



# Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly

*Advancing Research in Enrollment and Student Success*

Welcome to *SEM Prep*, a collection of articles from *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly (SEM Q)* curated for participants in AACRAO's Annual SEM Conference. Each year, content especially relevant to prevailing SEM practices is selected.

In this edition, I've chosen articles from Volume 5 and Volume 6 having a focus on recruitment, retention and research (data). These are known as the "Three R's" of SEM. They establish a base from which you can consider the core elements of SEM. Beyond the core, leadership is vitally important to practice. How we lead our institutions and our teams to consider, plan, implement, and measure SEM is every bit as important as the planning itself. This year, we feature the voices of women SEM leaders in *SEM Q*, including that of Susan Gottheil, one of the people I admire and learn from. She has been a leader in our field for decades, and her perspective on leadership has been forged from both great challenges and tremendous success.

While Susan's leadership vision spans all institutional types and countries, we know that SEM is practiced in

special ways within our profession. You will find articles that address SEM in the community college, graduate and international settings. As our profession has expanded beyond its undergraduate, four-year roots, the nuances of these practices have become more evident.

This special edition is dedicated to the memory of Melvin "Mel" Tyler, who passed away recently. Mel was one of the original Editorial Board members of *SEM Q* and one of the great leaders in our field. His legacy of accomplishment at UMKC transformed student affairs, enrollment, and student success there. Mel was a great colleague and will be sorely missed.

I look forward to seeing you at the SEM Conference in Washington, D.C., in November.

Enjoy and safe travels,

Tom Green, Ph.D.  
Editor-in-Chief

## About the Editor



**Tom C. Green, Ph.D.**, is AACRAO's Associate Executive Director, Consulting and SEM. During his more than 30-year career as an enrollment manager, he has led enrollment management efforts for six

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# PADDLING WITH PURPOSE: PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT SUCCESS AND RETENTION EFFORTS

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In an era of automated degree audit software, high-tech recruitment tools, data analytics, and limited resources, staff in Enrollment Management and student affairs and services areas may be asked how their work supports student success. Some may assert Enrollment Management and student support has gone digital and the ship can be set on autopilot. Yet if one thinks about success in terms of possessing the skills to navigate life's unknown waters, then Enrollment Management and student affairs and services staff members play instrumental roles—sometimes as the rudder and other times with paddle in hand—helping students sail. There are days when students peer over the edge of their boat and see nothing but murky water below. From administering an emergency loan to talking through a roommate conflict, to teaching test-taking strategies, it is often the commitment of the college “crew” who prevent students’ boats from capsizing. The committed actions of Enrollment Management and student affairs staff assist students to keep their sights set on the horizon and the blue skies of their future. In addition to helping steer individual students’ boats, Enrollment Management and student affairs staff are well positioned to captain institutional ships to the destined shore of student retention

(Mayhew, Rockenbach, Bowman, Seifert, & Wolniak, 2016; Pollock, 2013).

In its earliest form, strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) focused on recruiting students, but soon included a focus on student success, defined in terms of retention and graduation. Several researchers have noted that developing effective student services as well as establishing strong lines of communications across departments are key components of SEM (Bontrager, 2004; Smith & Gottheil, 2009). Gottheil (2015) argues that, based on her experiences, what has been the most critical factor to successfully incorporating SEM into campuses has been “using SEM as a tool to enhance communication, collaboration, and partnerships” (para. 3). Henderson (2014) argued that all aspects of a university ought to support students’ academic success and that all-encompassing division-level collaborative approaches to SEM promote institutional ability to support student success from the prospective student stage through to becoming alumni. However, past research (see Seifert, Arnold, Burrow, & Brown, 2011; Seifert & Burrow, 2013) found that focus group participants from across Enrollment Management and student affairs and services differ in how they perceive their unit’s contributions to student success and the

institution's retention efforts. Given the enormous variation in the day-to-day work of these staff members, this seemed highly plausible. This is despite the importance of a whole-campus approach to SEM (AASCU, 2005, cited in Lingrell, 2014; Gottheil, 2015; Henderson, 2014), in which the campus culture promotes staff members' consistent understanding of and commitment to realizing SEM priorities irrespective of employment area. In light of this importance, the current study explores how staff members' perceptions of their immediate work unit's retention efforts vary by area of employment. As one thinks about how staff members assist students in navigating uncharted waters as well as steering the institutional ship to improved retention on a nearby shore, it is important to understand whether our Enrollment Management and SAS crew are in sync with one another.

## Literature Review

The culture of postsecondary institutions is distinct, as they are operated by persons from "widely divergent educational, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds" (Schultheis, 2014, p. 1). Further, it is important to note that Enrollment Management and student affairs and services units, a microcosm of institutions, are staffed by those with varying education levels and disciplinary affiliation, race, ethnicity, sex, socioeconomic status, and geographic origin (Schultheis, 2014; Strange, Hardy Cox, & Seifert, 2011). These differing backgrounds combined with differing duties create challenges when motivating staff and recognizing responsibilities in relation to SEM and institutional goals, as well as acknowledging the expertise in, relating to, and collaborating with other units (Schultheis, 2014). Student success and retention efforts are an example of where these differences may be experienced and impact service provision.

Prior research has suggested that student affairs and services staff differ in terms of how they perceive their unit's efforts to support student retention when compared across division organizational structures and institutional types (Seifert et al., 2011; Seifert & Burrow, 2013). The present study extends our understanding by examining how these perceptions may differ by immediate work unit, with a particular examination on differences between Enrollment Management staff

and those who work in other units within a student affairs and services division.

## STUDENT FOCUSED VERSUS INSTITUTION FOCUSED

In a previous study that examined student affairs and services staff members' perspectives of their institutions' organizational structure in promoting or hindering their ability to support student success, Seifert et al. (2011) found that staff depicted their institutions with two forms of imagery. Some described their institutions using spider web-like imagery, where supporting student success was perceived to be a shared responsibility of faculty and staff, where senior leaders were described as encouraging collaboration between units, and where staff understood the mission and vision of the division and how these supported the corresponding mission and vision of the institution. Others described their institutions using silo-like imagery, where staff tended to work in individual units and there was less of a shared commitment toward supporting student success, where the senior leaders managed areas within their portfolio as discrete units, and where staff were less clear regarding the mission and vision of the division and how these supported the broader mission and vision of the institution. This distinction between spider-webbed or open systems and siloed organizational structures is not unknown in SEM literature. Bolyard (2013) describes a siloed approach: "In a decentralized graduate school environment, strategic Enrollment Management plans are often established in silos (if at all) and few resources exist to support individual graduate programs in their quests to execute on their plans" (para. 1). Romano and Connell (2014) cited Helgeson's "web of inclusion" as the alternative to the hierarchical structures that are often effective for task maintenance but rarely result in an open systems environment in which information is shared and decisions are made collectively (Hossler & Kalsbeek, 2013).

Romano and Connell (2014) also describe two organizational models for supporting student success. On one hand, there is a model where the existing structure of the specific unit drives that unit's function. In this case, when an institution attempts to introduce new principles related to SEM, the structure remains intact and SEM committees try to match the existing

structure to SEM goals. On the other hand, a student success model is based on institutional strategy, which drives the structure of the unit. With this approach, students are at the center and there is an emergent web-based model, rather than silos.

Seifert et al. (2011) suggest that these findings represent two possible approaches to organizational structure: student focused and institution focused. Student-focused organizational structures were designed with students' needs at the forefront, whereas institution-focused structures were primarily structured according to what made the most sense for institutions' business practices. An interesting finding of the study was that it was as possible to have a student-focused approach in a more decentralized student affairs and services organizational structure, with functional units (like career services and advising, to name two) duplicated across academic units and reporting to an academic dean, as it was to have an institution-focused approach within a centralized SAS organizational structure reporting to a single senior administrative leader. This suggests the importance of institutional leaders to model student success as everyone's responsibility (Gottheil, 2015; Hossler & Kalsbeek, 2013; Lingrell, 2014; Schultheis, 2014).

#### TRANSACTIONAL VERSUS TRANSFORMATIONAL/SERVICE PROVIDERS VERSUS EDUCATORS

Research has demonstrated that tensions may exist between Enrollment Management and student affairs and services staff, whose work has more transactional compared to transformational outcomes for students. Transactional outcomes are those that are administrative and operational in nature (Seifert et al., 2011) and tend to be assessed in terms of customer satisfaction, professional standards, and efficiency (Keeling, 2008). One example of a transactional outcome is a student retrieving a course add/drop form from the registrar and then submitting it for processing. Transformational outcomes are those in which students learn about themselves and/or others through meaningful engagement (Seifert et al., 2011). For example, a student enrolls in a leadership initiative and learns skills that she will bring forward in her life and career. Schultheis (2015) elaborates on the discussion above by stating that

when it comes to SEM specifically, admission offices are typically seen as responsible for enrolling classes, the transaction of "bringing in the class," but not necessarily engaged in the transformation of educating the prospect to graduate. While there may be tensions with regard to the purview of administration and staff, Schultheis states that "only when strategies become institutionalized does the campus community have a hand in student success; no department that stands alone will contribute the same positive impact upon students as a concerted and deliberate team approach" (p. 2). Student success and retention efforts are the work of everyone a student touches on our campuses.

These discussed tensions may derive unwittingly from the names of our units. Enrollment Management brings with it connotations of effectively and efficiently providing oversight to the institution's enrollment functions. Student affairs and services contain a level of tension that is transformational and transactional even within its phrasing. As Keeling (2008) noted, "student affairs' often implies a developmental approach that is not primarily oriented toward consumer values" where 'student services,' on the other hand, generally suggests exactly that—consumer services provided to students" (p. 15). Postsecondary education institutions are complex, and there is work in Enrollment Management and student affairs and services that needs to operate in a transactional, business-like manner. Services such as "financial aid, building management, food services, and the like require business skills and are typically found in the same division as those who are charged with promoting student co-curricular learning and development" (Davis, 2011, p. 90).

Blimling (2001) described four approaches to student affairs and services: student administration, student services, student development, and student learning. A student administration approach places a strong focus on policies and procedures, leadership, and the distribution of resources. A student services approach emphasizes efficiency and student satisfaction. A student development approach focuses on the psychosocial development of students and out-of-classroom learning opportunities, and a student learning approach emphasizes student affairs and services staff as partners in creating seamless learning environments. A tremendous amount has been written about where

to place Enrollment Management within the organization's structure: student affairs, academic affairs, or a stand-alone unit (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014; Hossler & Kalsbeek, 2013; Snowden, 2016). Tension and misunderstanding can stem from these units' different aims and approaches (Henderson, 2014), yet it is pertinent to remember that these services function within institutions where students and learning are central (Davis, 2011). Leigh (2014) asks a pointed question: How much is customer service like teaching? Asserting staff training is needed so that the transactional never gets in the way of the learning.

Seifert and colleagues (2011) found SAS staff members perceived their peers with transformational positions to have a more student-focused approach to their work, whereas those with transactional positions were perceived to focus more on upholding institutional rules/protocol. Participants commented that at times strict adherence to protocol may not have been what best supported students (Seifert et al., 2011). Turning to differences by institutional type, Seifert and Burrow (2013) found that SAS staff at community colleges compared to universities differed in how they perceived their unit's contributions to institutional retention efforts. In general, SAS divisions in the colleges were more focused on collaborations aimed at providing a high quality of service in support of student success, whereas university SAS divisions were more focused on creating opportunities for out-of-classroom learning alongside the provision of quality services. This difference may be a result of how SAS staff members viewed students—as customers or co-constructors. Community college SAS staff tended to describe students as beneficiaries and/or recipients of services, whereas university SAS staff described students with a service mind-set combined with a perspective that students ought to be engaged as co-constructors of learning environments.

While Seifert and Burrow (2013) identified that perceptions of units' contributions to institutional retention efforts varied by institutional type, one may question whether there are any significant differences in perspectives among participants when compared across work units. Additional research is needed in order to better understand how units that adopt a student administration or student services business model

compare to units that adopt a student development or student learning model in terms staff perceptions of their ability to support student success. Given that Enrollment Management and student affairs and services range in their emphasis on service and developmental goals as well as transformational and transactional outcomes in their day-to-day work, the current study explores how staff members' perceptions of immediate work unit's retention efforts vary by the area in which they are employed.

## Methods

Using a Canadian multi-institutional sample consisting of 7 colleges and 17 universities, this study examines Enrollment Management and SAS staff members' perceptions of their unit's undergraduate student retention efforts. Data collection took place during the winter semesters of 2014 and 2015, and respondents consisted of staff members whose unit either reported to the senior student affairs and services officer or whose work in an academic unit was directly connected to institutional student success efforts. Depending on the institution, e-mail invitations were sent directly by the research team or an institutional liaison to the sample. Response rates varied by institution, with a range of 18% to 75% and an overall average response rate of 45%. This analysis is part of the larger Supporting Student Success research project funded by generous grants from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Ontario Ministry of Research and Innovation, the Association of Registrars of the Universities and Colleges of Canada, and the Connaught New Researcher program at the University of Toronto.

The present analysis examines the degree to which staff members' perceptions of retention efforts differed by area of employment. From a list of 33 work units or functional areas common within Enrollment Management and student affairs and services, respondents indicated their primary unit of employment. These employment units were then categorized into the following: (a) Enrollment Management (included admissions and recruitment [ $n = 149$ ], assessment and evaluation [ $n = 27$ ], communications and media [ $n = 26$ ], financial aid/awards [ $n = 51$ ], financial services/bursary [ $n = 51$ ], and registrarial services [ $n = 154$ ]);

(b) Academic Support (included academic advising, accessibility/disability services, learning support services, library, technology including portal development and maintenance); (c) Health and Wellness (included counseling and psychological services, health services, wellness programs and services); (d) Campus Life (included athletics and recreation, housing and residence life, leadership development programs, orientation/transition and first-year experience programs, service-learning and civic/community engagement, student government/organization advising, student conduct/judicial affairs, town/gown relations); (e) Diverse Communities (included first-generation student services, aboriginal student services, equity program, international student services, graduate student services, religious and spiritual services); (f) Professional Development (included, for example, career services, co-op, internship or other work-integrated learning); (g) Senior Student Affairs and Services Office; and (h) Other. The categorization of the Enrollment Management area was informed by the SEM functions outlined by Hossler and Bontrager (2014); the other categorizations were informed by Seifert et al. (2014). The distribution of the sample by each category is provided in Table 1.

Staff members' perceptions of their employment unit's retention efforts were measured through five composite scales. The composite scales are described in Table 2. Each composite is the average of three or more survey items in which respondents indicated the degree to which they strongly agree (scored 5) to strongly disagree (scored 1) with a declarative statement. Respondents who indicated the statement was "not their work unit's role" or they "didn't know" did not yield a score for the composite measure. The survey items were developed from previous phases of the Supporting Student Success project (Seifert et al., 2011) as well as adapted from items used in the Parsing the First Year of College project undertaken by Patrick Terenzini and Robert Reason. Survey items comprising each composite are presented in the appendix.

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine the extent to which staff members' perceptions of retention efforts differed by their employment unit. A Bonferroni adjustment accounted for family-wise error in the post hoc tests (Field, Miles, & Field,

**Table 1. Sample Distribution by Employment Unit Categorization**

<b>Categorized Employment Units</b>	<b>Number of Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage of Sample</b>
Enrollment Management	458	26.13
Academic Support	415	23.67
Health and Wellness	131	7.47
Campus Life	291	16.60
Diverse Communities	147	8.39
Professional Development	178	10.15
Senior Student Affairs and Services Office	105	5.99
Other	28	1.60
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,753</b>	<b>100.00</b>

2013) with a significance level of  $p < .05$ . In an effort to maximize the data from this sample of Canadian Enrollment Management and student affairs and services staff, all respondents who generated a composite score were included in the analyses.

## Results

Returning to the metaphor of Enrollment Management and student affairs staff members as "crew" for individual student' boats as well as post-secondary institution's larger ships directed to the retention shore, several key differences between categorized work units were found. Mean score differences for the composite measures by employment units are presented in Table 3. Despite calls for Enrollment Management staff to have a holistic view of student enrollment from matriculation to graduation (Bontrager & Hossler, 2014; Gottheil, 2015; Henderson, 2014), staff members in other student affairs and services' units tended to have more positive perceptions of their employment unit's retention efforts than staff members in Enrollment Management. Specifically, staff members in Campus Life had significantly more positive perceptions of their unit's foundation for student success as well as for the unit's planned approach for student success. Staff in Academic Support and

**Table 2. Description of Composite Measures**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>
Perceptions of unit's foundation for student success	Measures respondents' perceptions of their unit's ability to convey to students that they can succeed at the institution, that they belong at the institution, as well as the unit's ability to facilitate students' involvement in academic and co-curricular activities	.88
Perceptions of unit's planned approach for student success	Measures respondents' perceptions of their unit's goals and objectives to helping students succeed	.89
Unit leadership in promoting and supporting student success	Measures respondents' perceptions of their unit's leadership and resources in promoting and supporting student retention objectives	.73
Student affairs and services administrators' encouragement to partner	Measures respondents' perception of the degree to which they have been encouraged by others at the institution to partner with cross-campus units to support student success.	.82
Cross-division referral, communication, and collaboration	Measures frequency and respondents' perceptions of cross-campus referral, communication, and collaboration to support student success.	.68

Professional Development also more positively perceived their unit's planned approach for student success and felt more encouraged to partner with units across campus to support student success than their colleagues in Enrollment Management. Similarly, staff working in units that support Diverse Communities indicated more encouragement to partner across campus as well as having more positive perceptions of their unit's foundation for student success than those in Enrollment Management. Finally, Academic Support staff indicated more positive perceptions of cross-division referral, communication, and collaboration than their colleagues in Enrollment Management.

There were a few other differences in perceptions by the units in which staff were employed. Staff in Campus Life, Diverse Communities, and the Senior Student Affairs and Services Office had more positive perceptions of unit leadership promoting and supporting student success than their colleagues in Academic Support. However, Academic Support staff had more positive perceptions of cross-division referral, communication, and collaboration than their peers in Campus Life.

### Discussion and Implications

The differences found between Enrollment Management and student affairs and services staff members' perceptions of their units' contribution to institutional retention efforts raised an important

question: If the goal is for the crew to paddle in sync, what would be the desired perception of staff members' with respect to unit's efforts to support student success? Taking into account the similarities and differences in the nature of day-to-day work across employment units, the balance of communication and referral to academic faculties and other stakeholder groups may differ dramatically between Enrollment Management and student affairs and services areas. Those working in some areas (such as Diverse Communities and Professional Development) may be strongly encouraged to create programmatic partnerships with a focus on transformational outcomes, whereas those working in Enrollment Management may be encouraged to focus on realizing transactional outcomes through the highest-quality and most timely communication with partners so that accurate information is conveyed to students. Irrespective of what one may deem as the optimal perception staff members hold with respect to the employment unit's retention efforts, our findings showed some marked differences.

Enrollment Management staff reported less positive perceptions of cross-divisional referral, communication, and collaboration, as well as encouragement to partner, than staff in other areas. These findings may reflect different access to opportunities for such engagement between Enrollment Management and student affairs and services areas. For example, staff in Enrollment Management may describe their roles as

**Table 3 Mean Differences in Composite Measures by Employment Units**

	<b>Enrollment Management</b>	<b>Academic Support</b>	<b>Health &amp; Wellness</b>	<b>Campus Life</b>	<b>Diverse Communities</b>	<b>Professional Development</b>	<b>Senior Student Affairs and Services Office</b>	<b>Other</b>
Perceptions of unit's foundation for student success (F(7, 1236)=4.49; p<.0001)	4.03 (.85) n=311	4.13 (.83) n=297	4.20 (.71) n=95	4.31 (.78) n=222	4.39 (.68) n=107	4.29 (.72) n=126	4.33 (.66) n=69	3.90 (.75) n=17
Perceptions of unit's planned approach for student success (F(7, 1265)=4.48; p<.0001)	3.85 (.80) n=315	4.07 (.90) n=308	4.04 (.88) n=99	4.12 (.79) n=225	4.23 (.80) n=112	4.18 (.75) n=125	4.09 (.72) n=71	3.76 (.96) n=18
Unit leadership in promoting and supporting student success (F(7, 1261)=3.96; p<.001)	3.39 (.81) n=313	3.23 (.97) n=306	3.34 (.91) n=97	3.54 (.87) n=227	3.55 (.94) n=112	3.37 (.84) n=125	3.66 (.86) n=71	3.20 (.76) n=18
Student affairs and services administrators' encouragement to partner (F(7, 1277)=4.73; p<.0001)	3.68 (.55) n=321	3.82 (.58) n=309	3.83 (.56) n=97	3.80 (.51) n=227	3.93 (.54) n=115	3.89 (.59) n=126	3.90 (.61) n=72	3.49 (.47) n=18
Cross-division referral, communication, and collaboration (F(7, 1443)=5.90; p<.0001)	3.87 (.62) n=370	4.12 (.65) n=342	4.02 (.65) n=108	3.91 (.65) n=259	4.02 (.62) n=127	4.06 (.54) n=143	4.03 (.67) n=80	3.58 (.84) n=22

primarily front facing (like meeting with students at college fairs), and/or fairly routinized and highly regulated (like processing financial aid applications and disbursing awards) in comparison to staff working in Campus Life, Diverse Communities, and Professional Development, who may describe their roles in terms of programmatic development and intervention. Using the example of Enrollment Management, some staff might not be able or particularly encouraged to leave their areas for the time necessary to participate in department-wide or divisional meetings and events where transformational and transactional goals and issues are brought forward and discussed. With these distinctions in the nature of the work, there is an opportunity for supervisors to help staff name and claim their unit's contribution to realizing department and institution-wide goals. Schultheis (2014) comments on the importance of directors' use of a distributed leadership style such that staff members recognize their agency and how their work supports the collective institutional effort. In employment areas where staff members' ability to participate in department planning and collaboration is perceived to be limited, supervisors' ability to find alternative ways to engage staff so that they feel both informed and involved in reaching department goals represents an important point for further reflection.

Lingrell (2014) asserts a powerful paradox in developing one's staff. Enrollment leaders must first develop themselves so that they are able to "See the future; Engage and develop others; Reinvent continuously, Value results and relationships; and Embody the values" (Blancard & Miller, 2009 as cited in Lingrell, 2014, p. 98). As Henderson (2014) so eloquently stated about leadership and realizing the institution's vision, "Visionaries must understand that their vision will provide a map, even a structure, but its reality will be defined by others who do the heavy lifting of implementation" (para. 9).

On a related note, staff members differed in their perceptions that their unit had a strong foundation and a planned approach for student success. Again, Enrollment Management staff, some whose work provides either front-facing service to students and/or follows routinized and regulated patterns, appear less positive in their perception that their unit pro-

motes students' sense of belonging, engagement, and other success-related outcomes. This may be a result of job descriptions in which promoting students' sense of belonging, engagement, and overall success are not articulated. One way of mitigating this perception might be revising language when developing job descriptions and responsibilities. Romano and Connell (2014) recognized the importance of job descriptions and job titles when they sought to improve SEM strategy at their institution and realized that "organizational charts and job titles are outward expressions of institutional priorities and strategies" (para. 12). As the organizational structure of a Center for Academic Advisement and First-Year Experience was restructured at their institution, renaming the "office and job title signaled to the campus and the current staff a change in mission and focus for the unit" (Romano & Connell, 2014, para. 13). Because those working in this department were involved in this process, there was a new understanding of the role that this department played in the institutional priorities concerning SEM. This, too, can apply to specific job descriptions of those working in different units, thereby reinforcing the role that each position plays in the context of institutional SEM priorities.

Offering complementary professional development opportunities may also be an effective way to mitigate differing perceptions concerning their unit's foundation and a planned approach for student success. Leigh (2014) states: "Frontline staff are running on instinct when SEM principles could help them partner as Enrollment Management professionals on institutional goals of student success" (para. 3). For this reason, institutions should consider how they are informing and training employees to understand the institutional SEM priorities and what they can do in their position to support these goals. Incorporating discussion of SEM into staff training and developing a certification process for staff would therefore be beneficial for both the employees and the institution (Leigh, 2014).

This is all to say that it is difficult for the crew of any boat to paddle in sync with others if the destination is not known. By reviewing job descriptions and titles as well as considering professional development opportunities, institutions can reconsider how staff members understand SEM and are encouraged to promote stu-

dent success, and in turn, a whole-campus approach to working toward SEM priorities can be actualized. The messages that the institution wants to send to students needs to be clearly understood by staff so that they can promote this message within the context of their roles. Leigh (2014) emphasizes the importance of the institutional branding being widely disseminated: “Filtering down from the leadership through the managers to the frontline staff that everything they do with students in every office is somehow connected to enrollment, to student learning, and therefore, to student success” (para. 1).

Including students’ stories as part of department narratives is also likely to positively influence staff members’ perceived opportunities to support student success. Gottheil (2015) and Leigh (2014) note the importance of each stakeholder, including students, in the role of SEM. “It is the development of those relationships and connections—between academic and administrative units, between students and administrators, between enrollment and service units—that leads to successfully establishing and achieving enrollment goals” (Gottheil, 2015, para. 4).

## In Closing

When observing how the crew paddles the institutional boat toward the destination of increased student retention and completion, the nature of staff members’ day-to-day work must be considered. The balance of communication and referrals may be a function of what is valued and possible across Enrollment Management and SAS areas. For example, partnerships and collaboration are concepts that may have different definitions and measurements from one area to the next. In addition, the nature and demands of one’s work may impact an individual’s ability to leave their area for sufficient periods of time to participate in department and community meetings/events. It may also impact staff members’ perceived degree of opportunity to support student success. Thus, it is crucial for leaders and supervisors at all levels to find ways of engaging staff so that they feel informed and active on campus. The resolution of tensions between staff whose work is more aligned with transformational outcomes and those whose work aligns most closely with transactional outcomes likely lies in developing a both/and approach,

where staff recognize their roles as educators *and* service providers (Keeling, 2008; Seifert et al., 2011).

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## Appendix. Survey Items Included in Composites

Composite Name	Declarative Statement and Scale	Constituent Items
Perceptions of unit's foundation for student success	Constituent items asked respondents to indicate level of agreement with the following statements based on the question stem, "Overall, I feel my immediate work unit does a good job of..." Response options varied from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conveying to students the sense that if they make the effort, they can succeed here.</li> <li>• Conveying to students the sense that they "belong" here.</li> <li>• Facilitating students' involvement in the institution's academic activities.</li> <li>• Facilitating students' involvement in the institution's nonacademic activities.</li> </ul>
Perceptions of unit's planned approach for student success	Reflecting on one's immediate work unit, constituent items asked respondents to indicate level of agreement with the following statements. Response options varied from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• My unit has a comprehensive approach to helping undergraduate students succeed.</li> <li>• My unit has a coordinated approach to helping undergraduate students succeed.</li> <li>• Undergraduate student success is a priority for my unit.</li> <li>• My unit has stated goals and objectives for undergraduate student retention.</li> <li>• My unit actively pursues stated goals and objectives related to undergraduate student retention.</li> </ul>
Unit leadership in promoting and supporting student success	Reflecting on one's immediate work unit, constituent items asked respondents to indicate level of agreement with the following statements. Response options varied from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unit administrators (such as program coordinators and departmental chairs for faculty and VP and directors for staff) provide clear leadership in promoting undergraduate students' success.</li> <li>• Messages about the unit's undergraduate student retention efforts influence how I approach my day-to-day work.</li> <li>• I feel that my unit receives the resources needed to realize its undergraduate student retention objectives.</li> </ul>
Student affairs and services administrators' encouragement to partner	Constituent items asked respondents to identify the extent to which they have been encouraged to partner with areas across the institution by the following people. Response options varied from "strongly discouraged" to "strongly encouraged."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students through senior administrative leaders</li> <li>• Students</li> <li>• Students affairs and services staff (colleagues)</li> <li>• Academic program, department or faculty staff</li> <li>• Academic program coordinator or directors</li> <li>• Faculty members</li> <li>• Direct supervisor</li> </ul>
Cross-division referral, communication, and collaboration	Constituent items asked respondents to indicate level of agreement with the following statements. Response options varied from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students to speak to their faculty members.</li> <li>• I regularly refer a student to other administrative staff with relevant expertise to ensure the student's success.</li> <li>• I work closely with faculty to support undergraduate students' success.</li> <li>• I work closely with student affairs and services staff in ways that promote students' success.</li> <li>• I feel my colleagues communicate and work together in an organized way to support undergraduate students' success.</li> <li>• Areas that deal with undergraduate student issues communicate and work together in an organized way to support students' success.</li> </ul>

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CAMPUS VISITATIONS TO COLLEGE CHOICE AND STRATEGIC ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

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SCOTT SCORE

The reasons a student may choose a particular institution when seeking a postsecondary education are many. However, campus visitation—more specifically, the campus tour—is frequently cited as the most important aspect of the college recruitment process. Correspondingly, in a hypercompetitive and fiscally afflicted higher education market, admissions officers are under immense pressure to attract new students and increase financial yield. As a result, marketers of higher education admissions have turned their attention to prioritizing the pivotal nature of a campus visit, and the overwhelming effect it has on both prospective students and higher education administrators. This article explores influences that affect a student's college choice and explains why campus visitation is the most important part of the recruitment process. Additionally, it reviews approaches and implications pertaining to campus visits and offers example-based suggestions on how enrollment managers can make visitations to their institutions fortuitous.

## Introduction

One of the biggest challenges institutions of higher education face is their ability to recruit new students, thereby increasing enrollment numbers accordingly. This task is inherently both daunting and complex, yet fundamentally necessary. With consistently changing technological and economic climates—and

the processes of recruitment and enrollment being cyclical—administrators must perpetually devote adequate resources (i.e., time and money) to the examination and application of strategies requisite for successful enrollment management. Marketing and admissions for higher education is big business, and in today's competitive market fraught with deteriorating

endowments and acute budget cutting, the stakes are higher than ever for institutions to not only reach out to the greatest number of students possible but also to “seal the deal” in a proficient and cost-effective manner. From initial contact through registering for classes, every step counts. As a result, many institutions are seeing the need to reorient their respective enrollment strategies and admissions practices in attempts to stay viable or remain a pacesetter among peers. For most, rejuvenation begins locally with the courting of high school seniors and revolves around one central component of the recruitment process: the campus visit—as campus visitation is often the most influential reason for specified college choice.

## Influences on College Choice in a Digital Age

Effectively communicating to prospective students the benefits of enrolling at a specific institution is perhaps the greatest charge of a higher education marketer (Johnston, 2010). Gone are the days of mailings, brochures, college fairs, and periodical advertising. As we live in a “digital age” where information is easily disseminated and obtained with just the click of a mouse or a tap on a phone, “high-tech” tools such as interactive multimedia and virtual realities, web-based forums, and social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.) are changing how people communicate and receive information. For example, in a 2010 study prepared by the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (UMASSD), researchers found that 100% of university and college admissions offices were utilizing at least one form of social media in the recruitment process (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). As such, marketers of higher education are not only altering their communication efforts with potential students; they are also targeting the precise factors that most heavily influence a prospective student’s decision on college choice. These influences can—and do—cover a broad spectrum, ranging from that of printed materials to social media platforms, to websites, to interpersonal communications with friends and family, to interactions with current and former students, to campus visits, and even cold-calls and text messages from admissions personnel (Hesel, 2004; Johnston, 2010; Noel-Levitz, 2017; Smith, 2005).

For many students, college choice is a multifarious venture filled with a dose of emotions, rational and irrational thoughts, and conjecture from family members, friends, and other outside voices (counselors, teachers, web sources, etc.) (Hoover, 2010; Johnston, 2010; Smith, 2005). Conjointly, prospective students are regularly inundated with a bevy of facts, figures, anecdotes, opinions, and other assorted forms of stimuli from which they base their decisions—decisions that often come with lifelong consequences and a hefty price tag (Hoover, 2010). Therefore, students, parents, and admissions officers alike must carefully evaluate each element of the decision process, prioritizing importance over preference.

Despite the prominent roles social media and the internet play in everyday life, people still conduct themselves in a physical world (Fleming & Grace, 2015). And while many of the previously mentioned factors do influence the decision process, “high-touch” experiences such as the campus visit tend to bear more weight than their “high-tech” counterparts. Accordingly, the campus visit—be it a tour, an open house, a fly-in, an overnight stay, or some other student-oriented event—is overwhelmingly the single most influential source of information for students in their decision on college choice (Brown, 2010; Hesel, 2004; Okerson, 2016). Chimes and Gordon (2008) avow:

Web sites, view books, conversations with alumni, guidebooks and admission reps all provide important clues about a school, but a campus visit is the best way to see if a school is right for you (p. 27).

## Why the Campus Visit Is Crucial

Campus visitations are equally important to students—and their families—as they are to enrollment managers. From a student perspective, the campus visit provides a highly personalized and “real” way to make a satisfactory college decision based on psychosocial factors and serves a decisive test for how students perceive they will fit in once enrolled (Nora, 2004; Okerson, 2016). In other words, the visit is a brief trial run at what life might look like at that institution. Consequently, the campus visit serves as a powerful stratagem in the decision-making process. In a study performed by Okerson (2016), participants indicated that campus visitations

were “a glimpse into their potential future,” and interactions met while visiting made the prospect more “real” (p. 48). Similarly, Fleming and Grace (2015) performed a study in Australia wherein students that spent a day visiting the University of Canberra (UC) stated they could envision themselves as university students having experienced what their lives might be like if enrolled there.

Comparable studies further support a correlative relationship between campus visitation and enrollment. For instance, a three-year longitudinal study performed at Midwestern State University (MSU)—with a sample of 23,187 students—concluded that students who visit campus are twice as likely to matriculate as students who do not (Brown, 2010). Likewise, California State University Northridge (CSUN) hosted an open house event for prospective students wherein they incorporated a participant-satisfaction survey to assess the effectiveness of their event in relation to acceptance rates at CSUN. More than 80% of the survey respondents confirmed that the open house event contributed to their desire to attend CSUN (Fischbach, 2006). Further still, a more recent study administered by Noel-Levitz (2017) found campus visitations (e.g., open house events, overnight stays, and weekend visits) to be at least 90% effective when used as a marketing and recruitment practice. Finally, a survey conducted by StudentPoll and the Art & Science Group endorses the value of a campus visit, as 65% of polled students indicated that over all other influential factors, the campus visit was most important (Hesel, 2004). From the poll’s findings Hesel (2004) propounds:

What we learned is that nearly all students—of every academic ability and income level—are visiting college campuses (and most reported visiting their first and second-choice schools). The findings point out that the hospitable nature of the community and the friendliness of the people students encountered during these visits had a significant positive impact on their interest in a school. Moreover, seeing facilities of interest to them, talking to professors, and attending classes made students more interested in the institution that ultimately became their first-choice school. (para. 4)

From an administrative perspective, research suggests that yield often increases markedly as students who

visit campuses are more likely to enroll. For example, in 2013, after hosting 1,300 accepted students to an overnight campus experience event, Dartmouth University saw yield for the class of 2018 rise to 52%—making them the only Ivy League institution to see an increase that year (Baskin, 2015). Similarly, in a more comprehensive study conducted in 2014, Ramapo College (New Jersey) hosted an array of campus visitation events (campus tours, open houses, admitted student days, and dean’s receptions) for prospective students—and the results were staggering. After taking part in campus tours, 87% of potential students said they were “highly or very interested” in enrolling at Ramapo (Hope, 2015, p. 4). Likewise, 88% of students who attended one of the several open houses indicated that they planned to apply. Further still, 74% of students who attended an “admitted student day” followed through with enrollment. Finally, 78% of students who attended a dean’s reception enrolled at Ramapo. Hope (2015) contends, “Some dean’s receptions saw a yield as high as 90.5 percent” (p. 5). Overall, one yield visit at Ramapo College in 2014 equaled a 66% yield return.

These outcomes and statistical conclusions are of great import to enrollment managers, as both purvey ample, credible evidence that above all else campus visitations truly are “make or break” events for those deciding on college choice. Recognizing this, many administrators are beginning to reconsider and retool their admissions processes. More specifically, administrators are keying in on one particular aspect of the admissions process that is part-and-parcel with the campus visit: the campus tour.

## The Campus Tour: What Works and What Does Not

As formerly intimated, a campus visit is essentially a sales and marketing device for prospective students and serves as a powerful stratagem influencing the student’s decision-making process. The campus tour—also referred to as “the golden walk” or “the golden mile”—has long been synonymous with campus visitations, often serving as the quintessential means of promotion for most institutions. The campus tour is a ritual unto itself, providing prospective students the opportunity to engage with the campus environment at

large. According to Kuh (2009), the campus environment encompasses everything physical on campus—buildings, equipment, furniture, signage, people, and landscape—which serves as a set of symbols larger than the individual items themselves (Okerson, 2016). Therefore, as students partake in a campus tour, they are intrinsically connecting openly with the ecology, climate, and culture of the institution. Resultantly, students are able to both evaluate and react to campus aesthetics and the community within. In this regard, an individual's 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). Simply put, “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, p. 37). This sentiment is fatefully important for admissions officers, as the campus tour does not simply start and finish on campus. Rather, the tour actually begins and ends at home, with every facet of the recruitment process being critical to the outcome.

## SCHEDULING

In today's technologically savvy world, one would expect that most prospective students—and their parents—have probably done a great deal of research and formulated opinions long before they step foot on a college campus (Hoover, 2010). Therefore, every aspect of the campus visit is crucial to not only prospective students but also the institutional enrollment managers charged with bringing these students onboard. For many, the campus tour—as well as the impression-building process—commences at home, typically with scheduling of the big day. Institutions with user-friendly websites, straightforward registration, and flexible visitation schedules are liable to appear well organized, thus forming a positive impression in the minds of the visiting student and their parents. Moreover, an institution that takes time to send follow-up messages—perhaps including information such as scheduling confirmations, maps, directions, parking details, links to local attractions, and clear contact information—will likely solidify their appearance as caring and professional (Mass, 2016). Conversely, institutions that make the

process difficult, and do not offer any assistance, risk coming across as unorganized and indifferent, thus forming a negative impression—perhaps even turning the student off from visiting at all (Mass, 2016).

## COMING TO CAMPUS

The pretour impression-building process resumes as students and parents must successfully navigate their way to the tour meeting place. Much like the tour scheduling procedure, institutions that furnish guests with information about their destinations are likely to impress, thus leaving their guests with favorable opinions of the institution. For example, way-finding systems designed strictly for the initial campus visit—such as clear signage and/or maps related to parking and campus buildings, courteous and helpful security guards, and current students enlisted to help personally guide visitors to their destinations—provide effective ways to help alleviate stress and curb anxieties (Hoover, 2009; Mass, 2016). Likewise, they also aid in creating an efficient, fluid, and professional experience. In contrast, institutions with ineffective or nonexistent way-finding systems only compound things by making stressful situations even more so (Mass, 2016).

## CHECK-IN AND PRESENTATION

Once on campus, students and parents inevitably wind up gathering in a designated location that serves as a “holding room” or “staging area” designed to welcome them to campus. This welcoming area holds significant leverage in the visitation process, as it is presumably the first interior space the guests will see (Mass, 2016). For that reason, it is vital that institutions strive to make the welcoming area as appealing and inviting as possible. For instance, the waiting area should contain ample seating and be clean and comfortable, situated near restrooms, and well stocked with a healthy variety of literature about the institution (Mass, 2016). Offering complimentary snacks and beverages, as well as opportunities for invitees to engage with current students and/or others on the tour, will also easily impress (Hoover, 2010; Mass, 2016). Additionally, “high-touch meets high-tech” interactive components such as touch-screen computers and video presentations offer effectual ways for institutions to both educate visitors and market themselves so (Head, Dunagan, & Hughes,

2010; Mass, 2016). The aim is to present a space that represents the institution, evokes a fun and collegiate feel, and predisposes guests to think optimistically and favorably about the institution and the upcoming tour (Head et al., 2010; Mass, 2016).

Before the excursion around campus, most institutions typically host a formal presentation or “information session” presided over by someone from the admissions staff (Chimes & Gordon, p. 27; Mass, 2016). More often than not, these presentations characteristically contain some form of an itemized “facts and figures” lecture, a throng of PowerPoint slides, and a Q&A session (Chimes & Gordon, 2008; Hoover, 2010; Mass, 2016). The intention is to tell guests what makes that particular institution “unparalleled and extraordinary.” However, there is seldom a discernible unique or “special” distinction that sets one institution apart from another as these presentations are often rote and routine in both subject and delivery.

As discussed previously, today’s consumers are knowledgeable, “tech-savvy,” smart shoppers who have likely done their research. Therefore, there is no need to rehash information one may already know and/or can acquire by browsing the institution’s website. By keeping presentations short, concise, and casual, institutions will have an improved chance of breaking through the muddle—or better, circumventing it all together.

### THE GOLDEN WALK (BUILDINGS, PERSONAL INTERACTIONS, AND TOUR GUIDES)

The physical walk around campus is undoubtedly the highlight of the campus visit. It is also the most influential part of the process, as what unfolds on the walk is likely to serve as the driving force in a student’s final decision. As previously discussed, the walk itself provides students and parents the opportunity to engage with the overall campus environment—the ecology, climate, and culture of the institution. This is meaningful, as research suggests that campus aesthetics, personal interactions, and a strong sense of community often play the leading role in determining a student’s connection to a particular institution (Barrett, 2014; Hesel, 2004; Noel-Levitz, 2016; Okerson, 2016; Schreiner, 2009; Spoon, 2006).

According to a survey conducted by StudentPoll and the Art & Science Group, 90% of polled students reported that seeing facilities of interest to them was the most important aspect of the campus visit (Hesel, 2004). The focal point of this finding, mind you, is the phrasing “of interest to them.” On campus tours, institutions typically like to boast their “latest, greatest, and most notable” facilities and amenities. These tend to include movie theaters, high-tech resource rooms, fitness centers, athletic venues, cafeterias, and even parking structures. However, Mass (2016) asserts, “Although impressive on the tour and clearly institutional points of pride, these structures are unlikely to be the tipping point that convinces a student to attend one school over another” (p. 56). Selingo (as cited in Stockwell, 2014) concurs, declaring:

On campus tours, colleges emphasize the bells and whistles. ... Don’t let them distract you. Smart students should focus their attention on the quality of teaching, the portability of their credits, and the value a degree or other credential will provide them in the job market. (para. 11)

In light of this, some experts recommend that institutions demonstrate hesitation when emphasizing their facilities, even if it means skipping common locales like the library (Hoover, 2010). While not as extreme, Mass (2016) offers a more amenable solution suggesting that institutions:

Balance the desire to show off new construction and student amenities with an equal focus on those things that most parents are interested in: academic venues, sustainability efforts, and sound financial management as demonstrated through renovated/repurposed structures. (p. 57)

Perhaps the most indispensable part of the campus tour is the tour guide. According to a survey conducted by StudentPoll and the Art & Science Group, 76% of polled students indicated that having a formal tour conducted by a student guide made an impact on their final decision (Hesel, 2004). In many respects, student tour guides are the most important people in the admissions process, as they are predominantly in the driver’s seat for the most momentous part of the campus visit

(Hoover, 2009). What they say, what they do, how they carry themselves, and how they engage with the tour group largely determines whether prospective students and their parents leave campus with favorable or unfavorable memories. The tour guide's main objective is to "be a master storyteller," helping prospective students and their parents to "feel the spirit" of the institution (Head et al., 2010, p. 53; Hoover, 2009, 2010). In this regard, successful tour guides are conversant, friendly, genuine, and able to easily relate to both students and parents alike (Hoover, 2010, Mass, 2016). Inversely, ineffective tour guides may gloss over questions asked, speak inappropriately, and be prone to highlight institutional weaknesses (Chimes & Gordon, 2008; Mass, 2016). On this detail, *how* the tour guide speaks is often more important than *what* they are speaking about (Okerson, 2016). Stressing the significance of tour guides to a campus visit, Mass (2016) proclaims:

For visitors, they become the face of your institution, for better or worse. It cannot be emphasized enough: the tour guide can, himself or herself alone, lead a student to decide that your institution is not an option. (p. 55)

### THE FOLLOW-UP

As mentioned before, the campus tour does not just simply take place at the physical campus. Rather, it begins and ends at home—where families research, discuss, and make decisions together. Institutions that extend communication efforts beyond the campus visit often stand out from their competitors. For example, an institution in search of feedback about the tour experience that takes time to follow up with tour participants is liable to be more favorably considered over those who cease all communication once the student leaves campus (Mass, 2016). More so, institutions that include a personal message—perhaps a handwritten note, or an anecdote specific to the day, tour, or student—leave a more lasting impression than those that do not (Mass, 2016).

### SUMMARY

The inference is that every detail in accordance to a campus visit matters. Every aspect of the campus tour plays an essential role in how students make their

final decision, and in what institution they eventually choose. As formerly suggested, personal interactions before, during, and after the campus visit have a profound impact on prospective students. Interactions before the visit create an initial idea of the campus; interactions during the visit stir ideas and perceptions of the campus community; and interactions after the visit affect the lasting impression of the visit on a whole (Okerson, 2016). Equally, even minutiae such as the day's weather, the campus location, and the attitudes of other tour participants are likely to influence one's impressions and overall opinions of an institution (Mass, 2016; Okerson, 2016).

While some details, such as the weather, are out of an institution's control, there is still much they can do to mitigate the negative effects these details may present. Needless to say, enrollment managers face a tough assignment when addressing how to satiate otherwise deal-breaking criteria. To accomplish this, many institutions are now looking to outside sources for assistance with recruitment efforts.

## Current Methodologies for Improvement

As stated earlier, both higher education marketing and student recruitment are vital to institutional sustainability—and therefore are big business. To such an extent, many institutions—such as Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas—heavily invest considerable portions of their annual budgets toward recruitment endeavors. In 2009, Hendrix College expended approximately \$1.5 million—roughly 4% of its annual operating budget—on marketing and recruitment alone (Steinberg, 2009). With much at stake, many institutions are seeking aid and advice from experts who specialize in helping organizations identify ways to increase yield and give customers a positive experience.

To stay ahead of the curve—and ahead of competition—any college or university can hire consultants to help overhaul their admissions process and redesign their campus tours. These firms can "audit" the current campus tour and then provide feedback on changes and improvements necessary for improved marketability (Hoover, 2009, 2010; Miller, 2012; Steinberg, 2009). The idea is to produce campus tours that are

positive and memorable, as institutions seek to deliver a more organic, spontaneous, and engaging experience for their guests (Steinberg, 2009).

For as long as institutions of higher learning have existed, they have always billed themselves as exciting venues “anchored in education, entertainment, aesthetic and escape”—as places with everything for everyone (Hoover, 2009, 2010, p. 38). Unfortunately, though, for most institutions, this is not the case. All too often campus tours are boring, formulaic, and predictable. Tour guides follow the same paths and spout the same historical and statistical jargon at every turn. Worst of all, they are deceiving. According to Head et al. (2010), “Authenticity is what consumers demand . . . institutions are too obsessed either with what they want to be or with being like an admired institution up the road or across the state” (p. 52). As such, consultants recommend that institutions clearly express to their visitors what *they* are—and what they are not (Hoover, 2009). The best way to achieve this is with tour guides.

As remarked earlier, tour guides are essentially ambassadors for the institution, and their engagement with tour groups is more often than not the most pivotal part of the process (Hoover, 2009). For this reason, consultants encourage tour guides to stray from facts, figures, and data. Rather, guides should lean more toward personal, “authentic” stories. Personal stories are more identifiable to prospective students, as guests are not likely to remember facts and/or figures—particularly when pertaining to physical structures (i.e., buildings). What people will remember, though, is an interesting anecdote or tidbit about someone else’s personal experiences. Prospective students are looking for people just like them, and they want to know that any institution would be lucky to have them (Hoover, 2009; Okerson, 2016).

In order to impress in an age where competition is plenty and people demand instant results and gratification, it is imperative to stand out from the crowd. Accordingly, many institutions are taking a cue from Disney and are using their tours to sell memories (Hoover, 2009, 2010). Tours today have become events. Guests expect both a “wow factor” and something tangible to ponder. Events must engage guests from beginning to end, and all members of the campus community should present a “Disneyland mentality”

for a truly efficacious tour (Hope, 2015, p. 5). Many institutions are capitalizing on this by creating “signature moments” or “takeaways” as a part of the tour (Hoover, 2010, p. 39). For instance, at the University of Louisville, guests should have their cameras ready, as they may spot one of the rare white squirrels that live on campus. Students and parents who snap photographs of the squirrels get a free T-shirt that says, “I spotted the white squirrel” (Hoover, 2010, p. 39). The notion behind takeaways such as this resembles that of personal storytelling. They sell memories and allow students to feel comfortable with the institution (Hoover, 2010).

According to Okerson (2016), the most influential part of the campus visit occurs on an “individualized level” (p. 158). Therefore, forged emotional connections to an institution become exceedingly important. For example, at Hendrix College, the emotional connection begins when guests pull into the parking lot and discover a space with a sign that says, “Reserved for [student’s name].” The connection continues as visitors receive a personalized program along with a backpack and notebook as they head off to attend a class of their choice and eat in the school’s dining hall. Students may also consult with an admissions counselor and a faculty member, where they can ask pertinent questions and get to know their potential professors. Finally, if students head to the mailroom before leaving campus, they will find a package waiting for them, the contents of which is a tie-dyed T-shirt cleverly bearing the slogan “Are You Experienced?” (Hoover, 2010, p. 40). Due to this experience—and despite all the fanfare embedded in the tour—one student who ultimately wound up enrolling at Hendrix College acknowledged the openness and honesty of his campus visit, stating:

Hendrix never lied to me—they said this is who we are and we aren’t for everyone. At a lot of other schools, it felt like everyone was pushing the school on you, like cheerleaders. I felt like they were the ones deceiving me. (Hoover, 2010, p. 40)

## Conclusion

As institutions of higher education annually face the challenge of maintaining and increasing their enrollment rates, research shows that beyond all other

means of attraction for prospective students nothing is more persuasive than a campus visit. Prospective students and their families bring certain expectations to their campus visits (Head et al., 2010). As such, enrollment managers, admissions counselors, and administrators alike must make every effort to impress when recruiting a new crop of fresh faces to their institutions. At a minimum, they should furnish students with a positive and lasting first impression by making them feel welcomed, accepted, and safe when on campus (Nora, 2004).

While it is difficult to control all the circumstances one may encounter when visiting a college campus, admissions officers can at least take steps toward ensuring that campus visits provide the information, insights, and experiences necessary to engage visiting students and parents, while compellingly communicating the true character and distinctions of their respective institutions (Hesel, 2004). However, as economic concerns and technological advances continue to evolve, the higher education landscape more rapidly and dramatically transforms. With that in mind, one cannot help but wonder what comes next, as current recruitment methodologies are likely to become antiquated. A new future trend in higher education marketing is surely forthcoming, as even “the happiest place on earth”—Disney—regularly reinvents itself to remain both prescient and tenable.

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# STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN THE SECOND YEAR: ADVANCING STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS BEYOND THE FIRST YEAR OF COLLEGE

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ALTHEA J. STERLING

Institutions typically invest heavily in the first-year experience to promote persistence, yet colleges are also experiencing a pattern of attrition in the second year. The second year is viewed as a period in which students encounter increasing academic, developmental, and social demands, yet the institution tends to provide less support relative to the first year. Using the interpretative phenomenological approach, this article explores sophomores' perception and understanding of their experience and the intentional approaches institutions can adopt in promoting their success. Semistructured interviews were conducted to analyze students' experiences in the second year. The findings suggest that sophomores are in the process of establishing their identity, re-evaluating their purpose and collegiate experience; consequently the need for a different kind of support is apparent. Second-year students are experiencing an internal transition and are still in need of year-specific support to successfully meet the demands of progressing through college.

## Introduction

Colleges and universities have operated under the premise that the impact of the first-year programs would continue to effectively address the needs of students in subsequent years. However, there is a growing interest in coordinating retention efforts beyond the first year. The United States Department of Education

statistics showed that about two-thirds as many students who dropped out did so in their second year in comparison to their first year (as cited in Lipka, 2006). Tinto (1993) asserted that issues that are important to the first year might not be important to students in subsequent years of their college experience. Colleges are seeing a slight drop in student retention

in the second year and have consequently turned their attention to understanding the second-year experience. The Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (2007) reported that at four-year institutions, while 80.4% of freshmen who enrolled in 2004 returned as sophomores in 2005, only 70.9% were still enrolled as juniors in fall 2006.

The research investigates issues and concerns of students in their second year at a large urban institution in the Northeast that offers rich first-year programs but loses students in their sophomore year. The retention rate of first-year students remains comparatively strong; however, there is a drop in the second-year rate of retention. The fall 2010 and 2011 cohort one-year retention showed an increase from 82.2% to 84.2% (Institutional Planning and Research, 2012), which suggests that the students are benefiting from the institution's structured first-year programs. On the other hand, the two-year retention rate dropped from 70.4% to 69.6%. This article explores the students' experience and discusses the implications for practitioners in higher education and opportunities for future research.

## Literature Review

Although much has been written about persistence of students in the first year, major gaps in the persistence literature exist on students beyond the first year. Problems with attrition exist in subsequent years even when students have been successfully engaged in the initial collegiate experience (Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005). There is, however, very limited empirical evidence on second-year students and the programs designed to help them.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the experiences and perceptions of students in the second year to better understand if they are still in need of college support beyond the first year. Specifically, this study asks: *“How do sophomores from a large urban institution perceive and understand their experience?”* To fully understand if students are having a different kind of experience in their second year relative to the first year, this section will provide an overview of the existing literature on the second-year experience and the implications for the kinds of support they may

need beyond the first year. The second year of college is often referred to as the “forgotten year” and viewed as a period of transition and adjustment for students who find that the safety net and security provided through structured first-year programming are no longer available. Toward this end, sophomores in general may face multiple challenges that are unique to their experience, and if these challenges remain overlooked, they could affect students' social decisions and academic progress. Three strands of literature guide this literature review: sophomore development, persistence, and the second-year specific challenges related to their new academic reality and experience with institutional policies and practices.

## DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS

The research emerging on the second-year experience suggests that this is the period in which students need to be astute in their decision making and develop a sense of meaning and purpose about their education, life goals, and their career (Gaff, 2000; Gahagan & Hunter, 2006; Pattengale, 2006; Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000; Reynolds, Gross, & Millard, 2008; Tobolowsky & Cox, 2007). During the second year, students are actively seeking to clarify their sense of purpose; consequently, they become self-evaluative and self-critical and are pushed by the need to declare a major and develop career goals. Additionally, they are also seeking insights into redefining relationships.

Developing purpose, establishing identity and defining lives direction becomes more important to students in their second year. This according to Richmond and Lemons (1985) is a major developmental task for sophomores and is important for students to successfully navigate the second year. Sophomores could deal with identity crises created by periods of confusion and uncertainty (Furr & Gannaway, 1982), struggle with their identity development (Coburn & Treeger, 2003), and encounter personal relationship problems (Richmond & Lemons, 1985). These developmental challenges are distinct from what they experience in the first year because the focus in the second year tends to move beyond managing the transition to college to focusing on clarification of purpose and reasons for being in college.

## ACADEMIC CONCERNS

Scholars purport that challenges related to academic performance is one of the concerns in the sophomore year (Adelman, 2006; Bean, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pattengale, 2000). Schreiner (2007b) described this experience as sophomores entering into the “academic twilight zone.” She contended that sophomores’ curriculum workload intensifies in its rigor because they are dealing with the demands of major courses and the general education courses they avoided in their first year. Additionally, the grades and GPA received in the first year could further affect their academic performance and their decisions in selecting a major in the second year.

Coupled with the intense academic workload is dealing with the reality of selecting and deciding on a major. According to Richmond and Lemons (1985), selection of a major is considered a significant personal decision and developmental task faced by second-year students and can become a stressful period for those who are pressured to pick the most appropriate major. In choosing a major, students should demonstrate academic competence for specific coursework, have an awareness of available options, and demonstrate strong decision-making skills, particularly in balancing interest with future career or life goals. Indecision about choosing a major may therefore be perceived as sophomores weathering the developmental crisis of meaning and purpose (Schreiner, 2007b). Students could remain undecided at the end of the second year, and according to Hunter et al. (2010), they are more likely to withdraw from school or select any major that would allow for career decision making later.

Sophomores may also face the challenge of not being accepted into their first choice major, or question whether their initial choice is appropriate. Schreiner (2007b) contended that it is often in the sophomore year that a student begins to realize that his or her plans for a certain major may not materialize and may awaken to the need to have a “Plan B.” Whereas the main challenge for first-year students is to connect to the institution, the challenge for sophomore students involves committing to a major or discipline that will support their professional trajectory (Hunter et al., 2010).

## PERSISTENCE IN THE SECOND YEAR

It is established in the literature that there are challenges specific to the second year and if not addressed could affect persistence. Historically, institutions have dedicated extensive resources to the incoming class in an effort to integrate and retain students, junior and senior students are guided into career advisement, planning, and future goals, but sophomores are left to navigate the environment on their own. Gardner (2000) outlined that retention efforts during the first year may be useless unless maintained during the second year.

Four distinct areas in which sophomores could face unique challenges include dealing with new academic demands, resolving developmental concerns, navigating institutional demands, and meeting expectations (Pattengale, 2000). Sophomores who are unable to meet these demands could become disillusioned by their new reality and experience the sophomore slump. The sophomore slump is identified as the leading cause of attrition in the second year. Freedman (1956) was the first to discover that sophomores could fall into the slump. Findings from his research at Vassar College suggested that second-year students were the least satisfied with their collegiate experience. He further stated that students who were ambivalent about their reasons for attending college or indecisive about their major could experience apathy and stress in their second year.

In addressing the issue of persistence in the second year, it is imperative to not confuse the factors with first-year issues. According to research conducted by Schreiner (2007a) about 20% to 25% of second-year students experience the slump. The results from her annual spring surveys showed that at 100 colleges, students who reported dissatisfaction or disillusionment experienced shock at losing the intense institutional attention and support they received as freshman. This support becomes necessary as they try to make critical decisions about the direction of their lives. Schreiner (2007a) defined slumping as a motivational, emotional experience. Sophomores could lose the connection they had during the first year. They are no longer in the honeymoon phase but are awakened to the reality of their environment and collegiate experience. Coburn and Treeger (2003, p. 47) described the sophomore year as

“the transition between wide-eyed awe and upper-class confidence.” Gansemer-Topf, Stern, and Benjamin (2007), in their research, concluded that sophomores felt invisible and lost.

The consequences of the academic challenges coupled with a reduction in support services often lead to disconnect and possibly to attrition from college (Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008). Ennis-Mcmillan, Ammirati, Rossi-Reder, Tetley, and Thacker (2011) concluded from their research that second-year challenges require second-year support. Their qualitative research explored sophomores’ experiences after being engaged in established first-year programs. The first-year programs, according to Ennis-Mcmillan et al. (2011), were successful in enhancing student engagement and achievement; but for many the impact did not carry through to the second year. The findings from their research suggested that the second year poses different challenges and require a different kind of support.

#### INSTITUTIONAL ISSUES

The ability of institutions to meet the needs of any class of students is critical to their continued success. There are, however, growing concerns about the sophomore experience because substantial evidence in the literature outlines that institutional support lessens in the second year. According to Juillerat (2000), sophomores tend to place a high value on an environment that promotes intellectual growth; valuable course content and excellent classroom instruction; knowledgeable, fair, and caring faculty; an approachable and knowledgeable advisor; tuition that is a worthwhile investment; adequate financial aid; a smooth registration process with a good variety of course offerings; and an enjoyable school experience. Sophomores are therefore becoming more critical of their environment and the availability of support and resources they need to keep them engaged beyond the first year.

Boivin, Fountain, and Baylis (2000) studied 60 students who left a small liberal arts college in Michigan during and after their sophomore year over a two-year period. The students identified issues specifically related to the institution and the inability of the institution to meet their needs as reasons for leaving. Additionally, lack of opportunities for leadership and lack of faculty

involvement were issues that were significant in the second year. Further, the students who successfully handled their personal transition issues in the first year were aware of what higher education ought to afford them (Boivin et al., 2000). Increasing awareness and expectations, according to Boivin et al. (2000), forced students to assess the adequacy of the institution in meeting their needs.

In summary, adjustment issues, academic demands, student engagement, faculty involvement, students’ overall satisfaction with the institution, and financial management experience are factors that have been identified as related to attrition in the second year. Students who exhibit low confidence in their transition experience to the second year, those who feel their needs are not being met, and those who struggle with academic demands are less likely to persist.

#### Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Schaller’s student development theory, which was used as the lens to explore the development of traditional-aged sophomores. Schaller (2005) concluded that the second year is a critical period for identity development. According to Schaller (2005), students should move through four stages of development in different aspects of their lives as they try to define themselves, their relationships, and their purpose. Sophomores who progressed through these stages will have a successful collegiate experience. Random exploration, focused exploration, tentative choice, and commitment are the stages of development through which students are most likely to advance during the second year.

The stage of random exploration is observed during the first year and is characterized by an interesting combination of exuberance and lack of reflection. However, some sophomores could linger in this stage. Students in this stage are less concerned with making decisions about their future and are more concerned with becoming associated with their new environment. Schaller identified the other stage as focused exploration. During this stage, students become self-evaluative, self-critical, and responsible, but this may not be so for all sophomores. The stage of focused exploration is considered a critical stage for sophomores because

true reflection and development start at this point and sophomores are beginning to have a deeper insight into the direction of their lives. The length of time spent in this phase could impact their choices and decision. The next stage is tentative choice and student should ideally be at this phase at the end of their second year. Schaller (2005) stated that students should have a clear defined picture of the future and feel a sense of responsibility for themselves and their learning. They begin the process of testing the choices reflected on during focused exploration. The final stage is commitment and according to Schaller (2005), this is the ideal stage where sophomores complete the transition but very few make it to this point at the end of their second year. There is increased engagement in the direction of their lives and students develop more confidence in their decisions and choices.

Schaller's sophomore development theory (2005) was ideal to create a framework for understanding the collegiate experience and needs of second-year students in this study. The theory establishes a frame of reference about the interpersonal and intrapersonal changes that occur while sophomores are in college. What are the challenges encountered in the second year? Are sophomores still in need of additional support even after exposure to intentionally structured freshman year experience courses, programs, and support services?

## Research Methodology

The premise of this research was to investigate and identify the experiences articulated by sophomores in a large urban public institution in the Northeast. The researcher gathered information from the voices of students to understand their perception of the second-year experience. The primary research question that guided this inquiry was the following: *How do students at a large urban institution perceive and describe their experience in the second year?* Students who were currently enrolled in the institution were participants in this study.

The methodology chosen for this research study is interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to study the lived experiences of sophomore students. The goals of the research included the following: generating and collecting

primary qualitative research data on the experiences of second-year students; applying the interpretative phenomenological analysis to the data; identifying the key themes of students' experiences in the second year; describing the experiences of sophomore students; and presenting the discussion based on the findings in the study, the theoretical framework, and existing research. The research focused on the students' understanding of their experiences and sense-making activities, which is the very essence of IPA.

Purposeful sampling was used for this study, and the inclusion criteria were as follows: students registered in the second half of the second year, students who participated in a first-year program, and representing different majors. Twelve traditional-aged sophomores participated in semistructured, open-ended interviews.

## Data Collection: Participants

Consonant with IPA is the intense qualitative analysis detailing the accounts of experiences derived from participants. Smith and Osborn (2008) identified semistructured interviews as the exemplary method for IPA. Semistructured interviews allowed for an open exchange and dialogue between the researcher and the participants. Merriam (1998) asserted that semistructured interviews and unstructured interviews are widely used in qualitative research. The open-ended nature of the questions provided opportunities for both the interviewer and interviewees to discuss the students' experiences and feelings about their sophomore year.

Following institutional review board (IRB) approval, the researcher, with the assistance of the first-year program director, recruited students to participate in the open-ended interview process. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were digitally recorded. The Rev.Com transcription service was used to transcribe the interviews, and the researcher analyzed the data with the aid of the MAXQDA software. The transcript was sent to each participant for review and feedback, and five participants responded.

Table 1 shows the distribution of participants, which is consistent with the student population at the institution. The students who participated in this study are traditional-aged students representing different majors.

**Table 1 Participants' Characteristics**

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race	Major	First-Year Program
Brian	20	Male	American Indian	Speech pathology	Yes
Carlene	20	Female	African American	Business	Yes
Christella	20	Female	White	Environmental science	Yes
Grace Ann	19	Female	White	Creative Writing	Yes
Jacob	20	Male	White	Actuarial mathematics	Yes
James	20	Male	Asian	Computer science	Yes
Jane	20	Female	White	Sociology	Yes
Karen	20	Female	Hispanic	Psychology	Yes
Larissa	20	Female	White	Psychology	Yes
Michelle	20	Female	White	Business	Yes
Pamela	20	Female	White	Early childhood ed	Yes
Stephen	20	Male	African American	Accounting	Yes

## Data Analysis

The data analysis process was iterative and inductive and the guidelines outlined by Smith et al. (2009), were adapted by the researcher to analyze the data. The MAXQDA computer program was used to conduct line-by-line coding of transcript and aided the analysis for this research. The initial stage of analysis involved immersing in the data through close reading of the transcript and note taking. The next step was working with the notes to transform notes into emerging themes. These themes were derived from the participants' accounts of their sophomore experience. Seeking connections between emerging themes, categorizing themes according to the similar concepts, and providing a descriptive label was the next stage of the analysis. The data were studied to allow for the emergence of constructs, Creswell (2007) outlined the importance of using categorical aggregation to establish themes or patterns. A final list of major themes were identified and applied to describe and explain the personal accounts of the participants' experience. The goal was to learn from participants the factors that contributed to a successful second-year experience and the challenges if any that they encountered.

## Major Findings and Emergent Themes

Seven major themes describing the second-year experience were identified. The themes defined the study

participants' understanding of gaining purpose, establishing relationships, dealing with personal and institutional challenges as well as their own experiences, and understanding of the sophomore slump. Additionally, through their own understanding of their second-year experience, participants shared the needs of students and the institution's role in meeting their needs. This section defines the themes and provides examples of students' quotes from the interviews that were reflected in the themes. Later on in the discussion, the themes are examined in the context of the theoretical framework and the existing literature.

### DEVELOPMENT OF SELF

The first theme highlighted participants' experience with development in their own intellectual growth, how they defined themselves, and their direction. The second year was described as a period of transformation both personally and academically. This transformation had participants becoming more reflective on finding meaning and purpose.

Jane stated:

Sophomore year you are developing and you are processing things around you differently; it's a learning experience, a kind of growing-up type of development. I learned a lot about myself and who I want to be and who I think I want to become and learn to be more confident in my academic work. I kind of matured.

As sophomores in this study matured toward adulthood, there was an increased awareness of self, purpose, and direction of their lives. Moral and psychosocial development occurred as they moved into adulthood. The 12 participants characterized themselves as growing and changing mentally, emotionally, and academically and becoming more engaged in active and reflective thinking. Brian concurred that his outlook became different: "This is when I started thinking more long term. I made a list of goals in my life that I'd like to accomplish by a certain time."

#### INCREASED SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Assuming greater responsibility for their learning and choices was a common thread among the participants. There was the stronger inclination toward taking their academic responsibility more seriously and dealing with the reality of being in college, which was different from how they felt in the first year. Michelle summarized it this way: "I think when you are a freshman you are like, oh, I am a college student, like, look at me. However, I when I got into sophomore year, I took it seriously. I just need to get things done."

The sense of responsibility extended to an understanding of what they needed to do in order to ensure their success. Realizing that study patterns changed, proper time management was required as well as the importance of resolving issues that could carry over from the first year. These unresolved issues could create more difficulty in the second year, especially when the academic demands and expectations increased. Stephen outlined the following: "I learned in the second year that I need to overcome my anxiety by three things: just hanging out with the right crowd, managing your study time, with your having fun, too."

#### DECISION MAKING

Developing strong decision-making skills was important for sophomores as they transition toward making greater academic commitment and thinking about their vocation. The decision-making process could sometimes become complex because sophomores are required to examine their own values and interests and sometimes balance these factor with parental expectations.

Grace-Ann shared her experience of having to balance her parents' expectations with her own choices. She struggled with the thought of disappointing her parents, who expected her to follow their vocational path of becoming a doctor. Her volunteer experience in the emergency room helped her to finalize the decision about her major. She outlined: "I realized, I looked around and said, this is not for me, not where I want to be." Similarly Stephen had to inform his parents about a change in major from computer science to accounting. He stated: "I wouldn't dare tell them in first year. In sophomore year I told them, you know what, I have to switch the major. It is not like a big thing; everyone in college does it."

Participants in this study expressed the importance of being judicious about choosing their major and doing so in a time-conscious manner. Stephen asserted: "Making a decision in the sophomore year about your major and career choice is significant and will set the groundwork for whether you will graduate early or not."

The challenge of choosing a major and declaring a major can often yield surprises for sophomores if they realize that they are struggling with required courses. Through the experiences of some participants, they learned the valuable lesson of finding an alternative major if the major chosen is posing academic challenges. Declaring a major can become a source of stress for sophomores if they are faced with academic challenges. Participants valued academic efficacy in courses related to their major. Jane had to seriously think about her initial choice: "I was not handling my pre-med courses well, so I turned to Plan B, which was psychology or sociology. After much advisement and how connected I felt to the courses, I chose sociology."

Deciding on a major was a huge developmental task for these participants, who wanted to choose a major they were passionate about or could excel in.

#### BUILDING AND MAINTAINING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS

Establishing meaningful relationships was another significant theme that emerged from the data set. Some participants saw faculty members as quite resourceful and felt more comfortable approaching a faculty

member. Some consulted with professors as they tried to make decisions about their academic and career goals. The consultation with faculty members extended to seeking advice for personal issues and needing recommendations. They viewed faculty members not only in their roles as educators but as information brokers, mentors, and individuals who understood students' struggles. Pamela's view of faculty was as follows:

In the second year you feel more comfortable going to faculty to ask for explanation, and to challenge a grade and insist on an explanation on why I got this grade. My connection felt deeper with faculty because my major was small.

Developing peer connection was a significant finding. Friendship with peers was at a deeper level to foster more meaningful relationships. Participants sought friends who shared the same values and who could make successful contribution to their academic journey. The importance of peer-to-peer connections was integral to sophomores in this study. They spoke of relying on peers and upper-class students for academic advice and guidance. Jane felt it was important to redefine her friendships:

The sophomore year was a year of transformation—a year where friends were different and friendships become more meaningful. I was very aware that I needed friends who were like me. I have this course and I need to study; let's go do it.

Karen also shared the same sentiment: "Second year you start choosing different friends; high school friends go away after the first year because of the major changes, and we establish new friendships."

## INSTITUTIONAL CONCERNS

The participants in this study highlighted some of the institutional challenges and the misconceived notions about sophomores and their preparedness to successfully navigate the college processes. Sophomores were beginning to feel comfortable with college, but ironically they were not fully prepared for the new demands of the second year. They were still in need of support such as more advisement on choosing a major, career, deciding on study abroad, and finding internships. For these sophomores it was about being prepared to

declare a major and doing so in a timely manner, having adequate advisers with availability, and being accurately informed about requirements for their majors.

Sophomores in this study were very critical of the quality of advisement at the institution. They were not particularly ready for the transition to departmental advisements. Some expressed concerns about the limited information on major requirements, insufficient advisers in academic departments to assist students, and limited course offerings. James was frustrated with trying to find courses. He stated: "I had to track professors down to get over tally for my major courses, and this was stressful." Brian had to do his research on his major and expressed his frustration with the lack of information about the speech pathology major:

When we are sophomores, this is the time where we want to look into that stuff. I felt that if I had someone to talk to personally, that would have been very helpful. I would not have to go what I went through. An adviser in the speech pathology department would have been good.

Some felt the institution needed to place more emphasis on students declaring their majors. Participants felt they were not prepared to meet the institution's deadline to declare their major and needed more time to think about their choices. Carlene expressed that the message of declaring a major needs to be emphasized:

I think it was told to us, but you don't really think about it until last minute. Maybe from the beginning of the sophomore year to the end of the sophomore year, even professors should remind you.

The process and the timing of declaring a major also posed challenges for sophomores in this study. Some academic departments had a straightforward online process, while other areas had a more complex and convoluted process. Sophomores tend to sense the urgency in declaring their majors as the deadline approaches. Carlene further stated the importance of engaging sophomores ahead of time to keep them informed of the expectations:

I think having open sessions where people could talk and be, like, I really don't know, would be helpful for sophomores, especially just because that is your

transition to where it is like, OK, I know what college is about now; I know what they expect of me; now I need to know what I want to study.

Financing their education was stressful for two participants. Even the financial aid process was still daunting for sophomores. Jane, for example, expressed her frustration with some of the college processes:

There are always things that are also out of my control at some point, like financial aid. The financial aid process is frustrating because of the way they communicate to students. You have to figure out where the bursar is, how to complete financial aid.

Some participants had to make the decision to work part-time and study to help their parents fund their education. These challenges created periods of stress for some participants. In addition to the new academic demands, trying to navigate college processes on their own, was the need to balance the personal challenges of deciding to work or stay in school.

### SOPHOMORE COMMUNITY

Building a community to establish identity and support is critical to a successful sophomore experience. The lack of social engagement in the sophomore year was quite evident and was identified as a major difference from the first-year experience. Participants recognized the change in the institutional attention and support in the second year relative to their first-year experience. There was a clear understanding that they felt less engaged, ignored, and abandoned by the institution. Carlene summed it up as such:

First year you are welcomed with open arms; they made you feel like you made the best choice ever coming here. Then you get kicked to the side a little in your sophomore year. In the second year, they don't really tell you anything.

Similarly, Christella also shared these sentiments:

In the second year, you kind of realize that you are on your own. In the first year, you have the Freshman Year Learning Community, but in the second year, you have to figure out where the bursar is, complete financial aid, figure out the registration process, figure out what the registrar is, and get used to figuring out things on your own.

There was the expressed need to bond with other sophomores who were having similar experiences. Establishing this network through events would allow them to meet other students and would help to increase their sense of belonging. They recognized the strong efforts to welcome them as first-year students and believed they needed a different kind of support to meet the needs of the second year. They repeatedly mentioned the need for more encouragement. For these participants, fostering a community of peers would support learning and increase their overall satisfaction with their sophomore experience.

One of the most vital elements of participating in the first-year program for the study participants was the engagement in communities and social programming, which helped with the integration process into college. When they transitioned to the second year, this type of social engagement was nonexistent. As evidenced by participants' responses, they agreed on the need for more sophomore-specific events to allow sophomores to bond and stay informed about the goals and expectations of the second year.

Jacqueline articulated her overall view of how sophomores were treated in relation to freshmen and upper-classmen:

In the first year, as an incoming freshman you get a lot of support. In the junior and the senior year, you are pretty much on track because this is your major. As sophomores, you are still looking for guidance on deciding on a major, career internship, or studying abroad, which is not necessarily there.

Carlene supported this view and highlighted that it is important to pay attention to sophomores because this is the point where students start thinking about transferring. "If someone wants to transfer, they would most likely think about it in the sophomore year."

### SOPHOMORE SLUMP

The sophomore slump is linked to the second-year experience and is identified as one of the reasons for attrition. When asked about their understanding of the sophomore slump, most participants shared their perceptions and experiences with slumping. Participants viewed the sophomore slump as a "wake-up period." Carlene described it as "a period similar to senioritis

in grade school where the bare minimum is done.” She recalled:

There were times when I was just too tired. I knew the work had to be done because bad things would happen if it weren't. Dropping out was not an option. Why would that be an option? You're, like, halfway there.

James detailed his experience with the slump and stated the following: “I think at some point I experienced this because during the second year no one is there to guide you. It is bad if it has to happen during your sophomore year and you can't get over it.”

Brian also shared his experience with slumping because of the challenges he had with defining his purpose being at that particular college:

I have the thoughts whether I need to be here. In the first semester of the second year, I was at a low point and I had to seek counseling. I needed someone to talk to, so I went to the personal counseling. I tried to talk to my mom about it but I never got anywhere. It was good to talk to someone about this. I was at a low point in the first semester of my second year and felt the need to talk to someone. It decreased a lot since the second half of the year and I was able to focus more.

Some participants in this study struggled with the sophomore slump for various reasons: not feeling that they belong, dealing with the new challenges and trying to navigate the environment on their own, trying to make decisions that could impact their future, trying to deal with the new expectations and transition from being in a community to feeling isolated. Some admitted to being less diligent and losing the motivation to complete their coursework. For some, experiencing the slump was a period of awakening to their new academic reality and losing the special status they experienced in the first year.

## Summary of the Research Results

The narratives that emerged from the participants' description of their second years substantiate findings from the existing literature. The participants viewed themselves as transitioning to another phase of their development and academic experience and evolving

from being newly minted college students to becoming more confident and seasoned in the environment. Their second-year experience was also framed as one with competing challenges and the need for year-specific support to meet these challenges.

For these sophomores, their developmental process was marked by an increase in confidence in choosing their direction and understanding their purpose. The study participants described themselves as developing into adulthood and making the best possible adjustments to meet the demands of the second year. The adjustments required them to reassess their lives and their academic journey to fulfill new standards of competence intellectually and interpersonally. Toward this end, they became mindful of establishing more meaningful relationships, developing purpose, and increasing their level of academic commitments.

There is evidence to suggest that these participants were either less reliant or were becoming less reliant on parental guidance and support and were more inclined to seek support from peers and faculty members. They relied on perspectives of their peers and faculty as they made decisions about their academic paths. Faculty members were regarded as partners in the learning process.

Although they had become more focused, purpose driven, and intellectually and psychologically grounded, they also experienced a gap or void in their second-year experience. Some sophomores further defined their experience as a period of being in college to do what needed to be done; these sophomores felt that the honeymoon phase of the college experience had worn off.

The findings revealed that sophomores were dissatisfied with aspects of their college experience. They expressed their dissatisfaction with institutional services such as academic and career advisement, lack of guidance and opportunities for social engagement, and major and career exploration. Participants also expressed the importance of having a stronger sense of community among students in the second year.

In conclusion, the participants' stories revealed that the second-year experience is multifaceted and sometimes contradictory. It is characterized by transformation of self and increased confidence, direction, purpose, reality check, relationships, academic expectations, and overall campus expectations. It also includes

challenges, frustration, confusion, strong decision making on career and major, less direction and guidance from the institution on what needs to be done, and awareness about having less time to make up for a mistake or failed course or changed decision. James summed up the second year as the end of transformation between college and high school to coming one step closer to the real life.

## Discussion

This section discusses the implications of the findings. The findings substantiate the literature on the unique needs of the second year and validate the importance of developing year-specific services to help students navigate the challenging areas and promote retention and student success. It is established in the literature and is evident in these findings that students could struggle with establishing their identity and reevaluating their purpose and collegiate experience. A consistent theme in the literature is the challenges associated with the decision of selecting a major. Selection of a major requires students to have the academic ability for specific coursework, awareness of available options, and strong decision-making skills to balance interests with future career and life goals. The findings from this study also showed that sophomores might need to balance parents' expectations along with the other factors that go into selecting their majors. This might be a unique finding in this study, but it is worth mentioning, as this adds to the mounting pressures of the second-year experience.

The scholarship on the second-year experience tends to frame the experience as one plagued with challenges. Overall, the findings from this research clearly substantiate the literature on the challenges students could face in the second year. However, there is evidence from this study to suggest that the transition to the second year can also be viewed as a year of opportunity with competing responsibilities. This finding is punctuated by the participant's desire to weather the storm of the second year. It is clear that without the year-specific support, sophomores will struggle to fulfill their responsibilities and become disenchanting with college life. Consequently, these opportunities could become challenges. Reframing the second-year experience as

one of opportunities further reinforces the need for the right kind of support for students to successfully fulfill their responsibilities.

## Statement of Limitations

Every study has limitations. Therefore, the researcher had to provide sufficient descriptive data to make transferability possible. The following limitations were included in the design of the student. The study was limited to an urban public institution and was conducted in one of 17 campuses within that large university system. The participants were limited to only traditional-aged students, and they were all students who participated in a first-year program; therefore, the perspectives of students who were not in a first-year program were not included. The sample size was also limited to students who had completed the second semester of the second year; therefore, there might have been additional challenges that they could have forgotten due to maturation. The sampling was purposeful, and the study participants were self-selected.

## Recommendations for Professional Practice

The following recommendations are proposed for professionals in higher education seeking to understand the needs and concerns of sophomores to ultimately provide the kinds of support that would successfully meet the demands as students progress through college. The research findings support the need for mentorship and guidance for sophomores. Establishing second-year programs and initiatives to reintegrate students into college and define the new realities will help sophomores with their development and transition. Sophomore-specific programs will help to promote opportunities for both academic and social engagement.

Second-year programs should have a mentoring component and should be inclusive and comprehensive. Peer-to-peer interaction was highly valued among participants in this research; therefore, providing mentoring services specific to the second year would be beneficial to sophomores who feel the guidance is limited. Mentoring would provide the opportunity for sophomores to be paired with faculty and staff or

upper-class students who could provide additional academic and cocurricular support as they try to make decisions about their goals and their future.

Creating a sophomore-specific orientation would provide the opportunity to present and discuss the second-year expectations. The orientation should include workshops to introduce students to different academic majors and expose them to study abroad and leadership opportunities. This level of engagement and support would help to bolster the second-year experience as students try to adjust to the new academic and social demands.

Focusing on academic and career planning is the hallmark of the second-year experience and is crucial to student success. Promoting initiatives and events that support major and career exploration would benefit students in the second year and cultivate collaboration between faculty and staff in sponsoring major fairs and career and major events. Partnerships among departments such as the career center, academic departments, student affairs, and personal counseling are essential to create a holistic experience for students. It has been established that sophomores need guidance and direction in exploring and declaring their majors and aligning their choices with their career or educational goals; therefore, advisement should be tailored to engage students into reflecting deeply about their academic plans.

Mastery of academic content and competence in major course was essential for sophomores in this study. Sophomores who are more engaged in their learning will remain committed to their major and will persist. Promoting undergraduate research in the second year provides the opportunity for students to become more engaged learners. This will increase the opportunity for more contact with faculty both inside and outside the classroom. The role of faculty in promoting retention is well documented in the literature.

Keeping sophomores informed is also necessary as they deal with their new realities. Creating a sophomore experience website directed to sophomore students will increase the campus awareness of this class of students. The website could serve as a repository for sophomore-specific information, events, and narratives. This will also help to develop a sense of community

for sophomores as they try to find a home in academic departments.

Prior to implementing sophomore initiatives, it is important to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment to provide the appropriate support for students and increase the institution's awareness of students' needs as they move through developmental changes and respond to expectations. Needs assessment could be conducted through additional focus groups and surveys. Assessment of these initiatives is also essential to ensure that programs are successfully meeting the needs of the students.

## Future Research

Since the research was conducted on traditional-aged students, there is room for more research on how different groups of students would advance through the stages of development. The results from the study are not generalizable, and more research is needed to understand the impact of financial aid on sophomore persistence. Additionally, the study participants did not include transfer students who could also be considered sophomores. Finally, this study was done at a four-year institution; therefore, a study of sophomore students within a two-year school could add to the scholarship on sophomores' experiences.

## Conclusion

Sophomores are similar to a sibling stuck between the older child and the baby seeking attention. The findings suggest that it is necessary to continue the provision of specific support to maximize all students' learning and development. Therefore, sophomores should not be viewed as the "forgotten class." It is necessary to understand that sophomores are going through a period of transition. This is more of an internal transition and dealing with new demands within the academic environment. While they are trying to process the transformation, the second-year specific support tends to be limited because institutions have operated under the assumption that sophomores are no longer new to the environment. However, we have learned that sophomores do require a different kind of approach—not handholding but guidance in helping them to define

their direction and purpose. This study supports the literature on the second college year and the experiences of sophomore students. Student in their second year of college encounter developmental, academic, and institutional challenges that, if not addressed, will lead to the sophomore slump, which is identified as one of the most significant reasons for attrition in this group. This study also adds to the literature that second year can be viewed as a year of opportunity with competing responsibilities. If institutions fail to provide year-specific support to assist students with fulfilling these responsibilities, the opportunities can become challenges.

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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

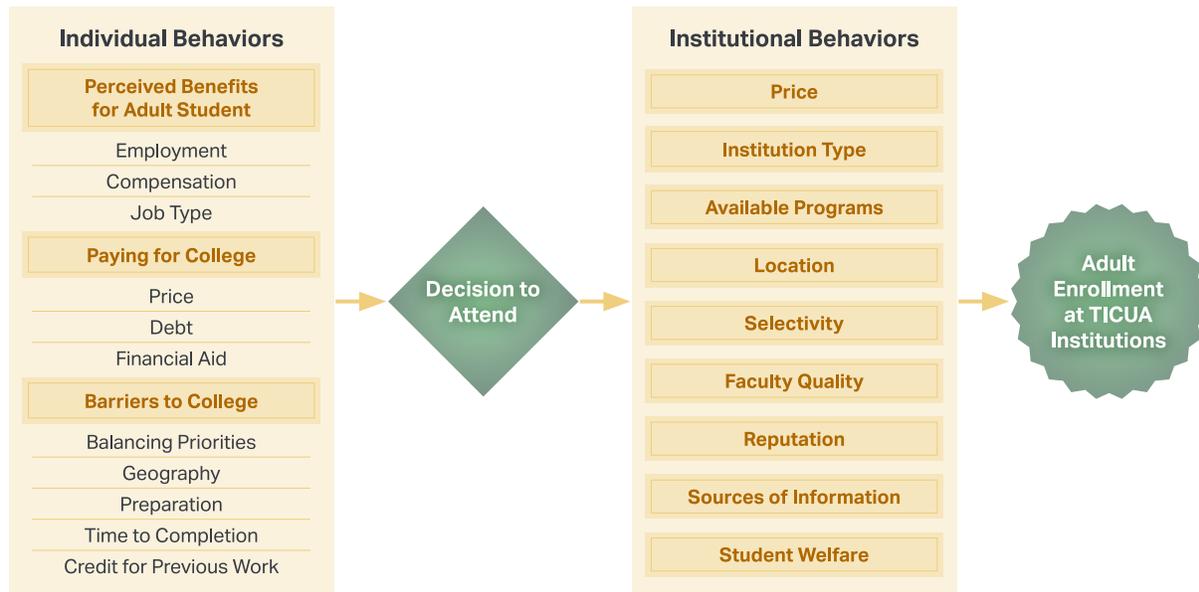
The authors employed a purposive sampling strategy to tease out specific information and expertise from volunteer adult students, campus staff, and administrators at TICUA member institutions. The authors partnered with TICUA to identify and invite institutions to participate in the project and ultimately 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

.....  
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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 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



### 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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 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.

## About the Authors



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has served as director for seven years and is the 2018-19 President-Elect for NCASFAA. His research interests include minority male mentoring initiatives, first-

generation and low-income students, financial aid innovations, business efficiency in higher education, and predictive and prescriptive analytics.



### Kristen McManus

Kristen McManus, Ed.D., currently serves as a dissertation consultant as well as on the Historic Resources Commission for Forsyth

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higher education, the effects of social media on work environments and predictive forecasting.

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 GRAD AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS

# Applicant and Faculty Characteristics in the Doctoral Admission Process: An Experimental Vignette Study

By Annmarie Cano, Lee H. Wurm, Jennifer Nava, Farron McIntee, and Ambika Mathur

The purpose of this research was to examine whether decisions made at one stage of strategic and graduate enrollment management, the admission phase, depend on both applicant and faculty characteristics. Faculty participants (N=62) were randomly assigned to read one of four vignettes of a prospective applicant to their doctoral program. They then rated the likelihood that they would interview and admit the applicant, and they also completed other surveys. Participants' empathic orientation and first-generation college student status and higher Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores were associated with more favorable admission decisions. Participant and applicant characteristics also interacted to predict admission decisions. The results have implications for strategic and graduate enrollment management professionals.

Diversity in higher education is related to enhanced problem-solving skills, positive student engagement and outcomes, and more robust intellectual contributions (Hurtado 2001; Hurtado and DeAngelo 2001; Valantine and Collins 2015). A number of studies have pointed to the need for diversity across the educational pipeline, including doctoral education, to ensure that universities are training the next generation of outstanding scholars and leaders (National Research Council 2011; Valantine, Lund, and Gammie 2016). Indeed, there have been significant increases in diversity in the doctoral student ranks, with increasing representation from un-

derrepresented groups (American Academy of Arts and Sciences 2015; Einaudi 2011). Yet some groups continue to be underrepresented in doctoral programs relative to their representation in the U.S. population (American Academy of Arts and Sciences 2015; Einaudi 2011; Valantine, Lund, and Gammie 2016). One reason for this finding is the loss of diverse talent at earlier stages in the educational pipeline due to lack of educational and academic opportunities to prepare students for graduate study (Valantine *et al.* 2016), socioeconomic challenges (Martinez, Sher, Krull, and Wood 2009), and/or cultural and psychosocial barriers (Steele 1997; Stephens, Fry-

burg *et al.* 2012; Stephens, Townsend *et al.* 2012). Strategic enrollment management efforts have attempted to address and improve student success by focusing on all stages of the student lifecycle in the context of the community, institution, and educational program (Dolence 1997; Sigler 2017). This strategy, as it pertains to graduate education, has been termed *graduate enrollment management* (GEM) (NAGAP 2017).

While all stages of the student lifecycle, from recruitment to alumni relations, are of interest to GEM professionals, a focus on the admission process may provide key insights for those who work in decentralized environments in which programs and faculty make admission decisions. In such environments, graduate admission review is a stage during which diversity in the doctoral applicant pool is lost (Miller and Stassun 2014; Posselt 2014). During initial review of applicant materials, some faculty members and programs inordinately weight standardized test scores (Miller and Stassun 2014) despite guidance from the Educational Testing Service (ETS) regarding the appropriate use of test scores (Educational Testing Service 2016a). In addition, some faculty members may inadvertently give preference to individuals whose applications mirror the faculty reviewer's own experiences, which often reflect higher socioeconomic status and privileged educational backgrounds (Posselt 2014). Such practices undermine efforts to enhance diversity, to create cohorts of students who can engage effectively with diverse populations, and to foster creativity. As noted by Posselt (2014), additional research is needed to identify the factors that may influence faculty members during the graduate admission process so that evidence-based recommendations can be made to improve the selection process. The purpose of the current study was to test the extent to which faculty members take into account two applicant characteristics—first-generation college student status and standardized test scores—when evaluating doctoral program applicants for admission. In addition, the extent to which characteristics of faculty members factored into these graduate admission decisions was considered.

Approximately 30 percent of school-age children in the United States have parents who earned a high school

diploma or less (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), with higher rates among students from underrepresented minority groups (*e.g.*, 61 percent of those who are Hispanic/Latino; 50 percent of those who are Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander; 42 percent of those who are American Indian/Alaskan Native; 41 percent of those who are black/African American). First-generation college students are less likely to aspire to graduate study (Carlton 2015), and they are two to four times less likely to pursue a doctoral degree (Cataldi *et al.* 2018; Choy 2001). In addition, their representation among students who earn doctorates has been decreasing steadily: first-generation college students earned approximately 30 percent of doctorates awarded in 1995 and fewer than 20 percent of doctorates awarded in 2015 (National Science Foundation 2017). These students share values and experiences—including a strong work ethic, community and teamwork, and the desire to give back to the community (Stephens, Fryberg *et al.* 2012; Stephens, Townsend *et al.* 2012)—that may contribute greatly to diversity in doctoral programs and, ultimately, to graduate student success. Unfortunately, very little is known about potential implicit bias facing this group of applicants during the doctoral admission process. Implicit bias is typically defined as an unconscious judgment that reflects stereotypes and prejudices about people based on their group membership (Greenwald and Banaji 1995).<sup>1</sup> Research has shown that hiring decisions in academia and industry are often subject to implicit (or unconscious) biases toward people from marginalized groups (Corrice 2009; Milkman, Akinola, and Chugh 2015; Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoli, Graham, and Handelsman 2012). An aim of the current study is to investigate potential bias toward first-generation college students during the doctoral admissions process using an experimental vignette design in which first-generation status is manipulated along with standardized test score performance.

Most graduate programs require applicants to submit materials such as a personal statement, letters of recommendation, transcripts, and standardized test scores (*e.g.*, Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores). Some

<sup>1</sup> See also <[implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/faqs.html](http://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/faqs.html)>.

programs use the GRE to make an initial selection of top applicants (Posselt 2014), a practice that is contrary to the guidelines put forth by the Educational Testing Service (Educational Testing Service 2016a). This practice persists for a variety of reasons, including research demonstrating the predictive validity of the GRE (Kuncel, Hezlett, and Ones 2001) as well as limited faculty time to review the entire applicant pool and values regarding the definition of merit (Posselt 2014). As shown by several investigators, weighting the GRE more than other materials or even making initial selections on the basis of standardized test scores can severely limit the diversity of the applicant pool; it is well-established that on average, women and underrepresented minorities earn lower scores than do white male test takers (Educational Testing Service 2016b; Miller and Stassun 2014; Smith and Garrison 2005; Vasquez and Jones 2006). On average, first-generation college students also earn lower scores on the GRE than do students whose parents earned college degrees (Educational Testing Service 2016b). Because GRE scores continue to be used by many programs to select a shortlist of applicants, it is essential that they, along with first-generation status, be identified as a factor that may affect admission committee members' decisions.

Appraisals of applicants are likely to be influenced not only by the materials they submit but also by faculty members' personal characteristics and tendencies. For instance, intergroup bias theory (Hewstone, Rubin, and Willis 2002) posits that people have more favorable appraisals toward members of their own "in group." Extending this to graduate admission, faculty members whose parents did not attend college might view a candidate with a similar background more favorably than might faculty members who do not share this background. Research has also been conducted on the role of an empathic orientation in altruistic decision making (Batson, Early, and Salvarani, 1997; Batson, Eklund, Chermok, Hoyt, and Ortiz 2007). Taking another person's perspective predicts empathic concern (*i.e.*, feeling for another person in distress), and both these tendencies may have independent effects on altruistic and prosocial behavior toward others (Batson *et al.* 2007; Davis 2015). Perspective taking and empathic concern may in-

crease the likelihood that faculty members will consider applicants in a more favorable light, especially if the applicants are from a potentially marginalized group, such as first-generation college students. In contrast, beliefs can also constrain empathy and decrease the likelihood of a favorable decision. For instance, strong beliefs in meritocracy (*i.e.*, "hard work always results in success"; Ledgerwood, Mandisodza, Jost, and Pohl 2011) may hinder a faculty member's ability to empathize with an applicant because the faculty member may not account for situational factors (such as the need to work part or full time and adjust to a different psychosocial, cultural, and academic environment) that may have hindered undergraduate success (Bui 2002; Martinez *et al.* 2009; Stephens, Townsend *et al.* 2012). Thus, it is possible that faculty members' first-generation status and empathic orientation may have direct effects on their admission decisions as well as synergistic effects with applicants' first-generation status and GRE scores.

The current study examines the admission decision-making process as one key stage during which the diversity of the applicant pool can be adversely affected, thus affecting the representation of different groups in the enrolled doctoral student body. This study employed an experimental design to test the extent to which first-generation college student status as well as faculty member characteristics affect graduate admission decisions. Specifically, four vignettes of a hypothetical candidate for a doctoral program were created in which first-generation college student status (mentioned or not mentioned) and GRE score (mid-level and high) were manipulated. All other information about the applicant, including research and work experience, undergraduate grade point average, and interest in the program, were identical. Faculty participants were randomly assigned to read one vignette and then to answer questions about the applicant and themselves. It was expected that faculty members would report higher likelihoods of extending an interview or offer of admission when presented with vignettes that cited higher GRE scores and vignettes with no mention of first-generation status. It was also expected that faculty's first-generation status, empathy, and meritocratic beliefs would relate to

admission decisions. In particular, it was expected that first-generation faculty members would be more likely to make favorable admission decisions for first-generation applicants and for perspective taking and empathic concern to relate to more favorable admission decisions. In contrast, it was predicted that a stronger belief in meritocracy would be related to less favorable admission decisions. The possibility that vignette and faculty member personal characteristics would interact with each other in predicting admission decisions was also explored. Finally, through open-ended responses, the types of additional information that faculty members requested about applicants were explored in order to gain insights into faculty members' thought processes during review of the vignettes.

## Method

### Procedure

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the researcher's university. Faculty members at a Carnegie-classified "highest research activity" doctoral university in the midwest United States participated in this study. Faculty members were recruited via posts to the university's online human resource management tool and through e-mails to department chairs and graduate directors. They were told that the purpose of the study was to better understand the decision-making processes of faculty during the doctoral admission process. Interested faculty members were directed to a link to an online survey.

After reading an online information sheet, participants were randomly assigned to receive one of four possible vignettes about a student who was applying for admission to their doctoral program. The only details that varied were first-generation status and GRE scores (a 2 [first-generation status vs. no mention of that status] X 2 [mediocre test scores vs. high test scores] design). Participants then read the assigned vignette (see below) and answered several questions regarding the applicant and themselves. Participants did not receive compensation for their participation.

### Vignette

The following vignette was presented to participants:

*Joe is an undergraduate in his senior year at a large public university who has applied to your doctoral program. Joe indicated in his personal statement that he is pursuing graduate studies to prepare to be a professor and researcher. Joe identified you as a potential advisor because he is interested in your program of study. It is clear from his personal statement that he has read several recent articles of yours and appears to understand the importance of the work presented in them. To prepare himself for this career, Joe has taken the necessary prerequisite coursework for the doctoral program. In college, Joe volunteered as a research assistant for a faculty member for one year. During this experience, he learned how to collect and enter data into Excel and SPSS, conducted descriptive analyses, and participated in weekly lab meetings with the professor, graduate students, and several other undergraduates. He noted that this experience was beneficial in helping him to recognize that he could pursue a career in scholarly research (first-generation prompt: especially given that he was the first in his family to attend college). Joe also noted in his statement that he volunteered at a social service organization once per week. Joe wrote that his research and volunteer experiences helped him develop skills to work effectively on his own and in a team. Joe also mentioned that he has learned good organizational and leadership skills by working a part-time job at a dining hall on campus during which he was able to work his way up the ranks from server to manager.*

Participants were also presented with a table of the applicant's scores (see Table 1). A relatively low first-year GPA (approximately B-) rising to a GPA just shy of a B+ was chosen as an indication that the applicant worked to increase his overall GPA. GRE scores for the two conditions were selected to ensure variability in admission decisions.

### Measures

Participants were asked to rate the likelihood on a scale of 0 to 100 percent of making each of three decisions

for the applicant, in this order: interview, admission, and funding (“Based on the information provided, how likely are you to invite Joe for an interview/admit Joe to your program/provide Joe with a fellowship or graduate assistantship for his first year of the program?”). After each decision, participants were asked if they would request additional details about the applicant (“What, if any, additional information would you like to know about Joe or his application to make a decision to *interview/admit/make a decision to fund* him?”). Likelihood of funding was not analyzed because there was a great deal of missing data for this variable. Participants noted that they do not make funding decisions and so were not able to provide a rating or that they only admit students they would fund. Thus, this variable was not analyzed further. It was possible that participants could go back and edit an earlier decision question after responding to the later decision question. If they did, it is also possible that reflecting on a later decision (*e.g.*, funding) may have affected an earlier decision (*e.g.*, interview or admission). However, no data are available to identify whether earlier responses were changed retroactively.

Sixty-six percent and 74 percent of participants indicated that they would have requested more information about Joe to make a decision to interview or admit him, respectively. The responses were reviewed by the first author to identify a preliminary set of categories. Faculty asked for the following information: (1) reasons for low GPA, (2) reasons for GRE score, (3) applicant’s interest in the program of study, (4) transcript or particular course grades, (5) information about research or technical skills, (6) communication skills, including writing skills, (7) personal qualities, (8) letters of recommendation, (9) demographic information, (10) other information (*e.g.*, financial need). Two raters who were blind to the vignette randomization then coded each response using these categories. Correcting for chance, inter-rater agreement for open-ended interview and admission responses was excellent across coding categories (interview mean kappa=0.89; admission mean kappa=0.93). Some participants received more than one code if their response fit more than one category. (Table 2 shows the frequencies of the codes.)

**TABLE 1** ➤ Applicant Score Information

GPA	
First-Year	2.75/4.0
Overall	3.2/4.0
GRE	
Verbal Reasoning	55th <sup>1</sup> vs. 75th <sup>2</sup> percentile
Quantitative Reasoning	40th <sup>1</sup> vs. 80th <sup>2</sup> percentile
Analytical Writing	50th <sup>1</sup> vs. 60th <sup>2</sup> percentile

GRE Prompt:

<sup>1</sup> Average

<sup>2</sup> High

**TABLE 2** ➤ Additional Information Requested by Faculty Participants

Information Category	Interview		Admission	
	n	%	n	%
Reasons for Low GPA	5	8.1	3	4.8
Reasons for GRE	6	9.7	3	4.8
Applicant’s Interest in the Program	7	11.3	11	17.7
Transcript or Specific Course Grades	10	16.1	5	8.1
Research and/or Technical Skills	10	16.1	9	14.5
Communication Skills	13	21.0	18	29.0
Personal Qualities	1	1.6	9	14.5
Letters of Recommendation	21	33.9	18	29.0
Demographic Information	2	3.2	1	1.6
Other	3	4.8	5	8.1

Next, participants were taken to a new screen (from which they were not able to change their previous responses). Participants then responded to survey items to assess demographics (*e.g.*, sex, degree year, academic discipline). To assess the first-generation college student status of faculty participants, they were also asked to indicate whether neither, one, or both of their parents had earned a bachelor’s degree. Faculty participants were coded as first-generation college students if they reported that neither of their parents had earned a bachelor’s degree.

Empathic concern and perspective taking were assessed with the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis 1980), which has been used in several studies to assess

dispositional empathic tendencies (Davis 2015). Inter-item reliability for the empathic concern scale was low ( $\alpha=0.49$ ) but was adequate for the perspective-taking scale ( $\alpha=0.77$ ).

Belief in a meritocracy regarding success in school and academic pursuits was assessed with a psychometrically sound measure used in prior work (Wiederkehr, Bonnot, Krauth-Gruber; Darnon 2015). Inter-item reliability was adequate ( $\alpha=0.74$ ).

## Results

### *Participant Characteristics*

The sample consisted of nearly equal numbers of female ( $n=32$ ) and male ( $n=30$ ) participants. Nearly all ( $n=59$ ) held a doctorate, with the remaining three holding a master's degree or equivalent. Eleven of the participants (18 percent) were first-generation college students; 50 (81 percent) were not; one participant did not respond to the question. Half of the sample ( $n=31$ ) were from the social and behavioral sciences, education, and business; 15 (24 percent) were from the biomedical sciences; 11 (18 percent) were from the arts and humanities; and four (6 percent) were from STEM disciplines. One participant (6 percent) did not identify with any of these groups.

**TABLE 3** ► Descriptive Statistics for Non-Categorical Participant Characteristics

	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Age	49.2	10.1	28	77
Years of Service	13.2	9.2	0	39
Empathic Concern	22.1	3.1	14	28
Perspective Taking	22.1	4.3	10	30
Meritocratic Beliefs	25.9	6.4	14	39

Table 3 shows descriptive statistics for the non-categorical participant characteristics. All had approximately normal distributions. Table 4 shows the zero-order correlations between them. Not surprisingly, age and years of service as a faculty member at the institution were positively correlated. Perspective taking was

inversely correlated with age and positively correlated with empathic concern. In addition, the correlation between greater perspective taking and less strongly held meritocratic beliefs approached significance.

T tests were used to assess the relationships between the dichotomous participant characteristics (sex and first-generation college student) and the non-categorical ones. Participants who were themselves first-generation college students had significantly higher scores on empathic concern ( $t[56]=-2.533$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) and on perspective taking ( $t[56]=-2.102$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) (empathic concern  $M=24.3$ ,  $SD=1.25$ ; perspective-taking  $M=24.7$ ,  $SD=4.55$ ) than did participants who were not first-generation college students (empathic concern  $M=21.7$ ,  $SD=3.22$ ; perspective-taking  $M=21.8$ ,  $SD=3.93$ ). There were no significant differences on age, years of service, or meritocratic beliefs. The t tests were performed a second time with participant sex as the independent variable. Female and male participants did not differ significantly on any of the variables.

Finally, participant background characteristics were examined as potential covariates of the two main outcome variables: likelihood of interviewing the applicant presented in the vignette and likelihood of admitting that applicant. Age and years served were not significantly correlated with these outcomes. Female and male participants did not differ significantly on either likelihood of interviewing or offering admission.

### *Applicant and Faculty Characteristics as Correlates of Admission Decisions*

Zero-order correlations were computed between the key participant characteristics (empathic concern, perspective taking, and meritocratic beliefs) and the two main outcome variables: likelihood of interviewing the applicant whose vignette they read and likelihood of admitting that applicant. Just one of these six correlations was significant: Participants with higher empathic concern scores were more likely to interview the applicant ( $r[56]=0.320$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

T tests were performed using first-generation status of the participant as the independent variable and likelihood of interviewing or offering admission as the depen-

dent variable. First-generation participants gave significantly higher likelihoods of admittance than participants who were not first-generation students ( $t[56]=-2.108$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). There was no difference in terms of interview likelihoods.

Table 5 shows the mean percent likelihood ratings for both interviewing and admitting the applicant in each vignette. Several regression models were fitted to the data to address the primary research questions. The starting point was a simple model containing the applicant's GRE scores (high vs. average) and whether the applicant was noted as being a first-generation college student. No faculty participant characteristics were included in this first model. There was a significant main effect of applicant GRE score ( $t[57]=3.233$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Applicants with high GRE scores were 19 percent more likely to be granted an interview than were those with average GRE scores. Mention of the applicant's status as a first-generation college student did not have an effect, and there was no statistical interaction between GRE scores and the applicant's first-generation status.

The same pattern held with admission likelihood as with the dependent variable. Applicants with high GRE scores were 17 percent more likely to be admitted than were those with average GRE scores ( $t[56]=2.696$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Mention of the applicant's status as a first-generation college student did not have an effect, and there was no interaction.

### *Interactions Between Applicant and Faculty Characteristics*

It was expected that individual differences among faculty may interact with information about the applicant in predicting admission decisions. Thus, a separate

**TABLE 4** ► Zero-Order Correlations for Non-Categorical Participant Characteristics

	Years of Service	Empathic Concern	Perspective Taking	Meritocratic Beliefs
Age	0.695 <sup>c</sup>	-0.071	-0.315 <sup>b</sup>	0.049
Years of Service		0.011	-0.155	0.020
Empathic Concern			0.510 <sup>c</sup>	-0.111
Perspective Taking				-0.247 <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>  $p < 0.06$ ; <sup>b</sup>  $p < 0.05$ ; <sup>c</sup>  $p < 0.001$

**TABLE 5** ► Mean Likelihood Ratings for Interviewing and Admitting Applicants

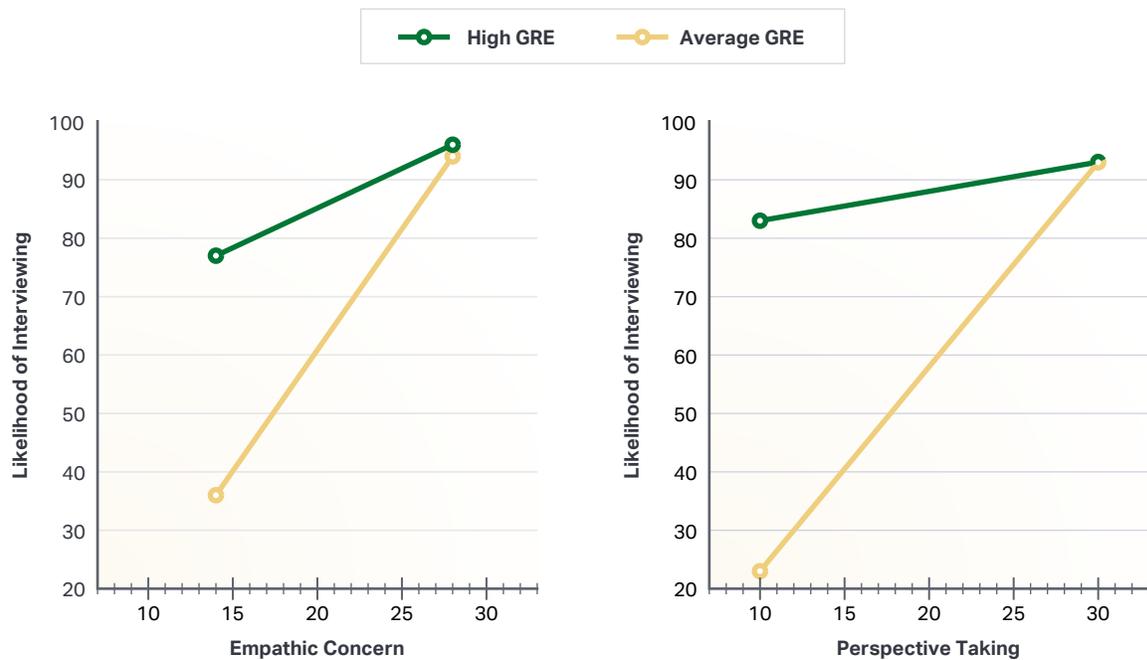
		Average GRE		High GRE	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
First-Generation Status Mentioned	Interview	64.9	38.6	89.4	13.2
	Admit	52.9	35.9	78.3	18.1
First-Generation Status Not Mentioned	Interview	73.6	24.9	87.8	13.5
	Admit	63.2	17.2	72.9	24.8

model was fitted for each of the participant characteristics in which that characteristic was allowed to interact with the two variables experimentally manipulated (*i.e.*, high vs. average GRE and mention vs. no mention of the applicant's first-generation status).

Two of the participant characteristics interacted with applicants' GRE scores in predicting the likelihood that an applicant would be interviewed: one was the participant's empathic concern ( $t[51]=-2.231$ ,  $p<0.05$ ); the other was the participant's perspective taking ( $t[51]=-2.335$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

Figure 1 shows the conditional effects of empathic concern (left panel) or perspective taking (right panel) for the two levels of GRE scores. In both cases, the slopes for applicants with average GRE scores are significantly different from zero while the slopes for applicants with high GRE scores are not.

Turning next to the likelihood of admitting an applicant as the dependent variable, there was a main effect of empathic concern ( $t[53]=2.175$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Consistent with the zero-order correlation discussed previously, higher scores on empathic concern were associated with greater likelihoods of offering admission.



**FIGURE 1** ▶ Likelihood of Interviewing an Applicant as a Function of Applicant GRE Score and Participant Empathic Concern or Perspective Taking

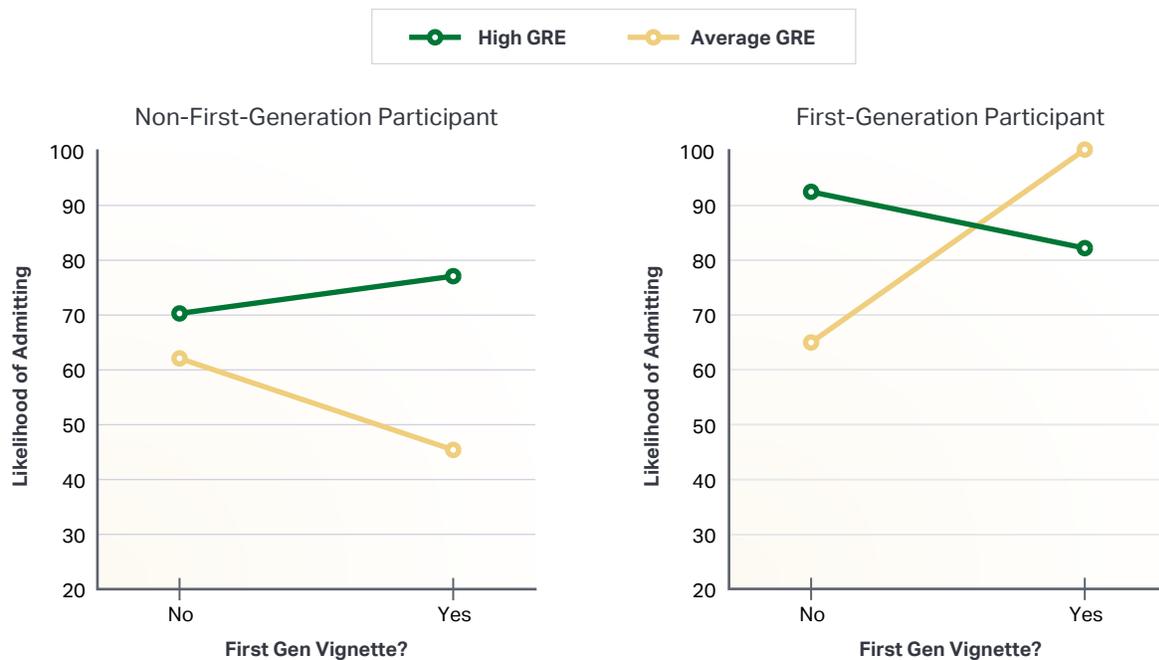
More interesting was a significant three-way interaction between the experimentally manipulated variables and the participant's status as a first-generation college student ( $t[50] = -2.151, p < 0.05$ ). An inspection of Figure 2 shows that faculty participants who were not first-generation college students provided lower likelihoods of admitting the applicant with the average GRE score if the vignette made mention of the applicant's first-generation college student status than if the vignette did not mention this status. When the GRE scores were higher in these vignettes, there was a slightly higher likelihood of admitting the applicant whose first-generation status was mentioned than of admitting the applicant whose first-generation status was not mentioned.

In contrast, faculty participants who were first-generation college students were more likely to admit the applicant with an average GRE score if the vignette mentioned the applicant's first-generation status. These faculty were also slightly less likely to admit the applicant with the high GRE score if the applicant also was a first-generation college student.

### *Additional Information Requested by Faculty Participants*

Recall that participants could indicate whether they would like to have had additional information about the applicant. Approximately two-thirds ( $n = 42$ ) and three-quarters ( $n = 46$ ) requested additional information for their interview and admit decisions, respectively. Participants who asked for any information reported a lower likelihood of admittance ( $M = 62.97$  percent,  $SD = 25.48$ ) than did participants who did not request additional information ( $M = 79.80$  percent,  $SD = 21.15$ ),  $t(57) = 2.54, p = 0.014$ . No such difference was found for interview likelihood. There were also no main or interactive effects of vignette on the likelihood of requesting additional information about the applicant, nor were first-generation participants more or less likely to request additional information.

However, the types of information requested by the participant were related to interview likelihood. Specifically, participants who requested information about the applicant's GRE score were less likely to interview the



**FIGURE 2** ➤ Likelihood of Admitting an Applicant as a Function of Applicant GRE Score, Mention That Applicant is a First-Generation College Student, and Participant Status as First-Generation College Student

applicant ( $M = 53.67$ ,  $SD = 27.54$ ) than were those who did not ask about the GRE score ( $M = 84.07$ ,  $SD = 21.84$ ),  $t(58) = 3.16$ ,  $p = 0.003$ . Participants who asked to see the applicant's transcripts or particular course grades were also less likely to interview the applicant ( $M = 63.63$ ;  $SD = 33.84$ ) than were participants who did not request this information ( $M = 83.71$ ,  $SD = 21.36$ ),  $t(58) = 2.28$ ,  $p = 0.026$ . Finally, similar differences were observed with respect to requesting information about the applicant's research skills (requested  $M = 66.20$ ,  $SD = 35.48$ ; not requested  $M = 84.00$ ,  $SD = 20.26$ ),  $t(58) = 2.21$ ,  $p = 0.031$ . None of the information requested after making admission ratings was associated with admittance likelihood.

## Discussion

Research has demonstrated that a key phase of effective graduate enrollment management is the graduate admission process. This critical juncture is susceptible to choices that interfere with efforts to enhance diversity (Posselt 2014). Students whose parents have not earned a bachelor's degree are underrepresented in doctoral

programs; however, these students have received little attention with respect to diversity efforts in graduate education. Therefore, one purpose of this study was to test the extent to which faculty reviewers would account for this status during their doctoral program admission decisions. The current study also investigated the role of standardized test scores and faculty reviewers' own personal characteristics in the admission decision-making process.

With respect to applicant characteristics, faculty participants were more likely to interview and admit applicants with higher standardized test scores. This should be no surprise as research has demonstrated the predictive validity of the GRE (Kuncel *et al.* 2001) and illuminated graduate admission processes at elite institutions (Posselt 2014). It was expected that the vignettes mentioning first-generation college student status would receive less favorable decisions. Generally, this proved not to be the case, although the effects of student status depended on GRE scores and faculty characteristics (as described below).

With respect to faculty characteristics, participants with a greater tendency to “feel for” others (*i.e.*, empathic concern: Davis 2015) were more likely to interview applicants, and first-generation faculty participants were more likely to admit them. These findings support the hypothesis that an empathic orientation may lead to reframing of applications in a more positive light. In addition, empathic concern scores were greater among faculty who were first-generation college students than among those whose parents had earned at least a bachelor’s degree. It is possible that given their personal experience, faculty who had been first-generation college students were more likely to take an empathic orientation, but this collection of results suggests that an empathic orientation is not limited to faculty who had this experience themselves.

The impact of personal experiences and an empathic orientation also depended on applicant characteristics, as evidenced by several statistically significant interactions predicting the likelihood of interview and admission. Greater empathic concern and perspective taking were associated with a higher likelihood of interviewing the applicant when faculty reviewed the applicant with the average GRE score. When faculty received the high-GRE vignette, empathic concern and perspective taking were not associated with likelihood of interview. There may be two reasons for these findings: First, an empathic orientation, regardless of the faculty member’s status as a first-generation college student, may lead him to consider situational factors that may have affected the applicant’s academic trajectory as an undergraduate. For instance, each vignette noted that the applicant had a low first-year GPA and that he also worked part time and volunteered. Second, the fact that empathic orientation did not affect admission likelihood when GRE scores were higher demonstrates that standardized test scores matter greatly. As noted by a growing number of researchers, many faculty members implicitly believe that as gatekeepers of the profession, they must judge merit or “deservingness” to pursue doctoral education on the basis of evidence (Jury, Smeding, and Darnon 2015; Smith and Garrison 2005). Standardized test scores have become the gold standard of evidence, but merit

can be construed in other ways, such as how well a particular student can fulfill valued goals set forth by the university or program (*e.g.*, research productivity: Hall, O’Connell, and Cook 2017; civic-mindedness: Hurtado and DeAngelo 2012; inclusive excellence: Posselt 2014).

Applicant characteristics (first-generation college student status and GRE score) interacted with first-generation status of the faculty participant to predict the likelihood of admittance. Of particular interest are the admission likelihoods for the applicants with average GRE scores. First-generation faculty participants appeared more likely to admit first-generation applicants than applicants with no mention of this status. In contrast, faculty who were not first-generation college students appeared to favor the applicant whose vignette did not mention first-generation status. One possible interpretation of this finding supports theories of in-group bias (Hewstone *et al.* 2002). Although faculty GRE scores were not collected, it can be hypothesized on the basis of ETS data (Educational Testing Service 2016b) that faculty who were first-generation college students had earned lower GRE scores than had faculty who were not first-generation college students. If this is the case, then perhaps first-generation faculty are expressing a bias toward applicants like themselves because the applicants are appraised as in-group members. It is also possible that first-generation faculty can empathize with the situational constraints that the first-generation, average-scoring GRE applicant may have faced, supporting an empathy effect. Consistent with the empathic concern and perspective-taking findings in which it was found that empathic orientation interacted with GRE scores, personal experience as a first-generation college student may elicit empathy for the applicant. This explanation also may explain why first-generation college student faculty reported a slightly lower likelihood of admitting the applicant with the high GRE scores if the vignette included mention of first-generation status than if the vignette omitted this information. Perhaps the high-scoring first-generation applicant is viewed as part of the “out group,” or the faculty participant did not perceive any compelling mitigating circumstances in the vignette.

In contrast, faculty who were not first-generation college students may be aware of the research on the challenges confronted by first-generation college students. Faced with the prospect of mentoring students who may need to accommodate to different cultural demands (Martinez *et al.* 2009; Steele 1997; Stephens, Fryburg *et al.* 2012; Valentine *et al.* 2016), these faculty may be more hesitant to admit these students unless they have mitigating information (*e.g.*, high GRE scores). These interpretations are speculative given the small sample size, and the results should be replicated before drawing conclusions. Additional work to test the role of the characteristics that faculty members bring to the evaluation of applicants from different backgrounds is recommended.

As part of the current study, faculty participants were permitted to request additional information about the applicants to provide clues as to the manner in which they interpreted the vignettes. The most requested information included letters of recommendation and communication skills, followed closely by research and technical skills, interest in the program of study, the transcript, and, at the admitting stage, personal qualities (*e.g.*, personality characteristics, persistence, enthusiasm, maturity). Faculty members who asked for transcripts and for information about the applicant's research skills were less likely to interview the applicant; these differences did not depend on applicant and faculty characteristics. It is unclear how additional information about the applicant's file would have been used had it been available. Additional evidence can be used to give a student the "benefit of the doubt," but it can also be used to justify ruling out a candidate. For example, higher education selection studies have found that search committees often disqualify candidates based on their appraisals of their personalities and the extent to which they anticipate the candidates will fit in socially and culturally (Danowitz-Sagarra 2002; Posselt 2014). Certain students may be at a disadvantage with regard to meeting the poorly defined standard of "good fit." For example, first-generation college students, whose values and experiences may differ from those of students whose parents attended college (*e.g.*,

Martinez *et al.* 2009; Stephens, Townsend *et al.* 2012) may be evaluated less positively because they seem not to fit the norm, perhaps in that they do not use the same expressions or formal academic language as peers who were raised by college-educated parents. The findings that interview and admission decisions are based on a combination of factors suggest that additional research is needed to better understand how multiple pieces of admission information are evaluated differently depending on both applicant and faculty characteristics.

The results of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, there are several limitations concerning the sample. Additional research is needed to determine if the findings are generalizable to other universities and specific disciplines. In addition, the proportion of faculty members who themselves had been first-generation college students was low. No publications or reports seem to document the numbers of such faculty members; however, the low numbers of first-generation college students who pursue and earn doctoral degrees (Choy 2001; Hoffer *et al.* 2003; National Science Foundation 2017) suggests that the sample is representative of faculty at other college campuses. Race and ethnicity data were not collected because of the concern that faculty who were members of minority groups underrepresented in higher education would be easily identified. Additional research on first-generation and other identities such as race, ethnicity, disability, sex, gender, and sexual orientation is needed. A second limitation concerns the ecological validity of the study as an experimental design with a brief vignette. Additional research could use expanded admission portfolios that include curriculum vitae, personal statements, and letters of recommendation. On average, first-generation students have lower GRE scores than do students whose parents enrolled in college (Educational Testing Service 2016b); other differences in cultural capital and socioeconomic background also exist (Carlton 2015; Martinez *et al.* 2009). Thus, it may be difficult to construct equivalent portfolios that are also representative of the student applicant population. Focus groups and interviews (see Posselt 2014) may also be utilized to delve into the thought processes of how different

groups of people use experimental and actual materials for admission decision making. Last, while meritocratic beliefs (that is, that hard work always results in positive outcomes) were hypothesized to reduce empathic capacity, this variable did not contribute much beyond a marginal and negative correlation with perspective taking. It is possible either that other measures tailored to the graduate education context could be developed and tested or that these beliefs are not as important as other faculty characteristics.

Despite these limitations, the current findings have implications for research and practice concerning diversity in graduate education. An empathic orientation and experience as a first-generation college student increase the likelihood that faculty will make favorable graduate admission decisions, especially when the applicant has not earned a high GRE score. The effect of faculty's first-generation status is even more pronounced when the applicant is also a first-generation college student. One could argue that giving more graduate school applicants the benefit of the doubt would make a difficult selection task even more difficult, but the current study suggests that some faculty may be more amenable to holistic review. Such review typically includes clear definitions and rationales of ideal applicant characteristics relative to a program's mission and evaluations of the applicant's entire package rather than making initial determinations on the basis of standardized test scores (American Association of Medical Colleges 2010; Educational Testing Service 2016a; Kent and McCarthy 2016). Increasingly, researchers, funding agencies, universities, and employers are interested in developing admission processes that can enhance the educational and creative missions of their organizations (Hurtado 2001; Valentine and Collins 2015). Calls for the creation of a "culture of performance" in graduate education may also provide GEM professionals with the tools to document how holistic review meets SEM standards and produces desired student and institutional outcomes (Bolyard 2013). Continued research of graduate admission using experimental and in-vivo designs may provide clarity as to the best ways to enact holistic review with the full cooperation of faculty members.

The current findings regarding the type of information that is often requested to further evaluate applicants imply that more guidance should be given to undergraduates about graduate careers, including the successful preparation of graduate applications (tasks in which SEM and GEM professionals are already engaged). First-generation college students across racial and socioeconomic categories often lack cultural capital or "insider knowledge" regarding how to succeed in higher education (Soria and Stebleton 2012) and consequently may be unaware of the job prospects available to people with advanced degrees. They and other students may not learn about these careers until their final years as undergraduates, by which time they may choose other careers. Those students who lack cultural capital and who do pursue graduate education may be less knowledgeable about the graduate application process. For example, students may be unaware of the importance of research experience outside the classroom and may lack the research skills and strong letters of recommendation that faculty emphasized in the current study. In addition to addressing these pipeline issues, faculty may benefit from training specific to equity and inclusion; Milkman *et al.* (2015) found that gender and racial bias occur even before the graduate admission stage. Programs like the McNair Scholars Program,<sup>2</sup> the National Research Mentoring Network,<sup>3</sup> and NIH Building Infrastructure Leading to Diversity (BUILD) Initiative<sup>4</sup> can counter these trends by offering faculty mentors and students knowledge about mentoring and career paths as well as training in essential research skills so they can succeed in graduate education and the workforce.

<sup>2</sup> See <mcnairscholars.com>.

<sup>3</sup> See <nrmnet.net>.

<sup>4</sup> See <nigms.nih.gov/training/dpc/Pages/build.aspx>.

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