

# SEM<sup>Q</sup>

## Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly

*Advancing Research in Enrollment and Student Success*

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## Editor's Note

Tom C. Green



Welcome to the sixth volume of *SEM Quarterly*. This first issue marks a significant milestone for the journal, as we celebrate its transformation

from a start-up to a robust resource in many ways. You will undoubtedly note the change in format. We moved from a more traditional online journal format provided by Wiley Publishing to a more innovative style, published in-house by AACRAO. We are grateful to Wiley and all we learned in our first five years.

As we move into our next phase of growth for the journal, we are excited to provide easier access to its content for AACRAO members and other researchers. The new format is also one that is more familiar to readers who read content from books or periodicals online. You may read the articles in our online journal directly from the new AACRAO website, or download the issues and articles as PDFs.

We are also marking this milestone with a new and important series of articles. This sixth volume begins with the first in a series

of leadership articles by women in the SEM field. Susan Gottheil, widely respected in SEM across North America, offers her vast experience and expertise in our "View from the Top." The issue also features three strong research articles. Crouse, Hinkle and Shatzer focus on adult student welfare, an oft-neglected aspect of mature learner education, and its relationship to student choice among this increasingly-important segment of higher education. Readers may wish to pay particular attention to the conceptual framework adapted by the authors from recent work by Braxton. As student choice factors drive institutional SEM planning, especially in marketing and recruitment, traditional models may be quite limited in their ability to reach and attract adult learners.

Scott Secore provides a complementary article on student choice and persistence with a focus on campus environment. This research examines how environment, from the campus tour through engagement that fosters retention and completion, impacts student choices for initial and ongoing enrollment. Readers

should consider both articles when developing differentiated enrollment strategies to reach the broad market of both traditional and adult learners.

Our fourth article is a case study from Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina. Authors Muhammed and McManus describe their work to strategically use data and social media to improve results in the university's financial aid office. The article is well-constructed, grounding its work in literature and offering readers a framework for examining student actions. It follows with logical, well-planned actions that resulted from data analysis, one of the fundamental practices of SEM.

I hope you enjoy our new format and the content of this issue. We enjoy and benefit from the feedback of our readers, so please let us know if we are hitting the mark for you or any ways that we can continue to improve and enhance SEMQ in the future.





 VIEW FROM THE TOP

# Reflections on Achievement, Hitting the Glass Ceiling and Breaking the Mold

by Susan Gottheil

There are two points in the year that always prompt me to reflect on where I have been, what accomplishments I have made, and what challenges I have faced. Such reflection spurs me to imagine how things might be different. Spring convocation—with its pomp and circumstance and celebration of academic success—is one such time. December, the end of the calendar year, marks another period of evaluation as we make promises to ourselves (and sometimes those closest to us) to live our lives a little differently and better.

Periodically I also engage in critical reflection on the state of our profession. Do our actions—and, more important, our outcomes—match the intentions we set for ourselves, our institutions, and the students and faculty we serve? Are we enablers and change agents...or gatekeepers? In our rush to embrace new technologies and implement organizational efficiencies, have we lost sight of the core values we embrace as student service and student affairs professionals?

A similar arc of achievement, planning, and reflection marks the paths of our careers. As I enter the final phase of my own work, the inevitable questions come to mind: Have I made an impact in my portfolio and in my profession? Have I helped enhance student access and success? Have I been a transformational agent of change? What more is left to be done? And if I can't do it all, what advice can I offer to those who will follow in my footsteps?

## In the Beginning...

Like many of us, my path to higher education leadership was not linear and was serendipitous. Aspiring to be a registrar (a paper pusher?) or enrollment services professional (a crass marketer and pencil pusher?) was not top of mind as I crossed the stage at my own undergraduate convocation. I was happy to leave the hallowed halls to begin my “real life” filled with adventure, new friends, and unknown opportunities. I went off to hitchhike through Europe, bask in the sun on Crete and traipse through museums, cathedrals and archeological digs. When the money began to run out, thoughts turned to “what next?”

My graduate education was in a field that interested me (women's history) although I had no clear idea where it would lead. As a naïve feminist and student activist, I saw no barriers or challenges ahead; opportunities were sure to come my way, and I was certain my skills and abilities would land me an interesting position somewhere (where, exactly, was unclear).

My graduate degree led me to a teaching position at a community college. My disciplinary interests led me to coordinate an affirmative action project for women at my institution. The emerging field of employment equity in Canada landed me my next job at a university in a different city where I focused on broader educational equity issues, including broadening access and retention for racialized minorities, indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities as well as female students

and staff. My vision for an inclusive and equitable postsecondary institution resonated with my peers, and the provost offered me a senior position overseeing academic and student services.

## My Rise Through the Ranks

It was at this juncture that the postsecondary world in Canada underwent cataclysmic shifts—large cuts in provincial funding and big tuition increases, the introduction of the *Maclean's* university rankings, increased competitiveness, and the genteel “Canadian” approach to collaboration between universities gone. The university I worked for saw a 45 percent decline in enrollment over a five-year period (Gottheil 2013).

With a disastrous shift in enrollment patterns, I was suddenly thrown under the microscope. I had orders from the top to reverse the dire enrollment trend, increase admission averages, buoy plummeting institutional reputation and rankings, and listen to/take direction from faculty colleagues. I met resistance from my staff, who considered me an outsider and doubted that I had the knowledge and vision to manage and lead an enrollment services team. I had never worked in a recruitment, admission, financial aid, or records office. I did not look like a typical university registrar. I was not a gatekeeper: I believed bad rules should be changed, and I felt that building relationships with all academic and administrative units was imperative if we were to achieve our strategic goals.

I needed to learn fast, change processes and institutional culture, and produce dramatic results. Like a good academic, I began to delve into research studies and publications, attend workshops and conferences, and see whether I could turn to any colleagues for advice and help. Strategic enrollment management (SEM) had begun to emerge as a profession, and I drank in the insights and wit of trailblazers such as Michael Dolence, Stan Henderson, David Kalsbeek, Richard Whiteside, Don Hossler, and Bob Bontrager. (Notably, these SEM pioneers were all white men; I wondered why so few women were in the field.)

During those early, heady days I implemented a SEM organization and planning framework at my insti-

tution, relying on data and evidence-based analysis to help shape our tactics and strategies. Yes, it did help to have a crisis to get everyone on board. Academic and administrative units alike volunteered insights and elbow grease to ensure that our intentional planning produced positive results. And we succeeded (Gottheil 2015).

## A Focus on Inclusivity

I was energized, yet...what happened to my commitment to build an inclusive community? In my enthusiasm and excitement about enacting change, had I forgotten my principles and commitment to open the doors of our institution wider to help those succeed who had traditionally been underserved? Was it possible to return to my commitment to educational equity and still be successful in reaching SEM goals?

It took another few years before the general SEM conversation expanded beyond achieving pure enrollment growth and increasing the bottom line. Financial leveraging raised ethical concerns relative to how SEM tactics had been implemented by some institutions (Bontrager, Espinoza, and Henderson 2007). The explosion of the myth of the homogeneity of our “traditional” student body spurred conversation about the need to focus on student success and not just access at colleges and universities. We began to set more discrete goals to increase specific segments of our student populations and to examine student outcomes and not just inputs.

As a Canadian I also began to understand the importance of situating the changes I needed to implement and the goals my institution needed to set within our cultural and historical context. This is a lesson all SEM professionals learn to take to heart: we must become scholars of our own institutions and experts on our own students. At my current institution, we have certainly set global goals of how big we wish to grow as a university and how many graduate and undergraduate students we hope to enroll. Yet we also have made a commitment to increase our indigenous student enrollment (as well as that of international students) and to ensure that the students who are admitted succeed. As a community, we are committed to providing the cultural, financial, academic, and social supports that students need to at-

tain their educational and career goals. In the process, we know that our success as an institution in helping all of our students will ensure that those “in the pipeline” will consider applying to our university, becoming part of our community and succeeding.

## The Face of Leadership: Where are the Role Models?

Much has changed since the end of the second World War: population booms and busts, the technological revolution, a focus on social justice and civil rights issues and an expansion of postsecondary enrollment that now includes many who had previously been “left behind.” Yet the face of leadership in our colleges and universities—and in our own profession—has not changed and does not mirror the diverse faces and lived experiences of the students in our hallways and classrooms. Can we achieve our inclusive SEM goals without addressing this inequity? Will we continue to admit students to what is still an essentially elite “old boys’ (white) club” and not face the more difficult questions of changing our pedagogy and curriculum, policies, and processes and interpersonal communication and relationships to embrace diversity in all its forms? It is time that we take a serious look at our organizational structures and management and aim for a truly inclusive postsecondary culture.

Changing the face of leadership cannot and will not happen overnight. The responsibility to ensure that the glass ceilings of college boardrooms are shattered rests with each and every one of us. Mentorship and encouragement begin in the daily conversations we have with students, listening to the barriers and challenges they face as they persist and succeed in their studies. Opportunities for young GLBTQ+, racialized minority and first-generation students to gain work-related skills that may lead to permanent careers begin in our offices with work-study positions and summer employment. We need to ensure that we tap a diverse group of staff to sit on committees and working groups and to work on “special projects” as these opportunities are stepping stones to other positions and career paths. If we include *all* staff in strategic planning and visioning retreats, then junior staff as well as management can be

exposed to wide-ranging ideas and opportunities and work together to collaborate on new models of service provision. Knowledge, skills and leadership are acquired over time. Equity and inclusivity need to be nurtured.

## Reflections on SEM Leadership

As a young professional I stood in awe of the many SEM groundbreakers who have since become colleagues and peers. With grit, persistence, and resiliency I was successful at a number of institutions in building a collaborative culture that exceeded enrollment expectations and ensured a broad range of academic and student support services. My rise to the “top” appeared to be meteoric and serendipitous, but upon reflection, the meandering path was built on experiences and opportunities that were given to me by mentors who had faith in my abilities. My mentors saw beyond my gender and knew that I was curious, eager to learn, and wanted to make a difference.

One may argue that I am symbolic of a generation of women who have broken through the glass ceiling. And while it is true that there now are more women in our profession and in positions of leadership, they still look an awful lot like me-- white, highly educated academics. So, as I reflect on my own journey, what remains to be done?

Too few first-generation, Latino/a, indigenous, and racialized minority students see a place for themselves at our colleges and universities. Even fewer find the supports they need to persist and graduate and achieve their educational goals. We still have much work to do. But it is also time for us to recognize that these students will not understand that there is a welcoming place for them to learn and grow unless they can see themselves—and faces like theirs—on campus. It is time for us to open up and nurture a new generation of SEM professionals. We have a moral obligation to mentor the next generation of leaders who will reflect the demographics and identities of the students we now serve and bring new ideas into the academy and our work. As we consciously work to bring those who may be different from us into our work units, we need to remind ourselves that ours is a profession that is not just transactional (*Seifert et al.*); we are transformative.

## About the Author

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### Susan Gottheil

Susan Gottheil is Vice-Provost (Students) at the University of Manitoba, where she is involved in strategic enrollment management planning and working with colleagues across campus to enhance the student experience. She has more than three decades of leadership experience in the Canadian postsecondary sector, helping institutions to promote and expand academic programs, increase student recruitment and retention, enhance learning and development, improve student and academic support services, and promote collaborative partnerships.

With an undergraduate degree from McGill University and an M.A. in Women's

History, Gottheil began her career at Vanier College Cegep in Montreal, where she spent nine years teaching before moving into senior administrative positions at Carleton University. In 2006, she moved to western Canada to help Mount Royal transition from a college to a university and roll out new undergraduate degree programs. Her background and experience cover a number of key areas including enrollment management, strategic planning, student and academic services, integrated marketing and communications, and employment and educational equity.

Gottheil is motivated by new challenges. She has inspired, managed and led cross-functional staff and faculty

teams to dramatically increase student enrollment and retention, improve student service delivery and student support programs, and enhance student success. Over the past few years, she has collaborated with Clayton Smith on the emergence and implementation of enrollment management in Canada. Together they have presented workshops at a number of professional conferences in the United States and across Canada, published articles, co-edited a book on SEM in Canada and organized the annual Canadian Strategic Enrollment Management Summits. Gottheil has helped a number of Canadian institutions develop strategic enrollment plans in her role as a senior consultant with AACRAO Consulting.

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 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

# Differentiating Commitment to Welfare: Adult Student Perceptions of Institutional Practices

by Shane Crounse, Lygie Hinkle, and Christin Shatzer

Adult learners are enrolling in U.S. higher education at a growing pace. These students have obligations and needs that influence their preferences for programs of study, scheduling, and specific support systems. This article recommends a number of research-based institutional practices relevant to the welfare of adult student learners.

Adult college students have long been considered “non-traditional” in comparison to recent high school graduates who enroll directly into a four-year residential college experience. However, there has been a marked shift such that adult college students are an increasing portion of the U.S. undergraduate population. State governments and national organizations have recommended a specific focus on recruiting and retaining adult students to achieve goals of increased postsecondary attainment. The literature points to several ways in which adult students differ substantially from students who are recent high school graduates. Adult students are more likely to be managing work and family responsibilities in addition to their college coursework. Their many obligations influence their preferences regarding programs of study, course scheduling, faculty engagement, and other aspects of the college experience. Without a thorough understanding of adult student needs and expectations, colleges and universities are unlikely to tailor their offerings, policies, or procedures to better attract and support adult students.

The research team conducted a mixed methods study, commissioned by the Tennessee Independent Colleges and Universities Association (TICUA), examining the college selection and enrollment choices of adult students (individuals age 25 years and older) at private, four-year, nonprofit institutions. This article focuses on best practices and adult student enrollment choices among Tennessee private nonprofit institutions. The findings include promising institutional practices specific to adult students, with a keen focus on adult student welfare. While the findings and suggested best practices are specific to Tennessee private, nonprofit institutions, other institutions interested in serving adult students across the country may draw on these best practices in ways that best suit their geographic contexts, program offerings, and campus cultures.

## Literature Review

According to the U.S. Department of Education, adult students—those age 25 years and older—accounted for nearly 8.2 million students enrolled in college, or about

40 percent of all students enrolled in college, in 2014 (Snyder, de Bray, and Dillow 2016, 466). In Tennessee, 900,000 adults (approximately 18 percent) older than 25 years already have some college education but no degree, and 1.4 million (approximately 27 percent) have only a high school diploma or equivalent (Census 2010; Tennessee Higher Education Commission 2015). The college enrollment decisions of an ever-increasing number of prospective adult students are largely influenced by specific institutional characteristics and perceived benefits of enrollment.

Recent research findings by Hutchens (2016) show that the availability of a specific major and program cost are the two institutional characteristics most important to adult students (Hutchens 2016, 42). Hutchens' findings (2016) also indicate that for highly nontraditional students (those with more than four nontraditional characteristics, such as working full time or having dependent children [Choy 2002]), the availability of a specific major replaces cost as their primary concern in their choice of an institution of higher education at which to enroll.

A 1987 study of nontraditional student choice reveals that a significant personal or professional event can be the catalyst for an adult's choice to return to school (Bers and Smith 1987). Review of the more recent literature supports earlier findings and concludes, regarding predisposition for college, that adults tend to fall into two categories: *professional predisposition* and "*right-time*" *predisposition* (Hutchens 2016; Hutchens and Franklin 2013). Findings from Hutchens' 2016 doctoral research indicate that adult students' reasons for enrolling in college included "personal growth, professional reasons, and a sense it was the 'right time'" (53).

For high-demand fields that provide a sustainable income for a family, postsecondary education is crucial; it can also be a welcome challenge and skill-building opportunity (Tolbert 2012). While the idea of return on investment (ROI) is important in the college choice process, adult learners who do not have access either to this information or to high-quality postsecondary options within a reasonable distance will still experience obstacles when deciding to enroll in higher education

(Blagg and Chingos 2016). According to findings from a Public Agenda survey (2013), prospective adult college students are interested in an academic experience that is connected to their work experience and professional goals and that provides some additional or new job experience (Hagelskamp *et al.* 2013).

Adult students use the Internet and word of mouth as primary sources of information in the college search and selection process (Hagelskamp *et al.* 2013; Hutchens 2016). While less critical for adult students, especially compared to their traditional-aged counterparts, campus visits do provide useful information about an institution or program where they might enroll. Adult learners are likely to visit and call programs and institutions to obtain information for use in their postsecondary choice process (Hutchens 2016).

The adult college search process is brief. A recent study found that 65 percent of nontraditional students choose to enroll within six months of beginning their college search process (Hutchens 2016). Adult students are also likely to select a school and decide to enroll in one step rather than decide to attend college, identify possible schools, and then select a school (the typical process for traditional-aged college students) (Hutchens 2016). These findings suggest that recruiters and advisors should communicate with prospective adult students in an efficient manner. Meeting students in the way that best serves their needs demonstrates a level of caring that is essential to student success.

## Institutional Commitment to Student Welfare

In their book *Rethinking College Student Retention*, Braxton, Doyle, Hartley, Hirschy, Jones, and McLendon (2014) recommend a series of practices that are essential to the success of commuter college students (*i.e.*, students attending non-residential campuses). Their recommendations include an array of actions that together highlight the importance of institutional commitment to student welfare and institutional integrity. The authors contend that commitment to student welfare and institutional integrity reflects the culture of the school. Specifically, "respect for each student as an individual

should manifest itself in the day-to-day interactions college and university administrators, staff members, and clerical workers have with students” (39). This agrees with Perna’s (2010) work: Faculty and administrators serving adult and working students must understand the population and adapt to its needs.

Institutional policy, procedure, and programming communicate the level of commitment to student welfare and academic growth and development (Braxton *et al.* 2014). How and when institutions offer academic programs, services, and support resources directly affect the accessibility of college by adult students and their ability to complete a postsecondary degree. Not providing classes and university services at convenient times for adult students is a significant barrier to adult students’ enrollment.

Most colleges and universities are not designed with the adult student in mind. This is especially apparent when considering the admission and financial aid experiences of adult students at institutions that have traditionally served the eighteen- to 22-year-old college-going population. Adult students often have complex family and financial situations, and these complexities typically require strategies and solutions beyond the knowledge of the traditional financial aid counselor (Hutchens 2016). Further, because financial aid policy dictated by institutions, states, and even the federal government is designed for traditional students and typically does not accommodate individual adjustments or case-by-case considerations, it offers little flexibility to adult students with more dynamic life circumstances (Hart 2003).

Institutions communicate their commitment to student welfare by intentionally structuring services and schedules to accommodate nontraditional student schedules. Straightforward processes for student experiences in registration, featuring campus technology and services and clear communication, also demonstrate concern for student welfare and increase student commitment to the institution (Braxton *et al.* 2014). It is critical to communicate student-centered processes and practices to adult students during the recruitment process so they can see how the institution values their welfare and experience.

## Conceptual Framework

Building on a review of the literature and critical engagement with the Braxton *et al.* (2014) paradigm of retention and student success, a conceptual framework was developed to better understand the adult college choice process (see Figure 1). This framework informed the study design and associated research methods.

## Study Design and Institution-Selection Process

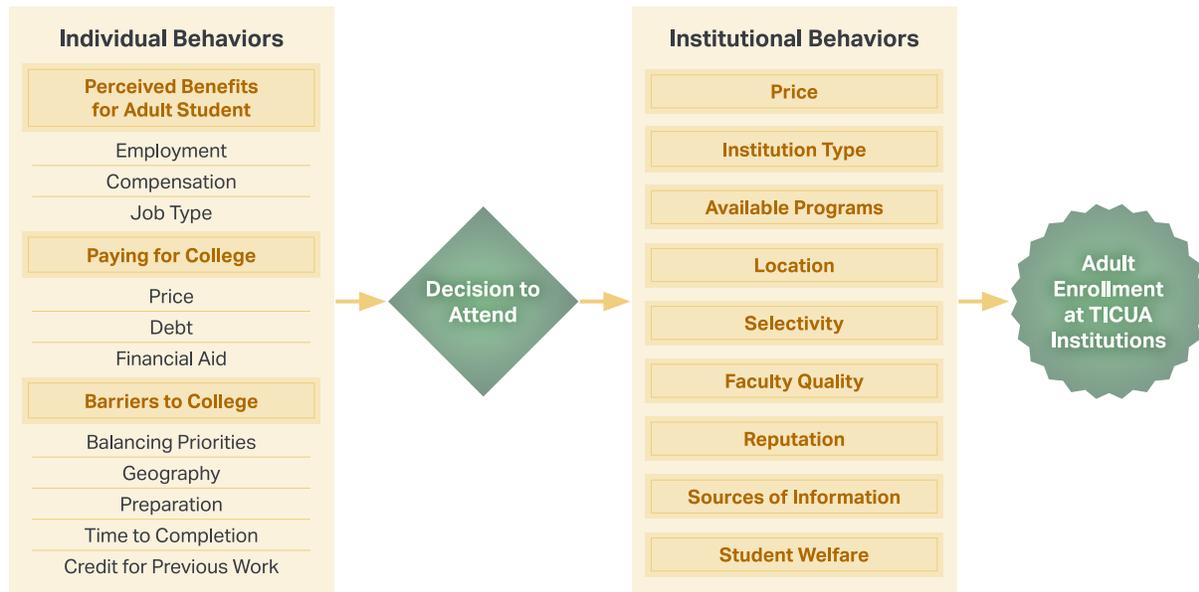
The authors employed a purposive sampling strategy to tease out specific information and expertise from volunteer adult students, campus staff, and administrators at TICUA member institutions. The authors partnered with TICUA to identify and invite institutions to participate in the project and ultimately contacted 18 TICUA member institutions to invite their participation in the inquiry about the adult student college choice process and adult college student success. Ten TICUA member institutions chose to participate, including four in the student survey, three in interviews of adult students and TICUA institution staff members, and three in the survey and interviews; an additional three TICUA member institutions participated in interviews of adult students and TICUA institution staff members.

## Methods

The study used a mixed methods approach to identify specific institutional practices that influence adult students’ decisions to enroll in higher education and to select a specific institution. The practices investigated were informed by the literature on adult students and institutional commitment to student welfare. This approach was chosen to allow research of broad trends related to adult student choices and behavior through survey data and interviews regarding how adults experience higher education at traditional four-year, liberal arts institutions.

During the fall 2016 semester, the authors surveyed adult students at seven nonprofit, private institutions in Tennessee.<sup>1</sup> In total, 2,879 adult students enrolled at the

<sup>1</sup> \*The authors sought and secured permission to use a survey instrument developed by Public Agenda, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization. In its November 2013 report, “Is College Worth It for Me? How Adults without



**FIGURE 1** ► Factors and Behaviors in Adult Students' Higher Education Enrollment

seven TICUA member institutions were invited to participate in the survey. The target population was adult students seeking their first degree at a TICUA institution. Distribution of the survey was managed at each institution by campus staff and may have included all adult students. The survey asked participants their age and the type of degree they were pursuing. However, the survey instrument did not specifically ask whether the degree was their first. In total, 402 students participated in the survey; 263 students completed the survey. Respondents eliminated from analysis did not finish the survey, were younger than 25 years of age, or were pursuing a graduate degree.

In addition to the survey, during the spring 2017 semester, the authors interviewed adult students and college and university administrators who work with adult students at nine nonprofit, private institutions in Ten-

nessee. Campus administrators distributed information regarding the project, including a request for volunteer interview participants. Potential participants were instructed to contact a member of the project team to set a schedule and location for their interview. In total, the authors spoke with 22 participants: ten current adult college students from three of the participating institutions and twelve campus administrators from nine of the participating institutions.

The authors analyzed the survey and interview data in order to better understand how private, nonprofit institutions in Tennessee can attract prospective adult students and demonstrate institutional commitment to their unique circumstances. The findings and recommendations that follow derive from this analysis.

## Findings

### *Institutional Characteristics and Perceived Benefits*

The survey included questions that addressed institutional characteristics and perceived benefits associated with college enrollment. The first asked students the

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Degrees Think about Going (Back) to School," Public Agenda researched elements associated with the prospective adult college student choice process, such as preparation and expectations. The authors adapted this survey to study adult students currently enrolled at colleges and universities in Tennessee. In addition to modifying the survey language, many questions were eliminated and some were added based on the literature on adult students cited above.

main reason they chose their institution over other schools. The frequencies of students' answers are presented in Table 1.

"Exactly the program you wanted" was the most frequently selected answer, followed closely by "convenience/location" and "other." Cost was highlighted by only 14.8 percent of respondents. These findings confirm the importance to adult students of finding a program that suits their professional and personal needs.

Table 2 presents the "other" answers according to identified themes regarding institution selection. The two most frequent themes were the religious affiliation and the affordability of the institution.

Another group of questions addressed the career field sought by survey respondents. Two questions asked students to describe their areas of study or career field sought and whether the field of study was a passion or was chosen for the job prospects it offered. The text boxes of the first question were reviewed and coded for similar answers.

Nearly 40 percent (39.7 percent) of survey respondents reported "passion" while 19.2 percent selected "likely to improve job projects." Of those students who chose "neither," six indicated a personal or faith-based mission, four indicated the importance of time to degree completion, and three indicated a career-related reason such as time already invested in the field or a desire to pursue a specific career path.

The literature highlights the role of cost and debt associated with college choice. Survey respondents were asked about their level of concern about debt (see Table 5) as well as about the main reason they were pursuing a degree (see Table 6).

Respondents who indicated "other" were provided with a text field in which to record their reason for pursuing a degree. Table 7 groups "other" answers by theme (some answers addressed more than one theme and were counted independently in each category).

An initial theme that emerged from the interviews was how perceptions of higher education's value were shaped by two factors: price and fit. The price factor was understood to mean the cost of tuition; neither interview group mentioned the cost of books, commuting, or

**TABLE 1** ▶ Primary Reason for Choice of Institution

Reason	n	%
<b>Valid</b>		
Convenience/Location	36	14.8
Affordability	28	11.5
Exactly the program you wanted	49	20.1
Admission requirements easier to meet/ that is where I got accepted	6	2.5
Best school for this field/degree	28	11.5
This school gave me the most credit for previous work or experience	22	9.0
Someone recommended it	29	11.9
Other	46	18.9
<i>Total (Valid)</i>	<i>244</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<b>Missing</b>		
System	19	
<i>Total</i>	<i>263</i>	

**TABLE 2** ▶ Secondary Reason for Choice of Institution

Mentions	n
Religious Affiliation of Institution	13
Affordability	13
Reputation or Recommendation	11
Convenience	10

**TABLE 3** ▶ Field of Professional Interest

	n	%
<b>Valid</b>		
Healthcare	28	11.9
Religion	84	35.7
Business	87	37.0
Teaching	8	3.4
Legal	8	3.4
Computing	5	2.1
Other	15	6.4
<i>Total (Valid)</i>	<i>235</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<b>Missing</b>		
System	28	
<i>Total</i>	<i>263</i>	

**TABLE 4** ► Reason for Choice of Academic Program

	n	%
<b>Valid</b>		
Passion	95	39.7
Likely to improve job prospects	46	19.2
Both	84	35.1
Neither (specify) what is the reason you are pursuing this specific field?	14	5.9
<i>Total (Valid)</i>	239	100.0
<b>Missing</b>		
System	24	
<i>Total</i>	263	

**TABLE 5** ► Concern About Debt

	n	%
<b>Valid</b>		
A lot	93	40.6
Some	53	23.1
Only a little	38	16.6
Not at all	45	19.7
<i>Total (Valid)</i>	229	100.0
<b>Missing</b>		
System	34	
<i>Total</i>	263	

**TABLE 6** ► Primary Reason for Pursuing a Degree

	n	%
<b>Valid</b>		
To get ahead in your current job or career	106	43.6
To get a different kind of job or career altogether (please describe)	78	32.1
To get a good education and learn about the world	26	10.7
Other	26	10.7
None of these	7	2.9
<i>Total (Valid)</i>	243	100.0
<b>Missing</b>		
System	20	
<i>Total</i>	263	

fees associated with college attendance. “Fit” was understood to mean “matching” between the adult student’s needs and goals and various aspects of the institution, including degree programs.

Several adult students reported that they perceived tuition costs to be high. Harriet referred to the cost as “pricey,” and several other students described it as “expensive.” Adult students’ perceptions contrasted with those of TICUA member campus staff, who described tuition as “lower price” and “competitive.”

Several adult students referred to major of interest as a key component in their college choice. Harriet shared that she

*could've gone back to [her previous institution] to start back where [she] left off with elementary education, but [she] wanted something different, something new, a new start. [She] decided to check out [her current institution]; they ended up accepting some credits, but it did [not] play a big role. [She] wanted to get into entrepreneurship ... and learn more about managing employees.*

Adult students also shared that supportive staff working in enrollment played a role in the “matching” process. Charlie said he was “walk[ed] through the whole process” of enrollment. Kate, a TICUA campus administrator, shared that “congruence between expectation and reality” was a critical component of adult student and institution matching. Kyle, another administrator, explained that “adult student[s] pick [an institution] because they tried other places and it did [not] feel like a good fit.”

Adult students spoke particularly about the interaction between price and fit and these factors’ influence on their perception of the value of education at their institution. Notably, the same adult students who perceived the cost of tuition as high expressed high levels of satisfaction with their institutions. Isaac described attending his college as a “life-enhancing experience.” Other adult students expressed similar satisfaction with their choice despite their perceptions of high price. TICUA member institutions’ staff and administrators observed, as the adult students did, that fit often trumps price. Kate shared that she believed that students chose

her institution because “they know [the institution’s] history,” they “believe in the brand,” and the institution “made them feel welcome.”

Interview participants indicated that personal and professional reasons influenced their enrollment. Several reported returning to school for “career development” and the availability of “future positions...with [a] degree.” Theresa shared that she was “looking for full-time work with benefits instead of multiple part-time jobs.” Adult students also reported that they returned to school for “access to a promotion” and “advancement considerations.” Another motivator was applicable skills for industry. Vivian, a staff member, shared that adult students were focused on developing “organizational skills that are practical for the workplace.” Several adult students agreed that gaining “industry-relevant skills” was a motivator.

Both interview groups also described personal reasons for adult students to enroll in college. Liz, a TICUA campus administrator, shared that “[adult students] are internally motivated to change their situation.” Several adult students described their interest in being a “role model” for their children and in avoiding “be[ing] an embarrassment.” Isaac was interested in being “an inspiration” for his children and his employees. Noelle, a staff member, described adult students as “motivating [their] kids” and “be[ing] the example.” Another motivator is earning a degree. Maureen, a staff member, shared that “students [felt] disappointed in not completing [their] degree” previously. Francina, an adult student, shared that she wanted to “finish what [she] had started.”

### Sources of Information

Survey respondents also described how they had learned about colleges and programs (see Table 8). Adult students most frequently reported gathering information from individual college websites ( $n=163$ ) and from family, friends, or colleagues ( $n=157$ ); more than 70 percent reported gathering information from both sources.

### Institutional Commitment to Student Welfare

The survey included questions about adult students’ experiences on campus and their preferences regarding

**TABLE 7** ➤ “Other” Reasons for Pursuing a Degree (by Theme)

Mentions	n
Career goals	15
Degree a life goal	11
Religious calling to school	10

**TABLE 8** ➤ Sources of Information About Higher Education Institutions

Source of Information	Total Responses (n)	Answered “Yes” (%)
Individual college websites	163	74.4
Friends, family or colleagues	157	71.4
Interactive websites to rank and compare priorities	95	44.6
College recruiters who promote, and market their school	80	36.9
Books with information on colleges and programs	63	29.7
Television commercials, billboards, or other ads	56	26.5
Guidance counselors at individual colleges	51	24.1
Financial aid advisors	50	23.3
An employer	43	20.4
High school guidance counselors	22	10.5

the award of credit for previous coursework or work experience (see Table 9). Large percentages of students received credit for previous coursework or work experience or were able to take a test to demonstrate previously learned skills. Only 13.5 percent report not receiving any credit for previous work.

Table 10 presents the data concerning the importance of the award of credit to adult students’ decision to enroll. The majority of students (68.4%,  $n=143$ ) stated that receiving credit was a significant factor in their decision to enroll.

The survey also invited feedback regarding adult students’ time to degree completion. One question asked students to indicate their preference for a well-structured program that supports timely graduation;

**TABLE 9** ➤ **Transfer and Award of Credit**

	n	%
<b>Valid</b>		
Transferred course credit	179	73.1
Received credit for previous work experience	17	6.9
Took a test to receive course credit	4	1.6
Other (please explain)	12	4.9
No—I did not receive course credit beyond normal course completion	33	13.5
<i>Total (Valid)</i>	<i>245</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<b>Missing</b>		
System	18	
<i>Total</i>	<i>263</i>	

another invited students to indicate their preference for exploring the curriculum, having both a well-structured program supporting timely graduation and curricular exploration, or neither. Students’ clear preference for a structured program and on-time graduation is evident in the 60.3 percent ( $n=141$ ) of valid responses for that choice (see Table 11).

Another theme that emerged from the interviews related to the nature and quality of interactions among TICUA member institutions, various institutional representatives, and adult students. Interview participants agreed that adult students have different needs from those of traditional-aged students. Christine, a TICUA member campus administrator, shared her belief that adult students may express their needs as “If I [am] giving my best, will you help me?” Laura, another TICUA member campus administrator, described adult students as “driven but not sure how to do it.” TICUA member campus staff, administrators, and adult students shared

some of the ways in which institutions are working to meet adult students’ needs.

Adult students reported satisfaction with enrollment and registration processes, noting that they were “speedy” and “quick.” Several shared that they completed their application process in one day; another shared that he completed the process in one week. Francina shared that one time she “almost dropped out, but...faculty followed up with her” and convinced her to persist. She also mentioned that staff members helped her register for the term when she considered leaving school and noted that she had experienced issues with registration the previous year that may delay her graduation.

Most of the adult students interviewed noted the importance of efficiency in the award of transfer credit. Karen pointed out that the “ability to get [transfer] credits ... made the choice easy.” Vivian “appreciated the credit for prior work experience and skills.” Barb shared that her “past associate degree credits all transferred” to her bachelor’s degree. Harriet, who had received through transfer nearly half the credits required for her bachelor’s degree, was also pursuing exams for further streamlining and cost savings related to degree completion. Tom was able to transfer credit for most lower-division classes, and that “saved at least a year” of courses.

Not all adult students reported having had a positive experience relative to transfer credit. Theresa shared that while her institution does offer transfer credit for relevant work, she found the process “burdensome, and [it] only award[ed] a couple [of] credits.” Several TICUA member campus staff agreed that transfer was sometimes “challenging” due to “unique degree programs offered” at their institutions.

**TABLE 10** ➤ **Importance of Award of Credit in Decision to Enroll**

	Yes, it was important		No, it was not important		I’m glad I received it, but it wasn’t important	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Transferred course credit	115	65.7	17	9.7	43	25.6
Received credit for previous work experience	4	82.4	3	17.6	0	0
Took a test to receive course credit	3	75.0	1	25.0	0	0
Other	10	83.3	2	16.7	0	0

**TABLE 11** ► Importance of Time to Degree Versus Academic Exploration

	n	%
<b>Valid</b>		
A clearly structured program that lays out the exact courses and exams you need to take to graduate on time	141	60.3
Being able to explore different classes and areas of interest before deciding what to focus on	17	7.3
Both	71	30.3
Neither	5	2.1
<i>Total (Valid)</i>	<i>234</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<b>Missing</b>		
System	29	
<i>Total</i>	<i>263</i>	

Adult students also shared their reasons for taking technology-facilitated classes. Some preferred face-to-face learning and shared that they “took everything on campus.” Harriet indicated that she “hadn’t tried [online classes] and was not planning [to].” Isaac offered his perspective: “Online classes for older adults are about scheduling more than anything. It is [not] a matter of preference, it is a matter of necessity.”

## Recommendations for Practice

Institutions can only minimally influence adult students’ behaviors and practices. They can cultivate prospective adult student interest, but ultimately, they cannot change the intrinsic motivations and values of adult students pursuing higher education. For these reasons, recommendations specifically identify practices institutions can adopt to promote a sense of welfare among adult students. Findings from the current research, supported by the literature, include the following:

- Given the brief college search timeline for and particular interests of adult college students, institutions should streamline communications for adult students and provide information specific to adult students on their websites. This would communicate that the institution has adult students clearly in mind in its practices and would provide easily

accessible information most germane to the adult student college search.

- Institutions can also work to ensure that faculty and staff are delivering consistent and timely professional and responsive services when adult students are on campus. This includes developing training for staff and faculty to build understanding of common issues and concerns, eliminate administrative hurdles, and automate, as much as possible, required action steps related to enrollment and registration of adult students. Further, adult students often need faculty to offer some flexibility—*e.g.*, reasonable deadline extensions or assignments that focus on adult perspectives or work experience—as well as to provide classroom experiences in which personal and professional experience clearly demonstrate the applicability of learning objectives.
- Institutions should also provide academic programs that incorporate high-demand skills that can be acquired quickly. When adult students are provided with the academic programs most interesting to them and those programs are delivered in a high-quality environment, price is less of a critical factor in the enrollment decision-making process.
- Adult students are also interested in institutional mission: programs that marry skill and content with understanding of vocation and purpose are attractive.
- Finally, credit for previous work and multi-modal learning options (online and classroom options, accelerated, subscription based) are largely necessary for adult learners to enroll in higher education.

## Limitations

The purpose of the study was not to generalize but rather to gain deeper insight into what supports adult college student success and degree completion at private, not-for-profit institutions in the state of Tennessee. As a case study, the project focused narrowly on issues specific to best serving adult college students in Tennessee. As a result, it may not be useful in informing broader student populations’ college choice process or higher education policy in states where circumstances

differ. The survey response rate and the total number of student interviews were low. Such circumstances can present challenges when drawing inferences for the entire adult student population.

## Conclusion

Adult college students are drawn to high-demand, career-focused programs that recognize and reward their skills and experiences. When adults arrive on campus, they expect professional and efficient administrative services that can support their completion of a degree.

Adult students' primary concerns pertain to balancing the demands of school, work, and family. Clear timelines and manageable costs can help adult students progress toward their degrees of choice. Adult students also appreciate the one-on-one support of high-quality faculty and caring support staff. The authors recommend that campuses interested in demonstrating their commitment to adult student welfare focus on these recommendations for practice and consider ways to build institutional capacity in these areas.

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 LEADING STRATEGIES

# The Impact of Campus Environments on College Choice and Persistence

by Scott Secore

The reasons a student may choose a particular institution when seeking a postsecondary education are many. So, too, are the reasons students may opt to persist at their chosen institutions. However, a sense of belonging and a strong emotional connection often supply students all the incentive they need. College campus environments play a pivotal role in the decision-making process, as the ecology, climate, and culture of an institution profoundly influence student perceptions and behaviors. Consequently, higher education administrators must take into account more than just their institution's good name, as the attractiveness and sociability of a college campus evoke feelings of acceptance and affirmation that extend beyond the classroom. This article explores the influences that affect student perceptions and explains why the campus environment is crucial to both college choice and persistence. In addition, it deconstructs the components that comprise the campus environment and offers insight into how administrators can elicit desirable student responses.

Whether large or small, rural or urban, public or private, two- or four-year, institutions of higher education differ in many ways. These differences are best understood through real-life situations within each specific institution's cultural milieu (Kuh and Whitt 1988) and are significant because they play an integral role in the decision-making processes and scholastic pursuits of both prospective and matriculating students. For prospective students, the campus visit is often the single-most influential source of information in their college choice (Brown 2010; Hesel 2004; Okerson 2016). Campus visits provide prospective students with the opportunity to en-

gage with the campus environment at large—to connect openly with the ecology, climate, and culture of the institution—thus informing and influencing their enrollment decision. For matriculating students, the campus environment has a similar effect, building upon initial sentiments to create contextual conditions that both encourage and support student learning and development. In many respects, the campus environment serves as the lone determinant of a student's future as the “feel” of a college campus and the sense of belonging it elicits have a powerful impact on cognitive and behavioral responses. As a result, enrollment managers, admission of-

ficers, and administrators alike must have an exhaustive understanding of the institutional environment and its effect on students' psyches. Only with a well-informed and complete understanding of how students feel and what they want and expect from a college campus can enrollment managers, admission officers, and administrators truly provide students with the best possible environment for social and academic successes.

## College Choice and Persistence

Historically, researchers studying student enrollment behaviors generally concur that most students arrive at their college choice through an interactive and evolutionary process that begins as early as middle school and culminates with postsecondary matriculation (Bateman and Spruill 1996; D. Chapman 1981; R. Chapman 1984; Hossler, Braxton and Coopersmith 1989; Hossler and Gallagher 1987; Jackson 1982; Litten 1982; Paulsen 1990). Essentially, the process unfolds as students determine their educational aspirations, investigate institutions of interest, and evaluate plausible options. While this decision process is intrinsically protean, it commonly occurs in three stages: (1) predisposition, (2) search, and (3) choice (Hossler and Gallagher 1987). In this context, however, stages are not explicitly prescribed and measurable. Rather, they are fluid, representing the changing mix of factors that affect decisions (Bateman and Spruill 1996). In other words, what occurs in the first stage of choice is likely to influence the second and third stages, thereby shaping students' interest and commitment not only to postsecondary education but also to a particular institution (Bateman and Spruill 1996). For example, during the search phase, interaction between students and institutions reaches its zenith as both parties aim to gather information and impress. Naturally, impressions formed during the search phase—particularly for the student— influence conclusions reached in the choice phase.

For most students, institutional selection (choice) emanates from a composite of personal sociological, psychological, and economic characteristics and those of the institutional choice set (considered institutions) (Hossler and Palmer 2008; Jackson 1982; Paulsen 1990).

For example, student attributes such as socioeconomic status, familial circumstances, academic performance and ability, educational goals, and career ambitions often serve as motivational factors guiding the decision process (Chapman 1981; Hossler and Stage 1992; Jackson 1982). Institutional attributes such as location, size, cost, academic offerings and reputation, social climate, and campus appearance also have a profound impact on students' final decisions (Chapman 1981; Hossler *et al.* 1989; Lee and Chatfield 2011; Noel-Levitz 2012). In addition, interpersonal communications with family and friends, as well as the Internet and social media, greatly affect how students communicate, receive, and adjudicate information (Secore 2018). Simply put, the reasons students choose to enroll at particular institutions are many. However, despite abundant resources and a rich array of variables, campus visits remain overwhelmingly influential to students and their families. Research indicates that social ethos and campus aesthetics weigh heavily in the decision-making process.

Studies suggest that during campus visits, attendance at social events (*e.g.*, sports competitions, arts functions, etc.), patronage of campus services (*e.g.*, coffee shops, dining halls, bookstores, etc.), and congenial interface with members of the campus community (*e.g.*, students, faculty, and staff) have a tremendous impact on students' college choices (Barrett 2014; Okerson 2016; Spoon 2006). More often than not, students simply identify with a welcoming and affable atmosphere where their potential peers are ostensibly benevolent, happy, enthusiastic, and proud constituents of their respective institutions. Friendly people, neighborly ambience, positive personal interactions, and a strong sense of community routinely appear in the literature as rationales for students' college choices (Barrett 2014; Hayes 1989; Hesel 2004; Johnson, Stewart, and Eberly 1991; Nora 2004; Okerson 2016; Petr and Wendel 1998; Spoon 2006).

Campus appearance also plays an influential role in students' college choices. In studies conducted by Boyer (1987), Heath (1993), Hesel (2004), Noel-Levitz (2012), and Okerson (2016), prospective students gave high marks and rave reviews for campus attractiveness.

Students frequently cite natural scenery/habitats (*e.g.*, green spaces, open/outdoor areas, trees, flowers, water features, etc.), and physical structures and layouts (*e.g.*, buildings, offices, residence halls, student unions, etc.) as having an effect on how they perceive a college campus (Barrett 2014; Harrington 2014; McFarland, Waliczek and Zajicek 2008; Okerson 2016; Spoon 2006).

These two factors (sociability and appearance) are of central importance to students' college choices as they provide an understanding of campus dynamics and evoke feelings that render positive or negative impressions. Students with positive feelings about a particular institution often forge an emotional connection with the school. Certainty and an emotional connection give the student a sense of belonging and acceptance. Students who feel that they belong and have value are more likely to enroll and matriculate (Kuh 2009). Moreover, matriculating students who continue to feel cared about tend to develop stronger connections to their schools and are wont to participate in educationally purposeful activities, establish meaningful relationships, take advantage of resources provided by the school, and report higher levels of satisfaction with their college experience (Cuseo, Fecas, and Thompson 2007; Harrington 2014; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek 2006; Kuh 2009). Kuh (2009) opines, "When students' expectations match their experiences in college, students are more likely to be satisfied and persist to graduation" (61). Thus, the impression rendered by acculturation of social and topographical milieus, along with ample provision of opportunity for the student to contribute to said atmosphere, is highly influential on both college choice and persistence.

## Environment

According to Dewey (1916), "environment" denotes something more than just the surroundings that encompass an individual: it is the connection between one's literal surroundings and one's interactions with it. He states, "The environment consists of those conditions that promote or hinder, stimulate or inhibit, the characteristic activities of a living being" (16). As such, where one's environment subsumes everything one en-

counters and interacts with—objects, structures, and people—environment is both fundamentally physical and social. Environment is also psychological, as interaction influences one's beliefs, behaviors, and overall disposition. In other words, environment is "where the individual mind, the social group, and the organizational structure meet and interact" (Baird, 1988, 126).

Moos (1973) theorizes that conceptualization of human environments occurs in six different yet inter-related dimensions that have a decisive influence on individual and group behavior: (1) ecological, (2) organizational structure, (3) personal characteristics, (4) behavior settings, (5) psychosocial characteristics and organizational climate, and (6) functional/reinforcement properties. Notably, the *ecological* dimension asserts that architecture and the physical constraints that limit or define activity influence behavior, while dimensions of *organizational structure* avouch that those characteristics inherent to the workplace—such as size, staffing ratios, salaries, and spans of control—influence behavior (Insel and Moos 1974; Moos 1973). *Personal characteristics* imply that the character of an environment is dependent on its members' demographics and traits—such as age, sex, socioeconomic status, etc.—while *psychosocial characteristics and organizational climate* aver that the impressions and perceptions of individuals both internal and external to the environment influence behavior (Insel and Moos 1974). Moos' approach infers that environments, like people, have unique personalities characterized by their order and structure (Insel and Moos 1974). Essentially, the relationship between humans and their environment is a two-way street: perception influences behavior, and environments dictate potential. Simply put, people shape their environment, and the environment shapes people.

The college campus environment comprises many facets influencing thought and behavior. From physical properties (*e.g.*, buildings and equipment), to citizenry (*e.g.*, students, faculty, and staff), to social and academic opportunities for connectivity, psychological and behavioral stimuli litter college campuses. With this in mind, Strange and Banning (2001) propose that campus environments embody four distinct elements, or sub-

environments, reminiscent of Moos' (1973) dimensions: physical, aggregate, organized, and constructed. Combined, these elements create the physical, perceived, and enacted environments embedded within the "total" environment of the institution.

The *physical* environment is the most salient and contains the natural and synthetic components of the campus (Harrington 2014). It includes tangible and concrete structures, outdoor/green spaces, navigational flow, spatial organization, accessibility, furniture, signage, lighting, and a host of other architectural, infrastructural, and/or design elements (Harrington 2014; Kuh 2009; Strange and Banning 2001). The *aggregate* environment consists of the collective characteristics of the individuals who occupy the physical environment—that is, the environment takes shape via the demographic features (*e.g.*, age, gender, ethnicity, etc.) and psychosocial traits (*e.g.*, personality, interests, habits, etc.) of its members and their interactions. *Organizational* environment refers to purposes and goals achieved through existing policies, procedures, and system of governance—that is, all campus entities and functions (*e.g.*, classes, clubs, offices, departments, etc.) are responsible for organizational outcomes. Finally, *constructed* environments are the shared perceptions and subjective experiences of group members and the meanings they assign to them (Harrington 2014; Strange and Banning 2001). In essence, this is the foundation for *campus climate* and *culture*.

For a better understanding of how the contextual conditions and sociability of an institution can influence a student's perception and behavioral responses, Kuh (2009) suggests viewing "total" environment through an interpretive frame that encompasses the ecology, climate, and culture of the school. However, it is important to heed the often arbitrary and interchangeable use of these terms to describe the physical, social, and psychological conditions of organizational environments. For example, Moos (1973) notes that ecology and climate are primarily concerned with the relationship between man and his physical environment whereas Williams (2010) argues that climate and culture should be viewed as "highly related organizational ideas that describe how the complex social systems of the campus come

together and coalesce to create a unique organizational milieu of people, interactions, politics, policies, beliefs, values, and outcomes" (9). Ecology, climate, and culture interrelate and overlap but individually emphasize different aspects of the campus environment.

## Ecology

Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines ecology as "the totality or pattern of relations between organisms and their environment." Lawrence (2009) defines human ecology as "the study of the dynamic interrelationships between human populations and the physical, biotic, cultural, and social characteristics of their environment" (176). Correspondingly, social ecology has roots in both ecology and human ecology but expands to incorporate communal and value-oriented properties that induce effective human functionality. On this subject, Insel and Moos (1974) surmise that "social cooperation is perhaps the most important regulatory mechanism in society, serving to mitigate the destructive and predatory elements found in the ecological evolution of other animal communities" (180). In other words, social ecology concerns the regulatory system of checks and balances between human societies and the resources of their environment wherein transactional relationships and interactions define behavior.

For institutions of higher education, the transactional relationships and interactions between students and the campus environment characterize *campus ecology*. Much like the interpretations of environment presented by Dewey (1916) and Moos (1973), campus ecology concerns a broad scope of criteria influencing student perception and behavior. How students affect campus spaces—and how campus spaces, in turn, affect students—is meaningful as students and campuses mutually define one another (Kaiser 1978). Roberts and Taylor (2016) avow:

*The setting of a university can shape for good or bad the learning experiences of its scholars; it can nurture or frustrate the building of social bonds and community interactions; and it can boost—or undermine—an institution's competitiveness in relation to its peers* (16).

According to Smith and Wertlieb (2005), ecological theory often explains students' ability to connect with an institution based on the relative attractiveness of the college environment, as the physical attributes and characteristics of the campus significantly affect students' emotional and psychosocial outlooks. For instance, a stimulating atmosphere generates interest and appeal. Griffith (1994) expounds on this sentiment, suggesting that "Attractively landscaped formal open spaces or habitats left in their natural form, as woods and gorges, help establish a venerable campus identity, stir alumni sentimentalism, create a strong sense of community, and curb escalating campus densities" (648). Moreover, environmental psychologists posit that one's surroundings influence both cognition and intellectual development, as research shows that interactions with nature often link to restorative and/or improved psychological and physiological health (*i.e.*, increased self-esteem, reduced stress, diminished fatigue, etc.) (Joye 2007; McFarland *et al.* 2008; Salingaros 1999; Scholl and Gulwadi 2015).

Physical spaces on campus also convey symbolic and nonverbal messages about the college experience, as the amount, locations, and arrangements of physical spaces both directly and indirectly influence students' perceptions and behaviors toward a school (Harrington 2014; Kuh 2009). For example, placement of residence halls near academic buildings and communal spaces (*e.g.*, student union, library, dining hall, etc.) increases opportunity for social interaction and encourages rigorous academic engagement. Likewise, situating regularly visited critical support services (*e.g.*, admission, registrar, financial aid, etc.) in a single location implies cohesiveness, organization, and convenience. In response, students' stress levels decrease, and their institutional satisfaction levels increase. Conversely, open spaces (*e.g.*, courtyards, fields, lawns, etc.) offer students relief from congested high-traffic areas—as well as their studies. Depending on students' needs, open and green spaces may promote active fraternization and integration or rest and relaxation. Research confirms that students who frequently utilize open and green spaces tend to rate their quality of life, overall satisfaction, and level of academic achievement higher than those who do not

(Hajrasouliha and Ewing 2016; Harrington 2014; McFarland *et al.* 2008).

Hajrasouliha and Ewing (2016) posit that "well-designed" campuses comprise seven morphological dimensions: land-use organization, compactness, connectivity, configuration, campus living, greenness, and context. *Land-use organization* constitutes the mix of research, residence, athletic, and academic facilities where *compactness* denotes campus density and building proximity. *Connectivity* describes the degree of street networks that bridge campus amenities and the campus to the surrounding area while *configuration* characterizes the strength of campus spatial structure. Patently, *campus living* refers to student residency, *greenness* represents nature and verdure, and *context* delineates urbanization. Simply stated, Hajrasouliha and Ewing (2016) deem a "well-designed" campus a "mixed, compact, well-connected, well-structured, inhabited, and green campus in an urbanized setting" (2). In light of this, Scholl and Gulwadi (2015) aver:

*Well-designed and connected networks of indoor and open spaces on campuses can be key, yet typically overlooked catalysts, in student learning and a strong influence on students' initial and longstanding experiences that promote a sense of belonging to the learning community* (53).

Students have preconceived notions of what a college campus should look like and therefore expect college campuses to look different from other places with which they are familiar (Okerson 2016; Scholl and Gulwadi 2015). Dober (1996) asserts that the college campus "expresses something about the quality of academic life as well as its role as a citizen of the community in which it is located" (47). For those experiencing their first visit, a well-designed and aesthetically pleasing campus doubtless will stand out. On this subject, Griffith (1994) contends:

*Universities that create and maintain an engaging campus environment, which is conducive to both activity and tranquility, receive further dividends. A well laid out campus with sufficient open space will assist in the recruitment of top notch students and faculty. A student's perception of*

*how a campus looks and feels plays a critical role in the choice of a higher education institution (650).*

Where the intentional placement of natural and manufactured physical properties helps students make important connections and form a sense of belonging to the campus, physical space is a worthy consideration for administrators (Harrington 2014). As such, higher education institutions can—and should—strategically design ecosystems and environments that are appealing and engaging to both prospective and matriculating students. Acute consciousness of tangible and intangible campus properties is vital, especially where enrollment managers must perpetually attract new students and retain current students. At a minimum, enrollment managers should familiarize themselves and their staff members with key physical attributes on campus. They also should work with admission officers to assess student interactions and department in order to better understand their campuses. Admission personnel can augment existing recruitment and retention strategies—such as the campus visit—to harness the potential of campus attributes. By identifying dominant purviews, performing appraisals, and exploiting campus geography, enrollment managers can optimize institutional idiosyncrasies to everyone’s benefit.

## Climate

One of the most well-known—and highly referenced—definitions of campus climate is that of Susan Rankin, Senior Research Associate in the Center for the Study of Higher Education and Associate Professor of Education in the College Student Affairs Program at The Pennsylvania State University. Rankin (n.d.), as lead consultant on a campus climate initiative at the University of California, defines campus climate as “the current attitudes, behaviors, and standards of faculty, staff, administrators, and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities, and potentials” (para 1). Another campus climate initiative (that of the University of Wisconsin-Madison) offers a different, more resplendent definition of campus climate:

*The atmosphere or ambience of an organization as perceived by its members...reflected in its structures, policies, and practices; the demographics of its membership; the attitudes and values of its members and leaders; and the quality of personal interactions.*

*Behaviors within a workplace or learning environment...that influence whether an individual feels personally safe, listened to, valued, and treated fairly and with respect (as cited in Bowers, n.d., para. 1).*

Simply, campus climate refers to the perceptions and experiences of institutional members (*e.g.*, students, faculty, staff, etc.) as it summarizes the inclusivity dynamics of the institution and the degree to which its members feel included or excluded (Baird 1988; Kuh 2009; Williams 2010).

More often than not, discussion of climate leads to discussion of diversity. In this context, diversity represents more than the differences in experience, age, sexuality, gender, race, religion, etc. that comprise the constituency of an institution and contributes to the richness of the campus environment (Fine and Handelsman 2010). It represents opportunities for institutional members to interact with—and better understand—differing histories and identities. Opportunities for recognition and interchange of diversity may include programs, clubs, academic courses, and even residence halls.

To highlight the complexities and overall significance of diversity, Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1998) devised a four-dimensional framework for understanding campus climate. According to Hurtado *et al.* (1998), an understanding of campus climate materializes best through (1) historical contexts, (2) structural breadth, (3) a psychological component, and (4) a behavioral component. *Historical contexts* have concern for the evolutionary factors of campus inclusion as well as the methodologies and experiences that helped shape contemporary institutional norms. The *structural dimension* is analogous to Moos’ (1973) personal characteristics dimension and Strange and Bannings’ (2001) aggregate environment, as the demographic features and personal identities that make up institutional membership are of central focus. The *psychological dimen-*

sion addresses perceptions of belonging and/or alienation among constituents while the *behavioral component* targets student experiences with the campus system. Thus, the primary concern is evaluation of student participation in campus programs, traditions, and activities together with interpersonal interactions among different identity groups. Unified, these dimensions are the foundation of a climate that cultivates engagement and celebrates difference (Williams 2010).

Whether academic or sociological, diversity on a college campus exposes students to a seemingly compounded, contrastive and enigmatic world. Diversity strengthens social maturity, broadens sagaciousness, reinforces adaptability, and promotes acceptance. Most important, it offers students opportunity for involvement, collaboration, personal growth, and development.

In terms of instilling and sustaining diversity on college campuses, enrollment managers are, in many respects, both the façade of and the stimulus for positive movement. Unfortunately, many ethnic, minority, and underrepresented students (*e.g.*, African American, Hispanic, Native American, or LGBTQ) experience a variety of personal, environmental, and institutional barriers that result in unequal, limited, or no access to a college education (Nitri 2001; Opp 2001; Thomason and Thurber 1999). These barriers often include extensive financial difficulties, lack of familial support, paucity of information about the college preparation and application process, low academic grades and test scores, and/or an absence of role models who have pursued higher education (Lee 1991; Nitri 2001). Nevertheless, enrollment managers can employ a variety of measures that can mitigate barriers and ensure diversity.

Foremost, enrollment managers and higher education marketers must be aware of the needs, histories, identities, and barriers that typify the students—and student groups—they seek to reach. To attract and retain certain students, institutions of higher education must identify with them. Likewise, recruitment and retention efforts geared toward certain students must be in direct response to the characteristics of the target group. Recruitment and retention exercises cannot—and should not—follow a “one-size-fits-all” approach. What works

for one type of student does not work for all students. LaBrie (2014) contends:

*It is important for an institution that is interested in recruiting a diverse student population to have an appreciation for the various communities it wishes to recruit in and to understand the role of the recruiter. The recruiter not only needs to have a deeper appreciation of the communities he or she is talking to, but often needs to be a member of that community (as cited in Lynch 2014, para. 22).*

In view of this, enrollment managers can also collaborate with current institutional members—faculty, staff, or students—and alumni to increase diversity. Admission officers may also solicit assistance from non-institutional community members, such as church leaders, athletic directors, and school counselors. By including minority (and other underrepresented) group members in recruitment and retention efforts, admission personnel can promote diversity. For example, during the recruitment process, minority student tour guides clearly communicate messages of inclusion and success at the institution (Alger and Carrasco 1997). Similarly, a minority adult presence (*e.g.*, faculty, counselors, etc.) at community events and college fairs demonstrates support and professional success. LaBrie (2014) posits:

*One of the more powerful ways of changing and becoming much more appealing to a diverse population is to reflect that population in the faculty as well as the staff who represent the institution. Students from underrepresented minorities will often look for mentors and colleagues that come from a common experience. They will see themselves within the institution if they see members of their community represented within the institution, and this has a snowball effect where a more diverse student population mandates a more diverse staff and faculty (as cited in Lynch 2014, para. 21).*

Among the most effective methods for stimulating retention are mentoring and support systems (Whitaker, Montgomery, and Acosta 2015). Institutional members, regardless of position and/or status, “can play a significant role in students’ lives by making a conscious effort to act as mentors, particularly to students who have

come from less privileged backgrounds or have overcome significant obstacles simply to enroll in college” (Alger and Carrasco 1997, para. 11). Likewise, academic and outreach programs, as well as varied co-curricular activities, should provide underrepresented students with opportunities to both explore and express the values of their mores.

Last, higher education marketers need to create effective messaging that transcends cookie-cutter parlance. The language and visual imagery used in institutional messages (*e.g.*, websites, presentations, social media, etc.) communicate a great deal about the types of students enrolled at a given institution. Perceptions rendered—whether intentional or incidental—not only inform prospective students’ impression of an institution but also affect their confidence in their own abilities (Arendt and Dohrman 2016). Thus, the means and modes of information delivery in recruitment and retention efforts must relay institutional intentions to serve all students equitably. To successfully attract and retain diverse students, higher education institutions must meet students’ psychological, safety, sense of belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization needs (Donnell, Edwards, and Green 2002).

## Culture

According to Smircich (1983), “Culture is usually defined as a social and normative glue that holds an organization together” (344). Expounding on this definition, Masland (1985) asserts that organizational culture “induces purpose, commitment, and order; provides meaning and social cohesion; and clarifies and explains behavioral expectations. Culture influences an organization through the people within it” (157). Kuh (2009) concludes that institutional culture is “the collective, mutually shaping patterns of institutional history, mission, physical settings, norms, traditions, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in college or university” (71).

Finding a canonical definition of culture applicable to all institutions of higher education is implausible. Each university and college is a world unto itself. With varied governance and organizational structures, am-

biguous and clashing methodologies for attaining goals, and a diverse array of personal philosophies and communal subcultures, higher education institutions are, in many respects, isolated in comparison to other organizations. Consequently, campus life and the college community are inextricably unique. Where campus climate reflects the perceptions and experiences of individuals toward an institution, campus culture reflects the character of an institution (Kuh 1993, 2009). Institutional character exists in two varieties: formal and informal, or espoused and enacted.

## Character

Hartshorne (1943) describes the college community as a social system based on three inherent elements: (1) demographic processes, (2) formal organization and material equipment, and (3) informal organization. *Demographic processes* are the backgrounds, characteristics, and overall composition of the student population—much like the previously discussed dimensions of Moos (1973), Strange and Banning (2001), and Hurtado *et al.* (1998). *Formal organization and material equipment* encompass both the functional makeup of the college setting (*e.g.*, classes, co-curricular activities, etc.), as well as the physical elements (*e.g.*, buildings, pathways, etc.), and concentrates specifically on how these elements affect student thought and behavior. Hartshorne (1943) labels this the “official culture” of the college environment (321). Finally, *informal organization* is the “unofficial culture” of the college environment and corresponds to the behavioral patterns and norms that students develop through their adjustment to the formal/official culture (321).

## Values

Kuh (1993) suggests that an institution’s values—and how those values are transmitted—elicit character. An institution’s values represent “widely held beliefs or sentiments about the importance of certain goals, activities, relationships, and feelings” (Kuh and Whitt, 1988, 23). Values and beliefs are either espoused or enacted. Espoused values are what people say they believe but do not necessarily do. They are often unconscious themes or symbolic interpretations of reality and tend

to take the form of assertions and assumptions—true or false—about institutional aspirations that come to portray the institution (Kuh and Whitt 1988; Smircich 1983). Enacted values are beliefs put into practice, such as policy and procedure. Enacted values and beliefs are conscious and explicit and guide the day-to-day routines performed by the institution's constituents (Kuh 1993; Kuh and Whitt 1988). Bear in mind that enacted values and beliefs are not always congruent with espoused values and beliefs. The intersections of formal and informal organization, in addition to inconsistencies regarding values, shepherd the creation of institutional character.

Institutional character manifests itself in campus culture through a “holistic, complex web of physical and verbal artifacts, enduring behavioral patterns, embedded values and beliefs, and ideologies and assumptions” (Kuh, 2009, 71). Members within their respective college communities use artifacts, values, beliefs, assumptions, and existing comportment to depict their campus culture to themselves and others (Schein 2004).

### Artifacts

Taking a cue from anthropology, artifacts signify cultural identity. They can be physical, verbal, or behavioral—that is, anything one can see, hear, and feel when encountering a new group with an unfamiliar culture (Schein 2004). Kuh and Whitt (1988) propose that physical (visible) artifacts are “things that surround people and provide them with immediate sensory stimuli as they carry out culturally expressive activities” (19). Physical artifacts encompass a macroscopic expanse and may include features such as indoor and outdoor spaces, architecture, art, and technology. Physical artifacts are often symbolic, creating a sense of place and establishing a style and personality singular to an institution and its environment. This helps convey institutional character and dictate behavioral conduct. Verbal artifacts concern language and the spoken and written word. Historical accounts and stories, as well as words and phrases (*e.g.*, slogans, mottos, and catchphrases), impart clues and insights into the character and culture of the institution. Behavioral artifacts refer to traditions, rituals, and ceremonies. Traditions connect the past with

the present and constitute means through which an institution's character grows and perpetuates (Kuh 1993; Masland 1985). Traditions vary from school to school and transmit the values and beliefs of the institution to its members and the external community through rituals and ceremonies (*e.g.*, convocations, graduations, inaugurations, dedications, etc.).

### Assumptions

Assumptions derive from values and beliefs. Values Orientation Theory (VOT) presents the idea that,

*humans share biological traits and characteristics which form the basis for the development of culture, and that people typically feel their own cultural beliefs and practices are normal and natural, and those of others are strange, or even inferior or abnormal* (Hills, 2002, 4).

VOT presumes that solutions to common human problems vary substantially, but societies and cultures typically choose one as dominant. Dominant value orientation (DVO) states that while one solution is preferable to the group, alternative solutions are still visible in the culture, and any given member of the group may behave according to both the dominant and variant solutions (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1961; Schein 2004). On college campuses, the administrative line holds the DVO, yet faculty and students bring diverse ideologies, thus establishing diverging perspectives. At times, these diverging perspectives may seem counterproductive. However, as colleges and universities are understood in terms of their expressive, ideational, and symbolic features, alternative solutions and differing perspectives only add to an institution's character (Smircich 1983).

Institutional cultures are generally stable but are by no means static (Kuh 2009; Kuh and Whitt 1988). Cultures change over time for any number of reasons. For institutions of higher education, culture is both product and process, with changes occurring on a daily basis (Kuh 2009). As student needs and demands increase, technology improves, faculty turns over, and the student body shifts annually, so does the culture of higher education and of individual institutions. Not all individuals will experience campus culture in like manner, nor

will they exhibit the same behavioral outcomes (Billings and Terkla 2014). For this reason, administrators, enrollment managers, and student affairs personnel alike must create and sustain a vibrant sense of mission as well as a distinctive culture that supports students' civic understanding and engagement (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens, n.d.). Accomplishing this, however, requires an extensive and penetrating grasp of both institutional character and student disposition. Hossler (n.d.) opines, "The more enrollment management professionals know about the characteristics, attitudes, and values of prospective students, the better able they are to design effective recruitment and orientation programs" (para. 5).

As stated above, both campus life and the college community are unique. As with issues of diversity, there is no fixed praxis for evaluating institutional character, discerning student disposition, and/or sowing a cultural imprint. Rather, as Scannell (2013) suggests, "Administrators must find a system that fits with their institution's mission and tradition to create" (54). Because student socialization occurs through perceptions of institutional norms—as well as through habitual participation in routine practices and communal events—it would behoove administrators, enrollment managers, and student affairs officials to carefully scrutinize their respective institutions' espoused and enacted values, examine institutional conventionalities, and heed inferences drawn by internal and external bodies (Colby, *et al.*, n.d.).

## Community

Diversity is an intrinsic part of campus life and adds to the institutional climate. With such an array of dissimilar, yet inimitable, castes of demography, experiences, values, beliefs, and assumptions present, one can only wonder how they connect. The answer appears to lie in *community*. Multiple studies reveal that a student's sense of community is rooted in personalized treatment and the quality of social life on campus (Cheng, 2004, 2005). Students' feelings of being cared about, treated in a caring way, valued as individuals, and accepted as part of the collective citizenry contribute directly to their sense of belonging (Cheng 2004).

Currently, a "catch-all" definition for what exactly constitutes campus community is lacking. However, Boyer (1990) provides a framework for community building, identifying six characteristics that define campus communities. He suggests that colleges and universities are at their best when they are: (1) educationally purposeful, (2) open, (3) just, (4) disciplined, (5) caring, and (6) celebratory. Institutions applying Boyer's framework offer a dignified, honest, and compassionate environment where students and faculty work collaboratively to strengthen teaching and learning, share in time-honored traditions and rituals, and work toward the good of the institution. Boyer's framework is noteworthy because it not only presents a model for community enhancement, but it also aligns with student ideologies about campus environments. Cheng (2004) underscores this by stating, "As valuable as this line of research has been, one can hardly take for granted that this is also how students perceive what a campus community should be" (219).

While the term community may mean different things to different people, it is undoubtedly an indispensable aspect of campus life, as existing literature and a spate of studies repeatedly cite a student's sense of belonging and feeling of connection to the campus community as the primary reasons for enrollment and matriculation (Harrington 2014; Okerson 2016; Yazedjian, Towes, Sevin and Purswell 2008). Brazzell (2001) notes:

*Whether consciously or unconsciously, students come to our educational institutions seeking more than just an academic education. They yearn for a sense of belonging, and the lack of it may prompt some to abandon either their institutions—or worse—their education (31).*

Schlossberg (1989) defines a student's connection to a specific college or university as an issue of "marginality versus mattering" (7). Marginality refers to feelings of dissociation one experiences when entering and/or inhabiting a particular environment. When students go from a place of inclusion and acceptance to a place of antipathy or insecurity, they are liable to bear feelings of anxiety and discomfort, as if they do not "fit in." Marginality is usually temporary and corresponds to

life transitions such as starting a new job or moving to a different city. Conversely, mattering is about affirmation. Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) suggest that “the feeling that others depend on us, are interested in us, are connected with our fate, or experience us as an egoextension [*sic*] exercises a powerful influence on our actions” (165). Mattering centers on four prominent conditions that are common to the human view of acceptance and affirmation: attention, importance, ego-extension, and dependence. *Attention* pertains to the idea that others may command an interest in or take notice of another person. *Importance* submits to the belief that people care about what others want, think, and do while *ego-extension* causatively ascribes to one’s impression that others will be proud of their accomplishments and saddened by their failures. Last, *dependence* taps into the concept of need whereby individuals rely on one another for subsistence. Simply put, “Mattering refers to our belief, whether right or wrong, that we matter to someone else” (Schlossberg, 1989, 9).

Analogous to Schlossberg’s theory of mattering is Rendon’s (1993) theory of validation. According to Rendon-Linares and Munoz (2011), validation refers to the:

*intentional, proactive affirmation of students by in- and out-of-class agents (i.e., faculty, student, and academic affairs staff, family members, peers) in order to: (1) validate students as creators of knowledge and as valuable members of the college learning community and (2) foster personal development and social adjustment (12).*

In other words, validation is a developmental process whereby expressing and demonstrating an active interest in students’ lives positively affects those students’ perceptions and attitude toward their sense of belonging as well as their personal, social, and academic capabilities. The more validation students receive, the richer their academic and interpersonal experiences will be (Rendon 1993). According to Rendon (1993), “When validation is present, students feel capable of learning; they experience a feeling of self worth and feel that they and everything that they bring to the college experience is accepted and recognized as valuable” (16). Rendon-Linares and Munoz (2011) further postulate

that validation helps marginalized students “acquire a confident, motivating, ‘I can do it’ attitude, believe in their inherent capacity to learn, become excited about learning, feel a part of the learning community, and feel cared about as a person, not just a student” (15).

Apropos of this, rituals and ceremonies play an active role in helping individuals overcome marginality, as rites of passage help them make sense of the contradictory nature of transitions—being a part of the past and the future concurrently. According to van Gennep (1960), rites of passage transpire in three stages: separation, transition (or liminal), and incorporation. Consider high school seniors, for example: Come graduation (ceremony), seniors withdraw (separation) from their status as high school students and transition into the liminal stage, during which they have no status. Once they begin college (reincorporation)—perhaps attending a new student orientation or convocation (ceremony)—they likely will develop a new identity that differs greatly from what they had in high school, culminating in acceptance. Tinto (1975, 1993) adopts this concept in his interactionist theory, postulating that students’ initial commitment to an institution as well as their goal of graduation relates directly to their level of integration into the academic and social systems of the college or university (Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon 2004).

What this should signify to administrators is the need to establish and sustain environments that cultivate growth and development, boost morale, incite feelings of commitment and loyalty, and bring about a sense of belonging (Baird 1988). Students identify with environments that are dynamic, benevolent, genial, inclusive, and steeped in pride. By keying in on characteristics associated with these descriptors, administrators can strategically identify areas that may need improvement, command added attention, or require simple maintenance. However, those deputed to perform recruitment and retention exercises are, fundamentally, at the helm of evoking, conjuring, and promulgating institutional community. Prospective students on a campus tour engage in “anticipatory socialization”—the “process by which individuals identify a group they aim to belong and socialize themselves

according to that group's norms" (Latham, 2004, 17). During this process, prospective students learn about the institution and develop a picture of what they anticipate from institutional membership (Feldman 1981; Latham 2004). Assuming students choose to enroll, they will then continue through two more phases: "encounter" and "change and acquisition." During the *encounter* phase, students enter into institutional society, become acquainted with new values and expectations, and reconcile previously held notions with the actual environment they experience (Latham 2004). During the final phase—*change and acquisition*—relatively long-lasting changes take place as students develop relationships, master the skills required for their mission, make requisite adjustments to their values and norms, and—presumably—perform successfully in their new role (Feldman 1981; Latham 2004).

Against this background, enrollment managers, admission officers, and student affairs professionals can facilitate effectual socialization through personalized attention and strong support programs. By taking a proactive approach to recruitment, engaging in dialogue, and developing relationships with prospective students and their families, admission counselors will not only tender an air of support, but they also will induce validation. Likewise, pre-college, first-year experience, and leadership programs—to name a few—help students integrate socially into the campus environment by introducing them to peers from similar and divergent academic and cultural backgrounds (Pulliam and Sasso 2016). Schlossberg (1989) reckons:

*Institutions that focus on mattering and greater student involvement will be more successful in creating campuses where students are motivated to learn, where their retention is high, and ultimately, where their institutional loyalty for the short- and long-term future is ensured (14).*

## Implications and Discussion

Student perceptions of the institutional environment, as well as dominant norms and values embedded within the environment, influence how students think and spend their time (Kuh *et al.* 2006). While there is no

guidebook or "how-to" manual for building and sustaining campus environments that satiate the needs and desires of prospective and matriculating students, three key areas common to all institutions of higher education offer a viable starting point.

First, there is a need for effective ecosystems wherein the campus environment consists of all the stimuli that impinge upon students' sensory modalities (Kaiser 1978). Simply put, the campus should not only look pleasant, it should be pleasant. Moreover, college campuses should be conducive to student activity. The grounds should be inviting to visitors and members of the institutional community alike and should be navigable and safe. Buildings, open/green spaces, and pathways should facilitate and encourage social interaction as well as respite. Further, they should be user-friendly: habitually used venues such as dormitories, dining halls, classrooms, and student services should be centrally located and easily accessible.

Second, effectual programming and organized social opportunities that promote student engagement and active involvement are imperative (Cheng 2004). Astin (1984) proposes that the amount of physical and psychological energy students devote to the college experience influences how they think and behave, affecting, in turn, their learning and development. Strange and Banning (2001) further Astin's theory, supposing that person-environment congruence is an indicator of a student's attraction to and satisfaction with an environment in which community is actually a measurable set of interactions between students and the campus environment (Cheng 2005). Research shows that students who interact with the campus environment and engage with the campus community not only report higher levels of satisfaction with the college experience but also get more out of it (Cuseo *et al.* 2007). For example, students are more likely to enjoy the college experience and persist to graduation if they reside on campus, belong to a fraternity or sorority, become involved in co-curricular activities (*e.g.*, clubs, student government, etc.), and/or take part in service-learning experiences (*e.g.*, community service) (Astin 1984; Cheng 2004; Cuseo *et al.* 2007). Likewise, student involvement

correlates positively with psychosocial development, cognitive complexity, individual and group competencies, and mature and meaningful relationship building (Foubert and Grainger 2006; Harrington 2014; Kuh *et al.* 2006). Active engagement also aids personal development as involved students tend to have increased levels of self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (Astin 1984; Tenhouse, n.d.). Thus, institutions can leverage a student's emotional, social, intellectual, and intrapersonal capabilities by providing resources that both encourage and advance active student involvement.

Last, sound student affairs practices, as well as logical and effective institutional policies, are requisite for optimizing the student agenda and cultivating a strong institutional connection. In a study by Cheng (2005), students commented on what factors of campus life either enhanced or diminished their sense of community. They expressed dissatisfaction with the school's services sector, complaining about residence hall maintenance, incompetent health services personnel, unfriendly security guards, and overpriced items in the bookstore. The intended topic of community gave way to students' discussion of student services for approximately one full hour. When the moderator reintroduced the question about community, one student retorted, "How can we talk about community without good services on campus? After all, this is the place we call 'home' for four years" (3). Astin (1984) calls attention to this topic:

*Administrators and faculty members must recognize that virtually every institutional policy and practice (e.g., class schedules; regulations on class attendance, academic probation, and participation in honors courses; policies on office hours for faculty, student orientation, and advising) can affect the way students spend their time and the amount of effort they devote to academic pursuits. Moreover, administrative decisions about many nonacademic issues (e.g., the location of new buildings such as dormitories and student unions; rules governing residency; the design of recreational and living facilities; on-campus employment opportunities; number and type of extracurricular activities and regulations regarding participation; the frequency, type, and cost of cultural events; roommate*

*assignments; financial aid policies; the relative attractiveness of eating facilities on and off campus; parking regulations) can significantly affect how students spend their time and energy (523).*

Students need to feel at home on campus and have their personal values recognized and respected (Cheng 2004). Without high-quality services—or routine and prudent assessment of said services—students are unlikely to feel a sense of community or form an attachment to the institution (Cheng 2005).

At face value, each of these action points presents institutional policy makers with strategies seemingly suited for long-term, macro-level implementation. Furthermore, execution of these strategies is contingent on the use of comprehensive assessment to identify institution-specific deficiencies. There are few sure-fire conventions for optimizing student-institution fit (Williams 1985). For this reason, enrollment managers, admission officers, and higher education marketers would be wise to analyze their current recruitment and retention practices with unremitting tenacity if they hope to enact change and/or improve effectiveness (Hossler and Gallagher 1987). Hossler and Gallagher (1987) contend:

*Professionals in these areas have developed an intuitive sense of what works best for them, however, many times admissions and marketing personnel view all of their recruitment activities as influencing the selection of one institution over another. This means that they are directing their efforts at the choice phase, when in fact, the most critical phase is the search phase. The best way for institutions to expand their applicant pool is to reach students at the search phase (218).*

Exigent shortcomings pertaining to enrollment are addressable at a micro-level. As stated earlier, the campus visit is a powerful stratagem influencing students' decision-making process. In essence, the campus visit is a sales and marketing device for prospective students, providing them with a highly personalized and "real" way to make a satisfactory college decision based on psychosocial factors (Nora 2004). Campus visits are, fundamentally, a decisive test of how students' perceive "fitting in"

once enrolled at a particular institution (Secore 2018). In this regard, the campus visit is a brief trial run at what life might look like should the student matriculate (Okerson 2016). To that end, enrollment managers heeding the advice of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) can potentiate both the search and choice phases quite easily by accentuating campus visits—specifically, the campus tour.

The campus tour has long been synonymous with campus visits, serving as the quintessential means of promotion for most institutions (Secore 2018). As stated previously, the campus tour is a ritual unto itself, providing prospective students the opportunity to engage with the campus environment at large. Students freely connect with the ecology, climate, and culture of the institution—evaluating and reacting to campus aesthetics and the community within. Where each institution is essentially *sui generis*, assumptions about the institution afford students the ability to acquire a “feel” for the institution. Likewise, the campus tour—as a formal campus ritual—responds to a basic human need to be part of a larger and distinct social entity (community) (Magolda 2001). In this way, students’ connection to a specific environment directly affects their response to the campus visit and tour experience, in turn influencing their attitude toward college choice (Kuh 2009; Okerson 2016). Plainly speaking, “The tour is the blind date of the admissions process. Looks matter a lot to the beholder, and first impressions do much to shape future actions” (Hoover, 2010, 37). Knowing this, enrollment managers and admission personnel should embrace the influential advantage a campus tour presents, as it tenders an opportune occasion to both display and propagate institutional character. By simply highlighting institutional strengths, and exposing prospective students to core institutional values and artifacts, enrollment managers, admission officers, and higher education marketers can seize what is perhaps the most powerful weapon in their marketing arsenals.

This sentiment also holds true regarding retention. As discussed above, all environments organically transform due to evolutionary progress and human intervention. Yet because change defines disposition, it is important to remember that a student’s life on cam-

pus does not exist in a vacuum, nor does it end with a campus tour. Rather, the tour is the genesis of the student-institution relationship; like any relationship, both parties enter into the affair not only with a predetermined set of needs and expectations but also with aspirations for a satisfying long-term arrangement. If an institution hopes to have success in keeping company with its students, “feelings” introduced during the search and choice phases—as during the campus tour—must remain present and somewhat consistent throughout the student-institution life cycle (*i.e.*, inquiry, enrollment, tenure, and alumnus). Otherwise, institutions risk mismatches in student-institution fit. Mismatches manifest themselves in the academic, social, and personal adjustment problems that many students experience on campus (Williams 1987). In turn, mismatches lead to dissatisfaction with campus life, poor grades, and a lack of motivation—culminating in attrition and, ultimately, withdrawal (*i.e.*, dropping out). The interdependency of student attributes and institutional characteristics is enormously consequential to strategic enrollment management as well as institutional policy promulgation—both of which are necessary for ecological and economic viability. Thus, macro- and micro-level measures tailored for effectual environment totality must always include the puissant and dynamic relationship between the student and the institution.

## Conclusion

Students’ perception of an institution profoundly affects their decision to attend and/or persist at the school. What a student experiences and how they feel about it likely will determine their level of interest and enthusiasm for involvement. As Insel and Moos (1974) declare, “The ‘climate’ of environments in which people function relates to their satisfaction, mood, and self-esteem and to their personal growth” (186). Moreover, since situation-specific contexts bind culture, every institution’s culture is unique. As such, administrators, enrollment managers, admission personnel, student affairs professionals, and higher education marketers cooperatively hold the keys to unlocking the potential of their respective campus environments. By carefully evaluating current policies

and practices, institutions can measure their respective campus ecologies, climates, and cultures to ensure a favorable “total” environment. Continued assessment of student needs, desires, and beliefs provides impetus to develop, transform, and sustain environments that best

align the student and the institution. In summary, a supportive, inspiring, and sanguine atmosphere propagated by existing college community members will strategically position an institution for longstanding success in its recruitment and retention efforts.

## About the Author



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constructive learning strategies for arts-based programs, the need for effectual arts-based academic leadership development, and the employment of effective strategic enrollment management strategies for arts-based higher education programs.

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 CASES FROM THE FIELD

# Charting the Course: Using Data Analytics to Assist with Strategic Enrollment Management

by Robert Muhammad and Kristen McManus

Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp and other social media platforms were created to give people immediate outlets to express themselves to their friends, family, and the world with just a few clicks of a button. These platforms have created a culture, particularly with Millennials who seek immediate gratification, constant feedback and affirmation (Pollack 2014). It is well documented that students check how many “likes” or positive responses they obtain on a social media post. “It is very interesting how most of the top reasons are all linked to what we call ‘passive networking’—that means users who come to social media to consume content rather than actively contributing to the stories” (Desreumaux 2015). In some instances, “they literally represent a snapshot of a world that’s consumed with appearing happy and confident and in control. But that’s not what social media should do” (Elmore 2013).

With the advent of such technology, it is no wonder that people no longer tolerate waiting in line (Shafir 2012). Photos of people waiting in lines are used to illustrate powerlessness while highlighting the distinction between choice and need. Yet waiting in any line implies that the line has value and is more important than the time of those in line (Shafir 2012). Organizational psychology, the science behind the study of standing in line, has led to some innovations. “Companies have come up with some novel solutions to shorten lines, including charging customers for skipping or advancing in the line. Examples include priority boarding on airplanes and special concession lines for NFL season-ticket holders” (Swanson 2015).

The Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid at Winston-Salem State University has successfully utilized social media, e-mail, postal mailings, and calling campaigns to engage both internal and external stakeholders for differing reasons. E-mail is used in conjunction with postcards and calling campaigns to engage students throughout the financial aid cycle and academic year. Facebook and Twitter are also used to communicate with students regarding issues related to the FAFSA, verification, special days dedicated to student services, and other student issues. A Facebook account maintained by the office is used to communicate with external stakeholders. Usage of these social media platforms to engage with students and the public at large enables the university to inform the public of its stories (Hope 2016).

If universities want to survive into the century while maintaining relevancy to the business world and the global market, they must utilize innovative methods that engage students from the time of admission through graduation. Unfortunately, today’s universities fail to provide students with thought-provoking experiences. This failure appears to be destroying forward thinking in young people. While this result is unintentional, it is insidious nevertheless for being unplanned, unnoticed, and unseen (Doss 2015).

Those universities that take the necessary steps to reach students where they are and to engage with them prior to their arrival on campus will be more successful in terms of student affairs and academic rigor. Successful engagement equates to economic growth and

positive branding. Students who are ‘invested’ and feel that the university is committed to their success work harder and develop kinship with their university. “The true measure of student success is how well students are prepared to accomplish their current and future academic, personal, and professional goals through the development of knowledge, a sense of responsibility and self-reliance, and a connection to the college and wider community” (Nazarene College 2014).

To maximize student success and retention, institutions must communicate proactively with students throughout all stages of engagement—for example, regarding how to register for the next semester’s classes, apply for internships, pursue study abroad opportunities, pay account balances, reapply for financial aid, and complete the steps necessary for graduation (Fleming 2016). Supplemental activities such as internships are early indicators of success because they demonstrate students’ fortitude, willingness, and, on some levels, critical thinking.

Strategic enrollment management (SEM) creates a highly interactive team that utilizes established principles of planning, implementation, evaluation and revision to ensure the institution’s constant success in fulfilling its educational commitments to its students. The activities described above are all part of managing enrollment in ways that engage, retain, and ultimately graduate students. “Successful enrollment management, as well as successful universities, requires multiple units to work together seamlessly to create a student experience, a student journey, if you will, that will ensure success for the students and enrollment health for the university” (Henderson 2017).

Institutions must ensure that messages are clear and succinct, providing answers that meet the needs of students. Improvement in student success leads to improvement in retention. Students who are actively involved in their academic progress, some form of student activities, and free of concern regarding finances are more likely to thrive at their institution.

Institutions that work to provide positive experiences in these areas are reviewed favorably in trade publications such as *U.S. News and World Report*, *Washington*

*Monthly*, and *The Wall Street Journal* (Annual College Edition). Boosts in reputation that result from inclusion in such reputable publications can lead to increases in enrollment and, ultimately, higher-quality enrollment.

## Importance of Data

According to a Helical IT survey, if a decision is made relying on data rather than pure intuition, the chances of succeeding are 79 percent greater. By implementing a centralized data collection process, an organization can make data-driven decisions (Nektar Data Systems 2015).

Often, the terms “data” and “information” are used interchangeably even though technically, there is a significant difference between them. Essentially, data are raw numbers collected by technology. Collectively, data look like a varied series of numbers; to simply read data would be of little benefit. Information, by contrast, is data that have been processed and interpreted so meaning can be attributed to them. Once an understanding of information has been reached, an office can make informed decisions.

It is imperative that an institution’s enrollment data-collection process be robust. Otherwise, information may be inaccurate, leading to poor decision making. The process by which data are transformed from a seemingly random list of numbers to helpful information used to direct organizational policies and processes may be lengthy. If an aspect or component of this process is weak, the results will be compromised.

Given SEM’s roots in strategic planning and data, it seemed natural for this financial aid director to begin to rely heavily on analytics and predictive modeling. During a few years with no enrollment manager, the financial aid director brought areas of enrollment management to the table to facilitate understanding of how offices can better assist on another and drive the SEM process forward.

Predictive analytics are means of deriving better decisions and actionable insights based on data. Predictive analytics aim to estimate the likelihood of future events by considering trends and identifying associations with related issues as well as risks or opportunities. Predictive analytics may also demonstrate correlations in data

that descriptive models might not reveal (for example, demographics and completion rates) (Daniel 2014).

The financial aid director used predictive analysis by extracting data from various areas of enrollment:

- How many students had applied and were qualified for re-admission?
- How many first-year and transfer students could the university realistically accommodate?
- After the next two semesters, continuing students versus students who were no longer Pell eligible were studied; a listing of students who would max out their loan eligibility was also generated.
- The number of students selected for the federal process of verification was investigated.
- A list of students who would be ineligible for financial aid due to not making satisfactory academic progress (SAP) was generated.
- A list of students who had outstanding balances with the university was compiled.

These areas were targeted because they would yield the most data regarding financial aid for the next academic year; would inform a model for accounting for these issues over the next few years; and would provide a mechanism by which to share this information with other pertinent offices on campus. For example, academic advising could be more vigilant with students who have to apply for re-admission or SAP.

“Moreover, as SEM has evolved, we have increasingly turned to technology to recruit, retain, and communicate with students whereas results should be about relationships” (Hope 2016). With the right formula of sensitivity, understanding and student engagement, data and technology can help build relationships and enhance student success.

Predictive modeling is utilized within enrollment management for a host reasons: strategic (enrolling a class, shaping a class, using population segmentation [*e.g.*, geographic, by academic ability]); budget (drive down marketing costs); and to demonstrate mathematically and empirically effective ways to implement a

data-driven culture of evidence at an institution (Henderson 2017). This article is the story of how one financial aid office successfully utilized social media and data to improve the student experience by minimizing lines.

## Background

Winston-Salem State University is a public Historically Black College and University (HBCU) located in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The Fall 2015 enrollment was 5,107, including 4,686 undergraduates. The Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid administers approximately \$65.2 million annually in federal, state, institutional, and non-institutional financial aid. Prior to making changes to previous processes, the director assessed weaknesses to determine what needed to be addressed: reports were ad hoc and were not written for financial aid but rather were modified from other offices' information; staff turnover and lack of training contributed to poor processes for verification of financial aid. Potentially costly mistakes were being made that could lead to compliance issues with federal and state education agencies as well as accreditors.

The director also noticed a lack of robust, proactive engagement. As a result, panic mode typically set in sometime during July as it became evident that students were not as responsive or proactive as expected. This led to the creation of bottlenecks rather than the finalizing of freshmen and transfer cohorts or their enrollment or ensuring the engagement of continuing students. Lines were inevitable, as were students' and parents' frustrations and complaints.

Over the past five years, the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid made a concerted effort to reduce the number of students who needed to visit one stop to sort out financial aid matters. Prior to this endeavor the office routinely encountered numerous obstacles and administrative hurdles; it was imperative for the office as well as for students that this initiative succeed.

Beginning in the 2014–15 award-year, the office started using various financial aid data to determine patterns of student engagement. Data from 2014–15 were compared to data from 2013–14 to see if the rates of response from students were similar for given time

periods; week was compared to week and month was compared to month. The impetus of this endeavor was the director wanting to ensure that the student experience was as efficient as possible. “Having understood that this generation is used to ordering items online and receiving them immediately, via iTunes or within two to three days through vendors such as Amazon, it was better to utilize the power of the Internet and instant gratification rather than fight it” (Muhammad 2017).

Some students had become accustomed to waiting in lines for service at the beginning of each semester. This may have been the result of any number of reasons, including lack of student follow-through, low engagement by the institution, lack of sufficient staffing within financial aid, and perhaps poor flow of institutional processes related to admissions and financial aid. To address these issues and others, some institutions use a “one-stop” approach that has become a staple on some campuses. Due to systemic problems that may not be adequately addressed each year, one stop may have become a norm rather than an exception. “Ideally, it would be preferable to have students take care of issues prior to the start of each semester, rather than having an ‘administrative triage’ for the weeks leading up to the start of school and the drop/add period” (Muhammad 2017).

## The Process

The director saw an inherent challenge with “one stop” and began to work with various offices to prevent having students wait in line for financial aid assistance. Offices enlisted for assistance were principally the registrar, admission, student accounts, and advising services. Reports were developed and shared among offices that provided details pertinent to financial aid completion. For example, admission and financial aid developed a report to identify admitted students who had not yet been awarded financial aid. Another report was developed to identify students who stated that

**TABLE 1** ► Start of Fall Term (Third Week of August)

Academic Year	Verifications (%)	Awards (n)	Financial Aid Acceptances (n)
2016–17	84	5,510	3,504
2015–16	80	5,450	3,481
2014–15	78	5,227	3,518

they would *not* be attending the institution. Removing these students from contact lists and cancelling their aid (when applicable) focused efforts on those students who intended to enroll.

These reports had become an important tool for understanding the cohorts and making educated predictions regarding how to adjust office processes to accommodate them. Predictive modeling uses data mining and probability to forecast outcomes (Brownlee 2015). “Predictive modeling as a practice is typically outsourced to third-party consulting firms most often due to resources, as many colleges do not have the staff with in-depth knowledge of statistical modeling or the time to engage in deep analytical assessment of predictor variables and regression models” (Fleming 2016). Yet due to the intricate nature of these reports and the need for updated information to continue developing sound processes, it was most expedient for the director to both tailor the reports and have them produced.

Verification of financial aid records was outsourced to College Foundation Incorporated (CFI). This robust service enabled the prompt notification of students selected for verification. CFI provided a dashboard that allowed for a review of the number of notifications, rate of response, and number of verification completions. This information provided the foundation of a comprehensive verification and awarding report that the director reviewed daily.

The comparison of data from year to year became the foundation for changing how students were engaged. The director continued to develop new ways to engage students as populations were identified whose rate of response had decreased from the previous year. New ways of engagement included signage containing

**TABLE 2** > Engagement: On-Campus Outreach

Session(s)	Target Semester (Upcoming...)	Timing	Population
Pre-Fall	Fall	Mid August	All students
Fall	Spring	Early November	All students
Spring	Fall	Early/Mid April	All students
Summer <sup>1</sup>	Fall	June/July	Freshmen
Fall	Spring	Early November	Special populations (band, athletics)
Spring	Fall	Early/Mid-April	Special populations (band, athletics)

<sup>1</sup> During orientation

QR codes that led students to specific web content, targeted postcard mailings, targeted calling campaigns, and video vignette services via Financial Aid TV (this last provided a 24-hour customer service opportunity for students and parents).

The director also implemented a series of mini one-stop opportunities: Sessions were hosted for continuing students and special populations (*e.g.*, athletes and band members) during the spring term for the upcoming summer and fall terms. Sessions for incoming freshmen were also held during the summer. The concept was to provide opportunities for students and their parents to resolve any outstanding issues prior to students' arrival on campus for the fall term.

The director also began to speak with on-campus colleagues about the importance of total engagement, meaning that all employees have a stake in ensuring that students have a good college experience. Everyone can assist, provide a word of encouragement, and smile. Faculty and staff including groundskeepers, cafeteria workers, and administrative assistants all have an interest in ensuring that students are admitted, enrolled, pass their classes and graduate. Students who do not enroll or who “stop out” have an impact on the institution's financial bottom line.

The director determined that students who completed their FAFSA by mid July would likely be awarded financial aid and be ready to start on time for the fall

semester. The approximately four-week window of “crunch time” would allow for students to, if necessary, complete verification, accept financial aid, and engage with other processes. Students who completed the FAFSA after July 15 likely would need additional support in completing financial aid requirements. For the 2016–17 award-year, the director estimated that

approximately 300 students would still need to complete financial aid processes.

The hard work paid off: For the entire one-stop cycle, no lines formed in financial aid. Students who needed assistance had procrastinated or been admitted late to the institution. (Financial aid staff were available to assist these students.) As a result of financial aid's effective use of a variety of communication methods (including social media) and its strategic work with other offices, students no longer dread visiting the financial aid office.

When institutional messaging clearly communicates the answers to students' questions, challenges, and needs, it aids in the achievement of interwoven goals. Greater student success leads to increased retention—and, over time, a boost to an institution's reputation. This can be important as institutions compete for more and better-qualified students.

## Epilogue

During the 2017–18 academic year, the director employed the same tactic and was rewarded—as previously—with no lines of students in the office. Financial Aid Services, Inc. used the office as a model and highlighted its achievement on its web page (FAS 2017). At various conferences and with colleagues, the president of FAS has consistently discussed the director's accomplishments and spoken about the university's continued innovation. This demonstrates that working within enrollment man-

agement and using predictive modeling lead to institutional—and, more important—student success.

Engagement is the new retention. SEM is inclined to build campus partnerships and exploit data and technology to create a holistic framework for student engagement throughout the academic journey. The SEM of engagement as the new paradigm of retention will make the student journey the focal point of enrollment management.

Other administrative offices are beginning to understand that full-time enrollment (FTE)=full – (FTE). By extrapolation, these partners are also understanding that  $FTE = FTE = FTE$ —that is, full-time engagement=fill-time enrollment=full-time employment. This symbiotic relationship has been beneficial not only in the short term as connections among campus partnerships are developed but also in the long term, especially as these affiliations continue to mature.

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