

The Perceptions of College Students Regarding the Factors Most Influential in Their Decision to Attend Postsecondary Education

Abstract

The philosophy of the student college choice process has theoretically been centered in Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three phases. As the concern for minority completion of higher education increases, there is a need to focus on the predisposition phase to determine what influences students' decision to attend college based on various background characteristics. This study will focus on those issues based upon student ethnicity.

Many Americans have looked to higher education to provide a bridge to economic and social equity for this country's citizens who are lacking in these areas (Bowen and Bok 1998; Minnesota Private College Research Foundation 1994). This expectation is especially significant to ethnic minorities who traditionally have been under-represented in higher education, including African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans (Pavel 1999; Thomas 1998). At the present time, a dramatic shift is occurring in the nation's demographics among the college-age population. The number of minorities in this age group is increasing while the overall college-age population is decreasing. Consequently, it seems that such shifts would be advantageous to college-age minorities in achieving some degree of equity in this area (Horn and Maw 1995).

The United States Department of Labor estimations of the year 2010 predict that 42 percent of the available job openings would require at least four years or more of college (U.S. Department of Labor 2000). However, historically, these three aforementioned under-represented minorities are less likely than their White and Asian American peers to pursue higher education (Thomas 1998). Even though college attendance within these under-represented groups shows increases (NCES 1996), the numbers seem to disproportionately lean toward two-year institutions as opposed to four-year institutions (Karen 1991). Thus, many of these groups continue to experience lower social status and economic prosperity (Horn and Maw 1995).

The limited pool of qualified minorities is also going to be evident among higher education faculty, where as recently as 1994, minorities constituted only 12 percent of higher education's full-time instructional faculty while representing 26 percent of the United States' population (Compact for Faculty Diversity 1994). The lack of minority faculty will present additional problems to ethnic minorities pursuing higher education, because there will be a lack of minorities who would possibly serve as mentors, promote and encourage success in minority students, and provide a knowledge and research base on minority issues in

higher education (Ibarra 1996; Seymour and Hewitt 1994). These are all critical issues, which if not addressed, will be detrimental to the success of many minority students including those who will enroll in graduate and professional programs upon the completion of an undergraduate degree.

It is important that institutions of higher education address the under-representation of minorities in various undergraduate programs because ethnic minorities make up almost one-third of American residents (*The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac* 2000). One way to address this problem is to more accurately develop recruitment strategies for high school students in these ethnic minority groups. This study will be important in providing a picture of the most influential social and economic factors that were significant to minority students in their decision to attend college.

Background

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) stated that there are three phases of the college choice process for students considering college—predisposition, search, and selection. During the first stage, predisposition, students decide whether they will attend college, which is determined usually by background and attitudinal characteristics. Once the student decides to pursue postsecondary education, the student enters the search phase, which has

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been identified as the period during which the student actually begins to seek information about higher education institutions. The final stage of the college choice process, selection, entails the student actually making a final decision on the institution that he/she would like to attend (Hossler and Gallagher 1987). This study focuses on the first stage and concentrates primarily on the personal, social, and economic factors that influence a student's decision to attend college.

Many have postulated that during this decision-making process, economic and financial issues most influence the predisposition stage (Astin 1980; Canale *et al.*, 1996; McDonough and Antonio 1996; Tierney 1980). Students who are considering college have to determine, in many cases, whether they can attend college based upon their family's support. The conclusion is that many students from minority backgrounds tend to avoid college due to the concern that they may incur financial hardships upon their family (Canale *et al.* 1996; Sevier 1992). Additionally, the level of knowledge and understanding of federal financial aid opportunities impacts many students' decision to attend college. For those students from economically deprived backgrounds, this impact is disproportionately negative (Gibbs 1995). Finally, the perceived benefit of attending college to enhance potential workforce earnings upon graduation from the institution is also an influential economic factor for many students (Wenglinsky 1996).

Social and personal factors also have been identified as factors critical to a student's decision to attend college (Abraham and Jacobs 1990; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Hagedorn 1999; Gilmour, Spiro, and Dolich 1981; Horvat 1996; Martin and Dixon 1991; Smith and Matthews 1992). These studies focus on the role that campus climate (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Hagedorn 1999), counselors and peers (Abraham and Jacobs 1990; Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper 1999), and parental and other family members (Gilmour, Spiro, and Dolich 1981; Horvat 1996; Smith and Matthews 1992) have on the potential college student's decision-making process. These factors individually or in various combinations impact college choice during the predisposition stage.

Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) stated that parents are the most influential in this decision-making process. Their research stated that in the three-stage college choice process (Hossler and Gallagher 1987), there is a three-stage parental influence model as well. This model consists of parents providing general information about college (proximity, price, etc.), encouragement, and finally college visits and applications. However, this model does not take into consideration the impact of other individuals, or entities, in the lives of these potential college students, particularly those who are first-generation students.

There have been various other studies that have analyzed college choice influences (Discenza *et al.* 1985; Gilmour, Spiro, and Dolich 1981). Dixon and Martin (1991) stated that most of these psychometric approaches were not sufficient in truly understanding college choice influences. Their College Choice Influences Scale (Dixon and Martin 1991), which focused on influences at all three levels of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice, was developed to achieve that goal, but it too seems to lack a true approach to measuring the predisposition stage. This instrument and its findings emphasize the role of parental, other family members, and peer influence on college choice.

This study will examine, more specifically, familial, high school personnel, college representatives, and other social/civic interactions that may contribute to student choice to attend college. These influences, which are promoted by these groups through encouragement, general college promotion, as well as economic support, are measured in an instrument specifically designed to determine various aspects of college choice. More specifically, this study will answer the following research questions:

- What factors were most important in student choice to attend college?
- Is there a difference in these factors of college choice based upon ethnic/racial identification?

Methodology

The instrument for this study was developed based upon literature related to college choice (Abraham and Jacobs 1990; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Hagedorn 1999; Dixon and Martin 1991; Gilmour, Spiro, and Dolich 1981; Horvat 1996; Hossler and Gallagher 1987; Martin and Dixon 1991; Smith and Matthews 1992). Upon the completion of the instrument, experts in the field were consulted to assure content validity. These experts included a high school counselor, a faculty member whose research specializes in college student issues, a college admissions counselor, and an associate dean for a college of education. After explaining the research and reviewing the original list of factors related to college choice during the predisposition stage, the experts eliminated some items due to duplication and relevance to the study, and finally, made suggestions related to wording of the remaining items. The final scale consisted of 11 demographic questions and 28 items related specifically to college choice. The latter items were to be responded to based upon a Likert scale, which ranged from 1-*Not Important* to 5-*Very Important*, with 3 being neutral.

The 28 items represented 6 subscales, which included factors that influence college choice such as family, peers, civic personnel, college personnel, and possible economic gain. Each of these subscales yielded reliabilities ranging from 0.723 to 0.952, with the overall scale yielding a total reliability of 0.89.

Upon gaining approval to conduct the study through the campus institutional review board at a large research institution in the Midwest, the researchers distributed the survey to students who participated in various student activities at the institution. The instrument was distributed to 219 students, with 61 percent of these respondents being female. Based upon classification, 38 percent (N=83) of the respondents were seniors, 20 percent (N=44) were juniors, 20 percent (N=44) were sophomores, and 15 percent (N=33) were freshmen. In terms of ethnic representation, 37.4 percent (N=82) were African American, 5 percent (N=11) were Asian/Pacific Islander, 38.3 percent (N=84) were Caucasian, 5 percent (N=11) were Hispanic, 6 percent (N=14) were Native American, and finally 8 percent (N=17) were in an "other" category, which includes students who identified themselves as multiethnic and international students.

General descriptive statistics were analyzed to rank the responses based upon the means for each of these ethnic groups' responses. Then, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the items was conducted to determine if significant differences existed

within this individual characteristic, ethnic identification. A Tukey *post hoc* test was conducted to determine where the differences existed among the ethnic groups.

Findings

MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS IN COLLEGE STUDENT ATTENDANCE

The responses of the participants' perceptions overall are displayed in Table 1. Even though each of the items was rated individually, the participants consistently rated the items related to achieving personal and career goals highest. There were four items in this category, and they all appeared in the top five of overall responses. Items from categories related to family/friends and high school personnel/support also were in the top ten list of factors that influenced participants' decision to attend college. There were three items related to family/friends, and there were two items related to high school personnel/support in the top ten. The last item in the top ten related to college-related efforts (field trips to college campuses).

Tables 2a and 2b (on the following pages) provide a synopsis of the means of each of the items on the survey based upon the race of the respondent. Even though there were some differences in the order of the top five, there was no difference in the top five items based upon race. Additionally, these top five items were consistent with the top five in the overall ratings of respondents in Table 1.

| Factor | Mean |
|--|------|
| Possibility of achieving a personal career goal upon the completion of college | 4.87 |
| To earn a college degree is a personal goal | 4.82 |
| Possibility of getting a better job upon the completion of college | 4.80 |
| Possibility of making more money upon the completion of college | 4.77 |
| Parents' encouragement to attend | 4.31 |
| Being enrolled in a high school program that prepared me for college | 3.82 |
| Teachers' support and encouragement | 3.75 |
| Parents' willingness to provide financing | 3.57 |
| Field trips to college campuses | 3.42 |
| Encouragement by friends who are attending/have attended college | 3.42 |

DIFFERENCES IN RESPONSES BASED UPON RACE

The ANOVA yielded fifteen significant differences in eleven of the items based on ethnic groupings. These eleven items were within four of the six subscales. These items related to college choice based on information, financial support, and encouragement received from various individuals and entities.

The first categorical subscale in which a significant difference occurred was related to the efforts of college admission offices. African Americans ($M=3.40$) responded significantly higher than Caucasian respondents ($M=2.78$) that admissions representatives providing them with college information had an impact

on their decision to attend college. Additionally in this subscale, as compared to Caucasian respondents ($M=2.52$), Hispanic ($M=3.73$) and African American ($M=3.10$) respondents stated that advertisements by colleges in their school or community were more influential in their decision to attend college. Finally, there was a significant difference between African American ($M=3.43$) and Caucasian respondents ($M=2.63$) based on their response to the role that college recruiters had in providing them with information about college.

Also within this subscale, significant differences were found related to scholarship support for extracurricular activities. African American respondents ($M=2.18$) rated the item related to the opportunity to participate in college athletics due to a scholarship more positively than did Caucasian respondents ($M=1.60$). Also, African American respondents ($M=2.93$) and respondents who identified themselves as an ethnicity other than those listed ($M=3.41$) were slightly more positive than Caucasian students ($M=2.15$) in relation to the opportunity to participate in other extracurricular activities due to a scholarship.

The next subscale in which significant differences were found related to the influence of church and religion on student college choice. African American students ($M=3.10$) were significantly more positive in their response to the statement that the encouragement they received from members of church- and religious-based organizations was more influential in their decision to attend college than Caucasian students ($M=2.37$). The African American respondents ($M=2.80$) more positively rated the statement that the information that they received from church- and religious-based organizations related to college influenced their decision to attend college more so than did Caucasian respondents ($M=2.14$). Finally, Asian respondents ($M=3.00$) and African American respondents ($M=2.58$) were significantly more positive than Caucasian respondents ($M=1.58$) in their response to the item related to the financial support of church- and religious-based organizations influencing their decision to attend college.

The final subscale, in the subset related to community and civic organizations, demonstrated significant differences. Asian respondents ($M=3.18$) were significantly more positive in their response than Caucasian respondents ($M=1.83$) to the item stating that information gained through a community/civic organization, such as the YMCA, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Rotary Club, etc., was influential in their decision to attend college. In addition, the ANOVA found a significant difference between the responses of African Americans ($M=2.76$) and Caucasians ($M=2.01$) in the item related to the impact of financial support from one of these community/civic organizations on their college choice process. The final significant difference in this subscale related to the impact of the encouragement from a community/civic organization or its members, where the responses of African Americans ($M=2.75$) were significantly higher than for Caucasian respondents ($M=2.06$).

Limitations/Recommendation For Further Study

As with most research, there were several limitations that were identified by the researchers after this study was conducted. The first limitation was related to the analysis of the respondents

Table 2a: Responses to the Importance of Selected Factors to Student Decision to Attend College, by Race

| Factor | Asian (N=11) | | Hispanic (N=11) | | African American (N=82) | | Caucasian (N=84) | | Native American (N=14) | | Other (N=17) | |
|--|--------------|------|-----------------|------|-------------------------|------|------------------|------|------------------------|------|--------------|------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD |
| Family/Friends' Support | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Parents' willingness to provide financing | 4.00 | 1.18 | 3.36 | 1.63 | 3.15 | 1.50 | 3.60 | 1.51 | 3.07 | 1.44 | 3.12 | 1.54 |
| Parents' encouragement to attend | 4.55 | 0.69 | 4.73 | 0.47 | 4.05 | 1.15 | 4.09 | 1.17 | 4.36 | 4.41 | 4.41 | 0.80 |
| <i>Placement in top 5</i> | 5 | | 3 | | 5 | | 5 | | 5 | | 5 | |
| Older sibling's (brother/sister) encouragement to attend | 3.55 | 1.51 | 3.27 | 0.91 | 2.83 | 1.47 | 2.83 | 1.51 | 2.29 | 1.20 | 3.25 | 1.53 |
| Other relatives' (other than parents and siblings) encouragement to attend | 3.36 | 1.29 | 3.36 | 0.81 | 3.18 | 1.47 | 3.17 | 1.30 | 3.57 | 1.09 | 3.24 | 1.39 |
| Other relatives' (other than parents) willingness to provide financing | 2.45 | 0.69 | 2.09 | 1.14 | 2.16 | 1.36 | 2.17 | 1.30 | 2.21 | 1.48 | 2.41 | 1.12 |
| Classmates' encouragement to attend | 3.64 | 0.92 | 3.00 | 1.18 | 2.74 | 1.35 | 3.06 | 1.32 | 3.07 | 1.49 | 3.41 | 1.37 |
| Encouragement by friends who are attending/ have attended college | 3.73 | 1.42 | 3.27 | 1.19 | 3.00 | 1.41 | 3.39 | 1.21 | 3.07 | 1.39 | 3.53 | 1.38 |
| Friends providing information about college | 3.55 | 1.04 | 3.50 | 1.08 | 3.05 | 1.29 | 3.34 | 1.30 | 3.21 | 1.42 | 3.06 | 1.39 |
| Career/Personal Goals | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Possibility of getting a better job upon the completion of college | 4.82 | 0.41 | 4.73 | 0.47 | 4.69 | 0.71 | 4.70 | 0.76 | 4.64 | 0.84 | 4.76 | 0.44 |
| <i>Placement in top 5</i> | 1 | | 3 | | 3 | | 3 | | 2 | | 3 | |
| Possibility of making more money upon the completion of college | 4.64 | 0.67 | 4.73 | 0.47 | 4.74 | 0.56 | 4.66 | 0.72 | 4.57 | 1.09 | 4.65 | 0.61 |
| <i>Placement in top 5</i> | 2 | | 3 | | 2 | | 4 | | 3 | | 4 | |
| Possibility of achieving a personal career goal upon the completion of college | 4.64 | 0.92 | 5.00 | 0.00 | 4.79 | 0.52 | 4.84 | 0.43 | 4.50 | 1.09 | 4.82 | 0.39 |
| <i>Placement in top 5</i> | 2 | | 1 | | 1 | | 1 | | 4 | | 2 | |
| To earn a college degree is a personal goal | 4.82 | 0.41 | 4.82 | 0.41 | 4.68 | 0.68 | 4.76 | 0.51 | 4.79 | 0.43 | 4.88 | 0.56 |
| <i>Placement in top 5</i> | 1 | | 2 | | 4 | | 2 | | 1 | | 1 | |
| Church/Religious Group Support | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Encouragement from members of your church or religious group | 3.00 | 1.34 | 2.91 | 1.45 | 3.10 | 1.32 | 2.37 | 1.32 | 2.57 | 1.28 | 3.06 | 1.29 |
| Information about college gained at church or religious group meetings | 2.73 | 1.10 | 2.73 | 1.35 | 2.80 | 1.22 | 2.14 | 1.18 | 2.29 | 1.27 | 2.59 | 1.33 |
| Financial support from your church or other religious group | 3.00 | 1.34 | 1.91 | 1.14 | 2.58 | 1.39 | 1.58 | 1.00 | 2.14 | 1.17 | 2.12 | 0.99 |

based only upon their ethnicity. The evaluation of the results solely upon this characteristic limits the study in that other characteristics may have influenced student decision to attend college. Additionally, only students from a large research institution were included in the study. As students at various types and sizes of institutions have different reasons for attendance, it would be imperative that students from a variety of institutions be evaluated to provide a more clear understanding of the decision to attend college. Finally, students who have not graduated from high school may be analyzed also to provide a more accurate view of the decision-making process because they are not as far removed as some of the participants in this study.

Discussion

The model developed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) has been significant in rationalizing the college choice process for high school students. Subsequent models and research have attempted to further their efforts (Abraham and Jacobs 1990; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, and Hagedorn 1999; Dixon and Martin 1991; Horvat 1996; Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper 1999; Martin and Dixon 1991; Smith and Matthews 1992), but

there seemed to be a void in the literature related to the specific individuals and organizations that impact this decision-making process. Additionally, these models have failed to evaluate the impact of the encouragement and financial support for students by these individuals and organizations as they determine whether they will attend college. This study attempted to address this void, especially regarding the predisposition stage of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model.

As a group, the respondents indicated that their primary reason for attending college was to achieve personal and career goals. Additionally, it seems that parents and friends have a significant role in their decision to attend college. Despite the efforts of college representatives and their recruiting materials, students did not rate these efforts as highly in terms of their decision to attend college. The only factor that appeared from this category was related to taking field trips to visit colleges. It is difficult to determine the true impact of this item because the item does not delineate whether family members, college representatives, personnel from their high school, or some other individual/group initiated the field trip. This is not to say that the efforts of college personnel should be eliminated, but their

Table 2b: Responses to the Importance of Selected Factors to Student Decision to Attend College, by Race (continued)

| Factor | Asian (N=11) | | Hispanic (N=11) | | African American (N=82) | | Caucasian (N=84) | | Native American (N=14) | | Other (N=17) | |
|--|--------------|------|-----------------|------|-------------------------|------|------------------|------|------------------------|------|--------------|------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD |
| High School Personnel & Support | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Teachers' support and encouragement | 3.73 | 1.19 | 3.91 | 0.83 | 3.58 | 1.03 | 3.44 | 1.29 | 3.93 | 0.99 | 3.94 | 1.03 |
| High school counselor's or other school personnel's support and encouragement | 3.64 | 0.92 | 3.82 | 0.75 | 3.26 | 1.28 | 2.87 | 1.35 | 2.57 | 1.28 | 3.29 | 1.16 |
| Being enrolled in a high school program that prepared me for college | 4.55 | 0.82 | 3.55 | 1.04 | 3.77 | 1.24 | 3.46 | 1.22 | 3.50 | 1.29 | 3.71 | 1.05 |
| Civic/Community Support | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Information gained through a community/civic organization (Boys & Girls Clubs, YMCA, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Kiwanis, Rotary Club, etc.) | 3.18 | 1.40 | 2.55 | 1.21 | 2.35 | 1.37 | 1.83 | 1.09 | 2.29 | 1.44 | 2.59 | 1.33 |
| Financial support gained through a community/civic organization | 3.10 | 1.45 | 2.91 | 1.22 | 2.76 | 1.40 | 2.01 | 1.27 | 2.79 | 1.42 | 2.76 | 1.39 |
| Encouragement of a community/civic organization or its members | 3.09 | 1.22 | 2.45 | 1.44 | 2.75 | 1.31 | 2.06 | 1.15 | 2.85 | 1.41 | 2.82 | 1.24 |
| College Personnel/Recruitment Efforts | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Opportunity to participate in college athletics due to scholarship | 2.45 | 1.64 | 1.91 | 1.22 | 2.18 | 1.42 | 1.60 | 1.00 | 1.71 | 1.20 | 2.18 | 1.42 |
| Opportunity to participate in other extracurricular activity due to a scholarship | 3.27 | 1.42 | 3.27 | 1.19 | 2.93 | 1.47 | 2.15 | 1.27 | 2.36 | 1.39 | 3.41 | 1.33 |
| Encouragement from an admission counselor from an institution of higher education | 3.00 | 0.89 | 3.64 | 0.92 | 3.01 | 1.37 | 2.67 | 1.19 | 2.86 | 1.46 | 3.06 | 1.44 |
| An admission counselor from an institution of higher education providing information about college | 3.36 | 0.67 | 3.82 | 0.75 | 3.40 | 1.19 | 2.78 | 1.34 | 2.79 | 1.42 | 3.24 | 1.27 |
| Field trips to college campuses | 3.27 | 0.91 | 3.91 | 0.94 | 3.45 | 1.24 | 3.04 | 1.37 | 3.07 | 1.14 | 2.94 | 1.35 |
| Advertisements of college in your community or school | 3.45 | 0.69 | 3.73 | 1.27 | 3.10 | 1.36 | 2.52 | 1.23 | 2.64 | 1.28 | 3.00 | 1.17 |
| Information about college gained from a college recruiter | 3.91 | 0.94 | 3.55 | 1.13 | 3.43 | 1.23 | 2.63 | 1.20 | 2.86 | 1.29 | 3.06 | 1.25 |

efforts should focus more on how a college education from their respective institutions can impact the achievement of personal and career goals. This connection can be achieved by accurately marketing the careers related to specific majors and graduate success rates in achieving jobs in these fields.

Due to participant differences based upon race in the ratings of the items, some interesting differences did come from the study. The findings indicate that admissions personnel and public relations material influenced African American students', and in some cases Hispanic students', college choice. The actual interaction with representatives from these offices and the literature that they distributed were important in these students' decision-making process. Additionally, the visibility of this public relations material in the schools of African-American and Hispanic students was also important. As many states are enacting laws that require institutions to eliminate affirmative action activities in their recruitment efforts, higher education recruiters should be proactive in establishing linkages and increasing visibility in schools that have considerable diverse student populations.

African American students also stated that church- and religious-based organizations were more influential in their college choice. The support of these organizations included moral as well as financial support. As research has shown that churches serve as a significant social network of support and encouragement for African Americans (Taylor and Chatters 1988), recruiters from institutions of higher education should make efforts to establish more formal relationships with these organizations.

This effort would transcend, but not neglect, the traditional method of college recruitment personnel to pursue students only through their high schools. Additionally, this may be conducive to the recruitment of students with Asian backgrounds. In this study, Asian students reported the financial support from church- and religious-based organizations was significantly influential in their decision to attend college.

Community and civic organizations were also important to African American and Asian students in the study as they made their decision to attend college. The types of influence varied, but these factors included information about college, financial support, and encouragement that was received from these groups. As with the strategy to approach churches and other religious groups as a recruitment method, college recruiters should also expand their recruitment efforts by establishing more formal relationships with individuals who participate in community and civic organizations. Students who may be attending these organizations' meetings and activities may be first-generation students; thus the college-educated individuals in these organizations may be influential in the college-choice decisions of these students.

Conclusion

Higher education has the potential to provide many opportunities for students. However, limited access to information can be a hindrance to some students. This study attempted to assess how college students make the decision to attend college based

on areas that had not previously been researched. Consequently, new information was found regarding what most influences the decision to attend college.

As more institutions are confronted with issues of attempting to diversify their student bodies despite anti-affirmative action laws and legislation, alternative methods of recruitment are going to need to be employed. By understanding what was most important to those students who are presently attending their institutions, these institutions can be more proactive in their efforts to recruit future generations of students from varying ethnic backgrounds.

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