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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF INFLUENTIAL FACTORS IN PROSPECTIVE
STUDENTS' DECISION TO APPLY TO THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA

by

Taylor Schoenfelder

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the
University Honors Program

Department of Marketing
The University of South Dakota
August 2018

The members of the Honors Thesis Committee appointed
to examine the thesis of Taylor Schoenfelder
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ABSTRACT

An Exploratory Study of Influential Factors in Prospective Students' Decision to Apply to the University of South Dakota

Taylor Schoenfelder

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Prospective undergraduate students face a multitude of factors that can influence their enrollment decision. Some of these deciding factors are university-centered which may include cost and tuition fees, the availability of desired academic program(s), and the institution's academic reputation. However, there are other factors that can have just as much significance and importance to a student: non-cognitive and emotional factors. This article highlights a rather large research gap surrounding the intersection of emotion and decision making in regards to undergraduate recruitment. Based on existing research of influential factors in prospective students' decision making along with the review of the Admitted Students Survey by the University of South Dakota, it can be concluded that more emphasis should be placed on emotional, non-cognitive factors in future research and marketing opportunities in higher education.

KEYWORDS: Cognitive Factors, Non-Cognitive Factors, Undergraduate Enrollment, Decision Making, Emotions

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

There are numerous cognitive and non-cognitive factors that can influence a prospective student's decision whether or not to apply to a university (Angulo, Pergelova, Rialp, 2010). Most of these influential factors are likely cognitive (Moogan, Baron, & Harris, 1999), in which a student recognizes and acknowledges these factors knowingly (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2018). For decades, research firms and higher education institutions around the world have been researching the effect of cognitive influential factors on undergraduate recruitment (Moogan et al., 1999). These cognitive factors include university-centered items such as academic reputation, availability of desired academic program(s), and cost of attendance (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017). Even today, much insight can be discovered by researching these factors within the target market(s), because "there is much to learn about how potential students attend to, absorb and store data in order to make logical and rational decisions on choice of university/college" (Moogan et al., 1999).

According to a study by Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2017), the top three factors in students' original decision to enroll in a university came down to cost, financial aid, and academic reputation, respectively. By using this research and/or one's own primary research of the most important factors in students' decision to enroll, universities can then promote these items to attract other prospective students. Universities commonly promote their cost of attendance, scholarships, availability of academic programs, student population size, and remarkable achievements in both academics and athletics, because these items are quantifiable and may be favorable in comparison to competing

universities and colleges. For example, the University of South Dakota promotes their distinction as the sole public and liberal arts university in the state, that they offer more than 200 undergraduate academic programs, are affordable, feature and NCAA Division I sports (USD at a Glance, 2018). Although research has yielded important information and results regarding cognitive factors in undergraduate enrollment, these factors are not the only major influence on prospective students' decision making.

Other factors in a student's decision process may be non-cognitive and/or psychological, which may involve subconscious notions and/or emotions and feelings. Whether they know it or not, humans use emotions and feelings in their daily decisions; however, the scientific research to reinforce this statement had been scant prior to 2000 (Lerner, Li, Valdesolo, & Kassam, 2015). Although there was a slow start, psychologists began to pay more and more attention to the interaction of emotion and decision making. In fact, "...yearly scholarly papers on emotion and decision making doubled from 2004 to 2007 and again from 2007 to 2011... Indeed, many psychological scientists now assume that emotions are, for better or worse, the dominant driver of most meaningful decisions in life" (Lerner et al., 2015).

Although psychologists have garnered more attention to the important intersection of emotion and decision making, the application of this intersection as it relates to the college decision process is an area that is surprisingly lacking. Indeed, there seems to be less than 10 scholarly articles regarding this topic. Angulo, Pergelova, and Rialp (2010) explored the literature on the "integration of rational and emotional factors that prospective students value when selecting a university." Having summarized current

findings, the authors concluded that their own review was the first of its kind to approximate this higher education phenomenon (Angulo et al., 2010).

The purpose of this research is to examine the spectrum of factors, including university-centered and emotional, non-cognitive factors, that can influence prospective students' decision to enroll in a university. In an exploratory study, the University of South Dakota sought to measure items of importance to prospective students in undergraduate recruitment. The results of the survey are yet to be analyzed properly and in a statistically-significant manner, but this article serves to promote the rightful inclusion of non-cognitive and emotional factors in future market research of higher education.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

To connect with prospective students and their families, universities must recognize and understand the cognitive and non-cognitive influences that affect prospective students in their college decision processes. Identifying aspects that are of high importance to students is crucial in undergraduate recruitment, because these aspects represent the criteria that students use when comparing universities (Elliott & Healy, 2001). Existing research demonstrates that there are numerous factors that can play a role in prospective students' college decision process. As noted, these factors include cognitive ones such as academic reputation, cost of attendance, availability of academic programs, and size of institution (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017). Other factors include non-cognitive influences, which stem from prospective students' emotions and feelings during their college decision process.

Academic reputation represents one of the most widely-researched factors in undergraduate recruitment. "Academics plays a pivotal role [to students]...They want to know if they are a good fit for your academic program, and if your academic program and your institution will fit their needs" (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2018). In an exploratory study conducted in Scotland, academic reputation was ranked by students as one of the top three factors when considering which university to attend (Briggs, 2006). Likewise in a study conducted in the United States, academic reputation was ranked by students as the third most important factor in their overall decision to enroll at a university (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017). Considering the definition of higher education, the purpose of a university is to provide an education to its students (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2018),

so it is reasonable for students to place a high amount of importance on the academic quality and reputation of a university.

Along with academic reputation, it also makes sense for students to weigh the importance of the price tag associated with their education. According to Angulo et al. (2010), cost and tuition fees represent another popular research item in undergraduate recruitment. In a study conducted by Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2017), cost was the item ranked as most important in students' enrollment decision. Along with cost, this same study revealed that financial aid was the second most important item (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2017), because students and their families are likely concerned with the out-of-pocket expense associated with college attendance. From a rational standpoint, the price tag associated with education is understandably very important to students and their families. This concern is universal, as a study in Peru showed that the availability of scholarships was a relevant factor in their research as well (Angulo et al., 2010).

Cost and academic reputation represent two cognitive examples of common research items regarding undergraduate recruitment; Angulo et al. (2010) grouped these two items, as well as several others, into the category of "university-centered underlying factors." Other factors that are university-centered and cognitive include academic excellence and subsequent career opportunities, education quality, institution reputation, campus facilities, cost and tuition fees, availability of scholarships, and distance from home (Angulo et al., 2010). Along with these items or those of similar description, Ruffalo Noel Levitz also included the university-centered factors of opportunity to play sports, size of institution, and geographic setting in their research (2017). Overall, university-centered factors are the most commonly used items or themes in research

regarding undergraduate enrollment. However, there is *another* category of research items in higher education that has received scant attention: “individual-centered factors” (Angulo et al., 2010).

Individual-centered factors include the personal values and emotional aspects of a person (Angulo et al., 2010). Recognizing the lack of research regarding the emotional perspective in higher education, Angulo et al. (2010) conducted research in Peru to “explain human behavior in education as well as to study the role of individual/attitudinal characteristics such as subconscious feelings and values.” To begin, Angulo et al. (2010) conducted 21 focus groups between August and October of 2003; the purpose of these focus groups was to uncover both rational and emotional factors that pertained to the research project. Namely, Angulo et al. (2010) sought to discover emergent factors that prospective students value during their college decision process. 168 prospective students representing 12 high schools (six private and six public) from Trujillo, Peru were randomly chosen to participate in the focus groups (Angulo et al., 2010). From the qualitative data, both emotional and rational factors were revealed; however, a new group called “emotional goals” emerged as another important influence in students’ college decision process (Angulo et al., 2010). This “emotional goals” group referred to the students’ immediate expectations and aspirations upon graduating from college (Angulo et al., 2010). After analyzing the focus groups’ data, “[14] rational attributes, 11 emotional attributes, and 11 emotional goals were identified during the focus groups and guided the elaboration of the questionnaire” (Angulo et al., 2010). This demonstrates the importance of gathering qualitative data prior to developing a questionnaire, so that the

questionnaire can be written with relevant survey items for researchers to gather more quantitative results.

The questionnaire developed by Angulo et al. (2010) was comprised of four sections: emotional attributes, emotional goals, rational attributes, and sociodemographic information. Once administered to students, the authors then gathered and analyzed the data using multiple tests commonly employed in segmentation analysis including factor analysis, cluster analysis, discriminant analysis, and a one-way ANOVA; these were conducted among others to assure validity and statistical significance of the data. Within their data, the authors found six distinct clusters or “segments” that they named as (1) ‘the independent,’ (2) ‘the entrepreneur,’ (3) ‘the rational,’ (4) ‘the dreamer,’ (5) ‘the hard worker,’ and (6) ‘the emotional’ (Angulo et al., 2010).

Of the six clusters, the ‘independent’ cluster represents self-confident and independent individuals who desire a university with a positive image or reputation (Angulo et al., 2010). Those in the ‘entrepreneur’ cluster are predominantly male with high levels of innovation and entrepreneurial spirit. ‘Rational’ students primarily look for quality and high standards in universities. ‘Dreamers’ want universities of both high quality and positive image as well, but for a low price. Students in the ‘hard worker’ cluster are dominantly female who desire to improve their current welfare as well as accomplish professional aspirations. Finally, members of the ‘emotional’ cluster are highly-emotional individuals who are more likely to attend low-cost, public schools, desire recognition in their local communities, wish to assist their parents in an economic sense, and also want to attain personal goals. When discussing the findings of their research, the authors expressed the need for further research regarding the hidden

psychological factors that prospective students experience during undergraduate recruitment (Angulo et al., 2010).

According to Bechara, Damasio, and Damasio's (2000) somatic marker hypothesis, emotion affects decision making both cognitively and non-cognitively. This somatic marker hypothesis suggests "a systems-level neuroanatomical and cognitive framework for decision making and the influence on it by emotion" (Bechara et al., 2000). The somatic marker hypothesis' key idea is that decision making is a process that is affected by signals occurring in humans' normal, bioregulatory processes; these processes include the ones that are expressed in feelings and emotions (Bechara et al., 2000). Additionally, the somatic marker hypothesis proposes that impaired decision making is largely influenced by a defect in one's feelings and emotions (Bechara et al., 2000). Considering the somatic marker theory, the results from the Peruvian study underline that the intersection of emotion and decision making in relation to undergraduate enrollment warrants further exploration. The remainder of this article will explain a research project conducted by the University of South Dakota, as well as apply the information gathered in the literature review for this university to use in its future marketing efforts.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Background

The University of South Dakota (USD) is a public, liberal arts institution located in the southeastern part of South Dakota in the small, quaint town of Vermillion (USD at a Glance, 2018). Founded in 1862, this flagship university was established before South Dakota officially became a state. Since its beginning, however, USD now offers over 200 undergraduate academic programs, over 70 graduate programs, NCAA Division I athletics, and the only law and medical schools in the state to attract prospective students. In fact, the university has over 10,000 current students which include first-time students, transfers, adult learners, and readmits (USD at a Glance, 2018).

During the recruitment cycle for the 2018-2019 academic school year, the Office of Undergraduate Admissions (henceforth referred to as Admissions or Admissions Office) at USD recorded its largest enrollment class of first-time, full-time (FTFT) students in the university's history; with just over 1,300 FTFT students, the Admissions Office is experiencing a historic year of recruitment and desires future record-breaking growth. Therefore, in the summer of 2018, USD's Admissions Office conducted a survey amongst accepted students to gather insights as to why they applied to USD; after the data's insights are collected and analyzed thoroughly, the university can then align and strategize their marketing efforts to continue recruiting increased amounts of prospective students.

CHAPTER FOUR

Method

USD's Admitted Students Survey was created in the late spring of 2018 through collaborative efforts between the Admissions Office and the Institutional Research team at USD; the survey was finalized during the following few months and after several USD student workers tested the survey and provided minor edits. Within the survey were 19 various questions, with most of the survey items predominantly university-centered. Altogether, the goal of the survey was to collect insights on decision factors that prospective students find extremely important and/or of high priority when selecting which school(s) to apply to for admission.

The first section of the survey was focused on learning the student type (high school student, FTFT student, transfer, or adult learner), whether respondents had taken a college course, and what the respondents' plans were for the upcoming, academic school year. Next, the middle section of the survey had an open-ended, ranking question regarding universities that students applied to; students were asked to list the universities that they applied to, and put these universities in order of preference of enrollment. Following this ranking item, students were asked about 13 Likert-type items on a five-point scale ranging from (1) "Not at all important" to (5) "Extremely important". These 13 cognitive, university-centered Likert-items included the following:

1. Overall reputation of the school
2. Availability of my desired majors/programs
3. Academic quality
4. Cost and financial aid
5. Graduate outcomes (job placement rates, graduate earnings, grad school placement rates)
6. Local surroundings (neighborhood, town or city)
7. Diversity on campus

8. Distance from home
9. Safety on campus
10. Campus facilities (such as library, labs, athletic facilities)
11. Opportunities for extracurricular activities
12. Social life
13. Opinions of friends or family members

After the Likert variables, the survey asked respondents to type their opinions to a series of open-ended questions.

1. What is the most important factor when choosing a college or university to attend?
2. What, if any, would be your top reason(s) for wanting to attend USD?
3. What, if any, would be your top reason(s) for NOT wanting to attend USD?

Following the open-ended items were several questions regarding the demographics of the respondents and their social media consumption. Additionally, there was a checklist question where students could select more than one answer to the following question: “What information sources have influenced your decision to apply to USD?” Students could then select from the following answers:

1. School counselor in high school
2. Direct communication from USD admissions counselors (emails, phone calls, etc.)
3. Direct communication from other USD representatives (current students, professors, etc.)
4. USD campus visit(s) or tour(s)
5. USD website
6. Hard-copy materials mailed by USD (such as brochures, view books)
7. Federal “College Scorecard” or “College Navigator” websites
8. Commercial sources (such as Princeton Review, U.S. News & World Report)
9. Friends, family members or other trusted persons
10. Other

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

Aside from the few open-ended questions, the first USD Admitted Students Survey was heavily focused on cognitive, university-centered factors with little regard to non-cognitive and emotional factors. This likely occurred since USD designed a survey that was similar to other surveys created by research firm(s) and/or other universities; these surveys did not place much importance on asking questions regarding non-cognitive factors, so therefore, USD's survey did not ask many questions to try to understand students from an emotional and feelings-based perspective. This overlooked opportunity is clearly missed by many, which further highlights a research gap and the need for more research on non-cognitive factors in undergraduate recruitment. Additionally, USD did not gather qualitative data prior to developing the Admitted Students Survey; as noted in the Peruvian study, acquiring qualitative data from focus groups provided researchers with valuable insight on how to develop and then structure a questionnaire (Angulo et al., 2010). However, USD's open-ended questions did allow students to express themselves and their most important factor(s) when applying to a university and why students may or may not want to attend USD. One characteristic of about open-ended items is that one cannot predict exactly what respondents will write, and so this presents the opportunity for unexpected insights to be discovered; on the other hand, open-ended items can prove to be difficult for researchers who try to quantify qualitative data (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

Regarding the USD Admitted Students Survey data, several hypotheses can be considered. When students answered the first open-ended item about their most important

factor in the college decision process, some students may have only selected an item or two from the previous list of 13 Likert items; however, other students may have written about factor(s) they deem as important that may *not* have even been listed by USD. For example, students could have written about emotional, non-cognitive factors such as how their feelings and experience on campus positively influenced them to apply to USD, hypothetically. If this is true, then USD should use this insight to get more students to visit campus. It has been noted that campus visits can have an incredibly positive influence on students. A study involving students in the United Kingdom showed that attending visit days on campus was “a valuable source in appraising the final evaluation stage, often changing students’ choice sets in the process...Many noted that the [visit days’] organisation, structure and personnel, created the biggest impressions” (Moogan et al., 1999). If USD finds that its prospective students feel the same way, that visiting campus had a positive and profound influence on them, then USD should work to decipher *why* that is by asking about this emotional, non-cognitive factor in future surveys. This can perhaps be accomplished by asking the following questions or questions like the following:

1. Have you been to USD on an official campus visit?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
2. How did you feel while you were visiting USD’s campus?
3. Which aspects of USD’s campus did you like?
4. Which aspects of USD’s campus did you NOT like?
5. Did visiting USD’s campus, either officially or unofficially, influence your decision to apply to USD? Why or why not?

Using these questions poses a risk, however, in that these questions limit the responses to primarily be from domestic students. International students rarely visit a

campus before applying to it, and so additional questions would need to be developed to gain insight on how USD looks to international students who do not visit campus.

In a similar vein to learning more about the influence of campus visits, the possibility of tapping into social networks via alumni could be favorable to university recruitment:

Alumni as well as ex-alumni associations could help universities to be aware of, maintain, and reinforce the emotional bonds among the people who have been students in a higher education institution, and they constitute a signal of belonging to something special for possible future students. (Angulo et al., 2010)

The University of South Dakota has already started making progress in this area, as the USD Foundation Office created a program called “30 Under 30” (USD 30 Under 30, 2018). This new program annually honors 30 young alumni under the age of 30 who have or are currently making outstanding contributions in their professional and personal lives. After the honored alumni send their respective stories and their reflection of their times at USD to the Foundation Office, these stories get promoted on the USD Foundation website and shared via email to a mailing list of other USD alumni (USD 30 Under 30, 2018). The Admissions Office is working in tandem with the University Marketing Department to promote these alumni stories to prospective students, knowing that these stories could create a bond of pride with future Coyotes. Gathering more information on this potential lead and by working to bring more prospective students to campus, the University of South Dakota may continue increasing their enrollment numbers.

If the opposite is true and respondents did not emphasize emotional, non-cognitive factors like positive, personal experiences on campus in their responses, then

USD must dig deeper into whichever university-centered insights are found and leverage them in future marketing efforts. To dig deeper, USD could send a follow-up survey with more specific questions on the university-centered insights, although I would recommend USD conducts focus groups to gather more qualitative information from students. Allowing students to express their opinions in a comfortable, conversational manner with other students could provide more useful insight than by strictly using a survey; however, focus groups do have the risk of groupthink, where individuals conform to the ideals and values of the group rather than truly expressing one's own thoughts and opinions (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2018). Regarding the Admitted Students Survey, responses to the other open-ended items of why students would or would not want to apply to USD likely also hold great value, as USD can benefit from seeing itself through the eyes of prospective students. Overall, USD should continue its progress in trying to learn about its student markets, because annual market research on student choice has become very important (Briggs, 2006).

Although there will always be a need for more research, USD does have some remarkable university-centered factors to use as an advantage over other institutions. As the lowest-priced flagship university in the United States, USD prides itself on its affordability. This affordability factor extends to those even outside the South Dakota borders; in fact, USD offers in-state rate of tuition and fees to residents in Iowa and Nebraska along with discounted rates to prospective students from Minnesota. It is university-centered factors such as cost and tuition fees that USD has been able to leverage in attracting prospective students, since research studies like the one conducted by Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2017) yielded results that cost was the number one factor in

students' original decision to enroll in a university. However, USD cannot solely rely on these university-based factors alone for student recruitment; just as the mind is more complex than we can currently understand, so is the decision-making process by prospective students. USD should strongly consider integrating survey questions regarding emotional/psychological aspects of a students' decision in next year's rendition of the Admitted Students Survey. By gathering feedback on more than just the university-centered items, USD can likely leverage newfound insight(s) in their market of prospective students; ultimately, USD should use the survey results to better understand and better personalize the journey of students in their college decision-making process. As Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2018) suggests, "That personalization - the feeling that your institution not only has the major a student wants but is the place for them to pursue their academic dreams - is how you will outmaneuver your competitors and shape enrollment in your programs."

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

This thesis explores the various cognitive and non-cognitive factors involved in prospective students' decision to enroll to a university, and serves to promote the rightful inclusion of non-cognitive factors in future research studies. After gathering secondary data on university-centered factors and discovering six distinct clusters within their own primary research, Angulo et al. (2010) argue that both rational and emotional points of view should be used in tandem to better understand consumer behavior for the purpose of segmentation. Bock, Poole, and Joseph (2014) agree with this argument by claiming that markets in higher education can be segmented based on rational, lifestyle, and emotional factors, and that analyses of these three types of factors can yield important implications. "While rational factors can be employed for the selection of the target markets, the emotional ones can be used for approaching them" (Angulo et al., 2010). Truly, those who do not research emotional factors in the undergraduate enrollment decision process are missing a crucial component of their research. With the increasing research on psychological influences in decision-making, it is concerning that such a large research gap exists at the intersection of non-cognitive factors and decision-making in relation to the college decision process. Further research will need to be conducted to fill this research gap and to better understand the emotions and feelings of prospective students during their undergraduate recruitment experiences.

USD has made great strides in the right direction by creating and distributing the first round of the Admitted Students Survey. Moving forward, USD should gather qualitative data prior to writing the next survey; Angulo et al. (2010) identified a new

group of “emotional goals” that likely would not have been uncovered had they not conducted focus groups prior to developing a questionnaire. With the discovery of this new influential group of factors, Angulo et al. (2010) identified emotional attributes in the pursuit of researching an approach of market segmentation for higher education. With more and more attention being turned to the intersection of emotion and decision making (Lerner et al, 2015), USD should turn to these scholarly sources for guidance and insight on relevant emotional factors that can be applied to the college decision process. Additionally, USD should reevaluate the style of questions being asked as well as the type of factors being examined. With such a large gap in research on emotional, non-cognitive factors in the college decision process, USD should include more multiple choice and open-ended questions involving emotional factors in addition to its established cognitive, university-centered factors in the second year of distributing the survey. USD might be surprised to learn more about the psychological components of prospective students in their decision whether or not to apply to become a Coyote.

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