College Choice Influences Among High-Achieving Students: An Exploratory Case Study of College Freshmen

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COLLEGE CHOICE INFLUENCES AMONG HIGH-ACHIEVING STUDENTS:
AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY OF COLLEGE FRESHMEN

by

Derek Takumi Furukawa

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the

Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Leadership

Department of Educational Leadership
College of Education
Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas
August 2011
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THE GRADUATE COLLEGE

We recommend the dissertation prepared under our supervision by

**Derek Takumi Furukawa**

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be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Doctorate of Philosophy in Educational Leadership**

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**August 2011**
ABSTRACT

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by

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College choice is an important process on the way to college matriculation. Understanding the motivators and influences of college choice can help an institution establish more effective methods of influencing the choice decision. This influence is even more significant among populations that are low in supply and high in demand, such as high-achieving students. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore high-achieving student perceptions of the areas that may influence their college choice. In-depth focus groups and interviews were conducted with high-achieving students at a single institution in the Southwestern United States to establish perceptions of influences of college choice. In order to see the process from the perspective of the institution, interviews were conducted with admissions staff and the researcher conducted a document analysis of the institutional viewbook.

Though focused on the experiences of high-achieving students, the findings of this study were consistent with previous literature in regard to the areas that influence college choice. Participants identified cost, institutional characteristics, institutional communication, institutional fit, and family as areas that influence their choice decision. The representatives of the institution explained their intent to pursue target marketing to outreach to high-achieving students, putting some emphasis on parallel outreach to
parents. Within the context of the sample, high-achieving students not only made a
decision on their top choice school, but then continued to reevaluate that decision before
making their final choice decision, lending to the possibility of modifying existing
college choice models. The final chapter discusses the implications of these findings for
theory, practice and future research.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is a pleasure to thank those who made this dissertation possible. First and foremost, I owe my deepest gratitude to Dr. Vicki Rosser, for providing the guidance, support, and encouragement needed to weather the storms of the dissertation process and persevere to completion. I would like to also thank Dr. Gerald Kops, Dr. Elizabeth Baldizan, and Dr. Gwen Marchand for being an amazing committee and continuing to work with me throughout the process. I am truly honored to be entering a field with such great scholars who care so deeply about the success of their students. Special thanks also go out to the staff in Admissions and the Honors College at Choice University, whose access provided me with rich data for this study.

I would be remissed to not also thank my family and friends for their unwavering support through these years. A special gratitude is bestowed upon my parents for providing support in all my decisions. To my doctoral student colleagues, thank you for providing those moments of sanity and reprieve as we marched forward in unison though the program. Finally, I give thanks to the University of Nevada, Las Vegas for being both the academic and professional home throughout this doctoral program and to the students of UNLV for continuing to reinforce my passion for working with college students.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Higher education research tends to addresses the student experience from the point where students matriculate at their respective institution. This is often based on the premise that the college experience cannot begin until the student is officially affiliated with the institution. However, looking at the decisions students make during the pre-matriculation period is an important first step in understanding the decisions they may choose upon matriculating at the institution. The college choice process is an important part of this pre-matriculation period. College choice has been defined as “the process through which students decide whether and where to go to college” (Bergerson, 2009, p. 2). This experience is often the first impression of the institution that can actually be controlled by the institution. In understanding this dynamic, it becomes evident the importance of exploring what the most influential actions are in a student’s decision to attend a particular institution of higher education. In an increasingly competitive marketplace for those students who are deemed high-achieving, the importance of understanding the areas that may influence choice become even more critical. This study explores the areas that high-achieving students perceive as most influential in their college choice decision.

Review of the Literature

The literature on college choice tends to fit into two broad categories: those areas that may influence college choice and the college choice process. A comprehensive look
at this literature shows that college choice is dependent upon a combination of both categories of choice theory.

Much of the literature on the areas that may influence college choice discussed how several different factors play a role in the college choice process of students. The research has shifted slightly from students defining the best schools as those that were most popular (Holland, 1959) to a combination of factors reflecting the great diversity of institutions with distinct characteristics (Litten, 1991). Some of this literature seeks to match student characteristics to institutional characteristics (Zemsky & Odell, 1983), while other literature focuses on what institutional characteristics are needed to influence a student’s decision (Martin & Dixon, 1991; Martin, 2006; Paulsen, 1990). With this in mind, the areas that may influence college choice tend to fall into five general categories: influence of family; influence of peers, institutional characteristics; institutional communication; and institutional fit. The literature within these categories tends to show multiple areas among each of these categories.

The influence of family includes parental educational background (Litten, 1982) and parental involvement in the college choice process (Bouse & Hossler, 1991). The parental educational background plays the most significant role in shaping the decision of students in the college choice process. It not only correlates with greater usage of college guidebooks and campus visits (Litten, 1982), but also influences where students seek expertise in the process (Hossler & Foley, 1995). Early involvement from parents in the college choice process tends to increase the likelihood of enrollment in college (Bouse & Hossler, 1991), and if that parent is an alumnus of a particular school, it increases the student’s probability of attending the same institution (Avery & Hoxby, 2004). The level
of parental involvement also has been shown to vary based upon ethnicity (Smith & Fleming, 2010).

Peer influence takes a broader look at both student peer groups (Kealy & Rockel, 1987; Kelpe Kern, 2000), as well as individual groups to which students chose to associate with (Burleson, 2010; Johnson & Stewart, 1991). While some literature supports the influence of a student’s peer group on their perception of college quality (Kealy & Rockel, 1987), other studies show that there is no influence on the actual choice decision (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989). Kelpe Kern’s (2000) study indicated that students did not see peer college attendance as a motivation for attending college. However, looking at more specific groups of peers, Burleson (2010) discusses the importance of a gay-friendly campus for the college choice decision of members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer (GLBTQ) community.

Institutional characteristics tend to focus on selectivity (Hossler & Litten, 1991) and college rankings (Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999). The distinctiveness of one institution to the next is what tends to make the college choice process so complex (Litten, 1991). While the cost of an institution plays a role in the characteristics of an institution (Avery & Hoxby, 2004), selective institutions are more adept to meeting the two selective institution criteria of admission rate and applicant quality (Hossler & Litten, 1993). Though they have their criticisms, institutions still use rankings by groups such as US News & World Report as selling points in their recruitment brochures (Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999).

Institutional communication examines the effectiveness of communication with potential students and their parents (Pagano & Terkla, 1991), as well as student
perceptions of materials provided by the institution (Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Kealy & Rockel, 1987; Lefauve, 2001). Pagano and Terkla (1991) found that parents had more concern about the availability of professional staff during the admissions process than students, but that they were satisfied with the overall admissions process. Understanding the need to communicate with parents supports the market-driven model of student recruitment (Kelpe Kern, 2000). Johnson and Chapman (1979) found that college catalogues were the most commonly used reference for students, but often were written at a reading level well above the audience of prospective freshman students. Hartley and Morphew (2008) then looked at recruitment materials to find that they conveyed a similar message as print ads, billboards, and television screens. Jaschik (2007) found that among these recruitment materials, students disliked college recruitment that was disingenuous or generic. Institutional communication has since moved to more materials that are accessible through online web content (LeFauve, 2001) and these new media provide multiple outlets to outreach to potential students. These media include online web content, social media, and admissions portals. Personalizing these media has proved to be successful in increasing student yield (Foster, 2003).

Finally, institutional fit focuses on how institutional characteristics, combined with student characteristics, create a specific campus environment that can be most conducive for student satisfaction (Kraus, 2008; Williams, 1986). Williams (1986) encourages enrollment managers to look at three sets of variables: characteristics of students, characteristics of the institutional environment, and the effects or outcomes resulting from the interaction of the student with the campus environment. The campus environment, or institutional profile, can be used to recruit students effectively (Astin,
Kraus (2008) indicates that most students attending college are attending their first choice and the process the students go through in deciding which school to attend makes a difference in their expectations when they arrive on campus.

Understanding the dynamics of the aforementioned areas that may influence college choice can be a bit overwhelming, but categorizing these influences into five broader categories (family, peers, institutional characteristics, institutional communication, and institutional fit) helps to show the importance that these areas have on the college choice decision. Each of these areas has a role in the decisions that students have to make in their college choice. The diversity of these factors is summarized in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. College Choice Influences**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Choice Influences</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Peers</th>
<th>Institutional Characteristics</th>
<th>Institutional Communication</th>
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<td>Influence motivation for attending college</td>
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<td>Parental involvement in choice process</td>
<td>Affiliations such as GLBTQ influence choice</td>
<td>State policies affecting public institutions</td>
<td>Online web content</td>
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<td>Parent role in paying for college</td>
<td>Guidance of counselors</td>
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<td>Admissions portals</td>
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<td>Investment in research and planning</td>
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The literature on the college choice process provides a representation of various stages that a student goes through in their choice of college. Though these models vary slightly from one theory to the next, they all flow in a linear model that moves from one stage to another to help explain the process of choice. Each of these models takes a different perspective based on their theoretical grounding and Bateman and Spruill (1996) divide these models into four categories: econometric models, sociological models, combined models, and an expanded model. These four categories look at college choice in the context of economics, sociology, a combination of economics and sociology, and personal and social phenomena, respectively.

The flow of stages is what makes the broad perspective of college choice relatively consistent. Kolter (1976) developed a model of college choice by exploring marketing theory to establish stages of choice. He divided the process into seven stages: decision to attend; information seeking and receiving; specific college inquiries; applications; admissions; college choice; and registration.

Hanson and Litten (1982) reexamined Kolter’s model and divided the process into five stages: college aspirations; beginning the search process; gathering information; sending applications; and enrolling. In establishing these stages, Hanson and Litten (1982) were able to find how various stages in the process affected students differently by gender.

Jackson (1982) then created a model that had a more traditional three phase design. He combined sociological and economic influences before dividing the process into three phases: preferences; exclusion; and evaluation. Under this model, the phase of
preferences includes areas of influence such as family, friends, personal aspirations, and academic achievement. The second phase of exclusion utilizes more economic factors including factors of cost that cause students to exclude institutions from their list of potential colleges. The third phase of evaluation under Jackson’s model is where students evaluate their options and ultimately make a final decision. This final phase includes the development of a personal rating scheme to rank institutions and make a decision that makes the most sense.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) took a similar three-phase design that included: predisposition, search, and choice. The Hossler and Gallagher model was reiterated by several other studies (Galotti, 1995; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith (1989); Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). In the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, the first phase focuses on characteristics of the students and whether they have aspirations to pursue higher education. The second phase involves the search process and the way that students and institutions seek out each other. In the second stage, students narrow their institution options and still evaluate whether attending college is the right fit. The final phase of the model focuses on the choice process where students take the information they gather from the search phase and make a decision on which school to attend based on their own evaluation criteria.

Each of these models fits into a similar timeline for the student college choice process. Henrickson (2002) notes that regardless of the number of stages that comprise the models, there tend to be similar characteristics among them. Figure 2 displays these models comparatively side-by-side, showing where various stages overlap with other models.
In looking at the choice process, the use of multiple choice models can provide a more comprehensive model to track a student’s process. However, the integration of all of the models can be a bit overwhelming. This study looks at the choice process as a combination of models from Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Jackson (1982). Hossler and Gallagher (1987) identify the three stages of college choice as predispositions, search process, and choice. Jackson (1982) also uses three stages, but identifies them as preferences, exclusion, and evaluation. Both models provide an initial stage that includes as student’s background characteristics and personal aspirations for college. Though Hossler and Gallagher (1987) label this stage predispositions and Jackson (1982) labels it preferences, they both share the same characteristics. The second stage in the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model is a broader look at the search process. Jackson (1982)
focuses more of his model on the search process, dividing it into the two stages of exclusion and evaluation. In an integrated model, the stages of exclusion and evaluation can be seen as subsets of the search process. The final stage of choice is briefly addressed in Jackson’s (1982) evaluation stage, but is expanded in more detail with Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model. In establishing a combination of these two models, the college choice process takes a more in-depth look at the search process and the choice decision. The broader stages of the choice process allows for a better sense of when various influences of choice can be inserted into the choice process.

In combining these two models, the framework for the study establishes that students enter the choice process with their predispositions or preferences, go through the process of searching for schools, and conclude with choosing an institution that includes both exclusion and evaluation of institutions. The combination of these two models still maintains a linear timeline for the choice process and can be seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3. College Choice Process
Purpose

This study is designed to examine college choice from the perspective of students who have recently completed the choice process and have matriculated at the university. The purpose of this study is to explore high-achieving undergraduate student perceptions of areas that may influence their college choice. The study is exploratory in nature in order to discover what first-year students tend to perceive as those areas that may influence their decision-making process for college. The results of this study are intended to help guide future research on admissions and recruitment practices in order to make the most efficient use of resources and most effectively recruit high-achieving students.

Research Questions

The review of literature identifies several ways in which we can explore the areas that may influence college choice. To explore all of these areas would be both extensive and may even cause conflicting findings. The following set of research questions provided guidance for the establishment of data collection and analysis for the study:

1. What areas do high-achieving undergraduate students at a public university perceive to influence college choice?
2. How do personal characteristics, such as family and peers, influence a student’s choice of college?
3. What experiences are identified as the most influential in a student’s decision to attend a particular institution?
4. How do institutional characteristics, institutional communication, and institutional fit, influence a student’s choice of college?
5. In what way does the institution intentionally try to influence college choice for potential freshman students?

6. To what extent do intentional college recruitment activities affect college choice?

The first three research questions focus more on the student experience and perception of college choice influences, while the last three research questions focus more on the activities that are practiced by the institutions to affect college choice. The third and fourth research questions align with the conceptual framework, exploring the stages of where areas of influence may affect the college choice process.

**Research Design**

As this study was exploratory in nature, a qualitative research design was most appropriate. Since the study explored the phenomenon of student choice for high-achieving students, qualitative inquiry was supported (Merriam, 2002). The purpose of the study is to better understand student behavior and the college choice experience, which aligns nicely with a qualitative research design (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2007).

This study was designed as a single case study as it allows the research to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of contemporary real-life events (Yin, 2009). The participants were bound by a single institution (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002) that is a representative case (Yin, 2009), making it a single case study design. Areas that may influence college choice can vary based upon regionalized external influences, making the single case study more appropriate than a multiple case study.
The participants were chosen from a large, public, urban, four-year research-intensive institution in the Southwestern United States. The choice of location was based upon an area with high population and economic growth as identified by the Brookings Institute (Lang, Sarzynski, & Muro, 2008). The institutions will be referred to as Choice University throughout this study. The individuals in the study included both staff from the admissions department of the institution as well as first-year students whose affiliation as high-achieving students was based on their participation in the University Honors Program. The participants were chosen in a purposeful manner in order to obtain a representative sample of the population (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006) and the choice of participants was mindful of gender, residency, ethnicity, and academic major.

Understanding the nature of a qualitative case study, the data were collected from multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2007). These methods of data collection included individual interviews with admissions staff, a content analysis of recruitment materials, student focus group interviews, and individual student follow-up interviews. The combination of these four methods of data collection helped in creating a larger picture of both institutional intent and student perceptions of the college choice process.

The analysis of the data included transcription of the interviews and focus groups followed by Bogdan and Biklen’s (2003) constant comparative method that focused on data analysis early on in the data collection process. This method allowed the researcher to ask more pertinent follow-up questions during focus groups and interviews in order to collect more robust data. Utilizing Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) programs, the data were coded and categorized. These data were then put into groups and reviewed again to establish emerging themes from the study.
**Definition of Key Terms**

The following definitions are provided for clarification purposes of the terms used throughout this study:

*College choice:* “The process through which students decide whether and where to go to college” (Bergerson, 2009, p. 2).

*High-achieving undergraduate student:* Students whose high school grade point average and standardized test scores is greater than the national average (Albali, 1997; VanZile-Tamsen & Livingston, 1999). For the purposes of this study, all students who are affiliated with the University Honors program are considered high-achieving as they have gone through an institutional review to meet one or both of the requirements (GPA or test scores) in order to be admitted to the program.

*Intentional college recruitment activities:* Those recruitment practices that are intentionally administered to reach specific populations of students (Lipman Hearne, 2010). In this study, these populations are specific to first-time freshmen who are considered high-achieving students.

*Pre-matriculation:* The period of time preceding the first day of classes for a first-time freshman student.

*Recruitment materials:* Recruitment materials include both print and online material that are provided to prospective students from the institution (Pagano & Terkla, 1991). These materials are the formal materials that are both formally approved and disseminated to prospective students.
Social media: The use of web-based technologies to facilitate communication among individual users (Tower, 2006). These media include blogs, podcasts, social networking sites, and instant messaging.

Super students: Students scoring 700 or higher on the math or verbal portion of the SAT or 30 or more on the ACT (Geiger, 2002).

Limitations

College choice is a process experienced by all students who choose or do not choose to attend college. However, the influences of these decisions are often not overtly apparent to students, as many of the influences are internal predispositions or preferences that may not be realized at the time of decision-making. This limitation had to be addressed in the design of the study in order to discover some of these non-overt influences. The design of the data collection is intentional so that the experiences of students at Choice University are discovered from the intentional efforts of the institution that are defined by the admissions staff and the admissions recruitment materials. By relating these shared experiences in a focus group setting, the design of the study intended to have students realize some of the influences after hearing from the experiences of their peers. Based on this same initial research, the use of technological recruitment efforts was the theme of focus for the individual follow-up interviews. The funneled design of the data collection all worked toward helping participants reflect upon their college choice experience.

Another limitation in this study is that the findings are restricted to a single university. As a single-case study design, the results of the study are limited to the context of Choice University. The findings should not be generalized to other public
universities, admissions staff, or high-achieving students. However, this exploratory may lead to future research that would increase the generalizability of its results. Further, the selection of participants was purposeful to obtain a representative sample of the population (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006).

While the characteristics of Choice University fit the needs of the research study, the institution was also geographically accessible to the researcher. The limitation of a convenience sample may risk the credibility of the study as another geographic area could have provided richer data for the study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). At the same time, this geographic limitation is often consistent among any single-case study.

**Significance of the Study**

In the market of higher education recruitment, high-achieving students are limited in supply and high in demand (Geiger, 2002). Understanding how high-achieving students perceive the interaction with institutions during the pre-matriculation period of courtship can be an important dynamic to study because of its implications on how effective recruitment can be implemented. This study provides insight into the perceived influences to college choice identified by high-achieving students. Though efforts are already made to attract high-achieving students, this study explored these methods to identify specific practices that may have greater influence on a student’s decision. This study can serve as a reference for admissions staff to not only see what practices are most influential, but what practices from other institutions could be implemented based on positive response from students.
Summary

This chapter provided an introduction of the study and research topic. The chapter included: brief review of the literature; overview of the conceptual framework; purpose of the study; research questions; research design; definition of key terms; limitations; and significance of the study. The next chapter will provide a more in-depth review of the relevant research and the study’s connection to theory on high-achieving undergraduate students, the choice process, and the areas of influence on college choice.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The areas that may influence college choice are numerous and dependent upon the context in which previous research has been conducted. Thus, several models of both the choice process and the matrix of college choice influences exist. In addressing the characteristics of college choice, several of these studies also include factors related to college access. However, this study focuses on the college choice process, which has been identified as “the process through which students decide whether and where to go to college” (Bergerson, 2009, p. 2). The purpose of this study is to explore high-achieving undergraduate students’ perception of areas that may influence their college choice. The study aims to examine high-achieving undergraduate students that may present a particular set of characteristics that varies from the rest of the college-going population. However, the general stages and influences of college choice are still factors in the ultimate decision by these high-achieving undergraduate students.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the relevant research and theory on high-achieving undergraduate students, the choice process, and the areas that may influence college choice. The chapter begins with a discussion of literature that characterizes the uniqueness of high-achieving undergraduate students. The review of the literature is then divided into two major categories about college choice: areas that may influence college choice and college choice models. Following these categories of literature, there is an explanation of the conceptual framework developed from relevant studies that is applied and used as a lens in this study.
High-Achieving Undergraduate Students

The definition of high-achieving students tends to vary from study to study. In some cases, a high-achieving group of students is identified by their affiliation with a program geared toward academically talented students such as an honors program or a college preparatory curriculum (Oakes & Guiton, 1995; Hébert & Reis, 1999). In other cases, they use standardized test performance or grade point average to determine levels of academic ability (Albaili, 1997; VanZile-Tamsen & Livingston, 1999). For high school students transitioning to college, Geiger (2002) coins the term super students that identifies students scoring 700 or higher on the math or verbal portion of the SAT or 30 or more on the ACT. His study looked at how these super students are distributed among public and private universities. One of his findings is that these “super students” are influenced by the academic reputation that an institution can provide and that public universities have become competitive because of the financial benefits they can afford to give these students.

Higher education runs in a market economy and “universities operate in competitive markets for undergraduate students” (Geiger, 2002, p. 85). Geiger goes on to show how high-ability undergraduate students are limited in supply and high in demand. Understanding this dynamic, one can assume that high-achieving students are accepted to more institutions and thus, have more of a decision process in their college choice.

“College discretionary aid offers are apparently used in large part to compete against other schools for the most sought-after students” (Manski & Wise, 1983, p. 25). As institutions are becoming more competitive for high-ability students, those institutions considered second or third choice schools are purposefully exceeding the average
financial aid award of a first choice institution by at least $4,000 and $6,000 respectively (Braxton, 1990). The idea behind the high awards is to lure high-ability students to less-selective institutions in order to increase the academic reputation of the institution.

When high-achieving students are looking at the costs, their metrics vary slightly from the traditional student population. Though they are indifferent to the distance the institution is from their home, they are sensitive to tuition, room, and board (Avery & Hoxby, 2004). Financial aid is included in this financial consideration. The “array of scholarships, grants, loans, and work-study programs exists because many parties want to alter meritorious students’ college choices” (2004, p. 240). Though the high-aptitude students are attracted by grants, loans, and work-study commitments, they prefer to attend the most selective colleges within the set to which they were admitted (2004, p. 288). Another way to look at this is that high caliber students are more attracted to affluent institutions. Blau (1974) indicates that the major reason for this tendency is that affluent institutions pay higher salaries that enable them to recruit better faculty and that high caliber students are attracted to institutions that have strong faculties.

One of the assumptions about high-achieving students is that they will immediately be successful in college. However, Balduf (2009) conducted a study of high-achieving students at Queen Mary College who received low marks and were put on academic probation. The study found that the participants did not have the skills necessary to succeed in college life. The identified skills that would have assisted them included time management and adjustment to independent life. Though this level of performance is considered an anomaly for high-achieving students, it is important to show that assumptions should not be made about this particular student population.
College Choice

The influences and stages of choosing a college are similar whether a student is deemed high-achieving or not. Research addressing the decision of a college applicant can be viewed in two different perspectives. First, the decision can be examined through the lens of identifying the factors that influence the college choice. Second, the decision can be divided into the various stages of the choice process. Both perspectives provide insight into how students approach the final decision of what institution to attend.

The Areas of Influence of College Choice

The first study on college choice was published in 1959 when John Holland analyzed National Merit Scholarship students from 1957 to see what characteristics caused them to choose a particular institution. He conducted a survey and found that the student’s background, with emphasis on cultural and personal development from the family influenced college choice. Holland (1959) went on to find that there was a perception that popular colleges were seen as the best institutions and that parents believed these schools were the superior choice.

Richards and Holland (1964) then studied the typical influences of college choice used by high school and college personnel when assisting students. This study had a sample of 8,292 students from among ACT test takers for 1964. They grouped student choice influences into four groups: intellectual, influential, practical, and social. The level of influence that each of these groups has on a student’s choice varies from person to person.

In 1966, Berdie and Hood investigated the predictability of college choice by analyzing results from a 1961 survey of Minnesota high school graduates. Berdie and
Hood focused on a random sample of 3,817 students out of the 44,756 students who completed the survey. They examined academic ability, along with socioeconomic, cultural, and personal factors. Like Richards and Holland’s findings, this study found that although there are several influences to college choice (i.e., parents, friends, teachers, and counselors) that have varying levels of influence, the extent of that influence varies from person to person (Berdie & Hood, 1966).

Chapman (1981) developed a college choice model that focused on traditional-aged prospective students. The development of this model was not based directly from a study, but is a reflection of several findings from other studies that Chapman investigated in order to develop a single, comprehensive model. His model suggested that choice is influenced by student characteristics in combination with external influences. “These external influences can be grouped into three general categories: (1) the influence of significant persons; (2) the fixed characteristics of the institution; and (3) the institution’s own efforts to communicate with prospective students” (1981, p. 492). When looking at the areas that may influence choice, these external influences provide a solid guide for a comprehensive look that is summarized in this chapter.

Embedded within these models are several factors that must be taken into consideration. Whether it is to match the student characteristics with institutional characteristics (Zemsky & Odell, 1983) or to identify the institutional characteristics needed to influence student choice (Martin & Dixon, 1991; Martin, 2006; Paulsen, 1990), these factors all play a role in the way that students perceive and choose institutions. St. John, Paulsen, and Starkey (1996) connect this stage of choice with student persistence and connect characteristics of college choice with characteristics of students who persist.
to graduation. Their study did not seek information about college choice or college persistence, but solely looked at nexus between the two areas. They used data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study of 1986-87 to find that there was both a direct and indirect influence on persistence decisions. They also found that some high-achieving undergraduates stopped out mainly for reasons of financial constraint and desire to transfer (St. Paul, Paulsen, & Starkey, 1996).

A good example of the development of college choice influences is detailed in a report from the Lumina Foundation that chronicles the history of higher education in the context of student college choice (Kinzie et al., 2004). The historical context has shown how college choice has varied in context of political, social, and institutional influence, but has stayed fairly consistent in areas of economic influences. The continued economic influence in conjunction with the social influence of college choice are what have helped drive the change in college marketing to outreach to a larger population of students.

In establishing these marketing strategies to affect student college choice, there have also been concerns about subpopulations that may be affected by these changes. Kelpe Kern (2000) discussed how community colleges might need to be more vigilant in the way they look toward traditionally aged students from urban areas in order to serve their population need. Her study surveyed 1,179 students from 20 high schools in a major southwest urban school district, utilizing a modified version of the College Choice Influences Scale originally developed by Dixon and Martin (1991). In relation, McDonough (1997) discusses the way that social class and school structure can influence the way students perceive higher education. All of these studies make a case for an
inclusive recruitment and admissions policy as to not exclude students from even the opportunity to make a college choice.

**The influence of family.** Though college choice models look at a comprehensive view of the factors influencing a student’s decision, one emergent theme is the role of the family in the choice process. Litten (1982) found that although there are several influences to a student’s choice of college, the parental education background played the most significant role in shaping the conduct of students in the college choice process. “Higher levels of parental education led to substantially greater incidence of usage of commercial guidebooks and visits to campus” (1982, p. 394). Further, the level of parental education had a strong influence on where their children sought expertise in the search process. However, use of commercial guidebooks may not necessarily be a deciding factor on a student’s choice. “There is some reason to question why guidebooks and ratings have received so much attention in recent years in light of their limited impact on the decisions of students and parents” (Hossler & Foley, 1995, p. 29). Regardless, they are still a resource that can be of assistance and students are often encouraged to utilize them as a resource in the choice process.

Related to education attainment, the role of a family alumnus plays a strong role in the choice process. A student who has “a father or sibling who attended the college greatly increases a student’s own probability of attending it” (Avery & Hoxby, 2004, p. 263). This alumnus effect has a significant impact on the probability of matriculation with a 70 percent increase if a father attends and a 90 percent increase if a sibling attends. This can be a reflection of shared family values or even family allegiance to a particular institution (Avery & Hoxby, 2004).
The parental involvement in student choice can be critical in the role of family. Bouse and Hossler (1991) found that parents must be involved early in any process designed to increase enrollments. The early involvement prevents the parents from feeling like an outsider in the process and provides a sense of inclusion in their child’s decision. Reynolds (1981) reported that parents go through a similar process as their children during the selection process and define their attitudes similarly to their children. She even warns admission officers to be cognizant of the way they treat parents because of their influence on the choice process. Thomas indicates that “parents winnowed the college choice set down to six key characteristics of importance: campus safety, location, costs of college, area of interest or program area, campus size, and campus environment” (2003, p. 157). Looking at parents of eighth-grade students, Flint (1992) found that among over 350 parents sampled in Illinois, there was more concern about college reputation than costs. Degree offerings and selectivity were deemed as factors related to an institutional reputation. Regardless, the ability of the student tends to influence the level and quality of parental involvement (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000).

With community college students, in particular, the communication methods of the institution play a role in the level of involvement by the parents of community college students. Bers and Galowich (2002) conducted a mixed-methods study of community college parents and found that in their sample of 13 parents used for a focus group, the majority of information that the subjects utilized came from formal, printed materials provided by the institution. The study revealed that traditional marketing would not be as effective as providing resources to key individuals, such as high school guidance counselors, who were in a position to effectively disseminate the information to parents.
The influence of family also differs slightly based on ethnicity. Nora (2004) makes it clear that there are varying familial influences regarding the pursuit of higher education among minority students. Litten reported, “certain information media, particularly high school counselors and mothers, are more important to blacks than to whites” (1982, p. 298). For Hispanics and African Americans, the level of parental involvement pertains to the likelihood to enroll in a four-year college or university (Perna, 2000). Further, Stewart and Post’s (1990) study found that minority students were more likely to enroll in institutions that are close to their home and that attempts should be made to recruit minority students who live within a several-hour radius of campus to attend in order to maximize yield. Smith and Fleming (2010) studied 11 African American parents in California, mostly from the Los Angeles area, and their parenting practices. Their qualitative study found that African American parents tended to have influence in the college choice process beyond the stages of predisposition and search as previously identified by Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999). Further, as their study consisted primarily of female parents, there was more encouragement for daughters to pursue higher education, which matches the gender difference in college-going African Americans.

The influence of peers. Although the evidence shows the clear influence of family, it would be expected that peers also influence institutional choice. However, research is somewhat inconsistent in this arena. Kealy and Rockel (1987) show that “the student’s peer group of high school students is highly influential across all dimensions of perceived college quality (p. 689). Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) indicate just the opposite and say that peers have no reported effects on influencing institutional
choice. Perhaps the best way to interpret these two findings is to say that peers have influence on a student’s perception of college quality, but do not go as far as having a direct influence on institutional choice. In other words, peers serve as an influence to one of the many factors that comprise college choice.

Perhaps the most contrary finding to the influence of peers came from Kelpe Kern’s (2000) study on college choice influences. She notes that “participants indicated that going to college because of friends were going was not a motivating factor (77.6% responded disagree or disagree strongly to the statement, ‘I am attending college because my friends are going to college’)” (2000, p. 492).

If we broaden the definition of what a peer group is, then there are a few other ways of looking at peer influence on college choice. In looking at peers in the context of a shared experience, the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer (GLBTQ) community was described by Burleson (2010) as a community that doesn’t consider a gay-friendly campus as the most important factor in deciding where to go, but does take into consideration the overall campus climate when selecting a school. In other words, the climate of the GLBTQ community plays a factor in whether a student chooses to include an institution in their short list of options for college.

The other non-traditional peer group could include guidance staff. Counselors, as familiar voices of authority, often provide insight into the choice decisions of their students. Johnson and Stewart (1991) conducted a study of 3,708 freshmen that responded to a questionnaire during their freshman orientation. The study examined the points in when the choice of a college was first made and a final choice made; the factors in making a college choice; and the resources used in considering colleges they might
attend. In the latter part of the study, high school counselors were used more than both parents and high school teachers, making them an important factor in where students gather information during the search stage of college choice.

**The influence of institutional characteristics.** The institutional characteristics of higher education vary immensely. The great diversity of institutions with distinct characteristics is the reason why the college choice process is so complex (Litten, 1991). When you combine this complexity with the diverse nature of applicants, the process of college choice no longer becomes a cut and dry system.

It is difficult to look at the college choice process without taking into consideration factors that the institution controls. Cost is an influence on whether an institution can be viewed as a viable choice for a student. Tied with cost is an institution’s tradition of awarding financial aid. “The parties’ objectives are diverse—from a purely altruistic desire to relax constraints facing the needy to a college’s self-interested desire to enroll high-aptitude student who raise its profile or improve education for other students on campus” (Avery & Hoxby, 2004, p. 240). The use of aid to reduce the sticker price of the institution is quite common, but has been shown to be a self-serving interest by the institution. Depending on a student’s background and need for aid, this shapes the personality of the institution.

Hossler and Litten (1993) conducted a study and found that two principal criteria were used to define a selective institution: the admission rate and the quality of the students who apply to the institution. Part of the institutional characteristics is the reputation that students perceive about the school. The focus groups in the study identified other factors that were important to students. They “indicated interest in the
character of the community surrounding a college; the diversity of the student body; the potential for faculty-student interaction; opportunities for student involvement in campus activities; issues of safety; curricular emphasis on pre-professional and professional programs or on the liberal arts; how many classes are taught by teaching assistants; and whether most classes are taught in seminar, laboratory or lecture formats” (1993, p. 81).

In regard to public universities, the factor of state public policies can also play a role in influencing student choice. Perna and Titus (2004) conducted a study looking at the relationship between state public policies and the type of institution that high school graduates attend. Their data comes from the National Educational Longitudinal Study from 1992-94. One of the major findings of the study is that “state need-based financial aid and institutional financial aid promote student choice among different types of colleges and universities” (2004, p. 520). Essentially, a state public policy that supports financial assistance to college students encourages the choice decisions of those students.

DesJardins, Ahlburg, and McCall (2006) tracked a sample of over 86,000 Iowa students through the process of sending ACT scores, application, admission, financial aid determination, and enrollment during a five-year span of time. They followed an approach that incorporated multiple factors in the eventual choice decision in order to isolate variables so that the most pertinent influences would emerge. They found that disappointing students with regard to their financial aid expectations had a negative effect on enrollment.

College rankings also serve as a comparative means for institutions. Most of the people that work in higher education know about rankings and criticisms of rankings that are released by groups such as *US News & World Report*. In an article in *Change*, Monks
and Ehrenberg (1999) indicate that many institutions use their rankings as a selling point in their brochures. Their study of 17 institutions, within or near the top 25 in the rankings, indicates that the institutional ranking in this publication has an affect on how an institution may adjust their tuition in order to better adapt to the students being recruited. There have been several criticisms of these rankings, but recently, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, had an article that talked about a group of scholars has begun to develop a new ranking system that looks more at rankings based on student choice preference rather than institutional selectivity (Glenn, 2004). Glenn (2004) describes the contents of a working paper that has Christopher Avery, Mark Glickman, Caroline Minter Hoxby, and Andrew Metrick pitting institutions against each other in final decisions of admitted students. This perspective moves the concept of quality away from institutional selectivity and closer to actual student preference.

**The influence of institutional communication.** To maximize their communication efforts, institutions have turned toward marketing strategies used in the business world to identify potential students. They use software to be able to “identify sets of student characteristics that predispose (students) to be interested in specific colleges or universities” (Hossler, 2007). Pagano and Terkla (1991) conducted research on the institutional contacts at Tufts University to evaluate the effectiveness of their communication with potential students. The study evaluated written materials disseminated by Tufts and sought to gauge the level of satisfaction with these contacts from both students and parents alike. They found that parents were more dissatisfied with the availability of professional staff than their children, but they were satisfied with the overall admissions process. In the case of communication, “an ongoing admissions
research effort enables both the admissions and financial aid offices to further improve their interactions with prospective students and parents” (Pagano & Terkla, 1991, p. 44). This finding circles back to the increased need to evaluate the services to function in a more market-driven model of student recruitment (Kelpe Kern, 2000).

The manner in which an institution conveys its information to students is also critical. Johnson and Chapman (1979) found that the college catalogues, which were the most commonly used reference to send to potential students, were written at a reading level difficulty “well above that of the major intended audience—the high school senior” (p. 316). This relationship is important because the link between college recruitment efforts and student choice is based on student perceptions of college quality (Kealy & Rockel, 1987). The influence of these perceptions is based on interactions with significant people, written materials, and admissions officials.

Hartley and Morphew (2008) conducted a content analysis of 48 viewbooks from four-year institutions. They found that beyond the viewbook images depicting an idyllic haven for potential students, there are six major themes that emerged from the analysis. These thematic areas are institutional context or campus features; academics or faculty; co-curricular opportunities; admissions and financial aid; value of an education; and the purpose of higher education. Their analysis shows that viewbooks tend to convey the same messages that print ads, billboards, and television screens do. This message conveys that the institution will make you happy, meet your needs, and help you succeed. However, the Education Conservancy found through student focus groups that students dislike “disingenuous” college recruiting, college fairs, and “generic” college recruiting (Jaschik, 2007). These same focus groups also indicated that students felt institutions
encouraged application in order to get their money and to better their acceptance statistics.

In regard to the effect on students, LeFauve (2001) examined the use online web content in college choice. Specifically, she looked at how viewbooks and web sites have similar properties of providing both information and persuasion to potential students seeking information. The ability to persuade a student has developed new vehicles in the various social media technologies such as blogs, podcasts, and instant messaging (Tower, 2006). There are several ways in which an institution can get information out to potential students and encourage, and often persuade, their enrollment. An article in The Chronicle of Higher Education noted that colleges were able to get more applicants by personalizing their recruitment web site to the student (Foster, 2003). This included such programs as admissions portfolios that take into consideration a student’s demographics before sending out more specific information. Donehower (2003) criticized the admissions process as being without any personal touch and notes that it’s the personal touch in a recruitment message that can help applicants and their families distinguish one school from another.

College admissions offices have also taken to specific forms of recruitment to try to recruit particular populations of students. This has existed in the past with the recruitment of student-athletes, where institutions have had to promote the institutional characteristics as well as the team and the coach (Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, & Palmer, 2003). With recruitment becoming more specific, institutions are adjusting their way of recruiting to be more specific. Docters (1999) talks about marketing in terms of having specific aims in mind and taking more of a rifle approach instead of a shotgun
approach. This approach to recruiting student populations is shown in Figure 4. The shotgun approach takes a broad stroke at reaching students in the general population, while the rifle approach targets specific student populations. The difference in these approaches is that the shotgun approach may not hit the specific populations intended in the recruitment process.

Figure 4. Docters’ (1999) marketing approaches

In the area of admissions, the Internet has helped streamline the process, allowing for easy sorting and evaluation of applications. Tansey (2005) echoes the personalized admissions portal, noting that getting personal helps the yield of applicants. Much of the literature is based around showing that technology has increased efficiency and ease of interaction for college admissions offices (Gifford, Briceño-Perriot, & Mizano, 2005; Hossler, 1999; Lim & Sun, 2003; Stoner, 2001). In general, these articles praise the
integration of technology in admissions and suggest ways in which to enhance their effectiveness.

In 2010, the Lipman Hearne consulting firm partnered with the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) to review marketing practices in higher education in order to identify trends among college recruitment offices. Their study consisted of an email survey of 212 CASE member institutions across a spectrum of institutional types. Their study found five trends from the survey. First, institutions that invested in research and planning to set their marketing agenda were more likely to employ a diverse and varied marketing effort. Second, despite there being a general thought that print media was a thing of the past, nearly all (96 percent) institutions engaged in print publications. Third, in a year’s span, institutions allocated more money to both interactive marketing and social media while decreasing allocations to traditional advertising. Fourth, the investment into social media is paying off for investors, showing increases in website hits, positioning, and alumni-giving rates. Finally, the study found that those institutions that partnered with an outside agency to handle their marketing experienced a positive impact on the quality of their applicants. As a whole, this study helps validate the use of social media as a viable choice for marketing practices.

**The influence of institutional fit.** Despite the amount of communication provided by the institution, the final decision of institution comes down to how well the student feels they fit with a particular institution. Classic research on student development Astin (1965) identified six factors that measured variation among college freshmen. These factors were intellectualism, estheticism, status, leadership, pragmatism, and masculinity. Astin then examined the type of institution that tended to
attract students with high scores on each dimension. He indicates that these factors can be used by institutions to help develop their institutional profiles to recruit students effectively.

In some cases, the institution in comparison can be dominated and irrelevant given a student is admitted to a dominating school (Avery & Hoxby, 2004). In this scenario, the viability of a “safety school” is non-existent if an applicant is accepted to one or more of his or her preferred schools. McDonough (1994) indicates that high-SES, middle-range academic performers have changed college choice into a very rationalized process rather than a soul-searching discovery or independent research.

Investigating the concept of institutional fit, Williams (1986) encourages enrollment managers to look at three sets of variables: characteristics of students, characteristics of the institutional environment, and the effects or outcomes resulting from the interaction of the student with the campus environment. Student characteristics have already been mentioned in the description of preference (Jackson, 1982) and predisposition (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Institutional characteristics “include a wide array of physical, academic, social, and psychological variables that together comprise the campus environment” (Williams, 1986, p. 36). The institutional characteristics become increasingly important in the way the student interacts with the institution. Even beyond the point of the choice process, these institutional characteristics, also considered cultural artifacts (Kuh & Hall, 1993), need to continue to be communicated, along with their underlying meaning, to incoming students through important moments such as new student orientation (Theroux, 2008).
When the factors of choice are all put together, there is an assumption that college students end up happy with their decision. In an article describing his own experiences as a father of two college students, David Kraus (2008) describes the complex factors of student choice as worrisome and frustrating. He mentions that over 67% of students attending college are attending their first choice of colleges and that some of the process that students go through in deciding which school to attend makes a difference with their expectations when they arrive there.

**College Choice Process**

There are several choices that students have to make in their college career and the first decision is that choice of college. Bateman and Spruill (1996) provide an overview of models that identify the stages of college choice. They divide these models into four major categories: econometric models, sociological models, combined models, and an expanded model. Econometric models specify that student exclude and evaluate the alternatives to postsecondary education based on the following criteria: geographic location, economic factors, and academic factors. The sociological model specifies a variety of individual and social factors that lead to educational aspirations. Combined models blend the most powerful indicators in the decision-making process from both econometric and sociological models. Finally, an expanded model focuses on personal and social phenomena that influence the college choice process.

Each of these models provides different stages of influence during the college choice process. The models described in this section tend to fit under the description of “process models” that Henrickson (2002) identifies in describing models of choice. “Process models” aim to capture elements of potential students, institutional
characteristics, and the application process. This section identifies the various models and conceptualizations that college choice incorporates. Whether it’s Holland’s (1959) model that started viewing the choice process in stages or the more current studies by Hossler, the contributions of these models and conceptualizations have shaped the current study of college choice.

College choice models have evolved since the first study by Holland in 1959. His study looked at 814 high-ability high school students and identified the complexity of the college choice process. The study showed that different kinds of students select different kinds of institutions. He notes, “like many personal decisions, the choice patterns found here are probably not really amenable to change because they are grounded in cultural and personal development” (Holland, 1959, p. 26). Numerous studies have looked at the various influences of college choice, but the process of making that choice emerged a few years later. The first model of college choice began with Kolter (1976) who looked at marketing theory to show how there are seven stages in the process of enrolling. These seven stages include: the decision to attend; information seeking and receiving; specific college inquiries; applications; admissions; college choice; and registration. Kolter’s stages of enrollment were accepted as accurate by most scholars until more recent work refined the mode.

Building on what Kolter had established, Hanson and Litten (1982) then reexamined the stages of college choice, creating a model that reduced the process to five stages: college aspirations; beginning the search process; gathering information; sending applications; and enrolling. Though their study introduced this new model of the choice process, their findings focused on the differences between sexes on the measures of
college attendance, selection, and admissions process. The stages of their model helped define where the differences existed between sexes in the choice process.

Jackson (1982) developed a model that combined both the sociological and economic influences of the choice process. His model separated the choice process into three phases: preference; exclusion; and evaluation. Within these phases, family background and social context influence factors leading to exclusion factors that ultimately lead to the choice decision. The interrelation of these factors can be a bit confusing and is best seen in a visual flow as shown in Figure 5. He recognizes the first stage in the model as one that focuses more on sociological influences such as family, friends, personal aspirations, and academic achievement. Within this first phase, “the strongest correlate of high school students’ aspirations (educational or occupational) is

*Figure 5. Jackson’s (1982) combined student choice model*
their academic achievement” (Jackson, 1982, p. 239). However, Jackson makes sure to show that these factors are only preferences and have no direct influence on choice, but influence other areas that ultimately lead to a decision.

The second phase of the model tends to introduce the economic influences of college choice. This includes the cost of attendance and the amount of financial assistance provided by the institution. Included in this phase is the geographic location of the institution as it can be directly tied with cost factors. This stage of exclusion begins the use of resources provided by the institution that may help inform students about their choices. “Students exclude colleges as unfeasible based on partial information when more information would lead them to do otherwise, and quite reasonably they do not consider colleges unknown to them or about which they can obtain no information” (Jackson, 1982, p. 240). This is the point in the choice process where the accuracy and availability of information from an institution is vital to avoid being excluded from consideration. In looking at the current use of technology in this phase, Cox-Otto (2006) indicates that potential students are more likely to use a website to exclude an institution than to include it.

Finally, the third phase of Jackson’s model is where students evaluate their options and ultimately make a final decision. In this phase, each student develops their own rating scheme to which they use to rank institutions and ultimately make a decision that makes the most sense. Jackson (1982) notes that although students create their rating scheme in this final phase, the opinions developed from the creation of their choice set in the exclusion phase are seldom changed by the rating scheme, giving those decisions direct influence on the ultimate choice decision.
Hossler and Gallagher (1987) also created a college choice model that looked at the process in three phases: predisposition; search; and choice. Hossler and Gallagher’s model gave the first comprehensive model for traditional students. The model is considered comprehensive because it includes in the influential factors both individual factors of the students as well as organizational factors of the institutions. The individual factors include student characteristics, significant others, educational activities, student preliminary college values, student search activities, and the student choice set. The organizational factors include school characteristics, college and university search activities, and college and university courtship activities. The model also looks at the expected outcomes in each of the phases. Each phase contains student outcomes as well, noting that at each of the stages, there is a factor of other options that plays into the decisions that are made by students in the choice process. A table of Hossler and Gallagher’s three-phase model of college choice is depicted in Figure 5.

The first phase of predisposition is similar to Jackson’s (1982) stage of preferences in that it entails characteristics of the students and whether they have the aspirations to pursue higher education. This phase also includes influences from individuals involved in the student’s life. The organizational factors include the existing characteristics of the institution. Upon leaving this phase, the student will have searched for college options as well as the alternative options to attending college (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

The second phase in the model involves the search process and the way that students and institutions seek out each other. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) characterize this phase with the initial interaction with the institutions in order to gather more
information. The search phase can be the stage when students reduce the number of institutions from every school to only those that meet a set of preferences established. This narrowing down of schools helps to create the desired outcome of a choice set. It is important to note that in the search phase, there is still a possible outcome of other options to college, showing that the search process could still influence whether a student wishes to pursue college.

The final phase of the model is the choice process of the student. This is when the student takes the information gathered from the search phase and evaluates the institutions to make a decision on which school they will attend. During this phase, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) identify the courtship activities that colleges and universities utilize to influence the choice decision. These activities include offering financial aid and communicating with the students. However, they do point out that the students surveyed by Astin, Green, Korn, and Maier (1984) in the American Freshman Survey had only 1-2 institutions as part of their final choice set. This means that at the point of making a decision, most of the options have already been eliminated through the search phase. The interaction of the students, and parents, with the institution increases throughout the three phases, but the major influences occur during the final phase of making a decision on where to matriculate. The complete model is shown in Figure 6.

Galotti (1995) conducted a study that had students look back at the criteria they used to make decisions to see if those decisions followed the decision process outlined by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). Galotti found that of the 207 participants, about half recalled the criteria they had originally reported using when making their college choice.
This study looked more at how individuals recalled their choice decision. In doing so, it shed light on the level of importance the college choice decision has on student lives.

Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) reiterate the model presented by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), but refine much of the terminology to describe the three phases. They divide these steps into three stages: decision to participate in post-secondary education; the investigation of institutions; and the process of applying and enrolling. The framework of predisposition, search, and choice still are apparent with this model.

Providing more longitudinal data, Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) wrote a book that explained the college choice process in more detail. Again, the conceptual framework for the book was based on Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-phase model. The predisposition portion is divided into two aspects of college aspirations. They present the three-phase model by providing several anecdotes for each phase of the
process and follow up with the theoretical and empirical explanation of these decisions. The study found that the “influences of college decisions of ninth-grade students are different from the influences on decisions of twelfth-grade students” (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999, p. 128). More specifically, they indicate that as students move closer to high school graduation, they learn more about their college options and the gaps between their aspirations and their realistic expectations become more apparent and accepted.

**Conceptual Framework**

To best understand an institution’s role in student choice, it is necessary to look at the choice process in its entirety. There are a lot of decisions made by traditional students in the choice process such as what type of school to attend, where to go, and what field to study. These choices all appear in various stages of a student’s transition from high school to college. By using an integrated framework of the stages of choice, it is easiest to identify an institution’s role in each of these stages. There are several works that address the stages of student college choice (Chapman, 1981; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler, Schmit & Vesper, 1999; Jackson, 1982).

Henrickson (2002) notes that regardless of the number of stages that comprise the model, there tends to be similar characteristics. There are two designs in particular that best summarize the stages of choice. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Jackson (1982) both address stages of the choice process that, in combination, best align with literature.

Understanding the importance of both the models of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Jackson (1982), combining the two models into an integrated choice process model is most appropriate for this study. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) identify the process of college choice inclusive of stages of student predispositions, the search
process, and the choice process. Jackson (1982) identifies the choice process inclusive of stages of preferences, exclusion, and evaluation. In combining these two models, the framework for the study establishes that students enter the choice process with their predispositions or preferences, go through the process of searching for schools, and conclude with choosing an institution that includes both exclusion and evaluation of institutions.

By developing a hybrid of two existing models, it allows this study to focus on the choice process through a commonly used model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), while incorporating an important aspect of exclusion and evaluation provided by another model (Jackson, 1982). This integrated model (see Figure 7) creates a framework that still views the college choice process as a three-stage process, but with two sub-stages during Figure 7. Integrated choice process
the search stage. This allows the study to not only delve into the positive factors that influence choice, but the negative factors that influenced exclusion of institutions. Further, the integrated model allows us to insert the various influences of college choice into the model at the various stages where they provide the most salient influence. The integrated model incorporates the themes of influence including family influences, peer influences, institutional characteristics, institutional communication, and institutional fit.

Summary

While college choice literature has addressed both the influences and the process of choice, the studies have tended to focus on either the influences or the process. A comprehensive review of the literature reveals that college choice cannot be predicted by affecting the influences or process, but is a byproduct of the two. Perhaps what the literature reveals to us the most is that there are numerous influences on a student’s choice of college and these influences tend to be contingent on several factors such as geography, economics, and communication. The college choice process tends to be consistent, which allows for a reasonable blend of theory to create the conceptual framework for this study. Further, the strong base for the choice process allows us to insert influences into various stages of the process.

Although the concept of identifying influences of college choice is not a novel idea, the contextualization of the study allows for specificity into the population of high-achieving students. Further, the qualitative research design allows for a more rich inquiry into more recently identified influences of choice, such as social media and interactive technology communication efforts, without excluding the other factors influencing choice. The goal here is to move beyond the categories of family, peers, institutional
characteristics, institutional communication, and institutional fit so that there may be more specific subcategories that may also influence choice. Beyond identification of these subcategories, further inquiry into these influences will be explored.

The next chapter will introduce the methods that were utilized to explore the student experiences. It includes an overview of the design of the study, including the process of selecting an institution for the case study as well as the process of selecting individual participants. Chapter 3 includes a description of the multiple data collection procedures as well as the data analysis techniques. The chapter ends with an explanation of the credibility, validity, and trustworthiness of the study and includes a description of the ethical considerations of the study.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The stages that students tend to follow in their college choice processes are fairly consistent from a theoretical perspective, but the variance among student populations exists with the numerous characteristics that may influence their choice. Chapter 2 provided a review of the relevant research and establishes a conceptual framework for the study of the college choice process among high-achieving college students. Based on this framework, there are several possible influences that may affect students' college choice that need to be explored. These influences align with the purpose of this study, which is to explore high-achieving undergraduate students’ perception of the influences that may affect their college choice.

This chapter presents the research methods used in this study. To explore students' experiences in college choice, the researcher used a qualitative single case study design that consisted of individual interviews with admissions staff, a content analysis of recruitment materials, student focus group interviews, and individual follow-up interviews with students. A qualitative software program was used to code and assist with the analysis of the data. This chapter aims to provide a theoretical and practical foundation for the qualitative data collection techniques utilized in the study. This chapter includes explanation of the following aspects of the study: the design of the study; selection of participants; data collection procedures; data analysis; and credibility and validity.
Design of the Study

As this study intended to explore the phenomenon of student choice in the context of high-achieving undergraduate students, its exploratory nature was supported by the use of qualitative inquiry (Merriam, 2002). Patton said that qualitative research “is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as a part of a particular context and the interactions there” (as cited in Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 5). This study aligned well with a qualitative design in that its purpose was to better understand student behavior and the college choice experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2007). From these experiences, the study identified commonality and shared experiences among the sample of high-achieving undergraduate students.

In this exploratory study, the approach to find the essence of the student experience was best achieved by conducting a case study. Case study methodology allows the researcher to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of contemporary real-life events (Yin, 2009), such as a process for student choice. Yin’s (2009) case study methodology aided in the construction of this study’s design. Merriam (2002) defines case study as “an intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, group, institution, or community” (p. 8). The nature of this study fits best into a single case study design because the participants were bound by within a single institution (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002) that is a representative case (Yin, 2009) of the group of high-achieving undergraduate students, with the intention of describing the phenomenon of college choice in depth (Merriam, 2002). This study aligned with Yin’s (2009) description of case study that acknowledges multiple variables of interest and multiple sources of evidence based on prior theoretical propositions.
Since college choice decisions can be influenced by regionalized external influences such as significant persons, characteristics of an institution, and institutional communication (Chapman, 1981), a single case study was an appropriate design in order to explore the student perceptions of areas that may influence students’ college choice.

The data collection methods utilized multiple sources of information. These included individual interviews with admissions staff, student focus group interviews, individual follow-up interviews with students, and a content analysis of recruitment materials. These data were analyzed using a constant comparison method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) with the assistance of a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis program. This form of analysis allowed for major themes and commonalities to emerge from the multiple data sources.

**Site Selection**

Understanding some of the dynamics of college choice literature, the selection of the site was based on selecting an institution that would have both an identifiable group of high-achieving students and a type of institution that would likely yield participants who made a specific choice among colleges. Further, the study looks at traditional seventeen to nineteen year old students in their first year of college since they would be least removed from the choice decisions about college.

In order to reduce some of the influences of cost and funds directed toward institutional communication, the site was chosen among public, four-year institutions. This study utilized a research-intensive institution in order to have a site that theoretically would have more high-achieving students to participate. In addition, the location of the site focused on a metropolitan area that had opportunity to pull from a large population of
students from the immediate area. The Brookings Institute identified the southern Intermountain West (Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah) as an area of fast population and economic growth that was home to many of these new megatropolis cities (Lang, Sarzynski, & Muro, 2008). Thus, the case was chosen at a large, public, four-year research-intensive institution in the Southwestern United States, referred to as Choice University for the purposes of this study.

Choice University is a four-year, public institution with enrollment slightly more than 27,000 students. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2010) classifies Choice University as a large four-year research university with high research activity and a primarily nonresidential population. It is a selective institution with a medium level of full-time four-year students and a higher transfer-in undergraduate population. Choice University is classified as having 60-79 percent of bachelor’s degree majors in professional fields and graduate degrees exist in at least half of the fields corresponding to undergraduate majors.

Selection of Participants

In choosing the case, it was important to make sure that the researcher had access to the participants. In order to do this, the researcher contacted the important gatekeeper to negotiate the consent to collect data (Glesne, 2006). In this study, the Dean of the Honors College at Choice University was contacted about the best way to reach the first-time freshman honors students. In this negotiation, it was discovered that all first-year freshmen in the University Honors program were required to take a one-credit orientation seminar. This unique design allowed for an accessible group of potential participants.
The approval from the Director of the Honors College Advising allowed access and initiated the selection of participants.

Consistent with qualitative research, the sample was chosen in a purposeful manner in order to obtain participants most representative of the population (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006). The criterion of high-achieving undergraduate students was met by only considering individual students that were participating in the University Honors program. Further, by using a population of first-year freshmen, it provided a sample that was still not far removed from their choice decision. Beyond that criterion, the students chosen for the study were only individuals who were admitted to multiple institutions. The reason for this restriction was because those students who were admitted to multiple institutions likely had to consider more issues that may have influenced their decision of undergraduate institution. In deciding the final sample of students, particular attention was given to have a sample representative of gender, residency, ethnicity, and academic major. Gender and ethnic diversity were important to see whether the issues that influenced choice differed by these characteristics. Residency was an important consideration since the site was a public institution and varying levels of financial support may have been a factor in college choice. Academic major also was important as it pertained to the academic reputation among disciplines for students' choice process.

Since the traditional age of college freshmen may have included individuals that were not yet of the age of consent, it was important to make sure that steps were taken to protect all participants’ rights. This study was approved through the Institutional Review Board in the Office of Research Integrity at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas before any interviews were conducted. Each voluntary participant completed an informed
consent form and was given the description of the study ahead of time. Those individuals who were under the age of 18 required parental consent in order to participate in the study. It was also important that the anonymity of the participants was maintained during the study. For this, each participant was given a pseudonym and informed of their anonymity in the study. Although the inquiry was not considered invasive or harmful, anticipation of any requests for anonymity were considered ahead of time.

Data Collection Procedures

Following Glesne’s (2006) criteria for choosing research techniques, the researcher sought to collect data that would be “likely to (1) elicit data needed to gain understanding of the phenomenon in question, (2) contribute different perspectives on the issue, and (3) make effective use of the time available for data collection” (p. 36). Typical data collection for case study research is extensive, drawing on multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2007). Thus, the data collection methods for this study included multiple forms. These methods included: individual interviews with admissions staff; student focus group interviews; individual follow-up interviews with students; and a content analysis of recruitment materials.

Questions in a case study are distinguished from survey questions by way of the general orientation of the questions and the levels of questions (Yin, 2009). The general orientation of case study questions focuses on questions directed to the researcher as a means of keeping the interview on track and relevant to the study. The levels of questions in a case study refer to the various types of questions that address the individual case, but may also include questions directed to more specifically to individual parties or more broadly regarding the entire study.
Individual Interviews with Admissions Staff

In order to get a sense of the potential experiences of the students, interviews were conducted with the Admissions staff at Choice University. Specifically, there were two interviews conducted. The interviews were conducted with the Executive Director of Admissions and Recruitment and the admissions recruiter responsible for outreach to high-achieving students for Choice University. The questions to the Admissions staff focused primarily on the practices and intentions of their recruitment activities. These questions stem from the fourth research question of this study that asks how the institution intentionally tries to influence college choice for potential freshman students. The guiding questions for these interviews can be found in Appendix A. The information collected from these interviews helped to shape what shared experiences needed to be addressed and omitted for the student focus group interviews. The Admissions staff was also able to provide a sense of why certain choices were made to engage in specific recruitment practices. These interviews provided a list of specific activities that were intentionally created, practices that were informally communicated, and a sense of the overall philosophy on recruiting high-achieving students.

Document Analysis of Recruitment Policies, Plans, and Media

Knowledge of the history and context of the recruitment setting is supported by the review of documents (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Bogdan and Biklen (2003) identify two types of documents that will be addressed in this study: official documents and popular culture documents. Official documents are produced by organizational employees as records for dissemination. Popular culture documents are those documents that are used to entertain, persuade, and enlighten the public. This study used the same
document to represent both of these types of documents. The college viewbook was deemed an official document, but was also the piece most often used to enlighten the public. The document analysis also answers the fourth research question on how the institution intentionally tries to influence college choice for potential freshmen.

**Student Focus Group Interviews**

The study continued with student responses and the method of collecting data also changed to a series of student focus groups. Focus groups are small structured groups with participants selected by the researcher who engage in a conversation that is normally led by a moderator (Litoselitti, 2003). “A key benefit of focus groups is that researcher interacts directly with participants. The interviewer or moderator can explore the responses given to questions or comments and thus discover more about individuals’ perceptions and views” (Langford & McDonagh, 2003, p. 3). The advantage to conducting focus groups is that it brings out opinions and experiences that would not have been addressed through a one-to-one interview, but would need prompting by the responses of another participant (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). They are influencing and influenced by other just as they are in real life (Litoselitti, 2003). The focus group interviews in this study were the source of information for many of the study’s research questions. These focus groups not only provided identification of influences to college choice, but also began to identify those areas that were more influential in the choice process. There were two focus groups, each with between two and five participants. The interview protocol focused primarily on answering the central research question: What areas do high-achieving undergraduate students at a public university perceive to influence college choice? The full interview protocol for the focus groups can be found
in Appendix B. Further, taking the advice of Greenbaum (1998), the study provided food for the participants (p. 44) as a small benefit for participation.

Individual Student Follow-Up Interviews

The interviews were designed to be more of an in-depth conversation to explore the phenomenon as the participants unfold the experience through their own views (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Specifically, three students were chosen for individual interviews and were selected based upon their responses during the focus groups. The initial Admissions staff interviews and document analysis provided a list of intentional activities that were utilized by Choice University to attract students. During the focus groups, those students who identified closest with the intentional activities were asked to be part of a follow-up interview. This interview was designed to provide a more in-depth view of the influence of intentional recruitment practices by Choice University, as identified in the sixth research question. These interview questions can be found in Appendix C.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data was an extensive process. The researcher transcribed the interviews and focus groups shortly after each session. This immediate transcription allowed for the researcher to incorporate important instances from the interviews while they were still fresh in the researcher’s mind. The transcripts were then loaded into computer software in order to help organize the data and the analysis of the interviews.

Constant Comparative Method

Bogdan and Biklen (2003) discuss using a constant comparative method that starts the data analysis early on in the data collection process. This method allows for
adjustment of the data collection in order to better address emerging themes and incorporates the multiple sources of a case study design. In this study, the initial interviews with Admissions staff and document analysis of the recruitment materials revealed ways to make slight adjustments to questions of redirection during the focus group interviews. These adjustments allowed the researcher to collect more robust data that would be relevant to the research questions. Similarly, the focus group interviews helped guide some of the redirection questions during the individual interviews.

Coding and Establishing Themes

The initial coding of the data was based on using very micro-level identifiers among the transcripts from the interview transcripts and documents. The high volume of these smaller data bytes were then grouped into themes. The review of literature provided a framework of potential themes that could emerge from the data. After these themes were identified, the researcher then read through the transcripts again to assure that those themes actually existed in the context of the interviews rather than picking apart the data.

Computer Assisted Analysis Software

To assist with the analysis of qualitative data, the researcher chose to utilize a program that fits into the category of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) programs (Lewins & Silver, 2007). Specifically, the Atlas.ti program was used to help with the coding and organization of the data. The CAQDAS programs are not designed to analyze qualitative, but are tools to assist with the planning, organization, and visual representation of the data (Lewins & Silver, 2007). In fact, Yin (2009) makes
...it clear that “these packages are two words: assisted and tools” (p. 128) and emphasizes that they do not perform the analysis for the researcher.

In this study, the Atlas.ti program provided a resource for organizing, breaking down, and reorganizing the micro-level data so that broader themes and patterns could emerge. In addition, the Atlas.ti program allowed for creation of visual representations of the data that help to graphically show the results of the study.

**Credibility, Validity, and Trustworthiness**

As with all qualitative studies, the researcher must make sure that the instruments and methods are appropriate and credible enough to be identified as research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify four quality issues associated with qualitative research: credibility; transferability; dependability; and confirmability. Each of these quality issues was addressed in the analysis along with trustworthiness.

Credibility refers to the plausibility of the findings. The data from the participants warranted multiple readings before any formal analysis was conducted. As mentioned earlier, there was an additional reading even after the analysis was performed in order to verify the feasibility of the analysis.

Transferability addresses whether the findings from this study could be applied to other settings. Though the sample was based on a specific group of students and staff members, the anonymity of the participants makes the idea of transferability plausible for other institutions.

The quality of the data analysis can be categorized as a part of the dependability of the study. To address this quality issue, the researcher utilized protocol that had been previously deemed appropriate for the methodology. More specifically, utilizing Yin’s
(2009) case study protocol provided additional support to the dependability of the analysis.

Confirmability was established by providing the transcripts from interviews to the participants to have them verify the accuracy of the data. The use of these member checks also contributes to the credibility of the responses as detailed by Merriam (2002).

Another way that the researcher addressed the credibility of the study was to utilize triangulation. Yin (2009) refers to triangulation as the use of multiple sources of evidence in order to better increase the validity of the study. The use of multiple sources of evidence helps to show that the findings are not a result of an anomaly derived from a single source.

Finally, the trustworthiness of the study has been viewed in various manners. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the aim of trustworthiness in a qualitative study as supporting that the inquiry’s findings are worth paying attention to. Lincoln and Guba consider their four quality issues (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) as components of trustworthiness in qualitative research.

**Ethical Considerations**

There are several ethical considerations that were addressed with this study. These considerations generally fell under the category of human subjects protection and field integrity. Human subjects protection refers to the protection of the participants involved in the study. Field integrity is a reference to the ethical activities in field of student recruitment that could be compromised based on potential findings.

In order to assure that the participants were protected, a full review and approval from the Institutional Review Board was secured. This review ensured that the informed
consent that participants signed had an accurate description of the activities they would be involved in as well as the rights, responsibilities, and risks they would be exposed to during the study. This review included approval of the general interview protocols, purposes of the study, and potential risks to participants.

The risk for field integrity was a bit harder to ensure. The idea of field integrity is to show that institutions, upon discovering unethical means of achieving productivity, have the restraint to resist using these techniques. The researcher, in working with the Admissions staff, identified the ethical pitfalls of some of the potential findings of the study in order to persuade the appropriate decisions by their staff. Further, since the researcher was an employee of the university, participants were not selected if they were direct advisees of the researcher. Even though the role of the researcher has only an indirect impact on the potential participants, the dynamic was worked around to avoid the potential perceived power of the researcher over the participants.

As with any study, the ethical considerations must be thought about, but often do not come to fruition. However, these ethical decisions in the design and process of the study are still important to bring up in the research design.

**Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the study design, including selection of participants, data collection procedures, data analysis, credibility and validity, and ethical considerations. In studying the phenomenon of student college choice, the use of a qualitative single case study was deemed appropriate because of the exploratory nature of the study and the regional influences that make this sample representative. The utilization of CAQDAS programs, specifically *Atlas.ti* aids in the constant comparative
analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) of the data to provide a robust illustration of the college choice process among high-achieving students. This chapter also delineated techniques to increase the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study, and considered the ethical considerations in working with human subjects for data collection.

The next chapter will summarize the study’s results and findings and provide an analysis of the data collected. It includes vignettes from the participants and a description of the overall themes that emerged from the study.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of a single case study in which the researcher explored how admissions staff seeks to recruit high-achieving students and how high-achieving students reflect on the factors that influenced their college choice decision. Data collected from individual admissions staff interviews, document analysis, student focus group interviews, and student individual interviews were interpreted using a constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) of analysis. Data were organized using Atlas.ti, a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data AnalysisS (CAQDAS) program to develop a hierarchical representation of the data consistent with the review of literature. The chapter first individually summarizes the findings from each of the data sources and then presents the collective findings for the case study.

Choice University Case Study

The institution used in the case study was Choice University. Choice University is a large, public, four-year research-intensive institution in the Southwestern United States. The school enrolled approximately 28,000 students and offered undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees. The freshman class was approximately 3,200 students, of which, fewer than three percent are part of the University Honors Program. Choice University was founded in the mid 20th century and its website describes the institution as transforming itself “from a small branch college into thriving urban research institution” (Institution website, n.d.). Choice University has a student population that hails primarily (80%) from in-state and has just fewer than 40% students of color.
The Office of Admissions and Recruitment at Choice University is responsible for the outreach and recruitment of all students to the institution. The admissions and recruitment team serves as the voice of the university to students, their families, and to internal and external constituencies regarding admissions related information and services. The office consists of 27 staff members, including 10 admissions counselors and an Executive Director.

The Honors College at Choice University has approximately 450 students involved in the program. According to their website, the mission of the Honors College was:

The mission of the Honors College is to provide for its students exceptional educational opportunities, available in the context of a dynamic community of learners — faculty and students alike — exemplifying a shared commitment to academic excellence and personal intellectual growth. The College provides traditional coursework, laboratories, studio and field experiences, intensive seminars and research opportunities, in a curricular array appropriate for students from their first day of university classes through graduation. The Honors College and its programs serve as exemplars of rigor, creativity, faculty-student engagement, dedication to academic integrity and community inclusiveness (Honors College website, n.d.).

Students participating in the Honors College are spread out among all nine academic colleges at Choice University with about 88% of the students coming from in-state. The Honors College has a slightly higher percentage of students of color (43%) than the institution.

This study utilized interviews with both admissions staff from Choice University
and students in the Honors College. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. The participants were either interviewed on the Choice University campus, online for a focus groups, or on the phone for an interview.

**Admissions Staff Interviews**

In May 2011, the researcher interviewed two members of the Admissions Staff. Both staff members were given informed consent forms for the interviews (see Appendix E). The first interview was with Chad, an Admissions Counselor who was in charge of recruiting high-achieving students. The second interview was with Lance, the Executive Director of Admissions and Recruitment (EDAR). Both staff members were asked the same questions (see Appendix A) in regard to the purposeful outreach to high-achieving students. Both interviews were conducted in the respective staff member’s office and each in-depth interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interview with Chad focused more on the front-line recruiting efforts of the office, while Lance’s responses, as would be expected from the EDAR, included more of a background on the purpose of the recruitment and the general outcomes expected.

**Admissions Counselor interview.** In the interview with Chad, the first question focused on the recruitment techniques for all students. Chad’s response focused back on high-achieving students, as that was his area of focus for the recruiting. However, he did say, “we’ll send them a communication saying, ‘hey, we want you to apply,’ or something like that. We won’t try and bring them in, feed them, give them extra attention.” Throughout the interview, there was a recurring theme that students who were not high-achieving were not given the same experience from recruiters than those who were high-achieving.
Since the emphasis during the interview was already skewed toward the high-achieving students, the rest of the questions quickly began to seek more information on how this population was recruited and handled. First, the researcher asked what criteria were used to identify the high-achieving population. Chad provided a layout of the criteria, explaining that the criteria, in order, were GPA, then test scores on either the SAT or ACT. In addition, students who are part of particular populations, such as National Merit Scholars, National Hispanic Scholars, or National Achievers were part of the high-achieving group.

When asked about specific recruitment programs geared toward high-achieving students, Chad explained,

So we’ll buy a huge list of names from the SAT corporation and we’ll specify and say we want students who score 600 or above in each section, critical reading and math. And we want a list of those names for students from these specific states. So we can get these lists from the College Board and we then can begin recruiting students that way so that they’ll go into a communications flow.

In inquiring about how this communications flow is designed, Chad explained that the key activity is to get the student to the campus. He said that “the big thing is trying to entice them to come to campus and take a tour and if we can do that, that’s really where students start to become sold on the school.” The emphasis on visiting the campus extended into description of overnight events that were designed to bring students to the campus to experience some aspect of campus life. He explains that they “take care of an overnight visit for (the student) on campus and (cover the cost of) all of their meals. We’ll try to plan it around an athletic event or an activity going on on-campus.”
Chad also spent a significant amount of time describing scholar dinners, which are arranged for local students who are deemed high-achieving students.

I mean, we are seeking out as many students as we can, as many qualified students as we can get, we want, but we won’t, for example, buy a list of names just to get regular students who are coming to Choice University. We will use that list to try and get the cream of the crop students. So it’s a little different in that we don’t give them as much attention. So, say the scholar dinner, we’ll invite 3.75 and above. Come to this scholar dinner. We’re going to give you a dinner, we’re going to recognize you, give you a certificate, those kinds of things.

The scholar dinners were described as a major focus of having personal interaction with potential students who fit the demographics that Choice University was aiming to attract and enroll.

The recurring theme to the interview was with Chad’s emphasis that high-achieving students needed multiple contacts to fully recruit them to Choice University. He provided an anecdote that emphasized the repeated contacts with a student that impacted her decision to attend Choice University. Chad described,

I have a girl that just yesterday night told me she’s coming to Choice University. With her, she’s from Arizona, she has a 3.8 unweighted GPA and like a 1360 SAT, which is pretty good. She’s got offers from all kinds of Arizona schools. I initially made contact with her from an initial list we got from the SAT, so I made contact with her. I sent her a letter before we went out to do a recruiting trip. I met her at one of the fairs in Arizona because of the letter that she got from me. So we started talking, and she was initially not really interested in Choice
University, but we started paying attention to her and she got interested. She started to come up for a campus tour and she was like, ‘I really like it and I would really like to come to Choice University,’ but her big concern was these other Arizona schools were offering her a lot of scholarship money. So I worked with Nick in Financial Aid and Lance and they put together a nice scholarship package for her. Got her a WUE, a western Undergraduate Exchange, and I presented that all to her and then last night she said, “This is great, I’m excited, I’m coming to Choice University.” So that’s a pretty concrete example of how that (recruitment) kind of works. The multiple contacts and continuing to work with her

This continued persistence, in coordination with offering an appropriate amount of financial aid, was what Chad emphasized as the reason why, in his experience, high-achieving students end up deciding on their schools. He acknowledges that in some of these situations, Choice University, as a young, public institution, often has trouble competing with bigger names. He says, “We have good academic programs, but we’re not like Stanford. We’re not known across the country unless we’re talking Hotel Management, so we have to try and attract these students through scholarship offers…and personalized attention that we give them.” While the reputation of the institution has hindered Choice University in relation to its competitors, Chad remained optimistic about the ability to recruit high-quality, academically strong students.

Executive Director of Admissions and Recruitment interview. Lance was approached with the same opening question about how Choice University handles general recruitment. His response included a little more focus on a purposeful approach to recruitment, including some empirical support,
Okay, well we base this on a study we did maybe three years ago of reasons why students were choosing Choice University and reflect on that and they were in this order: academics, location, cost, facilities, and student activities. And we segmented plans for different populations, but in general terms, we segment them by academic achievement as well as geographic location. But for everybody, we try to communicate with them at the 11th grade level, which includes outreach into high schools.

When asked about how high-achieving students were recruited, Lance explained additional methods of recruitment that were more deliberately targeted toward specific populations. Lance talked specifically of software programs that were purchased to coordinate recruitment efforts,

So the first piece is a kind of suite of products by a company, Hobsons. So that’s our database that people log into to give us their contact information. We generate mail campaigns out of there and we have another product called Connect, which is a Hobsons product, and Telecenter, which is a Hobsons product. All these kind of bridge the student information so we’re able to conduct call campaigns to specific populations and find scripts that you can call with and there’s e-mail campaigns and letter campaigns.

The interview revealed that these software programs were not designed to replace the work of a live counselor, but allows the institution to better organize their outreach efforts to prospective students. Lance mentioned that there are several hundred thousand prospective students out there and that Choice University had to be deliberate in deciding which students they would actively recruit to the institution.
An important component in recruitment that was emphasized by Lance was that parents are also included in the recruitment process. Lance explained a flow of communication for a typical student who expresses interest in the institution. This flow includes stages of communication with both students and parents. Those stages include an initial contact, academics, location, facilities, and student activities (see Figure 8). Lance noted that the inclusion of parents in this communications flow was deliberate since they have influence on student college choice. Throughout the process, the message is consistent all the way up until orientation when the same students and parents highlighted in the communications flow are present to talk to new students and parents.

Figure 8. Admissions communications flow
Lance described the details of the Admissions communications flow with more specific detail of the timing of the communication with this population. He indicates that five days after they get contact information, the series of e-mails starts for the student and the parent. He describes the first e-mail as a general, “Thanks for your interest in the institution” message and he explains, “post cards mirror (the e-mails) exactly because the same people and the same message are in the e-mails and within our e-mails are embedded videos, like 1-2 minute talks.” He describes the flow as continuing about ten days later with a focus on academics. Students get a message from a student and parents get a message “right now, from the dean of the Engineering College about academics.” Again, ten days later, messages go out regarding the location. Local students get a message from local students and out-of-state students get a message from an out-of-state student. Out-of-state parents get a message from a current out-of-state parent. Then, Lance does not identify the length of time before the next communication, but explains that it was about facilities and again, students and parents get messages from different people. Throughout this process, the goal is to drive the student to get an application submitted. If the student is still not applied, Lance explains that both parents and students get the same message from the study body president. At any point in this process, if a student applies, it stops the communication flow. The purpose of this very specific recruitment is to have “the consistency of the same people and the same message.” Lance explains that they try hard to have these individuals highlighted in the communications present at events such as orientation and parent panels.

Lance makes particular emphasis on the influence of parents of first-generation students. Lance explains:
Our suspicion is that it may be that every first-generation family isn’t in the highest socioeconomic status…they may be less likely than a very affluent family to be accessing the web on a regular basis. So that’s why we try to deliver (viewbooks) for them as well.

As part of the choice process, he recognizes that “the parents are the decision-makers” for these students. Because of this emphasis, he also emphasizes that repeated contact with both students and parents.

**Document Analysis of Recruitment Materials**

After the interviews with the admissions staff, it was discovered that the Office of Admissions focused on a single document for recruitment, the viewbook. Since the viewbook is a more visual document, the emphasis of its contents varied slightly from the information ascertained from the admissions staff. The viewbook, as the primary document used to promote the campus, is a visual representation of the campus. In doing such, campuses tend to put in as much information as possible into the viewbook to maximize the space provided for information. Choice University’s viewbook was full of examples of institutional characteristics. In addition, a request was made to receive both recruitment e-mails and letters, but those documents were not procured for analysis in this study.

The viewbook included reference to the faculty of the institution, with emphasis on the way they interact with students and conduct their research. “The College of Sciences aspires to develop and nurture students and faculty who generate knowledge at the forefront of science” (Choice University viewbook, n.d.). In this instance, it puts faculty and students on the same level of importance in the research activity of the
institution. Such language helps provide a message that the faculty is both accessible and forward-thinking in the way they work with students.

The Honors College also had specific highlighting in the viewbook. The information about the Honors College focused on the small community of scholars that comprises the Honors College. It highlighted successes of current and past Honors College students and the benefits that exist for students participating in the honors program. The Honors College is described as “a tightly knit community of dynamic and high-achieving students, faculty, and staff” (Choice University viewbook, n.d.). Again, this is an example of how the viewbook highlighted faculty and students connected together on the same level. The Honors College section included a testimonial from a former student who talked about her positive experience in the program and her successes after attending Choice University.

Throughout the viewbook, the language used was positive and focused on promoting the institution as a premier institution. Terms such as “high-quality,” “elite,” “world-class,” and “exceptional” were used to describe the institution, maintaining a positive message throughout the document. It used students to convey the messages in most of the document, perhaps trying to help students connect with the faces that were depicted throughout the viewbook by showing accolades and experiences of peers.

However, there was one major theme that was not present through the viewbook. There was an absence of personalized information. Nowhere in the document did it refer to ways for students to personally connect with the campus, other than general contact information to take a campus tour. Even that information was buried in small print on the last page of the viewbook. Surprisingly, there lacked encouragement in the document for
students to make a connection with an individual on campus or how to go about making that initial connection with the campus community.

There were five major themes that emerged from the contents of this document. The five major themes that emerged from the viewbook were student life, athletics, location, academic programs, and aesthetics. Each of these themes were repeated several times throughout the document and seemed to be the focus of what the institution was trying to convey to its potential students.

Student life is depicted in the viewbook with the representation of students as part of student organizations. It includes a list of eight categories of student organizations which includes: Academic/Professional/Honorary; Spiritual/Faith-Based; Diversity and Multicultural; International; Club Sports; Civic Engagement and Advocacy; Special Interest; and Fraternities and Sororities. There is also visual representation of these organizations with photos of members of club sports and student activities. Giving a first-hand account of student involvement, the viewbook has a photo of a current student who is quoted, “I am very fortunate to be a part of this organization because I have been able to learn more about the uniqueness of my culture while embracing diversity at Choice University” (Choice University viewbook, n.d.). In addition, there were several photos of students who were engaged in campus activities throughout the viewbook. For the purpose of identifying these images, students who were not depicted as attending and athletic event or engaged in an academic classroom setting were identified as participating in student life.

Athletics was also highly visible in the viewbook. Having a NCAA Division I athletic program, Choice University has received both current and past accolades for its
athletic programs. As such, the viewbook dedicated an entire page to athletics, emphasizing past athletes who have moved on to professional sports as well as providing photos throughout the viewbook that depict student athletes and students at athletic events. The athletics page indicates, “Choice University is one of the few public universities in the country that offer full-time student free tickets to all home sporting events, including basketball, soccer, football, and much more. As a student, you will experience university athletics without breaking the bank” (Choice University viewbook, n.d.). This language not only promotes the athletic programs, but appeals to the potential student considering college costs. Not surprising, the two sports depicted in images for athletics included men’s basketball and men’s football. Though the document lists a total of 16 Division I sports (nine of which are women’s sports) only the two largest sports were addressed in the viewbook.

More than was emphasized by the admissions interviews, the viewbook had several references to the location of Choice University. Not only were there photographic depictions of the city landmarks, but also the surrounding nature of the region. The viewbook indicates “Our location in Choice City offers a living laboratory where you can get hands-on experience in your future career while making a difference in a thriving community” (Choice University viewbook, n.d.). The viewbook also depicts location based on specific partnerships that Choice University has established with community agencies.

The academic programs at Choice University are each given a separate page in the viewbook. The document emphasizes the highlights of each academic college within the institution and provides descriptions of each college and the unique benefits of being
associated with those programs. As an example, the viewbook says the following about the College of Education at Choice University,

The College of Education is committed to creating an intellectual environment that promotes quality instruction, significant research, and professional service. Particular attention is focused on preparing professionals for diverse educational settings and on contributing to educational and pedagogical knowledge through scholarly endeavors. Collaboration among students, faculty, other professionals, and community members is essential to the college in achieving its goals. Integral to the mission is a dedication to being a premier college of education that serves our dynamic and expanding community, the state, the region, and the nation (Choice University viewbook, n.d.).

The focus of these vignettes in the viewbook is to show both the level of quality of the academic programs as well as highlight the relevance of the majors in society. Each of the academic units had slightly different themes. Some colleges highlighted facilities while others focused on faculty accolades. Some put emphasis on their community relations while others focused on their post-graduation job placement. All the colleges were consistent in showing at least some students in the images and all of them were shown with big smiles on their faces, looking very happy to be there.

The last emergent theme from the viewbook is the aesthetic quality of the campus. Aesthetic quality refers to the architecture, landscaping, and overall visual presentation of the campus. Just as the admissions staff emphasized the need to get students to the campus to see the campus, the viewbook provides a pictorial representation of the campus. As a visual document, the majority of the instances of campus aesthetics come
in the form of photos of campus facilities throughout the viewbook. Highlighted multiple
times were photos of the campus library, which even had its own highlight page.
Providing multiple meaning, the viewbook indicates “The Choice University Libraries
bring people and information together in innovative ways” (Choice University
viewbook, n.d.). It goes on to highlight the automated storage and retrieval system
employed to access archived materials at the Library. At the same time, there were no
buildings shown that were older or that did not appear to be modern in their design.
Unlike an institution that has a lot of tradition and highlights is older buildings, Choice
University focused on their new buildings and their state-of-the-art facilities.

**Student Focus Group Interviews**

In May 2011, the researcher contacted all first-year students in the Honors
College at Choice University to request participation in the research study. There were a
total of 95 students who were sent the initial request via e-mail. A copy of this invitation
can be found in Appendix I. Each student was given an informed consent form (see
Appendix F) to fill out an online survey to determine whether or not they qualified to
participate in the study (see Appendix D). The survey asked basic demographic
questions as well as whether or not students were accepted to multiple institutions. As
this was a study about college choice, it was vital that students participating in the study
had been accepted to multiple institutions so that a choice decision was made prior to
enrollment. In total, there were 12 responses to the survey. A summary of the student
demographics can be found in Figure 9, which includes pseudonyms, residency, gender,
ethnicity, major, and schools to which they were accepted. Of these students, two were
not asked to participate in the study as they had only been accepted to Choice
Table of student participant demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Residency</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Accepted to</th>
<th>1st Choice</th>
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<tr>
<td>Part34</td>
<td>Juan</td>
<td>Out-of-State</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Political Science &amp; Women’s Studies</td>
<td>Arizona State, Northern Arizona U, Arizona U, Penn State</td>
<td>Yale</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part87</td>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>Out-of-State</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Hospitality</td>
<td>UC Davis, Cal State Long Beach, Boston College, Indiana U</td>
<td>Boston College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part33</td>
<td>Chelsea</td>
<td>In-State</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>UC Riverside, Oregon, Colorado, Virginia, St. John’s, Claremont</td>
<td>Colorado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part18</td>
<td>Mary</td>
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<td>UC Berkeley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part41</td>
<td>Kendall</td>
<td>In-State</td>
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<td>Health Care Administration</td>
<td>Arizona, Washington, Oregon</td>
<td>Choice University</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part72</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>In-State</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>UC Davis, Arizona State, Texas</td>
<td>UC Davis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part8</td>
<td>Randi</td>
<td>In-State</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
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<td>Kansas State</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Maria</td>
<td>In-State</td>
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<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Melissa</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>None</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part17</td>
<td>Andi</td>
<td>In-State</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Hospitality</td>
<td>Johnson &amp; Wales, Nevada, Arizona, Florida State</td>
<td>Florida State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part21</td>
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<td>In-State</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>Arizona State, Nevada, Cal State Fullerton Occidental</td>
<td>Arizona State</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

University. Of the remaining 10 students, there was sufficient diversity to represent the Honors College population. Thirty percent of the participants were from out-of-state, and 50% of the participants were ethnic minorities. The participants represented 7 of the 10

1 Student did not show up to the in-person focus group
2 Student not asked to participate since she was only accepted to Choice University
3 Student did not show up to the online focus group
academic colleges at Choice University. Participants were accepted to an average of five schools, including Choice University.

In June 2011, the researcher conducted two focus group interviews with high-achieving students who recently completed their first year of college. Participants were given the option of participating in one of two focus groups. The first focus group was an in-person focus group that had three students sign-up and a total of two participants. The second focus group was an online focus group conducted via chat room that had seven students sign-up and a total of five participants. Both focus groups were asked questions about their experience in applying to college and the factors that influenced their final decision (see Appendix B).

**In-person student focus group interview.** The first focus group consisted of only two participants, with one participant who did not show. Juan was a Hispanic male from out-of-state who was double-majoring in History and Women’s Studies. Terri was a mixed race (Caucasian & African American) female from in-state who was majoring in Biochemistry and considering adding Business as a second major. The participants both knew each other already from interactions within the Honors College, which was seen quickly as an advantage since they felt comfortable being open and honest with each other. There were several influences identified as being important in the college choice decision.

One of the influences that was addressed was the location of Choice University. Both of the participants had a perspective of the campus that was not necessarily positive. Terri talked about how the location of Choice University was not very desirable for in-state students. She said, “It’s a cool attraction, but I just don’t know why kids aren’t
happy about coming here. I remember that I wasn’t happy about coming here, but I don’t remember why. I think it was just because I didn’t want to.” She went on to explain how the familiarity with the Choice University campus was a detriment to those local students who were so used to the feel of the campus.

In addition to location, the participants had a very positive experience with the Honors College. They talked about how they were able to connect with both faculty, staff, and students alike. Juan said, “I think one thing that really helped me like Choice University was the advising in the Honors College, just because they’re so great and they’re so…they’re just such a big help and any question that you have, they’re willing to answer you.” Terri quickly agreed with the helpfulness of the Honors College staff. She explained, “It’s not necessarily that you’re an honor student or in the Honors College, it’s just a different network that you have and you can relate to at Choice University instead of being just a normal student that’s not really involved in anything.” Both students continued later on to talk about their experiences with the Honors College and how it made them feel comfortable with their decision to attend Choice University.

There was also a bit of emphasis placed on how the participants’ families had an influence on the college choice decision. For Juan, experiences with his cousins, who attend Choice University, were helpful since he had to find new institutions to attend at the last stage of the application process. Though he had not visited the campus, he was able to take the testimonial from his cousins as sufficient information to base his decision. Terri was familiar with the Choice University campus because of her father’s employment at Choice University. In describing this relationship, she said, “I basically grew up on this campus, all around the College of Business, but I’ve gone to the
basketball games and gone to the football games since I was like three and I really like the campus.” Terri seemed to know a lot of the ins and outs of the college campus and wanted to make sure that she wasn’t coming to Choice University because of her father, but that she was familiar with the accolades of the institution.

Out of this focus group, there were several themes that emerged as factors in the choice process. These themes included whether it was a first-choice school, academic and institutional reputation, cost, individual attention, and knowledge about campus activities.

The first question of the focus group asked the participants to focus on the factors that influenced their decision to attend Choice University. Terri explained that her original intention was to attend New York University and that Choice University was a last minute application. She explained “I was actually going to NYU and about five days before graduation, I was like, ‘I don’t really want to go to NYU anymore,’ and I ended up coming here and I applied for a last minute scholarship and I got in.” Juan’s experience was that he did not get accepted to his number one choice, Yale University, and as he explained, “I couldn’t accept (the other schools) because they were so expensive and Choice University was just really cheap compared to the other out-of-state schools I wanted to go to, so that’s the reasons why I came here.” Both Terri and Juan explained that they were happy with their decision and satisfied with their decision to attend Choice University.

A recurring theme among the conversation revolved around where Choice University fell in regard to its reputation and ranking among other schools. Both participants were clear in stating that Choice University was not their first choice school,
but there were other factors that played a role. Juan explains, “I think it’s definitely showing that you can do something with your degree here and there’s a future outside of Choice City if you stayed at Choice University.” He goes on to discuss how strong the academic programs are at Choice University, but that the perception that he sees from the general public is that Choice University is poor. He explains, “I think it’s a big difference with adults and professionals. I don’t think they take Choice University too seriously.” Terri contributed to the conversation by talking about how Choice University has the reputation, among locals, as the school you attend to never leave the city. She even said, “I think they’re looking at it as a joke. I look at Choice University and I was like, ‘this is such a bad school. Why would anybody go here?’” Both agreed that Choice University has to try to promote the positive aspects of the institution better in their advertisement and outreach. Both students made it clear that Choice University was not their first choice of school and definitely was not within their short list of final schools based on the information they knew about the institution coming into the decision process.

Associated with the decision to attend Choice University, both participants made it clear that cost was a big factor in their decisions to attend. Juan provided perspective on the level of aid that was offered at competing institutions, noting that “(Top tier schools) are really generous in what they offer you for scholarships. The second tier, I guess you can say, they’re not.” Regarding cost, he went on to explain that “I was looking at UC (University of California) schools, but they were upwards of $50,000. So I think before I started, I chose Choice University because it was cheaper for my family.” Terri took a different approach to money, looking at it in a more utilitarian perspective:
I think price is always a factor. It was even a factor for me too and my dad gets a discount here and I still would get enough scholarship money to pay for the rest of my tuition, so I get to come here for free, which is nice, and I get to save all the money that (my family) saved either for graduate school or something else. I think it’s if people were planning ahead a little more, then they wouldn’t feel as bad about coming here.

Even in her defense of the institution as an appropriate choice for her, she still made a point to conclude that there is a sense that choosing to attend Choice University was not seen as a positive experience or decision. Throughout the conversation, Terri made mention of financial aid that she was offered both at competing institutions as well as Choice University. She explained that she had $30,000 aid offers from Pepperdine University and American University, and that she was only given $5,000 from NYU. She mentioned that with these institutions, that financial aid still wasn’t enough. She explained that Choice University gave her a $5,000 scholarship and that she is in a program that includes a $20,000 scholarship. Her father gets a discounted tuition for her and another scholarship she has covers everything else, making the cost essentially free for her education. During this time, Juan had moments where he looked surprised at the level of aid that Terri said she was offered. He later went on to mention that scholarship information needs to be more transparent in order for students to have a full financial perspective on their choice decision.

Beyond cost, the recruitment process for both participants seemed to come back to the need for individual attention. Earlier in the conversation, the participants spoke anecdotally about their experiences with personal connections, while later on in the
conversation, the tone switched to what could be done to help persuade prospective
students to attend Choice University. Juan expressed that there was no personal attention
in his recruitment. “No one approached me or e-mailed me asking do you want to come
here, but it was more me going to them and e-mailing them, and contacting them and
going to any events they had in the state.” Terri agreed with Juan’s experience of
initiating contact, noting that she got a bunch of letters and e-mails trying to get her to
apply, but nothing that was personalized. She described the experience as schools that
“just kept spamming you with all of the stuff.” Despite her negative opinion of this
contact, she did reveal that she ended up applying to some of the schools that kept
sending her information. Both participants expressed an increase in the amount of
general communication they received following their completion of the SAT.

Throughout the conversation, there were very few instances where participants
showed examples of a positive individual communication from an institution that was out
of the ordinary. Terri recalled,

After I got accepted to Pepperdine, they send me this huge beach package. There
was, like, tee shirts and Frisbees. It was really cool, and I was really happy, but
that was the only thing different from other schools, because everybody else did
just like the bumper sticker for your car and they sent me the pennants when you
get in, but other than that, nobody did anything that was out of the ordinary.

She also recalled that Choice University had a dinner for high-achieving students that
was held every year and that after the third year of participation, she was given a free
application and a scholarship for her academic achievements. She did recall being
individually recognized at these events, but with more emphasis on the third year.
As the conversation continued, both participants started to provide suggestions on ways that institutions could better outreach to potential students. One aspect of this outreach that was consistent was the need for individual attention to students. Terri suggested using current students to serve as mentors to prospective students to help answer questions and guide them to the campus and to be a part of Choice University. Her analogy to making this personal connection was based on a business model. She explained,

It’s like when you’re running a business. You want to be able to connect with your customers on a personal level so they can feel like, “I can trust them and I’m going to be loyal to them. Yeah, I can go buy it somewhere else cheaper, but I’m going to them.” I think it’s the whole idea of making them feel they are really important to you.

She went on to suggest that the use of pockets of interested entities on the campus, such as advisors, student government, or the Honors College could be a catalyst for this communication and connection. Juan mentioned that his experience with individual interviews for campuses was helpful for him to get a feel of a campus. However, he also recognized that the logistics of interviewing all students was not necessarily feasible with the current resources. Both participants expressed the great impact that having an accessible advisor in the Honors College made in their transition to the campus. They felt that the receptive and friendly nature of the staff in the Honors College helped ease their minds about the transition from high school to college and reaffirmed their decision to attend. Most telling from Terri’s experience was this quote, “It’s that whole cookie cutter thing that bothers me. I hated getting a letter. I got a couple of hand-signed letters
and that made me feel so much better. And I know it takes 10 times longer for people to do that, but getting a hand-signed letter is so much more meaningful.” The participants made it clear the personal touches did not have to be anything big, but something little to show that they are being looked at as an individual and not just a number in the recruitment pipeline.

The final emerging theme from the focus group was regarding the lack of knowledge about organizations and activities at Choice University. Both participants expressed that their satisfaction with the institution was heavily influenced by the activities and opportunities that existed on campus and that these opportunities were missing during the recruiting process. Juan is involved in the student government at Choice University and said,

I think one of the things is that there are a lot of cool things on campus, like our museum is really great and so many things that we don’t know about until we get here, because we need to have orientation and Premier event, and it’s all great, but when applying, I had no idea that things like this existed.”

He went on later to say, “I think student organizations and students really make this campus.” At the end of the focus group, the researcher asked participants if they were to go the choice process again, what would they have liked to see in the recruitment process. Juan expressed,

I think that if I was doing the process all over again, Choice University would be higher on my list…or even be on my list since it wasn’t until later. What would probably make me come here would be getting to know the university better and knowing its merits and learning about the Honors College and about student
government here and just campus life in general. There’s a lot of other schools that are great schools and they have great campus life and they’re so amazing and Choice University never really showed that to me before I came here. So that’s something that I would change and definitely it would sway me if I were to do it all over again. Just showing me that it is a great school and that even though it’s a commuter campus, there’s so much here in campus life.

Terri felt a similar sentiment as she explained that she would look more at campus life and what actually goes on on-campus. She expressed a bit of distrust for the recruiters, even saying, “I know they’re going to lie to me in a letter to get me to go there.” She emphasizes that being able to talk with people at the institution to see what actually goes on would be a big factor in her decision process.

**Online student focus group interview.** The second focus group was held online through a chat room. The focus group consisted of five participants, with two participants who did not show. Mary was an Asian female from out-of-state who was majoring in Psychology. Kendall was an African American female from in-state who was majoring in Health Care Administration. Tom was a Caucasian male from in-state who was majoring in English. Linda was an Asian female from out-of-state who was majoring in Hospitality. Chelsea was a Caucasian female from in-state who was majoring in Biology. Unlike the in-person focus group, participants were given user identification numbers to identify themselves in the chat room, allowing for more anonymity among the participants. This focus group provided more succinct responses and did not do as much elaboration on their experiences, but provided more diverse responses than the first focus group.
The second focus group was conducted following the same protocol as the first focus group. As such, the first question posed to the group was what influenced their choice to attend Choice University. The responses varied influences from location, cost, and feel of the institution. Chelsea talked about how Choice University was familiar to her and as such, she felt comfortable staying close to home. Linda said that moving out-of-state was better for her, especially because Choice University was known for her major. Mary’s experience was that leaving home was a good move and that Choice City was a familiar location to attend. Tom did not respond to the first question, but Kendall said that she couldn’t imagine going anywhere else.

Some of the influences that emerged from the responses included a recognition of the reputation of the Choice University campus. As mentioned previously, Linda said that she decided to attend Choice University, in part, because of its reputation in her field of Hospitality. She talked about how her desire was to go to Boston College, but when it came down to her decision, Choice University had a much better program for her field. However, her experience seemed to be isolated compared with the rest of the participants. Chloe and Tom both mentioned that Choice University did not have the best reputation among local students. Chloe said, “It’s the local school. Nobody wants to go here.” She later clarified that for a local student, the reputation of the institution was not strong and that there was not a perceived strength in the academic programs at Choice University. Tom also clarified, “At my school, everybody was trying to go somewhere else. Not that Choice University is bad, but people wanted something better. And better was out-of-state.” Mary did not say much to this effect, other than to mention that Choice University “was about the same as anything in Hawaii, so it’s better that I left home.” In other
words, the reputation of Choice University seemed to have a rift between in-state and out-of-state students. Those coming from out-of-state tended to have a more positive opinion of the school while the in-state students felt that there was little that made the school reputable among its peers.

Another influence that the participants discussed was the communication during the recruitment process. Prompted by questions that specifically asked about the communication and recruitment methods of both Choice University and other institutions, the participants had similar responses. “Nobody did anything special,” Tom said. “It was all cookie cutter, so I started just ignoring what they sent me.” Chloe, Kendall, and Linda all had similar experiences with the communication lacking a personal connection. Mary was the only participant who felt she had some good personalized communication. She said, “I’ll be honest. Coming from Hawaii, people on the mainland want you. It’s kind of where they want to say they have students from Hawaii. I felt I got a lot of phone calls from recruiters and alums.” She went on to explain that although the communication was made personally, she was turned off by some of the schools that sounded like they were recruiting her simply as a novelty rather than a legitimate academic interest. With all the participants, there was a sense that there needed to be more personal communication in order for them to have a better opinion of the schools recruiting them.

Several of the participants also discussed having some moment after they had selected schools where they felt connected with the institution. All three of the in-state students mentioned attending athletic events for Choice University and enjoying being a part of the support for the teams. Tom said, “I had some friends that go to Choice
University who took me to a football game. We cruised around the tailgate and I got a feel for college life. That was a cool experience.” Later he referred back to the experience as something that connected him with the other students at the campus, even though he wasn’t a student yet. Kendall, on the other hand, said she always felt a connection with the campus. She even said, “I think I grew up bleeding scarlet and gray because my parents raised me up on Choice University.” She had several instances where she mentioned her parents exposing her to the activities at Choice University. Linda said that when she came out for a campus tour, she felt that the tour guides were really nice and that “they were pretty honest with their experience, which was a nice change.” She mentioned that other schools were more impersonal on their tours. She said, “I’m friends with (the tour guide) on Facebook and she was totally helpful even after I went back home. It was like I already had a friend at Choice University.” These connections were expressed in the focus group, yet the participants still said that they wished there were more opportunities to connect personally with the Choice University campus.

As the focus group continued on, there were some themes that began to develop from their responses. From this focus group, there were three main themes that emerged as factors in the choice process, including location, the role of the Honors program, and cost.

Regarding location, Mary’s experience was that she wanted to go out-of-state for college and was encouraged to find a location that was familiar to her parents. She said, “My parents knew about Choice University because they visit Choice City every year and talked to other parents who sent their kids there. / For them, it wasn’t that bad and
actually gave them an excuse to visit Choice City more often.” Both Tom and Chelsea shared similar sentiments about Choice University, noting that it was inexpensive and that they already knew the campus well having been to events on-campus. Tom referenced his experience with friends attending a football game for Choice University. Linda had her heart set on attending Boston College, but the costs of living on the East Coast seemed to be too much. She knew that Choice University had a strong program in her field and was considerably less expensive than Boston College, which helped accomplish two things: “to get out of California, but still be able to afford college.” The allure of an out-of-state institution was still there for Linda, but Choice University was still close enough to home that her parents “didn’t freak out as much as me moving to the East Coast.” Kendall was the only student who had Choice University as her first choice. She explained, “I know it is the local school and everything, but it was the one that felt best. I guess I just wasn’t ready to leave home yet and I love it here, so why would I leave?” The participants all had slightly different reasons that influenced their choice, but still had some shared experiences in the process.

The shared experience of location carried with it both positive and negative connotations. The two out-of-state students, Mary and Linda, both mentioned the allure of leaving their home state to gain new experiences and saw Choice City as a location that would be a positive and maturing change of scenery. Linda described Choice City as “a vibrant city with a ton of stuff going on,” which helped her realize that it was a good place to be to study her major. Mary felt that it was a “good compromise with my parents for somewhere out-of-state.” Tom and Chelsea both had some negative
experiences with the location and even provided examples of the stigma that going to the local institution carried. Specifically, Tom said,

I’ve lived here my whole life. People go to Choice University and they never leave. / It’s not a bad place, but it’s just not a first choice location. / I guess I can see the allure of Choice City to out-of-staters, but it’s just like high school part 2 for locals.

Kendall then came to the defense of the location and said,

That’s a horrible way to look at it. / Aren’t you proud to be here? / I know that when I finish, I’ll be happy to have my degree from Choice University. / I’ll be even happier that I got to share those experiences with my family.

Kendall’s status as a local student made her opinion a bit different since the rest of the local students in all the focus groups tended to have a negative view of Choice University’s location. Like with reputation, the opinion about location was mostly divided by residency. The out-of-state students saw location as a positive factor in their choice while the in-state students saw it as a negative factor. Kendall’s slightly different take as a local student who looked forward to Choice University’s location made for a good bridge in the conversation between the two groups. Her defense of the location helped the researcher from having to mediate between an argument between the two groups, which worked nicely with the participants. When it was all said and done, both groups saw merits of the other groups, but felt that their experience was the more accurate depiction of Choice University’s location.

In addition to location, the focus group had a very positive experience with the Honors College. This was consistent among all the participants. They all held the
Honors College in high regard and attributed their satisfaction with the institution with their affiliation with the Honors College. When asked about what recruitment methods could be done differently, Linda said that highlighting the Honors College more would have had a greater impact on her decision. She stated, “If I had known about the Honors College from the beginning, that would have made a difference. / They were really good about keeping in touch and answering my questions. / They made me feel a part of Choice University from the very start.” In fact, much of the satisfaction with the Honors College seemed to stem from the individual interactions the participants had with the staff of the Honors College. There was one point where Chelsea mentioned an advisor by name and almost immediately, Tom, Kendall, Mary, and Linda all chimed in to affirm how great the staff was. Kendall even said, “My advisor kept in touch with me and I felt like she was really good about making sure I was all set with stuff before registering. / Nobody else took that time to make sure I was prepared for college.” Tom talked about how his older sister was a part of the Honors College, so he was already familiar with the individual attention he would expect upon enrolling, noting, “It was one of the bright spots of coming to Choice University. It definitely makes the campus smaller.” Mary echoed this sentiment and talked about her experience coming from a smaller school and transitioning to a large university, noting, “The Honors College helped make the big pond feel a little smaller.” She talked about the small class sizes in her honors classes and what closeness she felt with her fellow classmates. Chelsea said that if she were to do it all over again, knowing about the Honors College would have put Choice University higher up on her list of schools. She said, “It’s like you’re going to a top tier school without having to really leave the area. / As bad as Choice University is viewed
sometimes, it’s kind of nice to know you’re in the best part of it.” She went on to talk about how Choice University graduates compete with national scholarships and awards, which was “a good indication of how strong the program is.” The participants provided examples of the excellence of the Honors College and how students have received awards such as the Truman Scholarship and been accepted to great programs like Harvard Law.

Finally, the most prevalent theme of the second focus group revolved around the cost of attendance. In some way or another, the factor of cost played into the participants’ decision to attend Choice University. Kendall noted that with her scholarships from the Honors College and aid from the state, she was getting her entire tuition and fees covered. She stated, “It means that I can focus more on doing well in school instead of worrying about how to pay for it.” She talked about how her family wouldn’t be able to afford many schools other than Choice University and that despite the offers, she was still thinking about attending a community college to save money. However, because of the scholarships that she was awarded, Choice University was a financially viable option for her to attend. Mary talked about the cost in comparison with other schools. She said,

Choice University is pretty cheap. / I knew I wanted to go out-of-state, but it all came down to whether I could afford it. / Other schools offered me money, but it still left a lot to make up in the end. / It all came down to going to Choice University or UC Berkeley. The difference in cost per year was about $6,000, so the decision seemed pretty easy.

Tom and Chelsea both mentioned the scholarships that made Choice University really inexpensive. Chelsea said that if you were going to attend any state school, you might as
well make it your own and pay less, noting, “The quality of the education you’ll get there will be comparable.” This comment followed an explanation of how Choice University was similar to the large state universities that she was using for comparison. Linda’s experience was a little different. She recognized the huge difference in cost between Boston College and Choice University, but that the program reputation for her field was better at Choice University and that lesser cost was “an added bonus.” She went on to say, “It made it easier on my parents as well,” recognizing that the cost of higher education was falling on the shoulders of her family.

There was another school that was good for my field, but I didn’t even apply because it was both out-of-state and extremely expensive. / It wasn’t quite a private school, but it might have well been for the cost.

Overall, the key thread among the participants was that Choice University was an affordable option for college and that factor of cost played a role in where they decided to attend. The determination of cost came from a combination of the actual sticker price of the school in regard to tuition and fees as well as the level of financial assistance that was being provided to the participants. Every student in the study had some form of financial aid to assist with covering the cost of education. However, the participants first recognized that the price of Choice University was already starting out less than its peers.

**Student Individual Interviews**

In June 2011, the researcher conducted follow-up interviews with three of the participants to explore their motivations for choosing Choice University. Each interview was approximately 15 minutes long and followed the same interview protocol (see Appendix C). Participants were asked to fill out the informed consent for the interview
(see Appendix H) and were chosen based on their responses from the focus groups. Juan, Kendall, and Mary were chosen as participants for the interviews. Juan’s interview was done in-person while Kendall and Mary’s interviews were done over the phone. There were two themes that were explored in these interviews. First, each participant had mentioned their interaction, or lack thereof, with various forms of technology in the recruitment process. Second, the participants each had a unique experience with the influence of their family on their choice decision.

**Interview with Juan.** Juan was first asked about how he interacted with Choice University during his college choice decision. He responded,

> My interaction with Choice University during my initial college decision choice was incredibly minimal, if existing at all. I had many colleges in mind as I entered my senior year, roughly 20 schools from across the nation. Choice University did not enter my mind as a choice for my undergraduate studies until after I was rejected from the top schools I applied to and had to make a choice, then, between my “fall back” choices.

Juan went on to talk about how his interaction with Choice University was strictly done online through e-mails and through the web, noting that he had to seek out this information on his own accord. He did mention that he felt he was burnt out of the cookie cutter e-mails, letters in the mail, and voice-recorded calls, saying, “I felt as if I was being spammed.” His response from the focus group showed that he wanted to have more of the individual interaction with the institution. At the same time, there was a lot of information he said he was able to access by going online or interacting through online methods. However, interaction that was not initiated by him was deemed as unimportant.
He said, “I was rather indifferent” regarding the communication that was received from the institutions.

Juan’s experience also had some positive notes. He was very positive about his interaction with the Honors College. He said,

There were times when I Skyped with an advisor, and there was many times I emailed them with any questions that came to mind. The Honors College staff was what made me get excited about the school, they were the first to demonstrate to me that even in a school with thousands of students, one student’s concerns still mattered.

He talked about the friendliness of the staff in the Honors College and how that put his mind at ease about his decision. He also made point to say how they were willing to find ways to interact with him that were not extended from other campus offices or other institutions. It was interesting to see that the use of a video-conferencing technology, Skype, was mentioned without any aspect of it being new or innovative, but as a necessary option for communication. This caused the researcher to think that there must be some ways that institutions can implement these forms of communication to outreach to potential students.

Changing gears, the researcher then started to ask Juan about his experience with the influence of his family on his choice. When asked about his family’s experiences with Choice University, Juan talked about how his cousin, who attends Choice University, suggested the school and that it helped meet his desire to leave his home state and start somewhere new. He mentioned, “Choice University was the cheapest of my
choices and because I have family members who attend the school, it made sense.”

When asked to elaborate on it, Juan explained,

Their affiliation definitely encouraged my decision to attend. I can say for certain that if I had no family at Choice University, I would most-likely be at an Arizona state school. I really wanted to go out of state for college, and after I was rejected from the schools I decided to apply to, I was slowly becoming content with attending the Arizona State University. However, my cousins who attend Choice University constantly encouraged me to apply to Choice University. After I checked out the website and found out there was an Honors College I decided to apply and here I am now.

In this situation, Juan’s family was the catalyst for him to even look at Choice University and their encouragement helped him understand the positives of attending Choice University. Juan did make it a point to say that Choice University has a disconnect between what the admissions office portrays Choice University to be and what is the real Choice University. This was an important discovery in the interview because it talked more closely to the content that was being conveyed by the admissions office in comparison to what Juan experienced when he got to the campus. What is most telling from this mismatch was that the campus was essentially being undersold instead of touted to its potential students. Put simply, Juan says, “We need to better showcase our great school!”

Interview with Kendall. Kendall was the only participant who identified Choice University as her first-choice school. In doing so, it was important to see how Choice University was able to emerge as a top candidate for a local student. When asked about
her interactions during the choice process, Kendall talked about her experiences with student life even before she was admitted to the campus. She mentioned the pride she had in supporting the athletic teams and watching theatrical performances on campus. She said, “I was able to see some of what the current students already see. It was like I was becoming a student even before getting here. Choice University was like a welcoming place for me and it just felt right being here.” She mentioned how interacting with current students was a positive experience and that it helped her to see how college life could be. She explained, “Nobody showed this part to me from the school. It was my dad that showed me the cool stuff about Choice University. That’s where I was sold.” She discussed how her interaction with a recruiter from Choice University was good, but it was only during the random times that he showed up to her high school campus. She explained,

He only came to my school every once in a while. He was helpful, but he didn’t really do much to sell Choice University. It seemed like he was just there. Just doing a job instead of promoting. I saw him several times and it didn’t really get personal. He never remembered who I was.

She said that she wished there was more interaction with the staff, noting that when she began to interact with the campus, it was after she had already committed to Choice University and the interaction was with her Honors College advisors. She explained how they were helpful and made her feel a part of the university.

The researcher then asked about the way that Kendall communicated with staff at Choice University. When asked about her experience with the technology aspects of communication, Kendall made a point to say that she had more experiences just talking
with people at Choice University. However, she did mention one aspect of technology, in particular, that was significant. She explained,

I got some e-mails that had video links in them. It was pretty cool. I don’t think it got me to attend, I already knew I wanted to go here, but it helped confirm what I already knew about Choice University. Kind of remotivated me to go here. It even taught me a few things I didn’t know.

In Kendall’s case, the embedded videos didn’t help to sway a decision, but actually reconfirmed existing opinions about Choice University. Nonetheless, it was a memorable interaction with the campus during the recruitment stage. She referred to this interaction as being both “novel” and “cool” when she saw it. She said that other schools had just regular e-mails, but did not have the embedded videos. She also talked about how her dad saw some videos too during the college choice process.

When asked further about her family’s influence, Kendall’s responses showed a real closeness to her family. She said, “I love my family and totally adore my little sisters. It would have been really hard to leave them to go to college.” Her dedication to her family was also explained as a way to keep helping out her parents by bringing her sisters to school and helping around the house. She went on to explain, “My family is really close. They would have been crushed if I left for college, but they would have still supported me. I guess I just wasn’t ready to leave. I don’t think they were ready for it also. All in all, it was the right decision.” Kendall made a point to say that the financial assistance she received by attending Choice University was helpful for her family’s finances. She said, “My parents are really supportive, but they’re not rich, so any help is really helpful.” The researcher asked further about Kendall’s family influence. From
that, she explained that her parents attended Choice University, so that’s what she had around her growing up. She recalled that her parents always put Choice University as an option, but didn’t try to sway her to attend. However, she did note, “They were excited to see that I would be attending Choice University.” In light of her parents’ alumni status of Choice University, it was easier to see the correlation between family influence and her decision to have Choice University as her top choice school.

**Interview with Mary.** Of the out-of-state students, Mary had come the furthest to attend Choice University. The researcher first asked her how her interactions were with Choice University during the recruitment process. She explained,

I was being recruited by several schools, but Choice University was one of the only ones that I was considering. The schools I wanted to attend didn’t really recruit me. It was more me trying to get information from them. The other schools that were recruiting me, they were not really schools I was interested in.

She pointed out that she was already considering Choice University and that the recruitment from the institution was not what put Choice University on the table. She specifically recalls having someone from Choice University recruit in her state, which she pointed out as being rare. She said, “It’s not like people go out of their way to make it to Hawaii to recruit students. The fact that Choice University did was pretty unique.” She then talked about how she had interaction with her academic advisor and Honors College advisor prior to setting foot on-campus. She said, “Thank goodness for e-mail because that’s how I got a lot of my questions and stuff answered early on. I was happy that my advisors were willing to work with me that way.” She made it clear that her location necessitated the use of technology to communicate with schools. “There’s no
way I could have afforded to fly out to go to orientation. There’s no way I could have made an advising appointment in-person either. At least e-mail kind of bridged a gap for me.” She mentioned that she interacted about twice a month with each of her advisors all the way up until she stepped foot on the campus.

Mary went on to talk about how she was able to get a lot of the same experiences getting started with college that any other student would get because Choice University held a separate orientation program in her state. She explained, “You don’t expect a school to come all the way out to Hawai’i to run an orientation for a few students, but Choice University did that. It was a nice way of saying ‘we care about you’ and ‘you should come here.’” She said that Choice University was the only school that actually understood the transition from the islands to the mainland and that it not only put her at ease, but it made her parents feel more comfortable. She emphasized, “It was a nice personal touch. Made you feel like you were a part of (Choice University) already.” That sense of belonging is what was particularly memorable for Mary.

When Mary was asked about how her family felt about things, she reemphasized that her parents were familiar with Choice City and thought that it would be a good location. She said, “My parents were kind of like, ‘we can visit more often’ and stuff. Sometimes, I wonder if it was more an excuse for them to vacation to Choice City.” Nonetheless, Mary explained that the opinion of her parents played a big role in her decision to attend Choice University. “After all, they handle the money side of things, so if there was more, da kine, scholarships and stuff, it made it easier for them to make that call.” In the end, the factors that helped Mary make her decision included the cost, the location, and the positive reinforcement of her parents.
Summary of Findings

This study looked at the college choice influences of high-achieving students. In collecting information from both the institution and the students, there were several themes that emerged. The institution focused on recruitment through targeted populations, outreach to parents, and establishing a specific communications flow to talk to potential students. Their recruitment material put emphasis on programs and aesthetics of the campus. Students emphasized the cost of education, personal communication from the institution, and a final comparison with other institutions after the initial narrowing of options. This study discovered that one of the factors that was most prevalent among the student responses was cost, yet the Admissions staff mentioned that they had a very limited capability to do anything to bring the cost down to individual students. The focus that the institution took to work with parents seemed to be well-warranted because students identified the influence of their parents and family members on their college choice decision. Finally, the Admissions staff identified visiting the campus as a major influence on a student’s decision of whether or not to attend Choice University. At the same time, this was a factor in the comparison that students made in the final stages of their decision.

The flow of the college choice process fell fairly consistently with the conceptual framework identified in Chapter 2 where Jackson (1982) modifies the college choice model presented by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). The only difference was that most of the students, after identifying their first-choice school, weighed the institutional characteristics again to arrive at their final choice decision. The influences that were used to identify the qualities of the institutions were consistent with those influences
identified in the literature. In summation, the major themes that emerged from the data were as follows:

- The institution sought to intentionally target high-achieving students in their recruitment
- Recruitment materials tend to focus on the aesthetics and of the campus
- Students identify cost, institutional characteristics, and institutional communication as significant factors in the choice process
- Family may not be mentioned prominently, but the influence of family, particularly parents plays a significant role on the choice decision of high-achieving students
- High-achieving students compare their final institutions one last time before making the final decision of college choice.

**Chapter Summary**

Upon reviewing both the institution and student side of the recruitment efforts, there are some tendencies that emerged from the data. First, when it comes to the recruitment efforts of the institution, there is definitely a purposeful recruitment of high-achieving students and more efforts are put in that arena. At the same time, the messages that are being sent by the institution tend to focus on more general appropriateness of the academic programs, rather than highlighting the college experience. The student focus groups and interviews emphasized that the recruitment would have been better served if they highlighted what you could do when you got to Choice University, rather than why you should choose Choice University. A summary of the frequency of codes can be found for all data can be found in Appendix K. Recruiting aside, the factors that emerged
as most important to the students were the personal outreach, cost, and family support. The next chapter provides an overview of the study, answers the research questions identified in Chapter 1, provides implications for theory and practice, discusses limitations and future research, and summarizes the overall study.
CHAPTER 5
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore high-achieving undergraduate student perceptions of areas that may influence their college choice. Chapter 1 provided the background for the dissertation and stated the research questions. Chapter 2 reviewed the literature and provided a conceptual framework for college choice. Literature covered the areas of high-achieving students, college choice influences, and the college choice process. Chapter 3 detailed the qualitative research methods and the single case study design used for the study. Chapter 4 presented findings from the case study from both the institution and student data. This final chapter provides a discussion of the findings, a review of the research questions and connections to the previous literature, a discussion of the implications for theory and practice, limitations of the study, future research, and conclusion.

Research Questions

The research questions were established to find out whether there are trends among high-achieving student in their college choice decision. The questions were designed purposefully to look at both student perceptions of influences of college choice as well as the way the institution purposefully recruits its students.

Research Question 1

What areas do high-achieving undergraduate students at a public university perceive to influence college choice?
Previous research in the area of high-achieving students is limited. Manski and Wise (1983) discuss how discretionary aid is used to recruit target populations of students and Braxton (1990) discusses how the schools that are not first-choice tend to have $4,000 to $6,000 more financial aid, but neither look at the decision from the perspective of students. Avery and Hoxby (2004) say high-achieving students consider financial aid as part of their decision, but at the same time, identify cost as an institutional characteristic that all students consider in the college choice decision.

Chapter 2 identified cost as a factor that was part of the larger context of institutional characteristics. Avery and Hoxby (2004) talk about the sticker price of institutions and how financial aid is used to try and drive that price down for potential students. This study made it clear that cost was a driving factor among the participants. Students’ college choice decisions are influenced and even guided by the cost established by the institution and student aid is manipulated by institutions in order to be a promotional tool to potential students (Avery & Hoxby, 2004). Cost was identified as a factor used both early on in the choice process as well as in the final decisions of the students.

High-achieving students perceived other influences on college choice in this study. Consistent with the literature, students identified such factors as family influence, cost, communication, and institutional characteristics as factors affecting their ultimate choice decision. Though the influences vary from person to person as Berdie and Hood (1966) explained, there were still several influences in common for this population of high-achieving students. The various influences identified by the student participants are shown in Appendix M.
Chapman (1981) presented a model of external influences, which included the role of significant persons, institutional characteristics, and institutional communication. This study was consistent with Chapman’s (1981) findings with some slight modifications. The findings of this study identified significant persons as family members, more often parents. Institutional characteristics emerged from the study when student participants recalled comparing institutions against each other during the evaluation stage as well as when they compared their final institutions just prior to making their final choice. This second level of comparison may be most closely aligned with Glenn’s (2004) article where he describes a working paper that discusses pitting institutions against each other in final decisions. Institutional communication was reflected upon during most of the conversations about college choice. It included both the initial outreach from the institution as well as the follow-up communication to prepare the students for matriculation. Though communication by institutions was deemed as something driven from more of a market economy, it was still an important step in the college choice process (Hossler, 2007).

The most significant finding of this study surfaced when students identified a final comparison between Choice University and other institutions. This comparison emerged when students were making their final choice decision and weighing the final merits of each institution. This second evaluation showed a sense of consumerism where decisions are best made by comparing institutions against each other. After students made their choice of their first institution, they made the additional decision to compare the final institutions one last time before making their decision. This new finding emphasizes that
in this study’s population, high-achieving students take additional time in the choice process to include additional factors before making their final decision.

**Research Question 2**

*How do personal characteristics, such as family and peers, influence a student’s choice of college?*

The role of personal characteristics has a strong tie with college choice. The literature identified factors such as parental education background (Litten, 1982) and legacy status (Avery & Hoxby, 2004) as important factors in college choice. Parental involvement in the decision was deemed an important relationship to foster for an institution (Bouse & Hossler, 1991). The influence of family, though mentioned less often, held a more significant role in the students’ choice of college and in this study, it proved to be consistent among all student participants, making the involvement of parents of high-achieving students similar to that of parents of first-generation and underrepresented minority students. The interviews with Admissions staff recognized the importance in catering to parents of students to influence their choice. This was emphasized even more with first-generation students, which is consistent with literature about familial influences of higher education (Nora, 2004) and parental involvement in the process (Perna, 2000).

Students identified parents as being a major influence on their choice decision. In a case like Kendall’s, her parents’ experience with Choice University provided the alumnus effect that influenced her chances of matriculating (Avery & Hoxby, 2004). Though it was not identified in Chapter 2, the other recurring theme within family influence revolved around the financial aspect of higher education. The participants in
this study never self-identified as paying for school on their own. Aside from the scholarships that were earned and financial aid that was provided, each of the participants identified at least some assistance or financial influence that was provided by their parents.

Although Kealy and Rockel (1987) identified a student’s peer group as influential in their choice decision, their theory was contradicted when peers had little to no reported effects on influencing institutional choice (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Kelpe Kern, 2000). In this study, participants identified where they had peers attending college, but none of their responses seemed to have influence on their own decision of what school to attend. In fact, the only peer group that was brought up with any significance was with high school counselors. However, that influence proved to contradict Johnson and Stewart (1991) who said counselors provide insight into student choice decisions. The Admissions staff identified counselors as being counterproductive to recruiting students. Lance mentioned that counselors were not a help to Choice University at all, noting that they seemed to focus their time more on the troubled students than planning for college with the successful students. Students also identified the lack of assistance that they experienced from their own high school guidance counselors.

The significance of personal characteristics boils down to the emphasis on communication with both students and parents alike. As much as higher education talks about empowering students to make decisions on their own, the decision of college choice is still strongly influenced by family, particularly parents. In other words, the
college choice decision is not one that is made solely by an individual student, but by the
student and his or her family.

**Research Questions 3 and 4**

*What experiences are identified as the most influential in a student’s decision to attend a particular institution?*

*How do institutional characteristics, institutional communication, and institutional fit, influence a student’s choice of college?*

Institutional communication and institutional fit both emerged as influential in the
college choice process. As such, research questions three and four are addressed jointly
to address their shared content. Institutional characteristics are addressed afterwards in
relation to communication and fit.

Chapter 2 identifies the role of institutional communication and institutional fit. Students in this study identified a sense of personal connection that was most significant
in influencing their choice decision. The combination of institutional communication and
institutional fit are what comprise that feeling of personal connectedness. Donehower
(2003) criticizes the lack of personal touch in the recruitment process, but identifies this
personal touch as the way for one institution to distinguish itself from another. The
literature on institutional communication focused more on strategies to outreach to
students rather than the effect of these communications on student decisions. Regarding
institutional fit, research shows that this relationship is controlled by both the institution
and the student. Williams (1986) identifies the three variables that comprise institutional
fit: characteristics of students, characteristics of the institutional environment, and the
effects or outcomes resulting from the interaction of the student with the campus
environment. In other words, the student has to interact with a campus in order to establish whether or not they feel that institutional fit.

The students in this study felt that the experience that resonated most was the personal connection with the campus. Though this varied from student to student, it included such things as campus tours, campus visits, and individual communication with campus staff. Students identified a moment where they either were swayed to choose Choice University or had their decision reconfirmed to attend Choice University that was associated with some form of personal connection with the campus. In addition, the Honors College played a large role in a student’s satisfaction with the institution, but was not identified as a factor in making their choice decision as much as it was a validating factor of their final decision. This has to do with the fact that the Honors College communication, as strong as it was identified, did not come into play until a student decided to attend Choice University and began matriculation. Williams (1986) talked about matching up institutional characteristics with student characteristics to establish an institutional fit. As important as these characteristics were in the student choice decision, it was an individual moment that emerged as the turning point for college choice. For those participants who identified it, the institutional fit came when they felt connected through a campus program or a communication with institutional staff that they felt resonated with their own beliefs and motivations.

Regarding institutional characteristics, they are most prevalent at the early stages of the college search process when students are identifying institutions that could potentially be options to attend. In that early stage, admission rate and student quality are factored into the institutional characteristics (Hossler & Litten, 1993). However,
institutional characteristics are used to influence student choice at several points in the process (Martin & Dixon, 1991; Martin, 2006; Paulsen, 1990). The first research question addressed how cost is a factor that is included within the institutional characteristics. This study identified the influence of institutional characteristics not only in the initial search stage, but also in the final choice decision. In reflection, this is where student participants identified student activities and organizations as factors that create a positive image of the campus. Although they do not identify these as being highly significant factors in their decision to attend Choice University, they were identified as factors that would have made a difference, had they been communicated better to prospective students.

The bottom line is that institutional characteristics, communication, and fit all play roles in the choice decision. However, identifying an individual experience that influences college choice the most is important because it helps institutions identify ways to best strategize their recruitment efforts to be most effective. Though this was a single case study, the personal connection that students identified was addressed in a broader context of their overall interactions with institutions. As such, emphasis can be placed on making concerted efforts to connect on an individual basis with these students.

**Research Questions 5 and 6**

*In what way does the institution intentionally try to influence college choice for potential freshman students?*

*To what extent do intentional college recruitment activities affect college choice?*
Intentional recruitment is something that was both identified in the literature and addressed in this study. As such, research questions five and six can be combined to discuss both the methods and impact of intentional recruitment.

The Lipman Hearne (2010) report identified the need to diversity the marketing strategy of higher education institutions. The report also talked about investing into interactive marketing programs and firms to handle recruitment. The emphasis was that institutions should be funneling funds into specific marketing strategies as opposed to maintaining the old recruitment techniques in order to be effective. Intentional recruitment as has been done with student athletes (Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, & Palmer, 2003) should also be considered when looking at other populations such as high-achieving students addressed in this study.

Choice University intentionally sought after high-achieving students. By purchasing lists from the College Board and other entities, they recruit to a much more targeted sample. The approach was closer to the rifle approach described by Docters (1999). Choice University looked at past yield and what factors students most likely are swayed by in order to try and cater to the individual motivators for student choice. This intentional recruitment was presented by the Admissions staff as being a way to get more bang for their buck by going after a particular targeted population.

In addition, Choice University sought to try and get potential students to visit the campus to influence their choice decision. The Admissions counselor said that if they can get the student to visit the campus, there is a much higher likelihood that Choice University becomes competitive. These intentional efforts seek to follow the focus on institutional fit where students are connected closely with the campus through some form
of in-person interaction. By doing intentional recruitment, institutions are better able to provide that personal connection that students identified as critical in their choice decision.

It became clear that the intentional recruitment activities only helped open the door to opportunity. The work of the Admissions office was to help bring students to look seriously at Choice University in their college decisions. The Admissions staff presented a depiction of the Choice University campus that they felt was most appropriate for potential students. However, the information that the institution presented was not always received well. Student participants indicated that there was a disconnect between what the institution was marketing and what students can actually experience at the institution. This disconnect was actually underselling the campus and not providing a solid depiction of what the institution was all about.

At the same time, students who were a part of an intentional recruitment felt that if they were treated more as individuals, the impact of the recruitment would be greater. Again, this connection came down to feeling like they fit into the Choice University plan. Students recognized that if an intentional recruitment were to be individualized to each recruit, Choice University would do well in recruiting the best and brightest students. This perspective can be applied to nearly any institution seeking intentional outreach to prospective students.

**Implications for Theory**

A review of the conceptual framework established in Chapter 2, shows a three stage model of college choice. This model uses a combination of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model and Jackson’s (1982) model of the college choice process. Specifically,
Jackson’s (1982) model broke down the search stage into two parts, exclusion and evaluation. The result was a model that included an initial stage of predispositions and preference, a second search stage that is broken into exclusion and evaluation, and a final stage of choice.

A closer look at Jackson’s model shows the evaluation stage containing a rating scheme that includes family, location, costs, and institutional characteristics. However, Jackson (1982) says, “College attributes other than cost have relatively weak effects” (p. 241). This study provided another take on the importance of institutional characteristics for high-achieving students. As a consistent response from all participants, the final decision of college choice was preceded with a final comparison of schools, taking into consideration both cost and institutional characteristics, with specific emphasis on perceived student activities.

This study established that high-achieving students at Choice University made a choice decision, but still reevaluated their options before making a final decision. All but one of the students in this study had an institution other than Choice University that was their number one choice. The participants went through the evaluation process to establish their first choice school. However, despite their institutional preference that was made after moving through stages of exclusion and evaluation, they still encountered a new decision with final details to decide among their final choices. The findings of this study, in the context of Choice University, could provide an expansion of the evaluation stage of Jackson’s (1982) model, showing the narrowing of finalist institutions in the choice process. Jackson’s model accounted for a decision after evaluation, whereas this study showed that at Choice University, high-achieving students tended to reevaluate
their initial decision with a final comparison. Some participants actually chose an institution prior to entering into this final comparison stage. This study made argument to potentially create an additional stage in the decision process that occurs just prior to the choice decision. Students had established their first choice school, which implies having gone through the college choice process in its entirety. However, the choice decision still entered a last stage of review, deemed comparison, to influence the ultimate decision for the students. This potential new comparison stage is the point where the characteristics of one institution are compared with another to determine the best institutional fit for the student (see Figure 9). High-achieving students at Choice

*Figure 10. Choice University high-achieving choice model*
University paid particular attention to this last stage as they recognized the important decision they would be making.

Argument can be made as to whether it is necessary to add an entire stage rather than just reconfirm Jackson’s recognition that comparison is a factor in the evaluation process. However, since this study looked specifically at high-achieving students, the additional stage can be deemed necessary for students at Choice University as high-achieving students took the additional step in their decision-making to base their ultimate choice of school and, in some cases, even change their decision on which school to attend. The participants identified the characteristics of an institution as being pivotal in their choice decision or having potentially strong influence on their choice decision.

**Implications for Practice**

Although a single case study cannot provide guidance for all recruitment or admissions offices, the implications of this study provide some insight into some changes in practice that could be implemented by both Choice University as well as other institutions seeking to recruit high-achieving students. Geiger (2002) explains how “universities operate in competitive markets for undergraduate students” (p. 85). In this market, high-achieving students are limited in supply and high in demand. With large efforts and resources already being committed to recruit these individuals, understanding methods to more effectively recruit this population can be worth the small changes in practice. Admissions and recruitment directors need to pay attention to what their constituents say are important factors in their decision to make their actions more effective in the field.
This study provided a new stage in the college choice process. In doing so, it puts emphasis on comparative decision-making. There was also a sense that colleges tend to misrepresent who they are as an institution leaving a gap between what is sold during recruitment and what is experienced when a student arrives. If institutions were upfront in their comparison with existing or even aspirational peer institutions, it would ease the minds of some of their recruits. In other words, it is important for institutions to highlight how they may be better than other institutions and emphasize that point at the end of the recruitment process for high-achieving students. For instance, Choice University recognized that it does not have the most academically strong programs as some of their competitors, but the highlights of their campus could focus on the affordability of the school, the high-caliber of the Honors program, and the unique student life experience that students could only experience at Choice University. This action would help lay the initial tracks for factors that would be considered in the comparison stage of college choice.

The second implication for practice is to adjust some of the recruiting techniques for high-achieving students to create a more personal connection with students. Several participants expressed displeasure with the “cookie cutter” recruitment that they received from institutions trying to recruit them. Terri went as far as to say that simply having a hand-signed letter would have made a big difference. As much as admissions and recruitment offices are trying to be efficient and cost-effective, the automated responses and form letters that are being sent out are not being received well by high-achieving students. In fact, most of the participants in this study said they chose not to read through those communications, and a communication that is not read loses all effectiveness.
Though the general premise of personal communication is emphasized, there are several ways in which this can be achieved for high-achieving students. For example, creating a mentorship program for high-achieving recruits involves current students in the process, allowing the recruits to feel more immediately connected with some aspect of the campus. For Choice University, participants seemed to be receptive to being involved in that sort of communication. Regardless of the method of providing that individual attention, institutions need to make the extra effort to connect individually with high-achieving students.

**Limitations**

College choice is a very individualized decision process for a student. As such, previous research on the topic has provided models, but no specific formula leading to recruitment effectiveness. This limitation allows research to imply correlation of recruitment efforts to enrollment, but cannot infer any causation. The use of a single case study contributes to this limitation by only looking at a particular population of students. The findings of this research should not be generalized to all high-achieving students or all other public universities.

Another limitation to this study is the context of when the data were collected. During the time of the study, much of the United States population felt that the economy was in the midst of a recession (Morgan, 2011). Like many institutions, Choice University was going through a series of discussions about program eliminations, tuition increases, and state funding decreases. With the understanding of these ongoing issues, the concern about cost and affordability of higher education was prevalent in the
discussions with institutional staff and students alike. The findings of this research should be contextualized to a weak economic time.

The third limitation to this study is based on the time in which the data were collected. Due to an extended approval process from the Institutional Review Board, data were collected shortly after the Spring semester at Choice University. Data were collected to establish the reflection of the first-year experience of an Honors student at Choice University in comparison to the factors influencing their college choice decision. By waiting to get the college experience, there was less availability of students than expected. The biggest concern was whether there would be any out-of-state representation from the participants. Though the sample was smaller than expected, the participants were still representative of the population of the Honors College.

Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, further research is warranted on the topic of college choice among high-achieving students. First, it would be helpful to reexamine this study in a multiple case study design including a cross-comparison analysis to validate the findings. Do high-achieving students attending other institutions have the same experiences in their choice decision? If not, is that differentiated by whether the institution is large or small, public or private, rural or urban? These are the types of questions that could be answered by a broader sample.

Second, it would be helpful to repeat this study at a different time, perhaps closer to the point when students make their decision. Though it would not provide the same effect of comparing marketing materials to student experience, it may provide a more robust look at the motivational factors influencing choice. The concern with a study this
early is that students may make changes in their decision as evidenced by Terri’s decision to attend Choice University after already committing to New York University.

Third, more exploration needs to be made into the comparison stage of college choice for high-achieving students. As this is a newly discovered stage for this population, further study would look at the specific factors that influence decisions during that eleventh hour of the college choice process. Such research could provide insight on how institutions could best cater to their highly acclaimed recruits.

Finally, there was discussion in this study about other technological interactions with the campus. Though these interactions did not seem to make a significant impact on the decisions of students, it would be helpful to study whether or not students use technology as an exclusionary factor for their choice decision as indicated by Cox-Otto (2006).

**Conclusions and Summary**

This study was designed to look at the areas that may influence college choice among high-achieving students. This population was particularly important because it is a population that most institutions are competing heavily to recruit. Not only does this population have a great chance at being successful in college, but it also adds to the reputation and prestige of an institution. High-achieving students are generally drawn to institutions that are known for their selectivity, so the more high-achieving students at an institution, the better reflection of the perceived academic quality of the institution.

The college choice process is complex because of the numerous factors that are a part of the final decision and the myriad of options available (Litten, 1991). This study reiterates many of the influences that were already discovered in previous college choice
studies. Specifically, Chapman’s (1981) study defined significant persons, fixed characteristics of an institution, and institutional communication as the three aspects of external influences to college choice. Based on the information collected from the student participants, this study identified six major areas of influence to college choice. These areas were family, peers, institutional characteristics, institutional communication, institutional fit, and comparison with other institutions. Student participants regarded each of these areas as highly influential.

The conceptual framework established that there were stages of predisposition/preferences, search, and choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987) with the search process being broken into exclusion and evaluation (Jackson, 1983). The findings of this study added a final stage for high-achieving students that consisted of an additional comparison made just prior to a final decision. This new stage provides insight for institutions to address another instance where they can influence choice decisions among high-achieving students. Though this ultimately results in additional costs to affect yield, the outcome of having more high-achieving students is worth the additional investment.
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR ADMISSIONS STAFF INTERVIEWS

1. Explain the methods that you employ to recruit new students?

2. What, if any, intentional practices do you use to recruit high-achieving students?
   a. How did you decide on these specific practices?
   b. Who is involved in implementing these practices and why?
   c. Do you have any data that show the effectiveness of these programs?

3. What kind of funding do you have for recruitment purposes? Is it differentiated between general students and these high-achieving students?
   a. How do you perceive this funding in comparison to other peer institutions?
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

1. Thinking back to your choice of college, what were factors that influenced your decision to attend Choice University?
2. What were the factors that made you exclude other institutions?
3. What specific methods of recruitment did you see the various other schools use that seemed unique or innovative?
4. Is there anything that you can think of that you would have liked to see done by any one of the institutions that would have changed or reaffirmed your choice decision?
5. Now that you have started your college career, do you feel that the reasons for coming to Choice University are consistent with your current satisfaction at Choice University?
6. If you were to go through the choice process again, now that you're already here, what is something that you would have liked to see in your recruitment? Why?
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDENT INTERVIEWS

1. Explain how you interacted with Choice University during your college choice decision.

2. Explain how much you interacted with one-on-one interaction in relation to technology or virtual interaction.

3. What were your reactions when you saw these technology-based recruitment techniques?

4. Looking back at all the communication and interaction you had with Choice University, is there anything that seemed to be more influential in your decision to attend Choice University? If so, what was it and why?

5. If you were to identify the most influential factor in your decision to attend Choice University, what would it be and why was that the most influential in your decision?
APPENDIX D

COLLEGE CHOICE SURVEY

College Choice Survey

1. Major ____________________

2. Gender (circle one) Male Female Transgender

3. Residency (circle one) In-State Out-of-state

4. Ethnicity (optional) ________________________

5. Were you accepted to other colleges? Yes No

   If yes, which institutions?

   __________________________________________

   __________________________________________

6. Was Choice University your first choice for college? Yes No

   If no, which was your first choice?

   __________________________________________
APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT FOR ADMISSIONS STAFF INTERVIEWS

UNLV

INFORMED CONSENT

Department of Educational Leadership

TITLE OF STUDY: College Choice Influences Among High-Achieving Students
INVESTIGATOR(S): Vicki Rosser, Derek Furuwaka
CONTACT PHONE NUMBER: 702-895-1432

Purpose of the Study
You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore highachieving undergraduate student perceptions of areas that may influence their college choice.

Participants
You are being asked to participate in the study because you fit these criteria: You are employed by the university in the admissions and recruitment area. In order to participate in this study, you must have some role in the admissions or recruitment of high-achieving students.

Procedures
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following: participate in an interview to discuss ways in which the institution is recruiting high-achieving students.

Benefits of Participation
There may be direct benefits to you as a participant in this study. However, we hope to learn about the manner in which high-achieving students are recruited.

Risks of Participation
There are risks involved in all research studies. This study may include only minimal risks. You may feel discomfort in answering some of the questions from the interview, but the amount of discomfort should be limited.

Cost / Compensation
There will not be a financial cost to you to participate in this study. The study will take approximately 1 hour of your time. You will not be compensated for your time.

Participant Initials _____

Approved by the UNLV IRB Protocol #1102-3729
Received: 05-12-11 Approved: 05-13-11 Expiration: 05-12-12
Contact Information
If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Vicki Rosser at 702-895-1432. For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted you may contact the UNLV Office of Research Integrity – Human Subjects at 702-895-2794 or toll free at 877-895-2794 or via email at IRB@unlv.edu.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with the university. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

Confidentiality
All information gathered in this study will be kept completely confidential. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. All records will be stored in a locked facility at UNLV for 3 years after completion of the study. After the storage time the information gathered will be shredded.

Participant Consent:
I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I am at least 18 years of age. A copy of this form has been given to me.

________________________________________  __________________________________________
Signature of Participant Date

________________________________________
Participant Name (Please Print)

Participant Note: Please do not sign this document if the Approval Stamp is missing or is expired.

Participant Initials ______

Approved by the UNLV IRB. Protocol #1102-3729
Received: 05-12-11 Approved: 05-13-11 Expiration: 05-12-12
APPENDIX F

INFORMED CONSENT FOR STUDENT SURVEY

INFORMED CONSENT

Department of Educational Leadership

TITLE OF STUDY: College Choice Influences Among High-Achieving Students
INVESTIGATOR(S): Vicki Rosser, Derek Furukawa
CONTACT PHONE NUMBER: 702-895-1432

Purpose of the Study:
You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore high-achieving undergraduate student perceptions of areas that may influence their college choice.

Participants
You are being asked to participate in the study because you fit these criteria: You are a first-year college student who is admitted to the University Honors program. In order to participate in this study, you must be between 18-22 years old and had been accepted to more than one institution of higher education.

Procedures
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following: complete a survey of college choice. You may be asked to participate in a focus group to discuss areas that may have influenced your college choice decision. You may also be contacted at a later time for an individual follow-up interview.

Benefits of Participation
There may not be direct benefits to you as a participant in this study. However, subjects may increase their awareness of activities that motivated their choice of college and find other ways in which they can be engaged in their college experience.

Risks of Participation
There are risks involved in all research studies. This study may include only minimal risks. You may feel discomfort in answering some of the questions from the focus group, but the amount of discomfort should be limited.

Cost/Compensation
There will not be financial cost to you to participate in this study. The study will take approximately 3 hours of your time. You will not be compensated for your time.

Participant Initials

Approved by the UNLV IRB Protocol #1102-3729
Received: 05-12-11 Approved: 05-13-11 Expiration: 05-12-12
TITLE OF STUDY: College Choice Influences Among High-Achieving Students

Contact Information
If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Vicki Rosser at 702-895-1432. For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted you may contact the UNLV Office of Research Integrity – Human Subjects at 702-895-2794 or toll free at 877-895-2794 or via email at IRB@unlv.edu.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with the university. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

Confidentiality
All information gathered in this study will be kept with upmost confidentiality. However, full confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in a focus group setting. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. All records will be stored in a locked facility at UNLV for 3 years after completion of the study. After the storage time the information gathered will be shredded.

Participant Consent:
I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I am at least 18 years of age. A copy of this form has been given to me.

__________________________________________  __________________________
Signature of Participant                       Date

__________________________________________
Participant Name (Please Print)

Participant Note: Please do not sign this document if the Approval Stamp is missing or is expired.

__________________________________________
Participant Initials _____

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APPENDIX G

INFORMED CONSENT FOR STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS

UNLV
UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA LAS VEGAS

INFORMED CONSENT
Department of Educational Leadership

TITLE OF STUDY: College Choice Influences Among High-Achieving Students
INVESTIGATOR(S): Vicki Rosser, Derek Furukawa
CONTACT PHONE NUMBER: 702-895-1432

Purpose of the Study
You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore high-achieving
undergraduate student perceptions of areas that may influence their college choice.

Participants
You are being asked to participate in the study because you fit these criteria: You are a first-year college
student who is admitted to the University Honors program. In order to participate in this study, you must
be between 18-22 years old and had been accepted to more than one institution of higher education.

Procedures
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following: participate in a focus
group to discuss areas that may have influenced your college choice decision. The focus group will be
audio or video taped. You may be contacted at a later time for an individual follow-up interview.

Benefits of Participation
There may not be direct benefits to you as a participant in this study. However, subjects may increase their
awareness of activities that motivated their choice of college and find other ways in which they can be
engaged in their college experience.

Risks of Participation
There are risks involved in all research studies. This study may include only minimal risks. You may feel
discomfort in answering some of the questions from the focus group, but the amount of discomfort should
be limited.

Cost/Compensation
There will not be a financial cost to you to participate in this study. The study will take approximately 3
hours of your time. You will be compensated for your time with a meal provided prior to the focus group.

Participant Initials

Approved by the UNLV IRB, Protocol #1102-3729
Received: 05-12-11 Approved: 05-13-11 Expiration: 05-12-12
TITLE OF STUDY: College Choice Influences Among High-Achieving Students

Contact Information
If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Vicki Rosser at 702-895-1432. For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted you may contact the UNLV Office of Research Integrity – Human Subjects at 702-895-2794 or toll free at 877-895-2794 or via email at IRB@unlv.edu.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with the university. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

Confidentiality
All information gathered in this study will be kept with utmost confidentiality. However, full confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in a focus group setting. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. All records will be stored in a locked facility at UNLV for 3 years after completion of the study. After the storage time the information gathered will be shredded.

Participant Consent:
I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I am at least 18 years of age. A copy of this form has been given to me.

Signature of Participant __________________________ Date ____________

Participant Name (Please Print) _______________________

Audio/Video Taping:
I agree to be audio or video taped for the purposes of this research study.

Signature of Participant __________________________ Date ____________

Participant Name (Please Print) _______________________

Participant Note: Please do not sign this document if the Approval Stamp is missing or is expired.

Participant Initials _______ 2 of 2

Approved by the UNLV IRB. Protocol #1102-3729
Received: 05-12-11 Approved: 05-13-11 Expiration: 05-12-12
APPENDIX H

INFORMED CONSENT FOR STUDENT INTERVIEWS

UNLV
UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA LAS VEGAS

INFORMED CONSENT
Department of Educational Leadership

TITLE OF STUDY: College Choice Influences Among High-Achieving Students
INVESTIGATOR(S): Vicki Rosser, Derek Furukawa
CONTACT PHONE NUMBER: 702-895-1432

Purpose of the Study:
You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore high-achieving undergraduate student perceptions of areas that may influence their college choice.

Participants
You are being asked to participate in the study because you fit these criteria: You are a first-year college student who is admitted to the University Honors program. In order to participate in this study, you must be between 18-22 years old and had been accepted to more than one institution of higher education.

Procedures
If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following: participate in an interview to discuss areas that may have influenced your college choice decision. The interview will be audio taped.

Benefits of Participation
There may not be direct benefits to you as a participant in this study. However, subjects may increase their awareness of activities that motivated their choice of college and find other ways in which they can be engaged in their college experience.

Risks of Participation
There are risks involved in all research studies. This study may include only minimal risks. You may feel discomfort in answering some of the questions from the interview, but the amount of discomfort should be limited.

Cost / Compensation
There will not be financial cost to you to participate in this study. The study will take approximately 1 hour of your time. You will not be compensated for your time.

Participant Initials______

Approved by the UNLV IRB Protocol #1102-3729
Received: 05-12-11 Approved: 05-13-11 Expiration: 05-12-12
TITLE OF STUDY: College Choice Influences Among High-Achieving Students

Contact Information
If you have any questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Vicki Rosser at 702-895-1432. For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted you may contact the UNLV Office of Research Integrity – Human Subjects at 702-895-2794 or toll free at 877-895-2794 or via email at IRB@unlv.edu.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with the university. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

Confidentiality
All information gathered in this study will be kept completely confidential. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. All records will be stored in a locked facility at UNLV for 3 years after completion of the study. After the storage time the information gathered will be shredded.

Participant Consent:
I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I am at least 18 years of age. A copy of this form has been given to me.

______________________________  ______________________
Signature of Participant        Date

Participant Name (Please Print)

______________________________  ______________________
Signature of Participant        Date

Participant Name (Please Print)

Participant Note: Please do not sign this document if the Approval Stamp is missing or is expired.

Participant Initials __________

Approved by the UNLV IRB. Protocol #1102-3729
Received: 05-12-11 Approved: 05-13-11 Expiration: 05-12-12
APPENDIX I

STUDENT RECRUITMENT E-MAIL

To: xxxxxx@xxxx.xxx

From: derek.furukawa@unlv.edu

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Research Study

Dear __________,

My name is Derek Furukawa and I am a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Leadership at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore high-achieving undergraduate student perception of areas that may influence their college choice. You are being asked to participate because you are a first-year student who is admitted to the University Honors program.

I am asking if you can participate in a focus group lasting no more than two hours. The two times to choose from are in-person on Friday, June 3, 2011 from 12:00pm to 2:00pm or online on Tuesday, June 7, 2011 from 6:00pm to 8:00pm. Your participation in this study would be voluntary and all information will be kept confidential. Attached is the informed consent for the study for more information.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at derek.furukawa@unlv.edu or by phone at 702-883-4127.

Thank you in advance,

Derek Furukawa
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Educational Leadership
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
### APPENDIX J

SAMPLE OF DATA ANALYSIS

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<tr>
<th>Moderator: So what recruitment methods could be done differently to help sway your decision on where to attend?</th>
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<td>Part87: I wish they would have talked about the Honors College more.</td>
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<td>Part87: If I had known about the Honors College from the beginning, that would have made a difference.</td>
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<td>Part18: Yeah, honors is great</td>
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<td>Part87: They were really good about keeping in touch and answering my questions.</td>
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<td>Part18: but nobody knows about it</td>
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<td>Part87: They made me feel a part of Choice University from the very start.</td>
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<td>Part33: Did anyone work with Tiffany? She was awesome.</td>
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<td>Part18: I did</td>
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<td>Part72: I worked with Lisa, but I know Tiffany has been really helpful since then</td>
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<td>Part33: She always answered my questions right away.</td>
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<td>Part18: Yeah, she’s great</td>
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<td>Part18: Tiffany</td>
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<td>Part41: My advisor kept in touch with me and I felt like she was really good about making sure I was all set with stuff before registering.</td>
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<td>Part41: Nobody else took that time to make sure I was prepared for college.</td>
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<td>Part72: I had met Lisa earlier since my sister was in Honors. She was cool even then and asked if I was going to be coming to Choice University.</td>
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<td>Part72: It was one of the bright spots of coming to Choice University. It definitely makes the campus smaller.</td>
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<td>Part18: For me too.</td>
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<td>Part18: I came from a smaller school. I only had about 100 people in my graduating class.</td>
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<td>Part72: I had something like 800 in mine</td>
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<td>Part18: The Honors College helped make the big pond feel a little smaller.</td>
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<td>Part18: I like the small class sizes. I feel like I actually know the people in my Honors classes</td>
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<td>Part87: I agree</td>
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<td>Part87: And they’re actually on your level</td>
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BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Derek Takumi Furukawa

Home address:
1150 Heavenly Harvest Place #102
Henderson, NV 89002

Degrees:
Bachelor of Arts, English, 2000
Bachelor of Arts, Spanish, 2000
University of Northern Colorado

Master of Arts, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, 2003
University of Maryland, College Park

Dissertation Title: College Choice Influences among High-Achieving Students: An Exploratory Case Study of College Freshmen

Dissertation Examination Committee:
Chairperson, Dr. Vicki Rosser, Ph.D.
Committee Member, Dr. Gerald Kops, J.D., Ph.D.
Committee Member, Dr. Elizabeth Baldizan, Ed.D.
Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. Gwen Marchand, Ph.D.