convinced that a college education would benefit their future economic opportunities (Sojkin et al., 2012).

Other studies have investigated college choice in various countries. Brown and Mazzarol (2009) explored the impact of university images on Australian students' satisfaction and loyalty to the university. They understood loyalty to include, among other items, a willingness to refer

the university to others. Their findings suggested that student loyalty can be predicted by student satisfaction and that university image is the most influential measure of students' perceived loyalty, value, and satisfaction (Brown & Mazzarol, 2009). Like the limitations in Sojkin et al. (2016), this study came from Australia and focused on one city in that country, providing some limitations for the findings.

Bastedo et al. (2014) found further evidence that the brand image of a university can positively influence students' brand attachment and behavior in a study in the United States. The authors sought to determine whether a president's charismatic leadership positively influenced brand development. It was determined that among religious universities, there was a positive relationship between a president's charismatic leadership that increased brand image, applications for admission, and donor gifts. There was a positive association for religious universities, but not for all private universities, further demonstrating that a strong brand image can positively influence a student's attachment to, and behavior toward the university (Bastedo et al., 2014).

Because the case university for this study is a faith-based institution and one that has experienced a presidential transition in recent years, the findings from Bastedo et al. (2014) are relevant when considering how students become attached to the institutional brand. In summary, the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) has been used in some higher education settings, and where it has been used, it has provided a strong framework for understanding the college decision-making process. The framework provides the best way to understand the consideration set and how students make choices and provides the best opportunity to answer my research questions. The next section will explore this framework being used in higher education studies.

Consumer Decision Framework in Higher Education

There are very few studies that have used the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) in higher education settings. One of the earliest was a study by Laroche et al. (1984) that built upon earlier findings from Brisoux and Laroche (1980). The Brisoux-Laroche brand categorization paradigm included the evoked set (consideration set), hold set, foggy set, and reject set. Brisoux and Laroche (1980) studied a group of 1st-year, Canadian university students enrolled in a junior college business program, handing out questionnaires in ten different classes for 2 weeks. At the conclusion, 392 completed and useable questionnaires were collected. The aim was to understand students' attitudes, access to and availability of information about the university brands, their intention to apply, and their confidence in the evaluation of the universities across the four brand categories. In support of the Brisoux-Laroche brand categorization paradigm, the mean of the four studied categories was higher for the university brands in the consideration set than those in the other three sets, confirming the researcher's hypothesis that those brands that were in the consideration sets would have a higher evaluation than those in the other categories (Laroche et al., 1984). These findings confirmed earlier studies done by Howard and Sheth (1969) and Narayana and Markin (1975).

Rosen et al. (1998a) examined the approaches of high school students to college choice using a brand elimination approach to consumer decision-making. In the first study, the researchers analyzed diaries from 18 high school seniors (11 men and 7 women) related to their activities in choosing a college. These students were from four high schools in the northeastern United States. The second study used information obtained from the first study and previous research to develop a 23-question survey that was administered to 103 1st-year students in an introductory business course in a large northeastern university. They analyzed each stage of the

student decision process and determined that different sources of information are important to students at each stage of the college selection process.

Rosen et al. (1998b) also examined recruitment tools used in business programs from a Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016). They used the consideration set as a framework and elicited responses from 225 college program administrators. Administrators were surveyed to understand the most frequently used recruitment strategies to ensure that the program resided in the prospective student's awareness set. The study's results suggested that targeted recruitment activities aimed at creating early awareness in the process of brand elimination can positively impact enrollment (Rosen et al., 1998b). This finding speaks to the reason so many HEIs begin communicating with prospective students early in their high school career, including the case university in this study.

In a quantitative study, Dawes and Brown (2002) examined the size of the awareness, consideration, and choice sets during the college selection process. A survey of 266 1st-year students from the United Kingdom was deployed to determine whether any of the variables influenced the size of the three sets. Specifically, they looked at age, sex, ethnicity, academic ability, collegiate experience of parents, and the length of the college search process. They found several interesting data points across the sample: the mean awareness set size was 16.84, the consideration set size was 6.01, and the choice set was 3.28. This is consistent with the narrowing hypothesis confirmed in earlier studies as consumers narrow down brand choices in their decision-making process (Howard & Sheth, 1969; Narayana & Markin, 1975; Turley & LeBlanc, 1995).

In a follow-up to the 2002 study, Dawes and Brown (2004) used the same 266-student convenience sample from their previous study in the United Kingdom. These students were

searching for an undergraduate institution, were attending a large “new” university in central England and were interviewed during their first week of attendance so that they could more readily recall their college decision-making process. They analyzed the composition of the consideration and choice sets expressed as a percentage of new universities and old universities within a set. The new vs. old designation was used because the organization of the system in the United Kingdom up until 1992 was divided between universities and polytechnic institutions. After 1992, polytechnic institutions began using the term university in their title. So, for Dawes and Brown (2004) they used the term “old” to refer to those institutions that had university status before 1992 and the term “new” to describe polytechnic institutions.

They discovered that when a student’s father had attended college, there was no impact on the number of old universities in the consideration set, but the choice set did have a smaller number of old universities. If a mother attended college, an impact was not detected on the number of old universities in either set. Further, they found that the three variables of age, ethnic group, and university proximity were the most important in predicting the composition of both the consideration and choice sets (Dawes & Brown, 2004). This study carried out with students living in the United Kingdom, is important for considering the composition of both the consideration and choice sets and fills a literature gap for a specific focus on these two elements of the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016).

Finally, a qualitative study investigated the college selection process using the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) among students in the United States with a focus on the consideration set. Their qualitative study was part of a larger mixed-methods design where students were offered the opportunity to participate in an interview. The researchers interviewed 16 incoming 1st-year undergraduate students and 14 students responded to the

questions via email, for 30 participants at a midwestern public university with about 15,000 total students. Their findings revealed that the university brands in the consideration set ranged from one to eight and were not necessarily the same type of institution, which was consistent with the research done by Dawes and Brown (2004). They also found that the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) can be used to inform college selection decisions and that students tended to decide between three universities, which was also consistent with the findings by Dawes and Brown (2002). Further, they found that friends and relatives acted as decision mediators in the college decision-making process (Stephenson et al., 2016).

The participants in this study detailed the variables that contributed most to their college choice: price, perceptions of important others, size, location, major, and campus environment factors. Of these, the cost influenced the decision-making process as many students noted there were other schools higher on their list, but the cost was a prohibitive factor. Stephenson et al. (2016) also noted that campus visits were a significant part of the college selection process and noted that in the final process, it was the factor that tipped the scales toward the ultimate choice. The findings in this study are consistent with the Dawes and Brown (2002) analysis of the consideration set.

Each of these studies using the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) in higher education settings points to similarities in the consideration and choice sets about composition. They also confirm the earlier findings from Kotler (1994) and Turley and LeBlanc (1995) in distinguishing between the consideration set and the choice set. In the final section of this literature review, I will examine branding in higher education and how it has evolved.

Branding in Higher Education

The practice of brand development in higher education has become much more common in recent years, especially given the need to differentiate the brand in a crowded market (Dennis et al., 2016; Rutter et al, 2016; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2009). Each year, universities compete for students among a crowded field of competitors who often sound like each other, quoting similar statistics, touting faculty who care, and noting alumni who are standouts in their field (Bauer-Wolf, 2022; Harris, 2009). From the perspective of families trying to make college decisions, it is not surprising that confusion exists.

What often happens in situations when the choice between institutions is indistinguishable is that the differentiating factor between choices defaults to an evaluation of net cost. Universities that are consistently competing on cost can face challenging financial models, especially when the competition is fierce (Brint, 2022). Because of factors like these, HEIs have become more attracted to the concepts and ideas of brand development that have been used in the consumer world and specifically in the for-profit business sector. This warming to the idea of brand development while using marketing and advertising techniques to differentiate their educational experience from competitor institutions has become very commonplace as institutions seek to improve their market positions and develop competitive advantages (Bunzel, 2007; Harris, 2009).

Origins of Brand Management

The international company Procter & Gamble was a pioneer in the business strategy of brand management which focused on the specialization and differentiation of products (Schulz, 2012). Focusing on distinguishing the qualities of each brand from the numerous other Procter & Gamble brands allowed for targeting consumer markets with different sets of benefits, thus

avoiding competition between the brands (Schulz, 2012). This created a unique selling proposition that had three main principles. First, the proposition must be clearly stated, so that the customer knows if they purchase this product, they will receive this benefit. Second, it must be unique and express a benefit that competitors do not, cannot, or will not offer. Third, the proposition must be so strong that it can bring new customers to the product (Schulz, 2012). As organizations define what brands will deliver and what consumers can expect, the brand can drive consumer purchase decisions, prompting many to claim that brand is the only avenue to differentiate the product. If done well, brand strategy and brand positioning working together can allow brands to achieve favorable and sustainable positions in the market (Schulz, 2012).

Even though much of the literature around branding is centered in the business sector and can be instructive for HEIs, the findings do not always directly translate to the higher education space because a tangible good or product is not being offered in the same way as a for-profit company like Procter & Gamble selling laundry detergent. Regardless of the differences, learning from for-profit companies has been useful for colleges and universities, prompting Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) to note that universities have been utilizing successful market principles from the business world to gain market share and a competitive advantage in the marketplace in recent years.

Brand Development in Higher Education

Two of the earliest writers to discuss the need for branding in higher education were Kotler and Fox (1995), who wrote specifically about how the products and service offerings within higher education could be branded in such a way that they could be identified with the institution and allow for differentiation among competitors. This view was controversial in the early years of brand discussion in higher education, as academic leaders resisted anything that

would seek to associate the academy with marketing and branding being done in the corporate world. However, for Kotler and Fox (1995), if institutions wanted to continue to attract students who would enroll, persist, and graduate, they needed to seek differentiation with a clear identity and distinct market niche to develop the institutional brand. Their promotion of branding-related activities in higher education has continued to pave the way for HEIs today to become more comfortable with brand development techniques employed by for-profit companies, as competition for enrollment continues to increase as we enter the post-pandemic era.

As colleges and universities seek to develop their institutional brands, the building of brand equity is an important concept for exploration. According to Williams and Omar (2014), three pivotal factors can shape brand equity for colleges and universities. First, there is brand image, which is developed through positioning and marketing of the brand image to the external customer. Second, building brand identity is based internally as the organizational culture aligns with its mission, vision, and values. Third, is brand soul which is the equity built on the perceptions and everyday living out the brand values by employees (Williams & Omar, 2014). These efforts by institutions to build brand equity are considered extremely important because strong brands can attract items that senior leaders and board members desire, such as outstanding students, well-regarded faculty, talented administrators and staff members, additional funded research, increased media attention, greater alumni support, and loyalty from external stakeholders and donors (Sevier, 2008).

As Williams and Omar (2014) discussed the concepts around brand equity, it is important to note the difference between the two concepts of brand identity and brand image. Brand identity refers to how the organization is internally viewed and concerned about organizational identity and culture. Brand image refers to how the brand is viewed externally and centers

around the activities and strategies of marketing and enrollment leaders who seek to develop the image to external stakeholders, including prospective students. The development of the brand image is increasingly important for higher education institutions as they operate in complex, competitive environments where the pressure to differentiate and attract students is critical to institutional survival (Anctil, 2008; Chapleo, 2010; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Bauer-Wolf (2022) predicted that more institutions will be forced to close because of the pandemic's lingering financial effects combined with demographic changes resulting in fewer enrolled students.

Components of Brand Equity

Because brand equity is desired and useful for HEIs, it is helpful to explain the different components using Aaker's (1991) four-part brand equity model. The four features of brand equity are brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand association. Whether it is a customer buying goods from an organization or a prospective student choosing an educational experience in a higher education setting, both groups benefit from strong brands. This is true because strong brands strengthen one's ability to process information during the decision-making process, allowing for a measure of confidence in the purchase decision and becoming satisfied with their purchase decision and use of the brand (Toma et al., 2005). As it relates to higher education contexts, when a student makes a brand choice of institution, they purchase a set of solid positive associations with that brand that are held by many others (Toma et al., 2005). Aaker's (1991) model is considered one of the first and most comprehensive brand equity discussions.

Brand loyalty is the first aspect of Aaker's (1991) model and is applied to the corporate world, it has numerous benefits including the reduction of marketing costs, creation of leverage

with suppliers, generation of new customers through awareness of the product, and provides time to deal with threats from competitors (Toma et al., 2005). In the same way for higher education, loyalty to an alma mater is incredibly important for the institution because alumni relations activities are all designed to deepen connection to the university. As could be expected, most successful universities enjoy a solid and loyal alumni base from which to solicit donations, call on for support in times of need, and show loyalty in times of crisis where individuals are needed to speak on behalf of the institution and mitigate any damage that might be done to a brand (Toma et al., 2005). Universities are often in the public discourse, and a committed alumni base can amplify positive publicity and defend against negative messages. A strong institutional culture is what creates these bonds between a graduate and the university, so healthy brand loyalty is vital to building brand equity (Toma et al., 2005).

Brand awareness is the second feature of Aaker's (1991) model and is created by developing a strong brand. For Toma et al. (2005), brand awareness acts like an anchor to which other associations can be attached, like a mark of familiarity and a general likeability of the brand. In this way, there is a clear explanation as to why most people select a known brand over an unknown brand, perceiving stability, substance, and longevity. In the case of higher education institutions, brand awareness provides an instant benefit to those who have it. A simple example is a local college fair attended by students and parents. As a college admission counselor knows well, attending a college fair in a state where that state's flagship public institution is present, it is common to witness long lines of prospective families waiting to talk to the representatives at that table. In most cases, the flagship public university already has a strong brand awareness and likely solid brand equity built over several years, and many prospective families know or have some association with the institution or at the very least, consider themselves a fan of the

athletics program. Conversely, the small, regional private university from outside that state may have little brand awareness and may spend the evening trying to create their own brand awareness one table visitor at a time. The creation of marquee athletics programs at institutions is a prime example of attempting to generate positive brand awareness (Harris, 2009; Toma et al., 2005).

Aaker's (1991) third aspect of the model is perceived quality. This aspect is especially important in the current higher education context because of the hyper-competitive market that exists for the declining high school graduate population (Grawe, 2018). Perceived quality provides the reason to purchase a particular brand, allowing for product differentiation, product positioning, and the ability to charge premium prices for the good or service (Toma et al., 2005). When a perception of quality exists, it opens many opportunities for both corporations and HEIs including expansion into new markets or new product lines. As universities look for additional revenue sources to support others that may be challenged, they may use the perceived quality of the brand to develop online degrees for prospective students for whom place-based education is not possible or they leverage perceived quality to open continuing education opportunities that provide enrichment or certificates upon completion of the course or program. Institutions that do not enjoy a highly perceived quality of education typically have a more challenging time finding success because they must make the case for both quality and distinctiveness which can be a significant challenge (Toma et al., 2005).

Finally, Aaker's (1991) fourth aspect is brand associations which help consumers or in the case of HEIs, prospective students, find, process, and retrieve information about the brand. These brand associations help potential buyers to understand the brand position relative to the other available options. Brand associations provide reasons to purchase, engender positive

attitudes and good feelings about the brand, and can often facilitate the movement of the brand into new markets or areas (Toma et al., 2005). Colleges and universities are often in search of distinctive attributes that can aid in developing brand equity. One such example is the development of a premier honors college at an institution that can be used to differentiate itself from competitors without such a distinction. The association with academic quality or greater levels of undergraduate research opportunities can help distinguish and differentiate one brand from another.

Each aspect of brand equity articulated by Aaker (1991) is important for corporate entities and HEIs. Brand equity does not just happen, but rather is developed over time using strategic planning and executing institutional brand goals. Strong brands in higher education are characterized by institutions that have clear values that become apparent to the public through events, symbols, narratives, and practices that occur over time (Toma et al., 2005). The advancement of the institutional brand and enhancing the institution's identity is the chief role of the university's development and advancement teams. As Sevier (2008) noted, the advancement of the brand by the institutional external relations staff is achieved by shaping the image that stakeholders have of the institution into a unified, positive image. Various groups have different relationships with universities, which makes consistency and cohesion important outcomes of strong brands (Toma et al., 2005). There are studies worthy of exploration that seek to understand the importance of brand equity, as well as the activities that are most important in developing the institutional brand and positively affecting enrollment (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). I will explore these studies in the next section.

Studies in Higher Education Branding

Exploring brand development research in higher education points to certain aspects of the university brand that positively affect university enrollment. Rutter et al. (2016) sought to understand whether institutions with lower reputations can compete for students by increasing their brand presence. They studied a variety of 56 different universities in the United Kingdom to analyze each university's social media to understand what impact it had on recruitment performance. Their work provided evidence from research into social media-related branding activity that a positive effect exists for the use of social media on recruitment performance and a particularly strong effect when universities use social media in an interactive way (Rutter et al., 2016). By interactive, they explained that fostering relationships with Twitter followers who endorsed the brand was key to the success of brand attachment. They further found that having many Twitter followers is a strong predictor of recruitment success. Although social media activities are one strategy to build brand equity and brand awareness, it is important to recognize it as one component and not the only strategy.

In a separate study, Rutter et al. (2017) examined print publications used by the top 10 universities in the United Kingdom to draw comparisons between their relative brand positions using a brand personality lens. Whereas their earlier study looked specifically at social media, in this study, they attempted to understand how print publications like the prospectus communicated a brand personality, affecting better matches in enrollment. They found that one of the personality traits, sincerity, was evident in all 10 institutions, but there was clear evidence of differentiation between the other personality traits. Brand personality, in this study, was found to add depth to our understanding of positioning among HEIs (Rutter et al., 2017). Both social

media and print publications can add to the building of brand equity and thus impact enrollment positively for institutions with a comprehensive brand-building strategy.

Continuing with another recent study, Spry et al. (2020) studied how one HEI in the United Kingdom developed and maintained its corporate brand identity and how stakeholders were involved in that creation. Interviews with faculty and student focus groups were the basis for data collection. For this case study, the relevant finding was that in this United Kingdom institutional context, there was a disconnect with the university identity and image. Students were unclear about the value of the university's offerings and were more connected to the faculty that were meeting their needs. They believed that the faculty had a stronger image and identity than the university (Spry et al., 2020). Because universities in the United Kingdom are configured differently than most institutions in the United States, this may not be a finding that is relevant to both this university and universities in the United Kingdom in general.

Moving to a study done within the United States, Dennis et al. (2016) examined the effect of brand attachment on commitment, satisfaction, trust, and brand equity within higher education institutions. After surveying 605 students and graduates in the United States, their findings indicate that brand meaning is the main precursor of brand attachment strength that affects satisfaction, trust, and commitment as well as brand equity. Importantly, the day-to-day lived experience of brand characteristics, brand identity, and satisfaction are key for students' overall evaluations of their universities and brand equity. Strengthening work by Chapleo (2010), this study suggests that universities' positioning strategies may be focusing too much on building prestige, which seems counterintuitive to building brand equity, however, the authors note that strategies directed toward improving student satisfaction could have more positive effects on the building of brand equity (Dennis et al., 2016).

Branding in higher education has developed over time and has become much more common in recent years, especially given the need to differentiate within a competitive market (Dennis et al., 2016; Rutter et al, 2016; Waeraas & Solbakk, 2009). In this section, I discussed the origins of brand management, followed by brand development in higher education, the components of brand equity according to Aaker (1991), and concluded by examining studies in higher education branding. This review of the development of the university brand and building brand equity has revealed the importance to institutions seeking to differentiate themselves in the marketplace and create a competitive advantage in enrolling students that meet the institution's needs.

Summary

After a review of related literature, much of the research about how consumers made brand purchase decisions resides in consumer and business literature. Few studies extended the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) to higher education contexts. While studies within higher education literature that used the framework ultimately began to appear in the literature, what is important to note is that, over time, the development of the framework has provided a comprehensive way of understanding consumer decision-making behavior about brand choice (Howard & Sheth, 1969; Kotler, 1994; Narayana & Markin, 1975; Stephenson et al., 2016; Turley & LeBlanc, 1995). As each study combined to expand the framework completely, the fully developed framework provided an expedient way of understanding how buyers moved through the brand choice process, noting the consideration and choice sets of brands from which to choose.

Outside of the consumer behavior literature that focuses on brand-related factors, several studies within higher education contexts have provided an opportunity to review the

development of college choice models that have taken place over the last forty years (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; D.W. Chapman, 1981; R.G. Chapman, 1986; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Kotler, 1976; Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). Each has contributed its nuanced model, seeking to build upon prior research or fill gaps in the literature. Some researchers sought to simplify the college choice framework, while others believed the existing models were too simplistic and sought to expand them to explain the process more fully.

I also noted studies that have reflected upon prior research, noting the historical focus on White students, and searching to understand how minority populations navigate the college selection process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). As each study cited built upon previous research, each was more specifically focused on what steps are taken when one moves through the process and which principal factors are being considered by students as they move through the college selection process. These studies are distinct from the model being used in this dissertation as they focus more on brand-related factors that are important to a student's decision-making process.

When applying the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) to higher education contexts, provides an opportunity to understand how students move through the consideration set to the choice set, where a final decision is made. The literature, though limited in higher education studies, provides prior research on the number and characteristics of those college brands and other factors that are important within the consideration and choice sets, helping to identify research gaps that exist in the study of the consideration set. The selection of this framework provided the best opportunity to explore the consideration set and ultimate selection of a university because of its background in the business and consumer behavior literature, where brand-related choices have long been anchored. Further, my dissertation study will add knowledge about how students perceive the institutions in the consideration set, noting

the elements of the university brand that are particularly powerful in influencing university choice.

The final portion of the literature review provided an exploration into branding in higher education, focusing on the origins of branding within higher education, its development over time into a major focus for many HEIs, to exploring studies that seek to discover what brand-related factors are important to students as they make their decisions and how well HEIs are executing on highlighting compelling aspects of the university brand.

Explanations of important concepts like brand development, brand equity, brand image, and brand identity allow the reader to get acquainted with terms that are often confused without a proper definition. Understanding how these concepts fit together in consumer and business settings and higher education settings is important for understanding this case study. Discussion of the Aaker (1991) four-part framework of brand equity which are brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand association helps to orient the reader with the business literature and extend the concepts to higher education contexts.

Knowing that branding is an important part of helping higher educational institutions differentiate themselves in a crowded, competitive market, prompted a review of literature that focused on students' choices and brand-related concepts. These studies provide a greater understanding of brand features that are compelling to students as they make their choices and can help institutions develop interactive social media campaigns and digital marketing strategies to further develop brand equity (Dennis et al., 2016; Rutter et al., 2016; Rutter et al., 2017; Spry et al., 2020). This review of the literature related to college choice and the university brand has provided an overview of the compelling features of the usefulness of the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) and its ability to assist in understanding how students

navigate the college choice process, which leads to the next chapter on methods and details how my mixed methods case study was conducted.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Overview of Research Methods

I sought to develop a more complete understanding of the student college decision-making process using the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016). I used an exploratory case study with a mixed-methods design at a private, faith-based university to explore student decision-making around brand choice. A case study is a design of inquiry where the researcher develops an in-depth analysis of a case, in this instance a process, bounded by time and activity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). An exploratory case study was appropriate to discover where the findings would lead and how the findings would answer the research questions.

As Yin (2018) noted, case study research allows for an in-depth, descriptive study of the experiences of participants, which is appropriate for this study as I was seeking to better understand the experiences of future students as they navigated the college selection process and how they evaluated college brands. Diving deeply into this topic was important to me, but also the case university as it seeks to improve its understanding of how prospective students make decisions and judgments about college choice and the university brand. After the recent implementation of a multi-year strategic plan for the university and clarifying the institution's mission and values, this study has the potential to help elevate certain parts of the brand that resonate well with prospective students. Further, I employed a constructivist worldview, focusing on understanding the experiences of the first-time, 1st-year students involved in the study

through the use of a focus group, online survey, and open-ended questions in a semi-structured interview format to understand each participant's experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The methods for this study will be discussed in the following section.

The research questions guiding this exploratory case study were:

1. As first-time, 1st-year incoming freshmen reflect on their university selection process at a university selected for this study, what were the brand characteristics of the institutions in their consideration set?
2. What university brand characteristics did first-time, 1st-year incoming students identify as being most important to them when making the university brand choice?
3. How did first-time, 1st-year incoming students enrolled at the case study university evaluate the university compared to the list of institutions within their choice set?

Participants

The participants in this study were first-time, 1st-year students, 18 years of age or older, who were enrolled in their first fall semester at the case university. For the entering Class of 2024, the case university enrolled 704 new, first-time 1st-year students in the fall semester from 43 states and 12 foreign countries, with 55% of the class being in-state students. The gender breakdown of the class was 61% female and 39% male. An email was sent to 1st-year students who work in the Office of Admission inviting them to participate in a focus group. The focus group yielded seven students and was convened to help surface themes that would inform questions to be included in an online survey. All entering first-time, 1st-year students were invited to participate in an online survey that asked questions about the college selection process and was designed to answer the research questions. Students who completed the survey were invited to participate in a second round of the research process to seek answers to open-ended

questions in a semi-structured interview. Students were initially invited and selected using criterion sampling to achieve the targeted 12–15-participant number (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Several students who opted in during the survey ultimately declined the invitation to participate or did not respond to the invitation to schedule a time for the semi-structured interviews. All students who opted in during the survey were then invited to participate in semi-structured interviews following the initial survey deployment, during their first fall semester.

There were 13 students who participated in semi-structured face-to-face interviews. I kept the survey open for four weeks to provide time for the responses and for students to consider opting into the interview portion. The students who participated in the interviews were closely representative of the gender as well as the in-state/out-of-state makeup of the 1st-year class. This allowed for varied perspectives on the college selection process and what aspects of the university brand they believed to be compelling and influential, contributing to their selection of the university. Data from the Office of Admission at the case university was obtained and all first-time 1st-year students were sent an e-communication explaining the purpose of the study and asking for their participation. I obtained written permission from each student who participated in the focus group and interviews to include them in the research study and detailed the ways that their responses would remain confidential and only available to the researcher. The students who participated in the online survey were informed about the confidentiality of the survey in the email and provided their consent by clicking the button to begin the survey.

Data Sources

This study employed mixed-methods data collection methods that were used to gather information on the experiences, perceptions, and decision-making processes related to college selection of newly enrolled students at the university. An online survey and semi-structured

interviews were the two main sources of data collection from the participants. To answer the research questions, only the survey and interviews were used. The focus group was used to inform the questions and choices for the online survey. Because triangulation is an important approach to bolstering the validity of the study, I used multiple sources to ascertain themes in the collected data from participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Focus Group

A focus group was utilized in this study to gather data about perceptions of the university brand and the college search process from first-time, 1st-year students enrolled at the case university that would directly inform the online survey questions. I sent an email to all 12 first-time, 1st-year members of the undergraduate admission student worker team. From this group, seven first-time, 1st-year students volunteered to discuss their college selection process. There were five students from in-state and two students from out-of-state. Only one male student volunteered to participate in the focus group, the remaining six were female students. The focus group used guiding questions that provided opportunities for each participant to share their perspectives. See Appendix A.

Survey

A researcher-developed and focus-group-informed online survey was used in this study to gather data related to perceptions of the university brand and the college search process from first-time, 1st-year students enrolled at the university. All entering first-time, 1st-year students were sent an e-communication in their first fall semester explaining the aim of the study and asking for their participation in the online survey. The e-communication inviting students to participate was sent in November and then reminder emails were sent three times over the four

weeks that the survey was open to gather as many participants as possible, knowing that this was a time of transition for these students, and they had multiple activities taking place.

Student Interviews

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were used to gather information from first-time 1st-year student participants about their college search process and college brand choice. A series of questions designed to understand how the student formed the consideration set and what brand characteristics were important made up a portion of the interview. In addition, questions that cover how the student developed their choice set, factors that influenced how and why brands moved from the consideration set to the choice set, as well as the reasons brands did not advance from the consideration set to the choice set were explored.

Data Collection

The focus group was recorded and transcribed for analysis using Otter.ai and the questions were in a similar format to the semi-structured individual interview protocol. The alignment of the survey questions and individual interview questions addressed issues of validity. The data collected during the focus group was used to directly inform the development of the questions in the online survey that would eventually answer the three research questions guiding the study. The focus group was not designed to directly answer the research questions.

The online survey was created in Qualtrics and consisted of 11 questions that ranged from open-ended questions, level of importance rating scale, and select all that apply questions. The results were processed soon after completion for analysis using features in the Qualtrics software. The questions were designed to provide useful data to answer the research questions, while also providing coding that was helpful before the launching of individual semi-structured interviews. A panel of experts, made up of the Executive Vice President, Executive Director of

University Marketing, and the Associate Vice President for Undergraduate Admission at the case university were selected to assess the online survey and build validity for the survey instrument (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The survey was field tested by four upperclassmen, who were not part of the group surveyed, to understand approximately how long the survey would take and to check for any difficulties encountered either by an unclear or confusing question or for any abnormalities in the deployment of the survey in Qualtrics. An incentive was offered to maximize the study's online survey responses from first-time 1st-year students by including each participant's student email address in a drawing to win an Amazon gift card worth \$25. See Appendix B.

Each semi-structured interview was conducted in person on the case study campus, recorded for accuracy, and transcribed using Otter.ai to facilitate analysis. To address issues of validity the interview questions were closely aligned with the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interview was field tested by upperclassmen who were not part of the study to determine how long the interview would take and the same panel of experts were selected to review the interview protocols. Each interview took between 35 and 60 minutes and was largely dependent on how much each interviewee chose to share about their experience. Sample questions included: What aspects of the university brand attracted you to apply? If you had to describe the institution's brand identity, how would you do that? The interview protocol can be found in Appendix C.

Data Analysis

***Research Question 1** As first-time, 1st-year incoming students reflect on their university selection process at a university selected for this study, what were the brand characteristics of the institutions in their consideration set?*

Survey. In the survey, I looked specifically to understand the perspective of first-time, 1st-year students related to the development of their consideration set and the characteristics of institutions within the set. To capture data when it was fresh, I surveyed the entering first-time 1st-year class during their first semester at the case university. Next, I read the data from the surveys and made notes on the responses to gain a sense of the general ideas and reflect on the meanings. Then I organized the data by taking inventory of the details. I coded the data into elements that fit together and looked for patterns to generate themes. I coded using an inductive process that supported the emergence of findings from the data without a predetermined framework.

Interviews. In the semi-structured face-to-face interviews, I sought to understand the perspective of first-time, 1st-year students related to the development of their consideration set and the characteristics of institutions within the set, going beyond the survey questions to engage in a dialogue about the development of the consideration set. To capture data close to the decision-making experience, I conducted the interviews in their first fall semester at the case university, recording the interviews while simultaneously having them transcribed using the transcription software Otter.ai. Next, I read the data from the interviews and made notes on the responses to gain a sense of the general ideas and reflect on the meanings. Then I organized the data by taking inventory of the details.

Research Question 2. *What university brand characteristics did first-time, 1st-year incoming students identify as being most important to them when making the university brand choice?*

Survey. In the survey, I looked specifically to understand the perspective of first-time, 1st-year students about the important brand characteristics that helped to solidify their brand choice. I read the data from the survey and made notes about responses to gain a sense of the

general ideas and reflect on the meanings. Then I organized the data by taking inventory of the details. Next, I coded the data into elements that fit together and looked for patterns to generate themes. I coded using an inductive, in vivo process that supported the emergence of findings from the data without a predetermined framework.

Interviews. In the semi-structured face-to-face interviews, I was seeking to understand the perspective of first-time, 1st-year students about the importance of the brand characteristics of institutions within the set, going beyond the survey questions to engage in a dialogue. To capture data when it was fresh, I conducted the interviews in their first semester at the case university, recording the interviews and then having them transcribed using Otter.ai. Next, I read the data from the interviews and made notes on the responses to gain a sense of the general ideas and reflect on the meanings. Then I organized the data by taking inventory of the details. Next, I coded the data into elements that fit together and looked for patterns to generate themes. I coded using an inductive process that supported the emergence of findings from the data without a predetermined framework.

Research Question 3 *How did first-time, 1st-year incoming students enrolled at the case study university evaluate the university compared to the list of institutions within their choice set?*

Survey. In the survey, I was looking specifically to understand the perspective of first-time, 1st-year students about the important brand characteristics that helped to solidify their brand choice and how the case university compared with the other institutions within the choice set. I read the data from the surveys and made notes about responses to gain a sense of the general ideas and reflect on the meanings. Then I organized the data by taking inventory of the details. Next, I coded the data into elements that fit together and looked for patterns to generate

themes. I coded using an inductive, in vivo process that supported the emergence of findings from the data without a predetermined framework.

Interviews. In the semi-structured face-to-face interviews, I was seeking to understand the perspective of first-time, 1st-year students about the importance of the brand characteristics of institutions within the set and how the case university compared to other institutions in the choice set, going beyond the survey questions to engage in a dialogue about this process. To capture data when it was fresh, I conducted the interviews in their first semester at the case university, recording the interviews and then having them transcribed using Otter.ai. Next, I read the data from the interviews and made notes on the responses to gain a sense of the general ideas and reflect on the meanings. Then I organized the data by taking inventory of the details. Next, I coded the data into elements that fit together and looked for patterns to generate themes. I coded using an inductive process that supported the emergence of findings from the data without a predetermined framework. Table 1 provides the data source and data analysis for each research question.

Table 1*Research Questions, Sources, and Data Analysis*

| Research Question | Data Sources | Data Analysis |
|--|---|--|
| RQ 1. As first-time, 1st-year incoming students reflect on their university selection process at a university selected for this study, what were the brand characteristics of the institutions in their consideration set? | Student survey questions 1-6 | Quantitative; Inductive, in vivo coding |
| | Individual interview questions 1, 2, 2a, 2b, 4, 4a, 4b, 5, 5a, 5b, 5c, 5d | Qualitative; Inductive, in vivo coding |
| RQ 2. What university brand characteristics did first-time, 1st-year incoming freshmen identify as being most important to them when making the university brand choice? | Student survey questions 8-9 | Qualitative; Inductive, in vivo coding |
| | Individual interview questions 6, 6a, 6b, 6c, 7 | Qualitative; Inductive, in vivo coding |
| RQ 3. How did first-time, 1st-year incoming students enrolled at the case study university evaluate the university as compared to the list of institutions within their choice set? | Student survey questions 8-9 | Qualitative; Inductive, in vivo coding |
| | Individual interview questions 8-9 | Qualitative; Inductive, in vivo coding |

Coding of Data

As the data was gathered and analyzed, coding was done in an emergent process with inductive coding that allowed the data to be considered deeply without predetermining codes and seeking to fit the data within them (Saldaña, 2021). This inductive process was chosen because of the varying perspectives that exist within the online survey and individual interview responses. As each interview transcript was reviewed, I coded the data using the participant's

own words. I then searched for themes that emerged from the data and developed codes that best explained the perspective as students discussed their college selection process. Further, in the online survey, some questions asked for open-ended responses. This data was also reviewed and coded using respondents' own words as codes. Once the transcript was coded, themes emerged, and I grouped those themes as appropriate to arrive at the answers to the research questions. The use of in vivo coding, which is the process by which the respondents' own words are used to develop the code, was appropriate for this study as students were referencing their perspectives and unique situations (Saldaña, 2021).

Delimitations, Limitations, Assumptions

Delimitations

I have chosen to focus this study on one institution in the southern United States because of the available time to complete the research. In addition, I have chosen to interview and survey only first-time, 1st-year incoming freshmen because of the moment in time that is important to this study. The closer one is to their decision-making, the better able they are to recall the specific factors that went into their decision and the judgments made about university brands that were considered. The research questions guiding this study are also a delimitation as they focused very specifically on the consideration and choice sets in the framework. The time available to complete the study is also a factor in choosing the number of students to interview. The sample size of 13 students to be interviewed is also a delimitation of this study.

Limitations

Participants in this study were asked to recall elements of their decision-making process related to selecting a university and their experience and judgments as they evaluated potential university brands, which may limit their responses. To mitigate any difficulties in the recall, the

participants will be surveyed and interviewed in their first fall semester at the case institution so that their recollections will be fresh. Further, this study is highly specific to students at the case university being studied. Therefore, the results of this case study may be useful in similar contexts, but certainly not generalizable to all prospective students. In addition, the use of surveys and interviews captures a moment in time for participants and it is therefore difficult to follow up, over time, to confirm the data or seek clarification.

Assumptions

Knowing that every student has experienced the college choice process differently, I assumed that each student had been deeply involved in their college search process. I realized there may be some students who only looked at the case study institution and I assumed that there were still perspectives that could be learned as to how a student felt so confident that the case institution was their only choice. In addition, because current students were being asked to detail their thoughts and experiences, I made assumptions that their answers were true and reflected their perspectives. While discussions about perspectives happen naturally between participants and their peers, some participants may have used the experience of other peers that had been recounted to them, within this study. Whether or not that occurred, I assumed that the experience was also valid since it came from a current 1st-year student, though not one who was a participant in this study.

Role of the Researcher

Due to my position as an administrator at the case university, I realized my role as a researcher was a facilitator. I have informed opinions as to how students make decisions and why, based on my working with prospective students, but I checked my biases consistently in this study with the guiding principle that I truly wished to explore this topic and see where it

might lead (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I also know that my position as an administrator brings forward issues of positionality such that as the researcher, students may have chosen to provide information that they believe I wanted to hear instead of their own experiences. In all written communication to participants in the focus group, online survey, and interviews, as well as the in-person portions of the focus group and interviews, I stressed the need to share information openly and honestly. I made it clear that nothing that they shared would jeopardize their enrollment at the university and that the aim was to learn from them so that the university could better and more accurately articulate the university brand identity to prospective students. In the focus group and student interviews, I did not know the students who participated personally, so this helped protect against some unintended biases.

I have worked in admission and enrollment management for 23 years at four different institutions. I have served on numerous committees and worked closely with the marketing team at each of these institutions. My experiences as a higher education administrator have made me keenly aware of the challenges of growing university enrollment, maximizing net tuition revenue, and marketing the institution. Over time, my interest in branding, marketing, and student decision-making has continued to develop, bringing life to this research topic. This study can help the case institution discover more fully how students make decisions and what brand characteristics are most compelling to students who chose to enroll at the case university.

Ethical Considerations

I obtained IRB approval at William & Mary as well as the case university before I embarked on the research. Participants were given verbally and in writing the research study's aims. Each participant in the focus group and interviews signed the written consent form that detailed the study aims and agreed to be a participant. Pseudonymity was offered to each

interview participant. Anonymity about what was said in the interviews was discussed with each participant, noting that only I would have access to the transcriptions and interpretations. Data were kept on a password-protected computer and interview recordings were stored on a secure drive.

Timeline

After the successful defense of my proposal in October 2023, I went through the IRB approval process to begin the research in November 2023. It was important to capture the perspectives of first-time 1st-year students during their first semester so they could have an easier recollection of their decision-making process. The online survey and individual interviews were scheduled throughout November and December 2023 as well as early January 2024. After the interviews were completed, detailed analysis continued as I prepared for a final defense of my dissertation in late March of 2024.

Summary

This study's purpose was to understand how high school seniors made decisions about choosing a university by focusing on the consideration and choice sets. This mixed-methods, exploratory case study utilizing the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) used a focus group to inform the survey instrument and then an online survey and semi-structured interviews to understand the decision-making process as well as compelling brand attributes for first-time, 1st-year students at the case university. The results of this study fill a gap in the literature dealing with brand choice in higher education using the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) as well as addressing relevant issues of educational planning and leadership at institutions of higher education.

Findings from this study should be of interest to higher education leaders because of the focus on brand development, enrollment growth, and maximizing net tuition revenue. If decisions related to brand choice are understood more thoroughly, it facilitates the ability to recruit, enroll, retain, and graduate students at a higher level while allowing the university to expand, garner a wider national reputation, and launch students for lives of significance. This type of leadership is connected to the getting-on-the-balcony behavior of adaptive leadership to understand the larger situation as well as the identification of the adaptive challenges faced by the organization (Northouse, 2019). As leaders navigate change where silos exist, strategic planning is necessary to help allocate resources toward strategies that can positively influence enrollment (Armstrong et al., 2017). In this way, university leaders will have a greater ability to provide the necessary resources to areas of marketing, brand development, and communication that more significantly influence a student's choice. This understanding of student behavior allows for information power, helping the organization move forward more effectively (Northouse, 2019).

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

A thorough understanding of how students make decisions about which university to attend is an important endeavor for higher education leaders. Given the pressure on enrollment leaders to meet headcount, net revenue goals, and a host of other institutional priorities, it becomes a useful exercise to understand how prospective students respond to, or resonate with, components of the university brand. This study provides an opportunity to understand how students at a case university in the South progressed through the university selection process. Using the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016), I explored three sets of universities that students worked through as they progressed to their ultimate decision. The three sets are the awareness set, the consideration set, and the choice set, each one narrowing in size as they move closer to a decision.

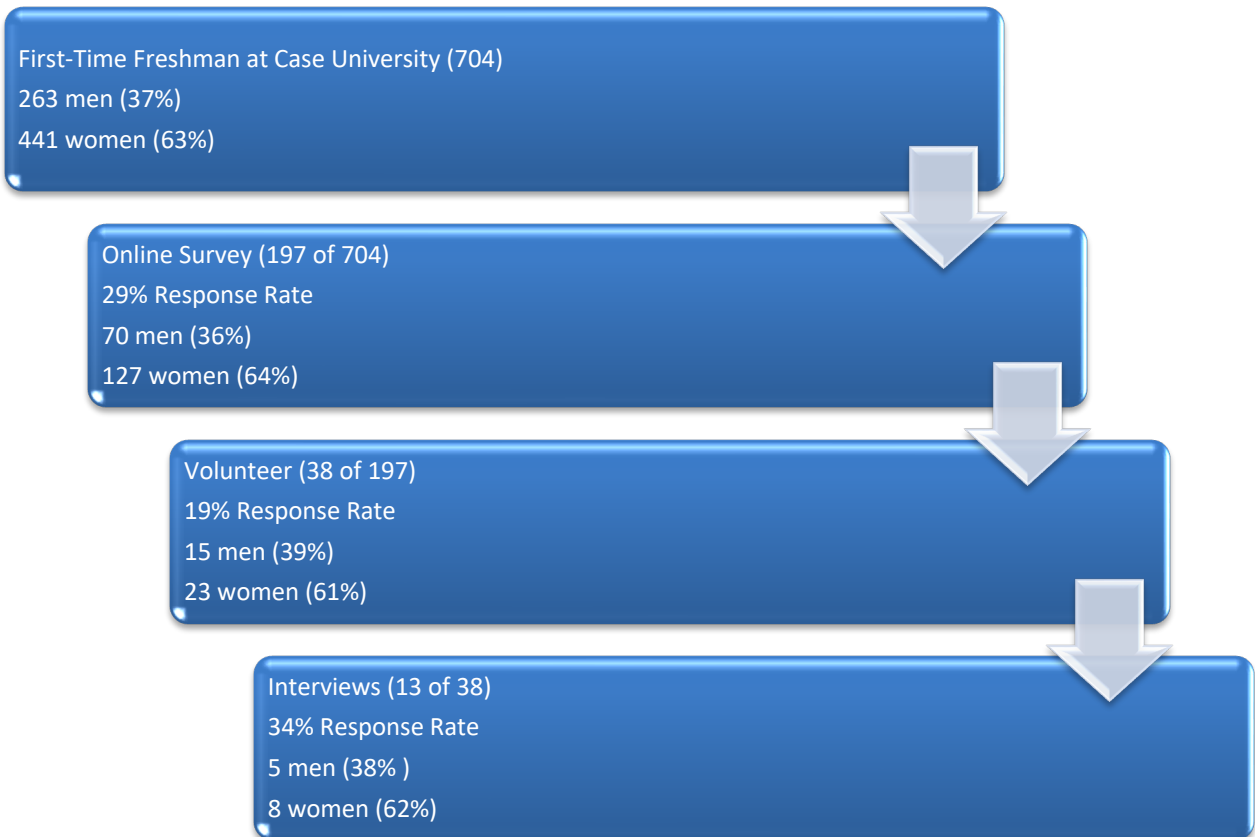
This chapter is organized in the following way. First, I will discuss each element of the research process, including the focus group that preceded the two data sources, the online survey, and individual interviews. Second, I will discuss the phases of the research and then provide profiles of each interview participant. Third, will be a discussion of the findings that answered each of the three research questions. Finally, I will conclude the chapter with a summary of the findings presented as well as a bridge to Chapter 5.

Before the beginning of the research study, a focus group of seven first-time, 1st-year freshman students was convened to yield a general understanding of their university search process as well as identify recurring themes and ideas that could be used to inform the questions

for the online survey. The first phase of the research design was an online survey that was sent to 704 first-time, 1st-year freshman students at the case university and completed by 197 students. The survey asked questions centered around the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016), specifically the awareness, consideration, and choice sets, seeking to understand compelling factors that helped students make the ultimate university choice. The second phase included 13 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with students who volunteered for the discussion while completing the online survey. These interviews allowed me to go deeper and explore qualitative factors, including the narrative behind what was asked in the online survey. Figure 2 shows the progression of the research study, beginning with the 704 first-time, 1st-year freshmen, narrowing to the 197 participants in the online survey, then the 38 students who volunteered to be a part of the interviews, and finally, the 13 students who completed the interview with me.

Figure 2

Progression of Research Participants



The themes that emerged from these interviews are fully described in this chapter. The online survey and the individual interviews will serve to answer the research questions. The following research questions guided this study:

1. As first-time, 1st-year incoming freshmen reflect on their university selection process at a university selected for this study, what were the brand characteristics of the institutions in their consideration set?
2. What university brand characteristics did first-time, 1st-year incoming students identify as being most important to them when making the university brand choice?

3. How did first-time, 1st-year incoming students enrolled at the case study university evaluate the university as compared to the list of institutions within their choice set?

Focus Group

To begin this study, I convened a focus group to generate themes related to the college selection process and inform the online survey that would be sent to the 704 first-time, 1st-year freshmen. I sent an email to all 12 first-time, 1st-year members of the undergraduate admission student worker team. From this group, seven first-time, 1st-year students volunteered to discuss their college selection process. There were five students from in-state and two students from out-of-state. Only one male student volunteered to participate in the focus group, the remaining six were female students.

Students were asked several questions structured around the three sets in the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) that guided this study. Beginning with the awareness set, continuing through to the consideration set, and then ending with the choice set. As the conversation progressed, several themes emerged. First, the focus group identified four major areas of how they discovered the case university: (a) family connections, (b) research on universities that offer sizable merit scholarships, (c) local knowledge of universities in the case region, and (d) research on faith-based universities.

The awareness sets for the focus group developed because of regional knowledge about HEIs due to peers, and family knowledge of the universities because of a connection, such as an older sibling or other family members, but mostly their awareness sets consisted of regional schools in their area. If they knew of a university from further away, it was typically because of some personal connection or through a popular athletic program. Specifically for faith-based universities, the awareness set developed because of signing up for information about faith-based

universities that produced large amounts of e-communication from these universities. Also, college summer youth interns at local churches helped some become aware of faith-based universities while others attended youth events where faith-based colleges were present.

The group noted that several factors helped move a college from the awareness set to the consideration set. Financial factors, including the availability of merit scholarships, the practicality of schools that were affordable, and a generous Advance Placement (AP) credit policy that could save time to a degree were important factors that came up during the discussion. The campus culture and quality of the academic program of interest were also important in moving from awareness to consideration. Size of the student body, distance from home, college experience provided, and overall reputation were also noted as factors.

As we discussed the characteristics of the brands within each of their consideration sets, several themes emerged: (a) notable athletic programs that promoted school spirit; (b) the efficiency of graduating early or graduating with a bachelor's and master's degree in 5 years; (c) faith-based communities, (d) strong research capabilities for undergraduates; (e) variety of sizes (large publics, privates of all sizes, and regional publics); and (f) variety of locations (college town, large city, small cities, rural, and suburban).

As the list narrowed into the choice set, the most important characteristics noted by students were: (a) cost, (b) distance from home, (c) authentic faith-based community, (d) research opportunities, (e) best combos (small campus in a big city), (f) choosing differently than their peers (not just a continuation of high school), and (g) a community of people where fitting in would be easier. When asked about the specific factors that led to enrolling at the case university, they noted the following: (a) net cost, (b) the way the university made them feel, (c) the faith-based community, (d) quality of the academic programs, (e) quality and cleanliness of

the facilities, (f) fun campus life opportunities, and (g) the clear intentionality of the admitted student events that were hosted on campus (“it felt like they really wanted us here”).

The focus group served a valuable purpose as a prelude to the study as it allowed themes to emerge as well as an ability to hear from students about their experiences with the case university and how they perceived it as they were going through the selection process. This helped both to confirm and amend some of the multiple-choice response options planned for the online survey. The focus group also surfaced some new ideas that persuaded me to add an open-response question to the online survey asking for specific reasons why students selected the case university so that I could capture the details in their own words. Finally, it was helpful to hear from the focus group participants about the importance of the work done in the Office of Admission as many of them serve as tour guides for prospective students.

Phase 1: Online Survey

The first phase of this research study was the implementation of an online survey sent to 704 first-time, 1st-year freshmen that comprised the entering class at the case university. The 11-question survey was open for six weeks and garnered 197 responses (29% response rate). There were 70 male respondents (36%) and 127 (64%) were female, which was nearly identical to the composition of the 1st-year class. Of the 197 respondents, 38 (19%) offered to participate further in individual in-person interviews, which is referred to as Phase 2. All 38 online survey responders, specifically 15 men (39%) and 23 women (61%), included their contact information to possibly move forward in the next stage of the case study.

Phase 2: Semi-Structured Interviews

The second phase of this research study was 13 semi-structured in-person interviews conducted at the case university with students who volunteered during their completion of the

online survey to discuss their process in depth. Students provided their contact information, and I contacted them via email and text message to discuss their process. Of the 38 students who volunteered, 13 completed the interview process. The 13 students are profiled in the next section and Table 2 provides a brief reference to residency, sex, and race/ethnicity.

Table 2

Profile of Students Participating in Semi-Structured In-Person Interviews

| Student | Residency | Sex | Race/Ethnicity |
|---------|--------------|--------|--------------------|
| Bill | Out-of-state | Male | White |
| Carl | In-state | Male | White |
| Cora | Out-of-state | Female | White |
| Hannah | Out-of-state | Female | White |
| Jane | In-state | Female | White |
| Joe | In-state | Male | White |
| Maria | In-state | Female | White |
| Mary | Out-of-state | Female | Asian |
| Reagan | In-state | Female | Black |
| Rick | In-state | Male | White |
| Rose | In-state | Female | Hispanic or Latino |
| Sarah | In-State | Female | White |
| Ted | Out-of-state | Male | Hispanic or Latino |

Participant Profiles

In this section, profiles of the 13 semi-structured interview participants are presented to highlight information about factors influencing the college decision-making process. Each profile serves to highlight the experiences of each student and provide a better understanding of

how each student decided to enroll at the case university. Pseudonyms have been assigned to refer to each participant to protect confidentiality.

Bill

Bill, a White male out-of-state student graduated from a private high school and found out about the case university after attending a college fair at his high school where the case university was in attendance. He decided to visit after his father took him on a tour of colleges during spring break and his father insisted that they visit. At first, he was reluctant to visit but ended up enjoying the campus visit. His consideration set consisted of six schools, all private faith-based schools, but his choice set came down to two schools. Bill decided to apply after having a great conversation during the visit with a faculty member in his major. The faculty member ended up being highly influential in his decision to attend along with a great scholarship and the major he wanted. He described the case university as an excellent faith-based community where it is easy to get plugged in socially and where faculty and staff are intentional about connecting with and mentoring students.

Carl

Carl, a White male in-state student, graduated from a public high school and came to know about the case university during his junior year of high school after receiving information in the mail. He decided to apply because of the faith-based community, smaller size, the quality of his major, and the location of the case university. His consideration set consisted of three schools, one highly selective in-state private, one flagship in-state public, and the case university. Carl's choice set became the flagship in-state public and the case university; he decided to attend the case university because of the authentic faith-based community that was more than a slogan, the quality of the faculty in his major, and a sizable merit scholarship.

Cora

Cora, a White female out-of-state student, graduated from a public high school and had been interested in the college search since she was in junior high school. Having visited over 40 colleges and applied to 18, she had a broad consideration set. While she preferred a smaller college, she applied to several large public universities but only if there was an honors college or another way to make it feel smaller. Her choice set consisted of three schools, a flagship public, a highly selective private, and the case university which she selected because of the scholarship she received, the amazing people she encountered, and the faith-based community. She described the case university as a warm hug.

Hannah

Hannah, a White female out-of-state student, graduated from a private high school and became aware of the case university because her father often traveled for business to the city where the case university is located, and he suggested they visit. The location, faith-based community, and quality of the residence halls prompted her application. Her consideration set consisted of four private schools, each of which was outside her home state. Two of the four were faith-based universities. Hannah's choice set came down to two universities and she decided on the case university because of the location, faith-based community, strong academics, and quality of the residence halls. She described the case university as a welcoming community of faith that integrates faith and academics in a beautiful residential setting.

Jane

Jane, a White female in-state student graduated from a public high school and learned about the case university from cousins who had attended the university. Her campus visit was prompted by her mother and after that visit, it became a top choice for her. Her consideration set

consisted of two in-state public universities and two in-state private. Jane intended to stay in-state for college and the case university ended up being her top choice because of the welcoming community and the personal attention provided to her during the admission process. She described the case university as a welcoming campus filled with genuinely nice people where you are not just a number, and everyone is included.

Joe

Joe, a White male in-state student, graduated from a private high school and came to know about the case university through family members who were alumni. The faith-based community that the case university provided was the driving factor in his search. His consideration set included one private, one faith-based university, and one flagship public, but his final choice set included the faith-based university and the flagship public. The main aspect of the university brand that attracted him to apply was the faith-based community and his ultimate choice to enroll was based on the smaller size, faith-based community, and the quality of his chosen major. He described the case university's brand identity as a warm and welcoming community with a strong sense of unity among the student body.

Maria

Maria, a White female in-state student, graduated from a public high school and became aware of the case university because of a summer youth camp that she attended at the university for many years and because an older sibling attended. She decided to apply because the university felt like home, the faith-based community, and the campus size. The university was by far her first choice, and she only considered one other regional public university. Her ultimate decision to attend came down to the faith-based community, having the complete college experience, and faculty that were interested in helping her develop her small business plan. She

described the case university as home, where a strong faith-based mission created an environment for flourishing in every aspect of life.

Mary

Mary, an Asian female out-of-state student, graduated from a public high school and came to know about the case university after doing some online research into faith-based schools. She was prompted to visit campus because she wanted a faith-based community in the south that had the major she was looking for and the case university fit her initial criteria. After her visit, she applied for and attended a summer program at the case university that further solidified her desire to enroll at the university. She considered five schools, all faith-based schools, and ultimately chose the case university because of the faith-based community, the quality of the faculty in her intended major, and the design of the coursework compared to other universities. Mary described the university as an efficient faith-based community with good courses, good faculty, and good organization.

Reagan

Reagan, a Black female in-state student graduated from a public high school and discovered the case university when her college preparation program at her high school toured the campus when she was in middle school. She loved the smaller, faith-based community, despite the predominant faith on campus not being her own. Her consideration set consisted of four schools, two out-of-state public universities, one community college, and the case university. As a first-generation high school student, much of her research was done without guidance from family or friends. The case university was her first choice, but she was somewhat apprehensive about attending a predominately White institution as a minority student. She overcame that anxiety by continuing to interact with faculty and staff which reassured her. After

earning a full-tuition scholarship to the case university, she determined that she could afford to attend her dream school. She describes the university as a welcoming faith community with strong academic programs and where faculty support you at every step along the journey.

Rick

Rick, a White male in-state student, graduated from a public high school and became interested in attending the case university after a faculty member encouraged him to apply during a summer camp for music. He decided to come for a visit after being encouraged by a professor in his area of interest. After looking at the six schools in his consideration set, all in-state schools except one, he decided to apply to the case university because of the faith community, the location, and the ability to make connections in the area of interest to him. His ultimate decision to attend the case university came down to the location, faith-based community, and the ability to connect with leaders in his field of study.

Rose

Rose, a Hispanic female in-state student, graduated from a public charter high school and came to know about the case university because she lived nearby and always heard good things about it. She was prompted to visit campus because of all the local schools to which she applied, she preferred the case university and so visited there first. She decided that if she liked the case university, there would be no reason to visit the others. Rose decided to apply after the campus visit solidified her interest, being impressed with the faith-based community, small campus size, and the campus felt like home. Her consideration set consisted of four universities and she ultimately chose the case university because of the small size, ability to make friends easily in the faith-based community, and sizable scholarship. Rose described the case university as a faith-based community that felt like home because everyone was so kind and welcoming.

Sarah

Sarah, a White female in-state student, graduated from a public high school and discovered the case university during her older brother's college search where she became impressed with the academic reputation of the university. When it came time for her search, she was fairly certain that she wanted to attend the case university and after her visit, she kept wanting to come back. Her consideration set consisted of three private in-state universities all of which were faith-based and a strong factor in her decision to enroll was the strength of her intended major at the case university and the connections to a major employer that was of interest to her, along with a manageable distance from home.

Ted

Ted, a Hispanic male out-of-state student, graduated from a private high school and discovered the university after an admission counselor visited his high school for a college fair. He was prompted to apply after researching the amount of merit aid he might be able to expect from different universities. The amount of merit aid possible drove much of his search process along with location as he and his family were very opposed to taking on debt. His consideration set included three private, faith-based universities and one flagship public in his home state. Ultimately, his choice set came down to which of the universities were giving him the most financial aid and he decided to choose the most affordable option which, fortunately for him, was his top choice, the case university.

Each of the individual interviews provided a unique perspective into how students progressed through their university search process. While the research questions focused specifically on the consideration and choice sets, the awareness set was also discussed in the interview process and will be useful to the case university even if not directly germane to the

research questions in this study. The following sections will detail each research question and the data used to answer each of them.

Research Question 1

As first-time, 1st-year incoming freshmen reflect on their university selection process at a university selected for this study, what were the brand characteristics of the institutions in their consideration set? Answers to this question were derived from the survey and in-person interviews. The analysis of these responses generated several themes from both the online survey and individual interviews. Discussions with students allowed many of these themes to be discussed in greater detail to help understand the reasons for the inclusion of universities within the consideration set. The relevant findings dealt with (a) consideration set size, (b) a wide variety of institutional types, and (c) influential factors helping to shape the consideration set.

Consideration Set Size

First, it is important to note the size of the consideration set. When looking at the number of schools to which students applied, 42% of survey respondents applied to two or three schools; 24% applied to four or five schools; 11% applied to six or seven schools; 12% applied to eight or more. Only 10% of students applied to one school. Over 75% of respondents had consideration sets between one and five schools. When asked about whether or not the case university was the first-choice school, 65% of survey respondents indicated that it was their first-choice school. Thus, over 75% of students in this study were considering no more than five universities and fewer than 25% had consideration sets of six or more universities. See Table 3 which details these results from the online survey.

Table 3*Size of the Consideration Set as Noted by Survey Respondents*

| Schools Considered | % of Respondents | No. of Respondents |
|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| 1 | 10% | 18 |
| 2-3 | 42% | 72 |
| 4-5 | 24% | 42 |
| 6-7 | 11% | 19 |
| 8 or more | 12% | 21 |

A Wide Variety of Institutional Types

When considering the characteristics of universities within the consideration set, considerable variety existed. Since the students interviewed were attending a faith-based university, one might expect the consideration set to be comprised of mostly faith-based institutions. This was not the case. For example, students who participated in the semi-structured interviews in this study were very likely to include institutions from different categories such as private, public, large, small, faith-based, and secular. Only three of the 13 students interviewed about their consideration set were looking only at private, faith-based institutions and one of those three was majoring in theology. So, pursuing a faith-based major played a role for one student in considering only faith-based universities. Only five students who were interviewed and were considering private universities only, each student had a mix of private universities, often consisting of faith-based privates, church-affiliated privates, and secular privates. Of the students who had a mix of public and private universities, more common characteristics of the universities in each interviewed student's consideration set were having a public flagship

university, a secular private university, a regional public university, and a private, faith-based university making up one's consideration set.

Table 4

Variety in the Consideration Set as Noted by 13 Interviewees

| Type of University | No. of Interviewees |
|---------------------------|---------------------|
| Mix of public and private | 8 |
| Private only | 5 |
| Faith-based only | 3 |

There were eight of the 13 students interviewed who included a mix of types of institutions (private, public, large, small, church-affiliated, faith-based, etc.) in the consideration set. For some, this was because of location or the imposing of geographical parameters on the college search and therefore they were considering colleges of different types within a narrowly defined region. For others, affordability played a considerable role in the consideration stage because while many preferred a faith-based institution, it was still unclear as to whether they would be able to afford a faith-based institution compared to a public university, specifically a public institution within their home state as many public out-of-state universities were sometimes comparable in cost to private institutions. Only two students interviewed considered two schools and for them, it came down to the faith-based case institution and a public university option in their home state. Neither was thrilled with the public option they considered, but they believed it might be a necessity if they did not earn a scholarship at the case university that would be substantial enough to help them attend. This finding is directly related to the affordability characteristic that will be discussed later in the chapter.

Influential Factors Helping to Shape the Consideration Set

When looking at the movement from the awareness set to the consideration set, 55% of survey respondents noted that word of mouth (family, friends, teachers) was how they initially became aware of the case university, which was the highest percentage of the options provided. See Table 5 which provides results from this survey question. During the interviews, hearing from trusted others about their experience with the case university or the positive reputation that it enjoyed was important as awareness moved to consideration. Hannah noted that her father was in town on business in the city where the case university is located quite often, and he was the one who suggested they look at it. She stated, “My Dad just knew some people from work that had either gone there or had spouses who had gone there, and he thought we should go look at it.”

Table 5*How Students Became Aware of the University*

| Category | % Selected | No. |
|---|------------|-----|
| Word of mouth (family, friends, teachers) | 55% | 96 |
| Online research | 49% | 84 |
| College fairs | 22% | 38 |
| Conversations with current students | 21% | 36 |
| Conversations with alumni | 18% | 32 |
| Social Media (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) | 15% | 26 |
| High school guidance counselor suggested | 13% | 23 |
| Other | 11% | 19 |
| Visit to my high school by an admission counselor | 10% | 17 |

Note. This table displays the answers to Survey Question 1: How did you become aware of the case university? Select all that apply. (See Appendix B)

For Bill it was a 2500-mile spring break road trip to look at colleges that his father put together which included the case school because his father had heard good things about the university and liked the location. Bill was not as enthusiastic as his father was about putting it on the list to visit, preferring to take the day off instead and do some sightseeing in the city. Bill said, “My Dad said, ‘no, you’re going to tour [case university],’ and I said, ‘OK, I guess I’ll tour it.’” The connection he made with a professor on the day of his visit accelerated his interest in possibly attending the university.

Several students mentioned a family connection to the case university having had a sibling apply and, in some cases, attend or a cousin who was an alumnus of the university. Joe stated, “I came to know about [case university] through a multitude of avenues. The primary one was through family. I have a lot of family who attended the school, and my grandfather was on the board of trustees.” Maria said,

My oldest sister was going to attend [case university] until 2 weeks before she started college and different life circumstances prevented her from coming and now my next oldest sister is a junior here, so I knew a lot about it.

Others mentioned looking to teachers at their high school who were alumni or had experience with the university in some way. Reagan pointed out,

My teacher told me about a scholarship to [case university] that was for students from my school who wanted to become a teacher, and that made me interested...and I’m pretty proud that I get to be one of the very first ones to get it.

Conversations with alumni and conversations with current students were selected by 18% and 21% of survey respondents, respectively, proving that a personal connection was indeed important to becoming acquainted with the case university.

The second most popular answer to the question about how they became aware was online research. In the online survey, 49% of respondents reported using some type of online research to discover more about the case university. For some, a simple online search for “faith-based universities” was the way they discovered the case university. Several of the students who participated in the interviews mentioned providing their contact information to the Christian Connector, which is an organization that allows students to receive information from a large number of faith-based universities. A few of them lamented the number of emails they began to

receive after signing up for this service. The location of the case university and the fact that it was a faith-based institution attracted students in this study to learn more, and for some, prompted the first visit.

Others looked at various ranking sites to determine whether their desired major had a good reputation while one interviewed student, Carl, used Rate My Professor to determine how other students rated professors in their major area of interest. Carl stated,

I looked up several faculty that were on the website and the reviews were largely quite positive and the ones that weren't showed them to be reasonable teachers, just maybe they were kind of hard in some ways, which does not really intimidate me. So, after doing all that, I came to know that the engineering program is different than a lot of engineering programs in the sense that the professors here are usually experienced in the field or actively working in the field.

For Carl, online research helped him determine that the faculty with whom he would be working met his expectations for knowledge and experience in his chosen major.

All 13 interviewees mentioned doing some type of research on the university's website. Some looked up majors and the faculty who would be teaching within those areas. Mary looked for particular courses that would be offered within the major and compared schools in that way. She noted,

When using the website, finding detailed courses within degree programs was really annoying and frustrating to go to the website and they just give you a very general broad base...well, the catalog is there but you can't find all that you need easily for a certain major.

Mary wanted more specific details on courses required for the major than the institutional websites often provided and searching through an online catalog was not helpful for her.

Bill, a theology major, spent time on each of the faith-based university websites in his consideration set, trying to get a sense of what each place was all about and how that might align with his faith convictions. He shared that he would “immediately start going through looking at doctrinal statements, all this stuff, and I immediately knocked it down, cutting the list in half very quickly.” He also used each university’s website to research reputation, sharing that, “I also looked for what the school’s reputation might be, because, you know, the name on your degree is a powerful thing in a lot of situations.” Bill ruled out one faith-based school because of the negative publicity recently associated with the brand due to misconduct by high-ranking university administrators over several years. He put it this way: “Ok, do I want that name attached to my degree...for me that was a big turnoff, so I went through asking what do they believe and what do they advocate for?” He was not interested in an institution that was mixing faith with politics.

When students were asked about what sources they relied on most in gathering information about colleges and universities, the college website was noted by the most survey respondents at 70%. See Table 6 for answers to this survey question. The next highest percentage was 65% and that belonged to campus tours/open house events. All 13 students that were interviewed visited the case university campus at some point along their journey, with the vast majority visiting multiple times. In each case, the campus visit experience furthered their interest in the case university, with two students having substantive conversations with faculty on their visit and follow up after the visit that solidified their decision to choose the case university. Bill noted that:

[One professor], when I was able to meet him, you know, he was very genuine. I had a great conversation with him...we talked theology for an hour and he made this very strong personal connection of, hey, I don't just want your money, but I want you here. And that was something that made [case university] different from a lot of the other colleges. It seemed a lot of the other colleges seemed more business whereas [case university], it seemed like it was more based around, you know, getting you there.

Many saw admission representatives at college fairs and high school visits in their areas and two of the 13 students attended a summer camp offered by the case university. Having a positive, personal experience on the university campus was an important factor in moving an institution to the choice set and ultimately enrollment.

Table 6

Sources Most Relied Upon When Gathering University Information.

| Category | % Selected | No. |
|---|------------|-----|
| College website | 70% | 121 |
| Campus tours/open house events | 65% | 113 |
| Word of mouth (family, friends, teachers) | 43% | 75 |
| Conversations with current students | 32% | 56 |
| Social Media (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) | 31% | 53 |
| College brochures/materials | 20% | 34 |
| Online forums or review websites | 17% | 29 |
| Conversations with alumni | 16% | 27 |
| Other | 4% | 7 |

Note. This table displays the answers to Survey Question 2: What sources did you rely upon most when gathering information on colleges/universities? Select all that apply. (See Appendix B).

The third most popular selection when asked about the sources relied on most to gather information about the university, at 43% of survey respondents was word of mouth (family, friends, and teachers) which was cited earlier as being the most common selection for how students initially became aware of the university. As I noted earlier, word of mouth conveys an element of trust in the individual being relied upon for information and is a reason that a well-developed university brand is so important for the recruitment and enrollment of students. Students and families with positive experiences share these experiences with others and bring new students and families into the university orbit.

In summary, when looking at the brand characteristics of the institutions in the consideration set, over 75% of survey respondents in this study had a consideration set size of five universities or less. Further, most students who were interviewed detailed brand characteristics of the universities in their consideration set that were a mix of institutional types, public and private institutions, faith-based and secular, large and small. Only three students of the 13 interviewed were considering faith-based institutions only. When students were constructing their consideration sets, word of mouth, online research, and college fairs were the three most selected ways students were discovering and adding the case university to their consideration set. As students gathered information during the consideration stage, the college website, campus tours/open house events, and word of mouth were the three most relied-upon sources to learn about each school being considered.

Research Question 2

What university brand characteristics did first-time, 1st-year incoming students identify as being most important to them when making the university brand choice? This research question was answered by an open-ended, online survey question that asked why the case university was chosen over the other schools in the choice set. Students were asked to be as specific as possible in their responses. This question was further answered by the discussion that took place in the semi-structured interviews around the choice set and why students made the decision they did. The top seven brand characteristics that arose as themes are listed in order of prevalence in Table 7 and are discussed below.

Table 7

Most Popular Themes Derived from Survey Answers to Research Question 2

| Category | % Selected | No. |
|---|------------|-----|
| Faith-Based Community | 50% | 71 |
| Affordability | 32% | 46 |
| Close-Knit Community in Major City | 31% | 45 |
| High Quality of Chosen Major | 24% | 35 |
| Proximity to Home | 22% | 32 |
| Reputation for Producing Successful Graduates | 19% | 27 |
| Optimal Size of Campus Community | 15% | 22 |

Faith-Based Community

The most prevalent theme shared by most students as to why they chose the case university was the faith-based community. Of the 143 responses to this question, 71 students

noted that finding a faith-based university that met all their criteria was a high priority in their search. Several students mentioned their preference for a faith-based university but were unsure as to whether they would be able to afford it. This explains why it was very common to see students have a mix of universities in their consideration set, knowing that a public, in-state university might be their choice if the financial package was not sufficient. A student remarked, “At [case university], I have found it so easy to invest in community because I am surrounded by it constantly and I can’t help but want to pour into the community.” A survey respondent said, “I chose [case university] primarily because I knew that I would be able to grow spiritually here, which was the most important thing for me in college.” Another survey respondent shared:

I was drawn to the small Christian community. I loved the idea of having a small community on campus but still being in a big city. I also love the reputation of the professors and knowing that everyone truly cares about the success of their students.

Knowing that professors strive to know each of their students was a comforting thought. This theme was shared consistently throughout both the survey and individual interviews and highlighted the importance of finding a faith-based community among the enrolled first-time, 1st-year freshman class.

Affordability

The next most popular reason for choosing the case university was affordability, with the scholarships they received that made it possible for them to attend. Affordability was mentioned in 46 of the 143 responses as a key component when making the brand choice. For some, it was primarily an academic scholarship based on their academic record that helped them to attend, while for others it was the combination of an academic scholarship and need-based financial aid that provided them a financial package that met their needs. One student remarked “The largest

consideration I gave was to scholarship opportunities. These directly reflect how much an institution values a student. [case university] valued me most.” Another student shared:

I was more impressed by [case university] than I was by other universities. Ultimately though, it all came down to scholarships. I could only do what I could afford. College is on my bill and mine alone, but [case university] was very generous with financial aid, more so than any other university, and while I did receive a full ride to [in-state public university] as well, I knew that [case university] would be worth paying a little more.

Financial considerations were a strong theme in this study, with students highlighting the importance of being able to fund their educational experience. Most of the students who mentioned this brand characteristic of affordability noted that they would not have been able to enroll without the financial package they received.

Close-Knit Community in a Major City

The third most popular brand characteristic that arose for the selection of the case university was the close-knit community in a prime location, as noted by 45 of the 143 respondents. Located in a major city, the university enjoys a residential location near a large urban area. For many students, the location provided all the things they were looking for as it relates to career opportunities (internships, industry connections) and social life outside of campus (concerts, entertainment, food, etc.). A student shared, “[Case University’s] location is much better for my choice of career, as opposed to the middle of nowhere Indiana.” Another student wrote, “I liked the location, size, community, and engineering department. All of these aspects seemed superior to the other schools that I visited.” A survey respondent remarked, “[Case University] was in a more appealing location to me than [private, faith-based university] because it gave me space to be independent, was in a fun city to explore, and was beautiful.”

Finally, a student commented “I loved that [case university] is in [case university city]. A small, close-knit community and school in a big city.” The close-knit community in a large city is a major brand characteristic that was important to students and families.

High Quality of Chosen Major

The fourth most common theme that arose was the perceived high quality of the chosen major as noted by 35 of the 143 respondents. Students investigated this in a variety of ways, including visiting with faculty members in their area during their campus visit or by phone follow-up after being admitted to the university. Others did online research that helped them to determine what their major would entail while also looking at the experience and professional background of the faculty members listed in their area. Finally, others heard from peers, alumni, or trusted others about the high quality of the major and used that as an indicator. A student shared that:

[Case University] fulfilled all the academic, social, and spiritual needs that I desired in a college. I have a very narrow major I wanted to pursue that required the utmost attention to detail and a very close mentoring network of professionals that have hands on current and prior experience in the field. I found that [case university] had the most professional staff and was not afraid to incorporate faith into their teaching.

One student remarked, “I knew there was a great Biology program at [case university] that would prepare me for medical school. I would receive a top-notch education while being close to home.” Another survey respondent put it this way:

I loved the program for my major. Every faculty member, especially in my major, seemed very caring and genuine, not to mention their impressive credentials. My

department is also very inclusive and dedicated to working with other people in the arts and wants you to have as much opportunity as you can.

The quality of the major theme went beyond just the fact that the university offered their major, but that they judged their major interest of good quality or of better quality than the other universities under consideration.

Proximity to Home

The fifth most prevalent theme was proximity to home as noted by 32 of the 143 respondents. Not to be confused with the location theme above, many students mentioned the proximity to their family's home as being a brand characteristic important for the final decision. Having an acceptable distance, whether that be for driving or flying, was an important decision driver for students. One student remarked that the case university being close to a major airport allowed her to get home more quickly than other schools she considered that would require a flight. Some students wanted to be close to home and the case university met that criterion for them. A student shared, "I realized that I would have the ability to be close to home, so I could continue my competitive sports journey." Another said, "The location also attracted me and I'm only an hour away from home." Finally, a surveyed student shared her reasoning, "Small, faith-based university that was close to home and allowed for a solid education with an excellent business program."

For some students, the proximity to home allowed them to continue living with their family and in turn reduce the costs associated with on-campus living. The students who responded to the survey and were interviewed detailed how their search involved universities close to their homes so that they could continue living there to save money. This limited their search to those universities in close commuting proximity which is typically less than 30 miles

and the potential for staying in-state and taking advantage of state financial aid programs that help defray costs. For these students, scholarships played a key role in their enrollment, without which they would not have enrolled.

Reputation for Producing Successful Graduates

The sixth most popular theme to arise was the reputation of the university for producing successful graduates as noted by 27 of the 143 respondents. Although this is similar to the “high quality of the chosen major” theme discussed earlier, this had more to do with the overall academic reputation and producing successful alumni. In their judgment, the university had a reputation for producing successful graduates. One student remarked, “A lot of people keep telling me it is a great choice and a really good school.” Another stated that they “liked that it had a great academic reputation.” A survey respondent shared, “I found great faculty here who wanted to invest in me and help develop my skills and see me thrive.” A few students mentioned asking teachers at their high school about the case university and whether they thought it might be a good fit for them. Some teachers had a connection to the university as alumni or knew former students who were now alumni and could speak to the educational experience they received. The reliance on trusted others to affirm their consideration of the case university was an important part of their decision process.

Optimal Size of Campus Community

The final brand characteristic in the top seven was the optimal size of the campus community, as noted by 22 of the 143 respondents. The size of the university, with roughly 3,000 undergraduates, was the optimal size for those who listed this as a brand characteristic that was important to their decision. Most students listed their preference for a smaller university, even though they may have had a much larger university in their consideration list and even their

choice set. One respondent shared, “I loved that it was a small school and that granted me the opportunity to make closer relationships with faculty and peers...I did not want to be in freshman class sizes of 130.” Another student wrote, “It was everything I was looking for. It was a small, private, Christian school on the outskirts of [city].” Finally, a student shared that, “I believe the most significant factors are the size of the campus (small), the quality of the engineering department, and the cost.”

As students discussed the size of the campus, several used the words, “It just felt right.” Others used the Goldilocks expression, “It wasn’t too big, and it wasn’t too small, it was just right.” Campus size played a role in getting to know their faculty members as well as connecting better with other peers. A few students mentioned the fear of going to a large university only to be connected to those they knew from high school and that choosing the case university allowed them to be able to develop new friends and relationships. Having the optimal-sized campus community and student body was an important brand characteristic for those surveyed in this study.

To conclude this section, the university brand characteristics that first-time, 1st-year students identified as being most important to them when making the university brand choice were (a) faith-based community, (b) affordability, (c) close-knit community in a major city, (d) high quality of chosen major, (e) proximity to home, (f) reputation for producing successful graduates, and (g) optimal size of the campus community. The next section will detail the findings from the third research question.

Research Question 3

How did first-time, 1st-year incoming students enrolled at the case study university evaluate the university as compared to the list of institutions within their choice set? As students

reflected on this question in the semi-structured interviews and in the open-ended responses from the survey, a few repetitive themes emerged that transcended the composition of the choice set. While each student had their perspectives about the other universities in the choice set and it was clear that some had done much more in-depth research on their choices than others, familiar themes arose about the case university and its comparison to the other universities in the choice set. The important themes that emerged are: (a) a more authentic faith-based community, (b) a more welcoming community, (c) a more personalized process focused on building relationships, (d) a more favorable location, and (e) more affordable when compared to the list of institutions within their choice set. These themes are illustrated in the following section.

Authentic Faith-Based Community

The most prevalent theme that came through for students was the authentic faith-based community. The distinction here is the use of the word “authentic.” From their perspective, the faith-based community that the university describes in its mission and vision statements and is crystallized in its core values is not just a tagline or a church affiliation long since gone. It is real. It is felt. It is genuine. This sentiment appeared in some form within each of the individual interviews. When students compared the case institution to their choice set, the sense of an authentic faith-based community stood out as a compelling brand characteristic of the university. Jane put it this way when discussing the comparison between schools in her choice set, “It was genuinely a Christian school. [Case University] doesn’t just say it’s a Christian school, it actually is. It’s so clear and so true. I felt that more here and saw that more here than at [another faith-based HEI].” Cora shared that the genuine faith-based community, “speaks volumes to the kind of people that are at [case university]. They’re not just trying to put on a show, the show is real life and I think that’s really special.” Finally, Carl shared this perspective:

When I say Christian universities...some are in name alone. I mean, so it's like, this one...is and that really grabbed my attention. This kind of stuff seemed more genuine, so I cared a bit more about it. The engineering college, they go out and they do mission trips every year, like a dozen of them. This school cares about it. So, there was the mission statement kind of stuff and then there was also the fact that I could see it, demonstrably, you know, in the university's actions.

The sentiment of the faith-based community not just being a talking point, but an actual lived experience by members of the community, was a strong comparison point to other HEIs within their choice set.

Welcoming Community

While offering an authentic faith-based community was an overwhelming theme that arose, the distinction of having a more welcoming community than others in the choice set also presented itself in the comments. This is closely connected to the authentic faith-based community, but there was a distinction in the comments related to the welcoming. From the perspective of those interviewed, this welcome began when they first visited campus. There was a feeling of wanting to quickly return because of the hospitality, friendliness, and kindness extended to them during their initial campus visit, which prompted several students to visit campus multiple times during the process.

Students communicated this sentiment in our conversations often. Jane shared, "When I did my first tour, I was like, this feels right. It's a warm hug. [Case University] is like a warm hug and when you know, you know." The sentiment of a warm hug was also echoed in the focus group when students were discussing their visit experience and then their first-semester enrollment perspective. In addition, the feeling had not changed for them post-enrollment. Maria

put it this way, “The first thing I would say it is feels like home, like a community that focuses on flourishing, just in every aspect of your life.” Rick had this perspective to share, “[Case University] is really a welcoming community and I know everyone says that, but [case university] has just felt like home since I've been here and it's become home for me.” The idea of a welcoming community at the case university was a significant brand characteristic that elevated the university when compared to other universities in the choice set.

Personalized Process Focused on Relationship Development

The idea of having a more personalized process focused on relationship development relative to other universities in the choice set is another common theme that was shared by multiple students in the interview process. Students recounted experiences with faculty members before enrollment where they felt wanted and valued by the university. Faculty members checked in on them periodically during the admission process after meeting them on campus. Faculty and staff remembered students' names after having met them previously. Faculty and staff sent personal notes, called prospective students by phone, and made the process personal. It was intentional and, in their experience, that feeling did not end once they enrolled, but rather continued and deepened once on-campus. A student shared with me that he wondered whether this was just an effort to get him to commit to the university, but to his excitement, he continued to experience this same level of personal investment by his faculty members once he enrolled.

For Rick, a music major at the case university, one of the faculty members in the School of Music was teaching in a summer program that he attended as a sophomore in high school. The professor engaged him in a conversation about whether he might want to major in music during college and invited him to apply to the case university. Rick was impressed when the faculty member recalled his name at their next meeting and even more impressed that he kept in contact

with him through the admission process. He shared that, “Dr. [faculty name] knows everybody and he told me when I was applying, he said all of my students have found jobs within the first 6 months. So, I felt like that was a really important thing.” Carl stated that one of his reasons for attending was his interaction with faculty that he did not get from other institutions in his choice set. He put it this way,

I communicated with Dr. [faculty name] and he was like 10 out of 10 the whole time. He was a significant reason why this school was of more interest to me, partly because of music, but also beyond that just his character sort of exemplified, you know what I was kind of looking for. He was a friendly professional, caring, and didn’t mind explaining things to me.

Maria, who founded a small business with her older sister experienced this engagement as a junior in high school, when her sister was enrolled at the case university. She shared this reflection about her experience:

Dr. [faculty name] and Dr. [faculty name], they kind of took us under their wing. I guess it was [my sister’s] sophomore year of college and my junior year of high school. So, we started getting in contact with them and they gave us connections and just resources for our business. So, that's also what pulled me here was just wanting to continue those resources and connections.

Being impressed by the faculty and the feeling of being more than just a number was a significant finding that students shared as they evaluated the university in comparison to the other universities in their choice set.

Superior Location in a Big City

The case university is fortunate to enjoy a location that is preferred by many prospective students. While not a surprising finding, this theme was prominent as students reflected on how the case university compared to other universities in their choice set. The case university's location in a city was often preferred when compared with institutions in less desirable locations for a variety of reasons. Many students believed their opportunities for internships and job/career options were superior by selecting the case university. Sarah shared her reasons for evaluating the location the way she did when she stated,

I'm from a really small town and so it's really experiencing big city life. That's kind of my big thing. But then also, [case university] is in a big city, but it's a small campus. So, I like that small campus, that small town feel, and a big city, like I have the best of both worlds.

Hannah described her evaluation of the location in this way,

I really liked the location. You know, it's in [city] but I really liked how it was in a neighborhood and you're still close to everything. You're also far enough away that you can kind of like get away from the craziness.

One survey respondent remarked, "The location is great for networking for my major in graphic design." Another responded with, "The opportunities that come with being in [city] were a big draw." Finally, a student put it this way, "[Case University] was in a more appealing location to me than [university in choice set] because it gave me space to be independent, was a fun city to explore, and was beautiful." The superior location of the university was an important theme that arose as students evaluated their options in their choice set.

Affordability

The final theme that was shared by most participants was the fact that the university was more affordable, made possible by generous scholarships that allowed them to attend. As they evaluated the case university compared to others in their choice set, they believed that the case university had made it possible for them not to focus so much on the financial aspect and could instead focus on other important areas. Several reflected that the case university was not always the least expensive financial option, but they were willing to invest more because the other characteristics were important to them.

Students had a variety of stories that they shared about affordability and the importance of scholarships, but a few stood out to me. Ted shared,

I think my biggest thing was money. Really, it was just thankful [case university] was my number one, but it also happened to be the only school that gave me enough money.

It was like, if another school had given me more money, I probably would've gone there.

A survey respondent remarked,

The cost of [case university] was significantly lower than that of [two universities in the choice set], especially after financial aid and scholarships were factored in. I was offered a much more significant scholarship by [case university] than the other two universities.

Bill talked about his experience being recruited by a faculty member in the School of Theology to choose the case university using scholarships available to theology majors. He recounted his story to me by saying,

And you know at the end, [Professor Name] after we were able to talk theology for a while, and he's like, I want you to here at [case university]. So, he was able to come up with a very generous scholarship, you know, and he matched the other college I was

considering. So, it was his constant commitment to say, hey, I'm going to try to get you here.

Reagan put her choice into perspective when she reflected on her decision this way:

I toured here in eighth grade, and the fact that [case university] just kept popping up through my educational journey, I was just like, thinking maybe this is a school for me. It's just how am I going to pay for this? But when I got a call from [admission officer] and told I got this scholarship to be an education major, and told me what that meant, that my whole tuition is paid for like, I'm blessed with that.

The affordability factor and the availability of scholarships to help defray the cost of their education were important aspects for most when it came down to choosing where to enroll. The students in this study believed that the generous scholarships offered by the case university were substantial compared to others in the choice set and allowed them to ultimately choose the case university.

Summary of Findings

This chapter discussed the findings that answered the three research questions guiding this study. Research question one sought to uncover the brand characteristics of institutions in the consideration sets of first-time, 1st-year incoming freshmen at the case university. The brand characteristics of the institutions in the consideration sets of first-time, incoming freshmen at the case university exhibited a variety of types (private, public, faith-based, secular, etc.)

I used online surveys and individual interviews to identify themes related to the size of consideration sets, types of institutions included, and factors influencing decisions. The first theme noted was the size of the consideration sets. It was noted that 42% applied to two or three schools, while 24% applied to four or five. Only 10% applied to just one school. Notably, 65%

of respondents indicated that the case university was their first choice. The second was institution type where participants exhibited considerable variety in considering different types of institutions. Private, public, large, small, church-affiliated, and faith-based institutions were all part of consideration sets. Among the interviewees, 8 out of 13 included a mix of institution types, driven by factors such as location, cost, and personal preferences.

The final theme related to influential factors that helped shaped the consideration sets, where word of mouth, particularly from family, friends, and teachers, played a significant role in initial awareness and consideration (55%). Family connections to the case university, such as siblings or cousins attending, were influential for some students. Online research was the second most common method for initial awareness (49%), with students using various sources, including Christian Connector, ranking sites, and Rate My Professor. College websites were crucial in gathering information, with 70% of respondents relying on them. Campus tours and open house events followed closely at 65%. Campus visits were integral to the decision-making process, with students valuing personal experiences and interactions with faculty members. The positive reputation and personal connections with the case university conveyed through word of mouth, campus visits, and online research, influenced students' decisions. Trust in family, friends, teachers, and positive personal experiences were vital elements in the information-gathering process. Overall, the findings emphasize the importance of personal connections, trustworthy information sources, and positive campus experiences in shaping the consideration sets of incoming 1st-year students. These factors contribute to the university's brand image and influence students' decisions throughout the selection process.

Research question two aimed to identify the university brand characteristics deemed most crucial by first-time, 1st-year students when selecting a university from their choice set. The

university brand characteristics that first-time, 1st-year incoming students identified as being most important to them when making the university brand choice were (a) faith-based community, (b) affordability, (c) close-knit community in a major city, (d) high quality of chosen major, (e) proximity to home, (f) reputation for producing successful graduates, and (g) optimal size of the campus community.

The data were gathered through an online survey and semi-structured interviews. Seven top brand characteristics emerged. First, students overwhelmingly prioritized a genuine faith-based community. The university's commitment to fostering a strong Christian environment, as reflected in its mission and values, played a pivotal role in their decision-making process. Second, affordability, aided by the availability of scholarships, emerged as a significant factor. Students often chose the case university due to the scholarships offered, which made attending financially feasible and reflected the value placed on them by the institution. Third, the close-knit community in a major city was a crucial brand characteristic. Students appreciated the proximity to career opportunities, industry connections, and vibrant social experiences outside the campus setting. Fourth, the perceived high quality of the chosen major was a key consideration. Students researched faculty expertise, program reputation, and the integration of faith into teaching methods, emphasizing the importance of a strong academic foundation in their field of interest. Fifth, many students specifically highlighted the proximity to their home as a crucial brand characteristic. This factor influenced decisions, with some students opting for the case university to stay close to home for various personal reasons. Sixth, the reputation of the university for producing successful graduates was a significant consideration for some students. The belief in the institution's ability to produce successful graduates and positive feedback from trusted sources contributed to their decision. Finally, the optimal size of the university community

played a role in decision-making. With a preference for a smaller campus, students felt the university's size of roughly 3,000 undergraduates offered the right balance, fostering closer relationships with faculty and peers. These seven brand characteristics highlight the diverse factors influencing students' decisions, including faith, financial considerations, location, academic quality, proximity to home, academic reputation, and campus size. The findings underscore the multifaceted nature of university selection, emphasizing the importance of aligning with personal, academic, and spiritual values.

Research question three explored how first-time, 1st-year students at a specific university evaluated it compared to other institutions in their choice set. First-time, 1st-year incoming students enrolled at the case study university evaluated the university as having (a) a more authentic faith-based community, (b) a more welcoming community, (c) a more personalized process focused on building relationships, (d) a more favorable location, and (e) more affordable when compared to the list of institutions within their choice set.

Several themes emerged from semi-structured interviews. First, an authentic faith-based community where students emphasized the genuine nature of the university's faith-based community, not merely a marketing tagline. The university's commitment to its mission and values stood out, with students expressing a real, lived experience of faith within the community. Second, was the welcoming community where the university was noted for providing a warm and welcoming community, starting from the initial campus visit. Students felt a sense of belonging and community, describing the university as a place that felt like home and focused on overall flourishing. Third, a more personalized process focused on relationship building where students highlighted a higher level of engagement and involvement with faculty and staff, both pre-enrollment and throughout their time on campus. Interactions with faculty, personalized

attention, and ongoing support influenced students' decisions to choose the university. Fourth, a superior location was noted as the university's location in a city was a significant factor, with students perceiving it as offering the best of both smaller campus and big-city experiences. Opportunities for internships and career options in the city were considered superior compared to institutions in less desirable locations. Fifth, is affordability, helped by generous scholarships compared to other universities, where many participants pointed to the importance of generous scholarships in their decision-making process. While the university might not always be the least expensive option, the availability of substantial scholarships allowed students to focus on other important factors, making the university financially viable. Overall, these themes highlighted the unique aspects that influenced students' evaluation of the case university against their choice set, emphasizing the significance of authentic community, welcoming community, faculty involvement, location, and financial support in their decision-making process.

In the next chapter, I discuss how the findings from the online survey and the individual semi-structured interviews align with prior literature and from research specifically related to brand identity and the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016). My findings, emerging from 197 survey respondents and the 13 students from the in-person interviews, answered my case study's three research questions while also identifying student perceptions and experiences that are both similar and different from findings from previous literature. As I contemplate the implications for theory and practice, I discuss the possible opportunities for further research in the area of college choice and the use of the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) along with how these findings may be used in the daily work of enrollment leaders as it relates to brand characteristics and the selection of a college from within the choice set.

CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS

This exploratory case study used a mixed-methods approach at a private university in the southeastern United States to explore college student decision-making around brand choice. Based on the purpose of the case study, I first conducted a focus group to collect student perspectives on the college search process and the university brand. Second, using the results of the focus group, I sent a survey to 704 enrolled first-time, 1st-year students in the Fall 2023 semester. Third, I collected and then analyzed the 197 responses to the survey. I then conducted individual semi-structured in-person interviews with 13 participants to understand the perspectives of students about their college choice process and the factors that influenced their consideration set and final choice set. The Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) forms the model upon which this study was based (see Figure 1 in Chapter 1).

This chapter provides a comprehensive discussion and interpretation of the findings derived from addressing the three research questions guiding the study. First, I provide a summary of the findings from the online survey and individual semi-structured interviews detailed in the previous chapter, referencing previous research where appropriate and discussing where the results of this research supported prior findings in the literature and where they differed. Second, I discuss recommendations for policy and future research opportunities in the field of college choice, branding in higher education, and the use of the consumer decision-making framework. Finally, I conclude the chapter by providing a summary narrative of the research from this case study.

Summary of Major Findings

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked: As first-time, 1st-year incoming students reflect on their university selection process at a university selected for this study, what were the brand characteristics of the institutions in their consideration set? I used an online survey and individual semi-structured interviews, revealing themes from three primary areas: the size of consideration sets, the types of institutions included within the consideration set, and influential factors that affected decisions. Of the students who participated in the online survey, over 75% of respondents had consideration sets between one and five schools. There was also considerable variety in the types of institutions included within the consideration set. It was not uncommon to have faith-based universities, flagship publics, and secular, private universities being considered alongside each other. Finally, the influential factors that helped to shape the consideration set were word of mouth and online research, which were the two most listed ways that students became aware of the case university. When asked about the sources they relied upon for their research, 70% listed college websites, 65% listed campus visit opportunities, and 43% listed word of mouth, primarily from friends, family, and teachers.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked: What university brand characteristics did first-time, 1st-year incoming students identify as being most important to them when making the university brand choice? Seven key brand characteristics emerged from the data gathered through an online survey and semi-structured interviews. These factors are noted here in their order of prevalence. First, an authentic faith-based community and the university's commitment to fostering a strong Christian environment played a pivotal role. Second, affordability, aided by the availability of

scholarships, significantly influenced students' decisions. Third, the university's tight-knit community with a location in a major city was a crucial brand characteristic. Fourth, the high quality of the chosen major and faculty expertise were essential considerations. Fifth, some students specifically highlighted the proximity to their home as a crucial brand characteristic. Sixth, the reputation of the university for producing successful graduates was a significant consideration for some students. Finally, the optimal size of the university community, with roughly 3,000 undergraduates, played a role in decision-making. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of university selection, emphasizing the importance of aligning with personal, academic, and spiritual values.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked: How did first-time, 1st-year incoming students enrolled at the case study university evaluate the university as compared to the list of institutions within their choice set? Several themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews. Once again, the authentic faith-based community and its genuine nature stood out as compared with the other college brands in the choice set. The university was noted for providing a warm and welcoming atmosphere. A personalized process focused on relationship development by faculty and staff was highlighted. The university's location in a major city was considered superior for career opportunities. Finally, the affordability and availability of generous scholarships compared to other universities played a crucial role in one being able to choose the case university. These themes highlighted the unique aspects that influenced students' evaluation of the case university against their choice set, emphasizing authentic community, welcoming atmosphere, faculty involvement, location, and financial support.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1

In answering the first research question about the characteristics of the consideration set it was important to note that 42% applied to two or three schools, while 24% applied to four or five. Only 10% applied to just one school. So, over 75% of students surveyed had consideration sets of five or fewer. This emphasizes a concentrated decision-making process among the participants. As Howard and Sheth (1969) noted in their study, the brands that are the alternatives to the buyer's ultimate choice are typically few. Laroche et al. (1984) noted in their work that the average consideration set size was 3.98 which is consistent with the findings from this study. However, when compared with Dawes and Brown (2002) and their UK study which stated the average consideration set size was 6.01, my research showed a consideration set much smaller. While my research study did have students considering six or more schools, they were clearly the minority. Furthermore, 65% indicated that the case university was their first choice, underscoring the significance of focused consideration.

Considerable variety existed in the types of institutions included in participants' consideration sets. Private, public, large, small, church-affiliated, and faith-based institutions were all present. This is again consistent with the original work by Howard and Sheth (1969) who noted that brands in the consideration set do not need to be of the same product class as well as Dawes and Brown (2004) and Stephenson et al. (2016). Howard and Sheth's (1969) example described a customer who looked to satisfy the need to consume beverages and their consideration set included tea and coffee. Similarly, some students who are looking to satisfy the desire to attend college looked at a variety of universities to fulfill that desire. Notably, eight out

of 13 interviewees included a mix of institution types, reflecting a nuanced decision-making process influenced by factors such as location, cost, and personal preferences.

The two most influential factors in moving the university from the awareness set to the consideration set included word of mouth and family connections to the case university (55%) and online research (49%). This finding is consistent with Stephenson et al. (2016) who found that friends and relatives acted as decision mediators in the college decision-making process. Sojkin et al. (2012) also found that family opinion was a principal factor in helping students pursue college. Howard and Sheth (1969) discussed the concept of decision mediators which are rules used by a consumer to connect the motives of buyers to the satisfaction of these motives. Many students recounted stories about family members who were alumni who shared their experiences and thus generated and developed their interest in attending. Others had friends who were connected to the case university in some capacity that encouraged their interest. Having a friend or trusted person validate and encourage one's consideration of the university was a common reflection that was shared in the individual interviews and served to move a student further in the consideration process. In an age where marketing messages are not always trusted, students tend to value the opinions of those they consider trustworthy (Hoover, 2016).

The three most popular sources of information when compiling the consideration set were college websites (70%), campus tours (65%), and word of mouth (43%). Campus tours or on-campus informational events were influential to students seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the institution. This finding was also in line with Stephenson et al. (2016) who noted that campus visits were a significant part of the college selection process and in their research, it was the final factor that tipped the scales toward the ultimate choice. This theme arose very clearly in the focus group as well where students commented on the impactful nature of an admitted

student event where they were able to meet other students who had the institution as a top choice. They commented on the feeling they had of being valued and wanted by the university. One student remarked, “I couldn’t believe they put this whole thing together for us...it was clear they really wanted me here from the faculty to the staff.” Dawes and Brown (2002) also confirmed this finding in their study of the consideration set. Howard and Sheth (1969) noted that in the consumer behavior literature, decision mediators develop and solidify when a repetitive purchase happens over time. The college selection process is not repetitive, and therefore new to buyers, so information is sought elsewhere, including social contexts (Howard & Sheth, 1969; Stephenson et al., 2016). Trustworthy sources, such as family, friends, and teachers, played a vital role in the initial awareness and consideration stages. I will discuss the findings from research question two in the next section.

Research Question 2

For Research Question 2, which asked about the brand characteristics that were most compelling to students as they made their college choice, seven themes surfaced. That the case university provided an authentic faith-based community along with the university's commitment to fostering a supportive Christian environment was not a surprising finding. Students distinguished the faith community at the case university as different than other universities that may talk about the existence of a faith community, but it is not part of the experience that one has when visiting the campus. The comments in the individual interviews centered around a community of faith that one fully experiences daily. Given the nature of the authentic faith-based community, it is by far, the most compelling brand characteristic driving most student decisions. Students who are not looking for a faith-based education are highly unlikely to have the case university in their choice set. The case university is firmly committed to integrating faith and

academics and therefore it is not something that students could somehow avoid if they enrolled. Toma et al. (2005) noted that strong brands in higher education have clear values that become known to the public through events, symbols, narratives, and practices that occur over time. Students communicated that they did not just see the institution stating their values but that the values were being lived out in the university community and that was attractive to them. That authenticity and the genuine Christian community came through very clearly in this research as a compelling brand characteristic.

Second, the affordability of the university, aided by the availability of scholarships significantly influenced students' decisions. This finding was consistent with Stephenson et al. (2016) as they found that cost was a prohibitive factor. The affordability factor was driving decisions for several students in this study causing several of them to begin looking very early in their search for schools that offered generous merit scholarships. Howard and Sheth (1969) were one of the earliest to note that finances could be an inhibitor, as a lack of resources can act as a barrier to purchasing a preferred brand. In the survey, 35% of respondents said the institution was not their first choice, and affordability was listed in several instances as a determinant. However, many students found that the significant scholarship helped make it possible to attend their first-choice university, with 65% of respondents saying that the case university was their first choice. So, the fact that students preferred the case university and found it to be affordable had a sizable effect on the ability of students to enroll at their first choice.

The university's tight-knit community and location in a major city with many opportunities were also crucial brand characteristics and are also consistent with the findings from referenced literature (Stephenson et al., 2016). For some it was proximity to home that was an important brand characteristic, for others it was the opportunities that existed in the case city,

and still for others it was that the location was further from home with the desire to study in a different part of the country or to break out of the normal college choices made by their high school peers. The students in this study identified the opportunities for internships and jobs that come from being in a city that can boast Fortune 500 opportunities in technology, finance, engineering, healthcare, and the arts. Access to these opportunities at the case university was considered better than the other universities in the choice set. Choosing the location as an important characteristic resonated with this study just as it has in prior studies looking at important characteristics of collegiate choices.

The high quality of the chosen major and faculty expertise were also noted as essential considerations. One would expect this to be an important driver of decision-making as it is the reason for the collegiate experience, to gain a degree that will allow one to obtain a good job or be admitted to a graduate school of choice. It comes as no surprise that this also is part of the findings in prior studies, though in Stephenson et al. (2016), it was the availability of the major, not necessarily the quality of the major. Still, that may be inferred as students do not often select something that they believe to be inferior. In this study, the quality of the major and the experience of the faculty was of particular importance to students. Closely related, is the student's positive assessment of the academic reputation of the university and the reputation for producing successful graduates, which appeared as a theme for students in this study, even though there were a variety of factors used to judge this such as the recommendation from trusted others and university ranking organizations. In other studies, this may be reflected in the quality of the major, but there was a difference in this study as it referred to the entirety of the institution's academic and successful alumni reputation. The desire to be proud of the diploma

that will eventually be awarded is where this theme originated and students believe that they would receive an outstanding education that would prepare them well for the future.

Finally, the optimal size of the university community, with roughly 3,000 undergraduates, played a role in decision-making. This is another prominent theme in other studies and students view this as a “too big” or “too small” choice as they compare it to others typically (Stephenson et al., 2016). In this case, students believed that the size was attractive to them, with several voicing the “best of both worlds” in that it was not too big, nor was it too small. Some mentioned being attracted to the size because they would get to know a variety of people, but it would not be so big that it would be overwhelming, and they would not know anyone. Many believed that the size made the community easier to navigate and ultimately find their community within. The next discussion will center on the findings from the third and final research question.

Research Question 3

In Research Question 3, I sought to discover how students compared the case university to others in their choice set. Not surprisingly, some of the same themes surfaced as they did in research question two. The authentic faith-based community once again was a strong theme shared by many. In the choice set, some students had other faith-based institutions that they were deciding between. Still, for many, the authenticity of the case university’s faith community, noting that it was more than just a slogan, was considered superior to the others being considered. The notion of being able to “feel” that community during their campus visits, to their interactions with faculty, staff, and current students kept being mentioned by students during the individual interviews as well as in the online survey. While there was nothing in the prior literature reviewed that specifically dealt with a faith-based community, other studies note the

importance of the campus life experience or a certain vibe that was felt during their campus visit experience (Rosen et al., 1998b; Stephenson et al., 2016). So, while perhaps unique to this study because of the case university's faith-based mission, the campus community, campus climate, and friendly community are often themes cited as important for students when making college decisions.

The warm, welcoming atmosphere that students experienced was noted as a positive characteristic of the case university when compared with others in the choice set. Students spoke about the warm welcome they received each time they visited campus with many students noting that it felt like home. An element of this theme is the feeling that prospective students have when they interact with current students and staff members in the admission office. They also reflected on the continuation of this feeling after they enrolled and began classes. Their comments centered around the ease of getting to know other students, the feeling of being welcomed into conversations or friend groups, being invited to social events, and the general feeling of welcome. As was mentioned in Chapter 4, several students resonated with a sentiment shared by a student during the focus group where she referred to the case university as a "warm hug." While this finding seems to be unique to the case university as this sentiment is not reflected in the other studies referenced in Chapter 2, it could be loosely connected to the campus environmental factors that were discussed in Stephenson et al. (2016).

Also mentioned as a positive comparison is the higher level of engagement students received with faculty and staff at the case university, compared to others in their choice set. One element of this finding is having quality interactions with professors in their academic area of interest which is important in the recruitment process. The feeling of getting to know faculty members who may become mentors during the college years was a frequent topic of

conversation during the individual interviews. Students referenced faculty members becoming involved in their recruitment process, remembering their names when they came back for a second visit, and the intentionality they felt by the faculty and staff in getting to know them as a critical part of the recruitment experience the case university seeks to provide.

The location of the campus was another characteristic that felt superior to students as they compared the case university to others within their choice set. As has been mentioned earlier in the chapter, the primary version of location that was referenced as being compared to others in their choice set was the opportunities that they believed the location provided would be more advantageous than some of the other options being considered. Access to internships, activities, and ease of getting back and forth between campus and their family's home were all positive elements compared by students. The location of the campus is certainly considered by the case university as an asset, especially as it relates to attracting quality faculty. Compared to college towns and rural locations, students in this study preferred being closely connected to a city for all the opportunities that location provides them.

The greater level of affordability aided by the scholarships received was the final characteristic listed by students in this study as being a positive factor in comparing their choices. As mentioned earlier in research question two, students as they narrowed their list to a final choice set felt that the case university had provided a financial package that was conducive to making their attendance possible. For some students whose decision-making process was driven by total net cost, the case university's affordability compared favorably to the others in the set. This was a welcome finding for those employees at the case university who often work more closely with those who are trying to make the financial situation work. One can often lose sight of the perspective of others who believe the institution has been very generous with

scholarship money when so much time is spent working with families who ultimately decide they are unable to make it work. Hearing the stories of students who were pleased with their financial packages and extremely thankful for them was a needed reminder and will be an important finding for the university financial aid team. As I mentioned earlier, affordability was a determinant found in prior studies as well (Stephenson et al., 2016).

Each of these areas of favorability noted by respondents will aid in the communication and messaging that will be used in future marketing pieces and in work done by admission counselors in helping students draw comparisons between the universities in their choice set. While none of these findings would be categorized as surprising to me, their perceived relevance and importance by current students have been instructive and will be important for the construction of future yield campaigns. In the next section, I will provide a discussion of the implications for policy and practice based on the findings from this study.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Several of the findings in this study align with prior research. Others are more unique to this study and case university setting. While the results of this case study may be useful in similar contexts, they are not generalizable to all prospective students. The survey and interviews capture a moment in time for participants, presenting a challenge to follow up over time to confirm or seek clarification. Nevertheless, there are important recommendations for higher education policy and practice that may be considered based on the results, certainly for the case university. Institutions that are public, private, secular, or faith-based can still take themes that surfaced in this study and evaluate their relevance to their specific contexts. The following discussion provides an opportunity to share some of the recommendations for the case university. A summary of the findings is listed in Table 8.

Table 8*Findings and Relevant Recommendations*

| Findings | Related Recommendations | Supporting Literature | Implementation Steps | Anticipated Challenges |
|---|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Importance of positive word of mouth | Enhanced communication strategies | Aaker (1991); Toma et al. (2005) | Provide updated messaging to stakeholders Enhance social media strategies to facilitate sharing | Staff resources Staff resources |
| Affordability impacting the consideration and choice sets for students and families | Accessible financial aid policies | Stephenson et al. (2016) | Funding scholarship programs Consolidation of existing programs Communication of scholarship programs more broadly | Resources and donor identification Lack of buy in for consolidation Resources to market scholarship programs |
| Importance of engagement with faculty during the admission process | Faculty engagement priorities | Williams & Omar (2014) | Prioritize recruitment activities among selected faculty Implement training program | Lack of buy in and resources Making the program mandatory |
| Importance of building brand equity to enrollment | Continuous Brand Evaluation | Aaker (1991); Toma et al. (2005) | Begin brand evaluation activities | Resources |

Note. This table displays the connection between the findings, related recommendations, and the literature supporting the recommendation.

Enhanced Communication Strategies

One of the opportunities for the case university and perhaps in other related higher education contexts is centered around the idea that universities should invest in strategic communication efforts, engaging with current students, alumni, and faculty to amplify positive aspects of the institution. Given the number of students who referenced hearing about the university through word-of-mouth sources, the strategic communication efforts among influential constituents can help bring greater early awareness among prospective students. Providing positive brand characteristics and student success stories to key influencers such as alumni, allows for the continuation of positive word-of-mouth recommendations. This could be accomplished by sending updates through the quarterly alumni magazine and expanding the address list to reach additional influencers. Social media messages can be influential in helping to share positive brand characteristics among prospective students as well as important stakeholders. The use of video content to share student stories and testimonials via social channels is another way to accomplish sharing success stories. Encouraging the sharing of these stories on social media channels organically by key stakeholders may start to expand positive brand awareness.

As Aaker (1991) noted in his model of brand equity, brand loyalty has numerous benefits, but specific to this aspect is the generation of new customers through awareness of the product. Toma et al. (2005) also noted the importance of a loyal alumni base that speaks positively on behalf of the institution, highlighting the need for a strong institutional culture that creates bonds between key stakeholders and the university. Based on the findings in this study, the case university could help foster the building of brand loyalty through the use of enhanced communication strategies.

Accessible Financial Aid Policies

Numerous students in this study referenced affordability as a key determinant and the need for scholarships to assist in funding their education. At the case university, generous scholarships were noted both as a brand characteristic in the consideration set as well as a positive description of the case university in comparison to others in the choice set. Based on the results, I recommend that the case university create policies to enhance scholarship programs to remain competitive in attracting and retaining students, making them a central part of its value proposition. For example, steps should be taken toward funding existing scholarship programs that are currently unfunded. This requires the identification and development of donors who would be interested in establishing scholarships that help students attend the case university. Once that is accomplished, the case university should consider the expansion of certain scholarships to help enroll other student groups who are institutional priorities for the university. This would require additional fundraising activities, but it would allow the university to expand funding to students who may not otherwise be able to attend. It should be noted that this is very difficult work and will not be completed immediately. Rather, it should be pursued over time with annual benchmarks to mark progress toward the overarching goal.

A second recommendation for practice is for the case university to actively promote and streamline its financial aid programs, ensuring transparency and accessibility for prospective students. To accomplish this, the case university should consider the consolidation of some of their longtime scholarships for certain groups of students into a larger program that could help fund more students who exist in the modern applicant pools. It will be important to make sure that prospective students and families are aware of the generous scholarships that exist at the case university, so a campaign to increase awareness among groups that would be positively

impacted by these programs will be needed. Resources at the case university should be allocated for these efforts to continue successful enrollment outcomes. With more cost-conscious families populating the college-going population at this time in our history, effectively managing and strategically awarding the limited aid that universities have available is important in generating the needed revenue to run the institution as well as the headcount needed to populate residence halls and classrooms (Brint, 2022). Stephenson et al. (2016) noted that cost factors were central to decision-making in their study of students and the case university should also consider these factors as it moves forward with planning for scholarship funding.

Faculty Engagement Priorities

One of the key areas of differentiation for the case university from others in the choice set was the high level of engagement with faculty and staff during the recruitment process. An important area discussed by Williams and Omar (2014) is the shaping of brand equity for HEIs. Knowing that faculty are key stakeholders in the building of brand equity, it is important to strategically utilize their abilities to positively affect enrollment. Faculty can be key in building brand identity, which Williams and Omar (2014) defined as when organizational culture aligns with its mission, vision, and values. They can also be leaders in developing brand soul, which Williams and Omar (2014) defined as equity built on the perceptions of everyday living out the brand values by employees.

Prioritizing Faculty Engagement in Recruitment. Students in this study routinely commented on how they experienced the warm welcome and engagement from the faculty which is part of the case university's brand identity. Therefore, the case university leaders should advocate for policies that prioritize faculty engagement and involvement in student academic and personal development. This can come in various forms, including a recruitment function in

faculty loads so that faculty are not overburdened by teaching a full load and being responsible for working with prospective students. While this recommendation is a difficult one to accomplish, there may be opportunities to work on this over time as faculty loads may already be full.

This also requires resources and a willingness in the Provost's Office to either compensate faculty in some way for this work or make it known in the hiring process that prospective student recruitment efforts will be part of the position's responsibilities. This does not have to be part of every faculty job description, but perhaps the first place to begin is to identify one faculty member in the department who has this as a job responsibility and serves as a liaison to the undergraduate admission office. Policies like this can keep the most effective faculty members capable of communicating persuasively with prospective students about their programs and allow them to make meaningful connections with students. Further, this can help build awareness of the importance of faculty connecting with prospective students and its positive effect on enrollment outcomes.

Investing in Faculty Training Programs. From a practice perspective, based on the findings of this case study, I recommend that the case university invests in faculty training programs that emphasize the importance of personalized attention and support for students, including post-admission and pre-enrollment. Training faculty on effective communication with prospective families as well as the use of customer relationship management tools employed by the admission office can aid in helping faculty know with whom they should be communicating and also be able to see what other communication has taken place to assess where a student might be in their college selection process. A first step toward this goal would be the identification of faculty by the department who will be communicating with admitted students.

Second, training could be set up at the beginning of each fall semester for faculty members and staffed by the undergraduate admission office. Over time, there may be the ability to set up a video course that could be accessed on demand for new faculty members and could be used as a resource for this training.

Continuous Brand Evaluation

As the importance of building brand equity continues to take hold in institutions of higher education, the need to consistently monitor and assess how well an institution is doing with building brand equity is important. The basis for this study was to help the case institution better understand elements of the university brand that were resonating with prospective students and that ultimately helped them choose the university. As Aaker (1991) noted, the four features of brand equity are brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, and brand association. Strong brands strengthen the ability to process information during the decision-making process (Toma et al., 2005). When families have a hard time distinguishing between institutions, a strong brand can aid in that decision-making process. Therefore, the case university should establish a policy for the promotion of continuous brand evaluation to ensure alignment with student expectations and evolving market trends. This would require the resources of the university marketing team at the case university and potentially an external partner. I acknowledge that dedicating resources to this may be difficult, so building toward this goal over time will likely be necessary. Once established, this would help the case university understand their prospective students, where enrollment opportunities might exist, and the ability to gain additional market share in a competitive environment. From a practice perspective, I recommend the regular assessment and adaptation of branding strategies to reflect the institution's strengths and resonate with the values of prospective students. This also requires resources to regularly assess how the brand is being

developed over time and will take time to move this into regular practice at the case university. The intervals for assessment need to be established and adhered to so that strategies can be adjusted if necessary.

While I believe that these recommendations will help the case university, I acknowledge that many of these recommendations will be difficult to achieve, especially as they relate to additional fundraising, expanded budgets, and reduction of faculty teaching loads. Nevertheless, they should be considered as a goal to reach over time, with incremental progress being made annually, rather than something to be implemented immediately.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several opportunities for future research that I considered as I moved through this case study. One of those opportunities would be a brand perception study that could delve deeper into the concept of university branding by exploring how students perceive and interpret the brand image of different universities. An investigation of how brand consistency, reputation, and messaging influence students' perceptions and decisions would be a fascinating study and timely for our field.

A second recommendation is a study about parental influence on the college decision-making process where an exploration of the role of parents in the college search could help reveal how their influence moves institutions in and out of the consideration set and their influence on the ultimate choice set. Research that investigates how parental expectations, involvement, and preferences shape students' decisions is a timely subject given the desire to compete for attention in a crowded marketplace. It would allow higher education leaders a better understanding of the dynamics of parent-student collaboration or conflict during the college selection journey.

A third recommendation for future research is a post-enrollment study that would extend research to include post-enrollment experiences. Investigating how well students' expectations align with their actual experiences at the chosen university is a fascinating topic and revealed interesting answers when this question was explored in this study. While not a primary answer to the research questions in this study, I found it interesting to hear answers to this question during the semi-structured interviews. A study focused on exploring the factors influencing student satisfaction, retention, and post-graduation outcomes would be worthwhile for most institutions trying to increase their retention rates and generate additional tuition revenue.

A fourth recommendation for future research is the influence of faith-based institutions on the recruitment and selection process. There are very few studies that explore faith-based institutions and their influence on the selection process, so learning more about their impact by selecting several institutions for a study would be a worthwhile research project.

Summary

This study provided an opportunity to learn from students at the case university about how they navigated the college selection process. Using the Consumer Decision Framework (Stephenson et al., 2016) to guide this study, students were asked to share their journey from awareness to consideration and ultimately choice. These three sets provided a framework that is useful for exploring the college selection process as well as an effective visual mapping of how they moved through the process. In this case study, I posed three research questions to better understand how students made decisions and what brand-related factors were compelling within this process.

In the final sections of the chapter, I explored implications for policy and practice based on the findings from this case study, and I offered suggestions for future research. The

understanding that brand awareness occurs through positive word of mouth, prompted the suggestion of the need for enhanced communication strategies aimed at key influencers. Noting that college costs impact both the consideration and choice sets for students and families formed the basis for the promotion of accessible financial aid policies at HEIs. Hearing from students about the importance of engagement with faculty during the admission process called for making faculty engagement a priority at HEIs. Finally, the clear emergence of the importance of building brand equity to enhance enrollment calls for continuous brand evaluation to stay current on how the brand is being perceived among prospective students.

Opportunities for future research included an investigation of how brand consistency, reputation, and messaging influence students' perceptions and decisions, a study on parental influence in the college decision-making process, and a post-enrollment study that looks at whether or not their expectations before enrollment matched their experiences post-enrollment.

The findings from this study align with prior research in the field related to my questions about the consideration and choice sets, but it also provides new insight into the experiences of students who selected a faith-based institution and the factors that were compelling to them in their selection process. I sought to fill a gap that exists in the literature about branding activities in higher education. Further, this research fills a gap in the literature on faith-based institutional branding and college choice. This case study adds depth to the literature on this topic and will hopefully be useful to other researchers in the future as the higher education literature in brand development continues to be built out over time.

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APPENDIX A

Focus Group Protocol

Welcome to this focus group discussion on the process of selecting a college. I am so glad that you have chosen to spend your college years here. I am enrolled in a doctoral program at the College of William & Mary, and I am researching the process used by first-time, first-year students to make college choices as well as elements of the university brand. Today, I am attempting to better understand students' decision-making process when selecting a university and what university characteristics were particularly compelling in that determination. Your insights and experiences are invaluable in understanding the college selection process among first-time, first-year students. I appreciate your participation and encourage you to share your thoughts openly and honestly. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers; I am here to learn from your experiences. This university can only improve when we receive honest feedback. What is said here is confidential and should not be shared with others.

I. Introduction (5-10 minutes)

Welcome and Introduction to the Session

Explanation of the Purpose of the Focus Group

Overview of Confidentiality and Consent Procedures

Icebreaker Activity: Participants introduce themselves, share where they are from and what high school they attended, and share how they discovered the case university. In our discussion, I will ask you about three sets of institutions that were likely part of your college decision process: the awareness set, consideration set, and choice set.

II. Exploring the Awareness Set (15 minutes)

The awareness set is the group of schools that were in your consciousness when you began the college search process. You were aware of these schools early in your process.

- What colleges/universities were you aware of when you began the college search process?
- Why do you believe you were aware of these colleges? How did you come to know about them?
- Were you aware of any faith-based colleges as you began your process? If so, which ones? How did you come to know about them?
- Did any of you have any interaction with this university before you began your college search? If so, what interactions?

III. Exploring the Consideration Set (15 minutes)

The consideration set is the list of all schools that you considered. There may be some on this list that you visited, applied to, decided not to apply to, or were denied admission to.

- Thinking back to your college search, what factors moved a school from one you were simply aware of to one that you seriously considered for your education? Please be as specific as possible. Anything else?
Academic Programs and Reputation?

Location and Campus Environment?
Financial Considerations?
Social Life and Extracurricular Activities?
Family and Peer Influence?

- Another way to ask the above: As you moved forward in the college selection journey, how did you add schools to your consideration list? What criteria did you use?
- How many schools did you seriously investigate? What does seriously investigating mean for you?
- What were some of the characteristics of the schools in your consideration set?
- What schools were in your consideration set?

Discussing Decision-Making:

- What sources of information (websites, college fairs, counselors, peers) were useful to you?
- What role did your parents and peers play in this process?
- What, if any, challenges did you face during making decisions about college?

IV. Exploring the Choice Set (15 minutes)

The choice set is the small group of schools from which you made your final choice.

- What university characteristics were most important to you as you narrowed down your final choices?
- What were the characteristics of schools in your choice set?
- What schools were in your final choice set?
- What was your first choice college? For those that didn't mention LU, what helped you enroll here?
- Compared to the other schools in your choice set, what were the pros and cons of this institution?
- What specific factors made you ultimately choose this institution?
- Reflect on your initial expectations versus the reality of your college experience thus far.

V. Q&A and Closing (10 minutes)

- Allow participants to ask questions or seek clarification.
- Closing Remarks: Thank participants for their valuable insights.
- Reiterate the importance of their contributions to the study.
- Remind participants of confidentiality and how the gathered information will be used.
- Provide information on how they can access the findings of the study, if interested.

Conclusion:

Thank you all for your participation and candid contributions. Your insights are vital in understanding the college selection journey and what characteristics of this university were important to you in your search. Your experiences will contribute significantly to improving the college selection process for future students.

APPENDIX B

Survey Protocol: Factors Influencing College Selection

Introduction:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey. The purpose of this research study is to gain insights into the institutional factors and university characteristics that influenced your decision to select this university. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used solely for research purposes. Please answer each question to the best of your ability. Students who complete the survey will be entered into a drawing to receive a \$25 Amazon gift card.

Section 1: Awareness Set

1. How did you initially become aware of this university? Please select all that apply.

College fairs

Conversations with alumni

Conversations with current students

High school guidance counselor suggested

Online research

Social media (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.)

Visit to high school by an admission counselor

Word of mouth (family, friends, teachers)

Other (please specify): _____

2. Which of the following sources did you rely on the most for gathering information about the college/university? Please select all that apply.

Campus tours/open house events

College brochures/materials

College website

Conversations with alumni

Conversations with current students

Online forums or review websites

Social media (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.)

Word of mouth (family, friends, teachers)

Other (please specify): _____

Section 2: Consideration Set

3. How many other colleges/universities did you apply to?

1

2-3

4-5

6-7

8 or more

4. Was this your first choice university? Yes/No
If not, what was your first choice college/university?

5. What were the three most important aspects of the university brand that attracted you to apply? Select the top three options.

Academic reputation
Athletic opportunities
Career/graduate school preparation
Faith-based community
Location
Quality of the faculty
Size of the student body
Other (please specify)

6. As you narrowed your list to the schools to which you were admitted, how many colleges/universities did you seriously consider attending?

1

2-3

4-5

6-7

8 or more

7. Please rate the following factors on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being "Not important" and 5 being "Extremely important," based on their influence on your college selection.

Academic Reputation
Alumni Network/Connections
Availability of Online Learning Options
Campus Culture/Christian Community
Campus Facilities (libraries, laboratories, sports facilities, etc.)
Campus Safety and Security
Career Services and Job Placement Assistance
Cost of Attendance
Diversity and Inclusion on Campus
Extracurricular Activities and Clubs
Financial Aid/Scholarship Opportunities
Location (proximity to home, climate, city size, etc.)
Opportunities for Internships

Personal/Family Recommendations
Prestige/Ranking of the Institution
Quality of the Desired Program/Major
Reputation of Faculty
Social Life and Student Community

Section 3: Choice set

8. What other colleges/universities to which you were admitted did you seriously consider attending? Please list the full college/university name.
9. Why did you choose this university instead of the other schools you seriously considered? Please be as specific in your response as possible.

Section 4: Additional Comments

10. Part of this research is to better understand the impact of the university brand on college choice. Would you be willing to participate in a short, in-person interview to discuss your college selection process? The interview will remain confidential, your name will not be associated with any results of this study and will not impact your enrollment at this university.
Y/N

If yes, please provide your contact information (email and cell):

11. If you have any additional comments regarding the college selection process or factors that influenced your decision, please feel free to share them in the space provided below.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your feedback is highly valued and will contribute to a better understanding of the factors influencing college selection.

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol: Adapted from Stephenson (2016)

Introduction

I am thankful for your participation in this research and for speaking with me about your college decision-making process. I am enrolled in a doctoral program at the College of William & Mary, and I am researching the process used by students to make college choices as well as elements of the university brand. Today, I am attempting to better understand students' decision-making process when selecting a university and what brand elements were particularly compelling in that determination. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used solely for research purposes. I encourage you to share your thoughts openly and honestly. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers; I am here to learn from your experiences. This university can only improve when we receive honest feedback. I will ask you questions about three sets of schools, the awareness set, consideration set, and choice set. I will explain each of these first. Any questions before we begin?

Icebreakers or Data to be Gathered Before Interview

What do you hope to accomplish after graduation? What are the primary activities that have occupied your time here so far?

Questions

University Awareness Set

The awareness set is the group of schools that were in your consciousness when you began the college search process. You were aware of these schools early in your process.

1. How did you come to learn about this university?
2. Did you visit campus before your enrollment?
 - a. What prompted the visit?
 - b. What types of information sources did you consult (e.g., rankings, Niche)?
 - c. What were your impressions of printed materials you received from this university (view-books, postcards, fact sheets)?
3. Did you visit the university website?
 - a. What were your impressions of the website?
 - b. Did you read this university's Mission, Vision, and Values? If so, what were your impressions?

University Consideration Set

The consideration set is the list of all schools that you considered. There may be some on this list that you visited, applied to, decided not to apply to, or were denied admission to.

4. What aspects of the university brand attracted you to apply here?

- a. Was this your first-choice school?
- b. If not, what was your first-choice school?
- 5. What other schools did you seriously consider besides this one?
 - a. What factors were compelling about them?
 - b. What factors did you find least compelling?
 - c. What reasons went into the decision not to attend each university?
 - d. What reason was the most important in your decision not to attend each university?

University Choice Set

The choice set is the small group of schools from which you made your final choice.

- 6. How would you describe this university?
 - a. To what other schools do you compare it?
 - b. How does the school measure up against those competitors?
- 7. What were the main factors that helped you decide to attend this university?
- 8. What other colleges/universities to which you were admitted did you seriously consider attending? Why?
- 9. How did this university compare to those that you seriously considered?

Post Enrollment Questions

- 10. Did your impressions of the university change after you enrolled?
 - a. If so, how has your impression changed? When did it change?
 - b. What caused your impressions to change?
 - c. What was most surprising to you?
- 11. If you had to describe the university's brand identity, how might you do that?

Final Questions

- 12. Is there anything else about your admission experience or your student experience that you'd like to share with me?
- 13. Is there anything else you'd like to share (or stress) regarding communicating the university brand (or university characteristics) to prospective students?
- 14. If you were asked to communicate the most valuable aspect of this university experience to prospective students, what would you say?

I want to thank you for your time today and for the candid feedback that you have provided. Your contribution is an important part of this study.

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study that seeks to better understand the way in which first-time, first-year students make decisions about choosing a college/university and what brand-related factors are most important in decision-making.

I understand that all first-time, first-year students will be asked and have the opportunity to participate in the research process as members of the entering first-year class and that my participation in the study is purposeful and voluntary. Data collection will be ongoing throughout the cycle from 10-18-2023 to 10-18-2024. Data collection methods will include a focus group, survey, and individual semi-structured interviews. All first-time, first-year students who complete the survey will also have the opportunity to opt into a semi-structured interview that will be conducted one-on-one between the participant and researcher, based on participant interest.

I understand that the interviewer has been trained in the research of human subjects, my responses will be confidential, and that my name will not be associated with any results of this study. I understand that the data will be collected using an audio recording device and then transcribed for analysis. Information from the audio recording and transcription will be safeguarded so my identity will never be disclosed. My true identity will not be associated with the research findings. I understand that there is no known risk or discomfort directly involved with this research and that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time. I agree that should I choose to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the study I will notify the researcher listed below, in writing. A decision not to participate in the study or to withdraw from the study will not affect my relationship with the researcher, the case university, the College of William & Mary generally, or the School of Education, specifically.

If I have any questions or problems that may arise as a result of my participation in the study, I understand that I should contact Byron Lewis, the researcher, at: blewis01@wm.edu. I understand that I may also contact Dr. Jim Barber at (757) 221-6208 and/or email at jpbarber@wm.edu. You may also contact Dr. Tom Ward at (757) 221-2358 or EDIRC-L@wm.edu. My signature below signifies that I am at least 18 years of age, that I have received a copy of this consent form, and that I consent to participate in this research study.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Signature of Researcher. _____ Date _____

VITA

Name: Byron W. Lewis

Place of Birth: St. Charles, Missouri

Education:

2024 Doctor of Education
Educational Policy, Planning, and Leadership
College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia

2004 Master of Ministry
Christian Ministry
Freed-Hardeman University, Henderson, Tennessee

2000 Bachelor of Business Administration
Marketing
Freed-Hardeman University, Henderson, Tennessee

Experience:

2018-Present Vice President for Enrollment Management
Lipscomb University, Nashville, Tennessee

2008-2018 Interim Dean of Admission, Associate Dean of Admission
Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas

2004-2008 Director of College Counseling
Greater Atlanta Christian School, Norcross, Georgia

2001-2004 Admission Counselor, Associate Director of Admission
Freed-Hardeman University, Henderson, Tennessee