

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Administrator Perspectives on the Relationship between Campus Environments and Campus Visits and Student College Choice and Persistence

By Scott Secore

The reasons a student may choose to enroll and matriculate at a particular postsecondary institution are many. Yet a sense of belonging and a strong emotional connection often supply all the incentive students need. Campus environments play a central role in the college choice process as the ecology, climate, and culture of an institution profoundly influence student perceptions and behaviors. Higher education leadership must take this into consideration if they hope to increase and maintain enrollment numbers. Yet the literature rarely reports the institutional point of view. This study surveyed higher education administrators to discern whether they heed student messages regarding the significance of campus environments and visits to college choice and persistence. Statistical and subjective analysis—via independent samples *t*-testing and open-ended questioning—concluded that administrator perspectives concerning the campus environment closely correspond with prevailing student perspectives. This is good news for higher education.

Understanding how and why a student chooses to enroll at a particular higher education institution has been a topic of scrutiny and disputation for much of the past century. As early as the 1920s, educational researchers (Comfort 1925, Halle 1928) discussed how the college one attended had considerable bearing on one's future

(Hossler and Palmer 2008). Halle (1928) asserted, "The choice of a college is vital. So many young people go to the wrong institution, not knowing that there are almost as many kinds of colleges as there are of individual character and needs" (5). At the time, higher education was funded primarily through student tuition; minimal

aid in the form of scholarships, fellowships, and state government funds was available to students (Kinzie, Palmer, Hayek, Hossler, Jacob and Cummings 2004). Postsecondary attendance was paltry—limited principally to middle- and upper-class white males—and college choice was influenced primarily by media such as brochures, pictures, catalogs, and word of mouth. Final determinations were based predominantly on factors such as institutional reputation, size, location, and political/religious association (Kinzie, *et al.* 2004).

After World War II, U.S. higher education experienced a remarkable growth spurt. Government-sponsored higher education initiatives such as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (the GI Bill), the National Defense Education Act of 1958 (NDEA), the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA), and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) greatly extended access to postsecondary education by providing students and institutions with financial incentives and resources for maturation. Predictably, postsecondary enrollment soared, established institutions expanded, new institutions were founded, and competition blossomed. As a result, college choice shifted: Whereas historically students had decided which college to attend primarily on the basis of institutional characteristics, they now considered cultural and personal factors such as practicality, educational background, parental interests, and socioeconomic status (Kinzie, *et al.* 2004; Richards and Holland 1965). External influences also began to fluctuate more widely. Whereas students once relied solely on brochures and word of mouth to inform their decision making, they now had the option of visiting college campuses. In mailing students their application, many colleges began enclosing letters encouraging them to visit (Kinzie, *et al.* 2004). Myriad studies reveal that campus visits and tours are the preeminent factor influencing students' college choice (Barrett 2014, Brown 2010, Hesel 2004, Okerson 2016, Spoon 2006). One could evince that the introduction of campus visits fundamentally transformed the way in which students and institutions approach entry into higher education.

Visits are a decidedly powerful means of introducing prospective students to the campus environment

(*e.g.*, the ecology, climate, and culture of the institution). Indeed, the environment has a profound impact on student cognition and behavior. For better or worse, the physical properties, social ethos, and intangible aesthetics of a college campus combine to influence student perceptions, motivations, and actions. The "feelings" elicited by being on campus often determine not only a student's relationship with the institution but also the student's prospective social and academic ventures at the institution. Students with positive feelings about a particular institution often forge an emotional connection with it. Such a connection gives the student a sense of belonging and acceptance. Students who feel they belong and have value are more likely to enroll and ultimately matriculate (Kuh 2009). Matriculating students who continue to feel valued tend to develop stronger connections to their institutions. In turn, they are more likely to participate in educationally purposeful activities, establish meaningful relationships, take advantage of institutional resources, and report higher levels of satisfaction with their college experience (Cuseo, Fecas and Thompson 2007; Harrington 2014; Kuh 2009; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayek 2006; Schreiner 2009). According to Kuh (2009), "When students' expectations match their experiences in college, students are more likely to be satisfied and persist to graduation" (61).

Campus visits furnish students, families, and institutions with a shared experience that is uniquely intangible, intimate, and indelible—three powerful effects often lost when not experienced firsthand. Yet visiting a college campus is not always feasible (*e.g.*, cost, location, time commitment, etc.), and technological advancements such as the Internet, mobile phones, and social media have streamlined contemporary information gathering. As a result, differentiating what does or does not work is a challenge for today's higher education leaders, including presidents, vice presidents, provosts, enrollment managers, admissions directors, deans, department chairpersons, etc. With constantly changing technological and economic climates—and the cyclical processes of recruitment and retention—administrators must perpetually devote adequate resources (time, money, and staff) for the examination and application of

strategies requisite for successful enrollment management. Studies suggest that favorable campus visits consistently translate into significant yield for institutions (Baskin 2015, Hope 2015, Ruffalo Noel-Levitz 2017). Because campus environments enable confident promulgation of institutional character and values and campus visits afford the institution a “one-shot” opportunity to make a positive impression, it is imperative that institutional leaders put their best foot forward (Secore 2018b). Administrators—as well as faculty and staff—must have a thorough understanding of their respective institutional environments and of their effects on a student’s psyche. Only by completely understanding what prospective students anticipate from a college campus and how matriculating students feel about current campus contexts can administrators provide the best possible environment for their social and academic success. Put simply, higher education marketing and admissions are big business; institutions would be wise to orient their enrollment strategies, admissions practices, and retention efforts toward optimizing their campus environments and visit experiences (Secore 2018a).

Purpose

Literature indicates that college campus environments have a commanding effect on students’ psychological and emotional outlooks as well as their conscious and overt behaviors. Research further indicates that a campus visit—primarily in the form of a campus tour—is the most effectual method for tapping into a prospective student’s psyche during the college search process. Yet despite profuse research that both substantiates the psychosocial implications of campus environments on cognition and behavior and affirms the effectiveness and value of campus visits relative to enrollment, it is uncertain whether administrators actively (and/or proactively) heed its findings. One notable study broached this topic: Johnston (2010) surveyed students and employees at an unidentified university to gauge their opinions as to which information sources (*e.g.*, campus visits, social media, websites, family and friends, high school counselors, etc.) predominantly influence students’ college choice. The results indicated a significant gulf between

student and employee opinions: Students ranked campus visits as being highly influential whereas employees underestimated the potential of the campus visit, ranking it well below parental and peer influence, social media and websites, and even print mailings.

Providing clarity on the institutional perspective is crucial. The current study was conducted to address an ostensible gap in the literature regarding institutional perspectives and to discern whether administrators truly acknowledge student affirmations concerning campus environments and visits. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

- Do administrators believe that campus environments and campus visits/tours have an effect on recruitment and retention efforts at their respective institutions?
- Is there a significant difference in attitude/opinion between administrators based on leadership status (*i.e.*, job title/function) and geographical location (U.S. region)?
- Do administrators share similar convictions about the significance of campus environments and campus visits/tours toward both recruitment and retention, as students reportedly do?

Paradigm/Design

This study surveyed institutional leaders (*i.e.*, upper administration) employed at independent higher education institutions in eleven states spanning the south and midwest regions of the United States: Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. Survey participants represented institutions belonging to ten higher education consortia: Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida (ICUF); Georgia Independent College Association (GICA); Independent Colleges of Indiana (ICI); Kansas Independent College Association (KICA); Association of Independent Kentucky Colleges and Universities (AIKCU); Missouri Department of Higher Education (MDHE); North Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities (NCICU); Association of Independent Colleges and Universities of Ohio (AICUO); South Carolina Independent Colleges and Universities

(SCICU); and Appalachian College Association (ACA). Each consortium comprises select private, non-profit, regionally accredited, four-year, baccalaureate-granting higher education institutions in its respective state.

All of the consortia (and their member institutions) were purposely selected for this study based on assumptions and conventions inherent in private university and college operations. While the fiscal and ideological actualities of public and private higher education business models are a matter beyond the scope of this study, they are noteworthy. Similar to factors that influence a student's college choice, public and private higher education institutions have different economic and sociological objectives that influence not only how they enroll students but also which students they enroll (Lederman 2013). The literature commonly suggests that in response to state officials, public colleges and universities focus primarily on providing affordable education to in-state students; by contrast, private colleges and universities (driven by endowments) are decidedly selective and preoccupied with maximizing their quality and reputations (Chingos 2017; Epple, Romano, Sarpea and Sieg 2013; Lederman 2013). As a result, the recruitment and retention dynamics—as well as the risks and incentives—at private institutions are arguably more consequential than are those of public, state-funded institutions.

Given this study's goal of quantifying a problem and understanding its prevalence by looking for results that could be projected to a larger population, a deductive framework and quantitative methodology were utilized (Mora 2010). However, where qualitative research affords data collection in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, inductive data analysis is useful for establishing patterns or themes of a personalized nature (Creswell 2007). For that reason, a supplementary qualitative approach was also utilized. A descriptive and non-experimental approach was employed, and found differences were juxtaposed by means of comparative analysis.

Data for this study were collected through a short, Web-based, independent, Likert-type survey instrument. The survey was in three sections—campus environments, recruitment, and retention—and comprised

twelve questions—one concerning campus environments, six concerning recruitment, and five concerning retention (*see* Table 1, on page 29). The survey also incorporated three open-ended questions (one at the end of each section). Surveys were disseminated electronically to administrators with responsibility for policy making, oversight, and superintendence of strategic enrollment management processes at each consortium's member institutions. While higher education institutions typically contain similar hierarchical structures, power structures are often distinctive, and enrollment management oversight often spans several occupational roles with varying titles and reports. For these reasons, surveys were distributed primarily to presidents, vice presidents and associate vice presidents of enrollment/admissions, provosts, deans/directors of admissions/enrollment, and assistant/associate deans/directors of admissions/enrollment. Depending upon institutional hierarchy and titling configuration, surveys were also distributed to individuals with such titles as vice president of academic affairs, enrollment management coordinator, and director of student success.

The survey was open to respondents for approximately one month during spring (March/April) 2018. Survey questions were scored using a four-point scale: 4=strongly agree, 3=agree, 2=disagree, and 1=strongly disagree. A four-point scale was utilized to circumvent otherwise anodyne and irresolute responses. All survey responses were anonymous, with no identifying data. However, for purposes of pertinent data collection and analysis, participants' official job titles and the states in which they were employed were disclosed.

On the basis of their job title/administrative function, survey respondents were assigned to either of two diagnostic categories. Comparing the specific nuances that delineate title and function among colleagues—and thereby distinguishing “executive” from “senior-level” leadership—is beyond the scope of this study, but it is important to note that in contemporary higher education, many academic and support services administrators serve as both “visionary” and “manager” in all forms of political, economic, and social engagement (Secore 2016). From an organizational context, the role of leader—as

well as the concept of leadership—could be considered aberrant as the composition and strategic layout of higher education often run counter to those of corporations, small business, government agencies, etc.). For example, executive roles (as of a president, vice president, or provost) are mostly analogous to their counterparts in other sectors. However, academic and support services roles (as of deans and directors) are relatively unusual in sectors other than higher education and give rise to complications that further confound the nature of those positions (Black 2015, Secore 2016). For example, deans occupy a unique place in the continuum of academic and support services administrators as they are ordinarily the link between departments and upper administration (Illinois State University n.d.). In light of this, the use of regnant descriptors (*i.e.*, utilitarian stereotypes) was requisite for both codification and examination purposes. Consequently, presidents, vice presidents and associate vice presidents of enrollment/admissions and provosts were combined to represent executive-level leadership; they constitute group one in the first portion of this study. Directors and deans as well as associate and/or assistant directors of admissions/enrollment were combined to represent senior-level leadership; they constitute group two in the first portion of this study (*see* Table 2, on page 30).

TABLE 1 ► Survey Sections/Questions

Question	Campus Environment
1	I believe that my institution considers the campus environment (<i>i.e.</i> , man-made and natural aesthetics, social ethos, cultural capital, institutional character, diversity, etc.) to be an admirable characteristic—and a critical component—of our institution (and its mission).
Recruitment	
2	I believe that campus visitations and tours influence the decision of college choice for prospective students.
3	I believe that campus visitations and tours are more influential than factors such as parental influence, social media, websites, direct mailings, guidance counselors, etc. in regard to student college choice.
4	I believe that my institution considers campus visitations and tours to be significant marketing tools for effective recruitment.
5	I believe that my institution puts considerable effort into making campus visitations and tours favorably memorable experiences for prospective students and their families.
6	I believe that my institution actively considers student needs and feelings about the campus environment when making critical decisions that will impact recruitment.
7	I believe that my institution's campus environment has a noticeable/observable impact on admissions.
Retention	
8	I believe that the campus environment influences student decisions to matriculate.
9	I believe that the campus environment is more influential than factors such as parental/peer influence and academic success in regard to persistence.
10	I believe that my institution puts considerable effort into maintaining the environment portrayed during the initial campus visitation/tour (thereby influencing/impacting persistence).
11	I believe that my institution actively considers student needs and feelings about the campus environment when making critical decisions that will impact retention.
12	I believe that my institution's campus environment has a noticeable/observable impact on retention.

Survey respondents were also divided into two categories based upon geographic location. The United States comprises several regions, each with its own rich history and cultural identity (Abadi 2018). Determining exactly where those regions start and end can be contentious. While debate over regional differentiation is beyond the scope of this study, the use of regnant descriptors (*i.e.*, *vox populi*) was once again requisite for both codification and examination purposes. Con-

TABLE 2 ► Survey Respondents by Job Title

Classification	n	%
Executive Level		
President	5	4.8
Vice President	39	37.5
Associate Vice President	6	5.7
Provost	15	14.4
Total	65	62.5
Senior Level		
Dean	6	5.7
Director	29	27.8
Associate/Assistant Director	3	2.8
Other	1	0.9
Total	39	37.5
Aggregate	104	100.0

TABLE 3 ► Survey Respondents by Region

Classification	n	%
Southern Region		
Florida	2	1.9
Georgia	5	4.8
Kentucky	6	5.7
North Carolina	18	17.3
South Carolina	11	10.5
Tennessee	6	5.7
Virginia	1	0.9
Total	49	47.1
Midwestern Region		
Indiana	16	15.3
Kansas	18	17.3
Missouri	3	2.8
Ohio	18	17.3
Total	55	52.8
Aggregate	104	100.0

sequently, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia were combined to represent the southern states and constitute group one in the second portion of this study; Indiana, Kansas, Missouri, and Ohio were combined to represent the midwestern states and constitute group two in the second portion of this study (see Table 3).

An independent samples *t*-test was used, per survey question, to compare the mean differences between the two administrative groupings. Subjective data from the open-ended questions were reviewed for saliency.

Findings/Analysis

As a result of varying hierarchical structures, divergent job titles and responsibilities, unidentified differences between consortiums, and inconsistencies within the workforce (*i.e.*, turnover, hiring freezes, restructuring, varying employment numbers, etc.), an accurate number of potential survey participants—as well as the precise number of survey invitations actually distributed—is unknown. Ultimately, 104 surveys were completed/submitted. Of the respondents, 62.5 percent (*n* = 65) held executive-level leadership positions, and 37.5 percent (*n* = 39) held senior-level leadership positions. (See Table 2 for a listing of survey respondents by job title.) Nearly half (47.1 percent; *n* = 49) of respondents were employed at institutions located in southern states whereas 52.9 percent (*n* = 55) were employed at institutions located in midwestern states. (See Table 3 for a listing of survey respondents by institutional region.)

■ **Research Question 1:** Do administrators believe that campus environments and campus visits/tours have an effect on recruitment and retention efforts at their respective institutions? Survey results clearly indicate that higher education administrators believe that campus environments as well as campus visits and tours have a profound effect on recruitment and retention efforts at their respective institutions. For example, approximately 70 percent of all administrators—regardless of job title/function and institutional region—responded “strongly agree” to the statement that their respective campus environment serves as an admirable characteristic and critical component of their institution and its mission. Likewise, approximately 60 percent of all administrators—regardless of job title/function and institutional region—also responded “strongly agree” to a series of questions regarding the advantageousness of campus visits and tours to recruitment praxes. In addition, 76 percent of executive-level administra-

TABLE 4 ► Survey Respondents by Job Title and State

Classification	Number of Respondents by State										
	FL	GA	IN	KS	KY	MO	NC	OH	SC	TN	VA
Executive Level											
President	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vice President	1	4	2	5	1	2	10	7	5	2	0
Associate Vice President	0	1	2	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0
Provost	0	0	0	6	2	0	1	2	0	3	1
Total	1	5	4	17	3	2	13	9	5	5	1
Senior Level											
Dean	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	2	1	0	0
Director	1	0	8	1	2	1	5	6	4	1	0
Associate/Assistant Director	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Total	1	0	12	1	3	1	5	9	6	1	0
Aggregate	2	5	16	18	6	3	18	18	11	6	1

tors and 81 percent of senior-level administrators either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that campus environments have bearing on student retention. Approximately 85 percent of all administrators—regardless of institutional region—either “strongly agreed” or “agreed” with statements concerning the effect of the campus environment on student retention. Tables 5 and 6 (on page 32) illustrate the aggregate response by job title and institutional region, respectively. (For a complete breakdown of responses by job title and state/region per survey question, please contact the author.)

■ **Research Question 2:** Is there a significant difference in attitude/opinion between administrators based on leadership status (*i.e.*, job title/administrative function) and geographic location (U.S. region)? Information collected from the survey was used to conduct a series of independent samples *t*-tests. For thoroughness and reporting accuracy, an independent samples *t*-test was performed for each of the twelve survey questions, per both inquiries (*i.e.*, job title and region), culminating in 24 total appraisals. The results indicate that there is no significant difference between administrators based on job title/function (at an alpha level of 0.05). (See Table 7, on

page 33.) Further, the results indicate that there is no statistical significance between administrators from southern and midwestern regions (alpha level of 0.05) save for a minimal difference pertaining to the observable impact of campus environments on retention ($t [102] = 1.75, p < 0.05$, one-tail). (See Table 8, on page 33.) These outcomes suggest that executive- and senior-level as well as southern and midwestern administrators are essentially concordant in their perspectives regarding the potent relationship that exists between campus environments and visits/tours and college choice and persistence. (For complete statistical analyses, please contact the author.)

■ **Research Question 3:** Do administrators share similar convictions about the significance of campus environments and campus visits/tours toward both recruitment and retention as students reportedly do? Based on the survey results and corresponding statistical analyses, it is relatively safe to infer that administrators indeed do share similar convictions as students about the significance of campus environments and campus visits/tours for both recruitment and retention. The substantive tally of favorable scores (*i.e.*, “strongly agree” and “agree”) suggests that institutional leaders’ perspectives align

TABLE 5 ► Aggregate Response by Job Title

Question(s)	Category	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Executive Level									
1	Campus Environment	45	69	19	29	1	2	0	0
2–7	Recruitment	235	60	132	34	24	6	2	1
8–12	Retention	118	36	130	40	35	11	7	2
Aggregate Total		353	49	262	37	59	8	9	1
Senior Level									
1	Campus Environment	28	72	10	26	1	3	0	0
2–7	Recruitment	145	62	76	32	12	5	1	0
8–12	Retention	71	36	87	45	35	18	2	1
Aggregate Total		216	50	163	38	47	11	3	1

TABLE 6 ► Aggregate Response by Institutional Region

Question(s)	Category	Strongly Agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly Disagree	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Southern									
1	Campus Environment	34	69	14	29	1	2	0	0
2–7	Recruitment	183	62	91	31	18	6	2	1
8–12	Retention	96	39	117	48	26	11	6	2
Aggregate Total		313	53	222	38	45	8	8	1
Midwestern									
1	Campus Environment	39	71	15	27	1	2	0	0
2–7	Recruitment	195	59	118	36	16	5	1	0
8–12	Retention	93	34	135	49	44	16	3	1
Aggregate Total		327	50	268	41	61	9	4	1

with student expectations and attitudes not only regarding campus environments but also regarding the overwhelming effect of campus environments on college choice and persistence.

Practical Significance

According to Kirk (1996), a major criticism of significance testing procedures is that they do not accurately tell researchers what they want to know, which often leads to fallacious and/or spurious reporting and conclusions. It is through a qualitative lens that veracity,

pragmatism, and administrator-student consonance are truly evident.

The survey's three open-ended questions were an invaluable asset to this study as they provided non-numerical insight to matters that are largely subjective. For example, several respondents described key ecological properties discussed in the literature (*e.g.*, green space, water features, campus compactness, grounds configuration, etc.) as being vital to both their recruitment and retention efforts. A vice president of enrollment from Ohio said:

Our college was intentionally set up so that every window has a nice view, and there is plenty of green space, a lake, benches, nature trail, gardens, statues, and a labyrinth so one can take advantage of a calming, beautiful place for reflection.

A dean of admissions from Kentucky said:

Our institution has worked to improve the physical characteristics of our campus environment, including the development of significant green spaces in and around the neighborhood. Students and families want to feel safe and comfortable, and the look and feel of buildings and the areas surrounding them are important. It's not just about addressing deferred maintenance but about creating warm, welcoming spaces.

The most noteworthy response concerning campus ecology, however, came from a provost in Kansas. Capturing the essence of ecological theory, the provost averred that:

Visitors often indicate the physical campus is an 'idyllic college campus.' There is a small stream running through campus, several of the buildings are on the historic register, and everything including residence halls and Greek houses are within a four-square-block footprint. The physical environment is important to all campuses as the physical footprint often provides the 'first impression' for a student and family. If they don't like what they see physically, they may not invest enough to meet faculty/staff or learn more about academic programs and options for engagement.

Respondents further endorsed views expressed in the literature by commenting on communal aspects of the campus environment. Numerous respondents remarked that it was important for students to “imagine themselves living, learning, and playing in that environment” while having “a positive feeling at the campus outside of class.” The two most notable responses spoke to the criticality of students being able to call a college campus “home.” A vice president of enrollment from North Carolina commented, “It's important for students to visit campus and visualize themselves there. Does it feel like home? Are they comfortable? Nothing can

TABLE 7 ► Independent Samples *t*-Test Results by Job Title

Question	Executive (Mean)	Senior (Mean)	<i>t</i> [102] =
1	3.68	3.69	0.15 ^a
2	3.89	3.87	0.31 ^a
3	3.06	3.05	0.07 ^a
4	3.86	3.79	0.88 ^a
5	3.49	3.59	0.81 ^a
6	3.29	3.36	0.47 ^a
7	3.57	3.69	1.20 ^a
8	3.65	3.67	0.20 ^a
9	2.65	2.72	0.45 ^a
10	3.2	3.21	0.04 ^a
11	3.2	3.03	1.21 ^a
12	3.37	3.21	1.46 ^a

^a $p > 0.05$

TABLE 8 ► Independent Samples *t*-Test Results by Institutional Region

Question	Southern (Mean)	Midwestern (Mean)	<i>t</i> [102] =
1	3.67	3.69	0.17 ^a
2	3.92	3.85	1.01 ^a
3	3	3.11	0.77 ^a
4	3.84	3.84	0.01 ^a
5	3.55	3.51	0.36 ^a
6	3.27	3.36	0.71 ^a
7	3.69	3.55	1.50 ^a
8	3.65	3.65	0.02 ^a
9	2.69	2.65	0.26 ^a
10	3.27	3.15	0.87 ^a
11	3.16	3.11	0.39 ^a
12	3.41	3.22	1.75 ^b

^a $p > 0.05$

^b $p < 0.05$, one-tail

replace seeing the campus in person.” A vice president of enrollment from Ohio said, “It [the campus] will become a student's home for four years. It's important that they like what they see and can envision a positive interaction with their environment as a member of the campus community.” These sentiments have more cogency as they relate to recruitment. Where a contex-

tual relationship exists among student interest, college choice, and matriculation—with recruitment bridging the gap—it is fitting that the most pointed responses centered on campus visits and tours. In this regard, respondents echoed the literature, reflecting both student and administrator perspectives.

Student respondents described the personalized and emotional nature of campus visits, how the “feel” of the college campus shapes deliberation, and why they ultimately chose to enroll. A provost from Kansas noted:

Students who visit are much more likely to enroll...because the key is to help them to picture themselves on our campus...to imagine themselves having the college experience here. Being able to get them here is a powerful tool in attracting them and retaining them.

Similarly, a vice president of enrollment from North Carolina noted that “the student will ‘feel’ if the campus is right for them and thus it is an emotional connection that is made or not made.” A vice president of enrollment from Ohio said:

We understand that their [sic] is a “head” part of the decision and a “heart” part of the decision and that it is very much about a ‘feeling’ they get when on campus. Many decisions are made on the look and feel of a campus before the prospective student even meets a college official or any student ambassadors.

Likewise, a vice president of enrollment from Missouri noted, “Students need to be able to see themselves on campus—to experience how they think the campus ‘feels’ and if they will fit in. A campus tour provides this in a way that no other tactic can.” A vice president of academic affairs from Tennessee concluded, “The most frequent comment from matriculating students refers to their campus tour sealing the deal to attend our institution: ‘It felt like home.’”

Several respondents cited the nexus between campus visits and yield and acknowledged the gravity of this relationship. A vice president of enrollment from Indiana asserted:

Finding the right fit is key to enjoying college. It’s hard to find a fit if you have not previously stepped foot on campus. We yield students who have visited at much higher rates, and students who visit multiple times are often a definite deposit.

A vice president of enrollment from South Carolina said:

Yield rates prove that campus visits are the greatest indicator of student interest and propensity to enroll. Students who visit gain a far better understanding and appreciation of the college and what we have to offer. With limited marketing budgets and very little name recognition, tours are important to highlight our programs, make one-on-one connections, and dispel false initial impressions due to our particular market niche.

In the words of a president from Kansas, “The campus visit is the closer. The yield rate of those who have made a campus visit is considerably higher.”

Notably, several respondents shed light on their recruitment activities, highlighting efforts to maximize yield. A director of admissions from Kentucky noted that the institution’s tour guides “make their own storyboards and make the tour a personalized experience for the prospective student.” A vice president of enrollment from Ohio said:

We do some creative pieces with our tours to give students a choice: a ‘behind the scenes’ tour which shows students and families interesting things around campus that most do not see! We have a lot of fun with it. We also do one ‘around town,’ which is a driving tour that shows what is within five minutes of our campus. We also have a traditional tour, and we do some tours where we have faculty and students set up in specific interesting places who [sic] will do show and tell about the spaces.

Respondents emphasized practices that are both associated with and accessory to the tour experience. A vice president of enrollment from North Carolina disclosed:

We provide personal tours that are customized to the student. We have students/parents complete feedback forms

after tours to see where we may need improvements. We set goals for our admissions counselors on the percent of tours to the pipeline. We have proven results that show students who visit campus are much more likely to deposit than those who do not.

Two respondents offered seemingly cautionary input, noting that recruitment processes are more than just a campus visit/tour. The first, a director of admissions from Ohio, opined:

It is important to note that influences such as social media, parental influences, recommendations, direct mailings, websites, etc. are important to get a student to visit a campus. Once they visit, the campus visit outweighs these other factors. The visit and other factors should be treated separately and not one more important than another as they are too different. If a student doesn't like what they've heard or never heard about your school, they will never visit.

The other, a director of admissions from South Carolina, asserted:

I think it is important to separate out personal influence versus website/marketing/social media from the campus visit as I believe the campus visit has a much greater impact. I also feel that the timeline should be taken into consideration as a student may never get an opportunity to visit the campus if the website/social media/marketing does not hit the mark. So, in those terms, they are critical and one could say even more important at the prospect/inquiry stage [of the recruitment process].

Survey respondents were not as certain that the campus environment influences retention as it does recruitment. A provost from Kansas said:

I think the main factor in retention is the student's sense of belonging. The campus environment has a large role in that...an environment that squares with what a student expected and imagined helps to retain them, but one that doesn't will tip the scales in the other direction.

While a number of written responses did, in fact, acknowledge the campus environment's role in student decisions to matriculate, most respondents conceded that

persistence is more likely attributable to an amalgamation of factors, including finances/cost, student preparedness, family dynamics, quality of life/residency, academic and social success, and the campus environment.

While this study examined three separate questions, the principal research objective was simply to (1) learn what higher education administrators believe about the relationship between college campus environments and student college choice and persistence and (2) indirectly compare the strength of those beliefs to well-documented student beliefs. When viewed through a quantitative lens, there is little doubting administrators' belief that college campus environments have a commanding effect on students' college choice and persistence. The tally of favorable scores and lack of statistical significance suggests that higher education administrators, collectively, perceive campus environments as well as campus visits/tours as highly influential and valuable. Qualitative feedback by survey participants not only corroborates measurable results from the study but also substantiates student statements in much of the literature. In this regard, one can confidently infer that administrators and students are in agreement as to the influential nature of campus environments and campus visits. Moreover, it would appear that some administrators are listening: Not only do they hear what students are saying, but they acknowledge it—to the extent that proactive (and active) measures are readily being applied. This is evident in perhaps the most noteworthy response of the entire study. A vice president of enrollment from South Carolina captured the essence of strategic enrollment management:

I have said that the college campus isn't a collection of buildings; it is the faculty, staff, students, and alumni who form a community. I recognize that how the physical aspects of our campus show to prospective students and parents is a factor that influences their perception of the institution.... Students have a baseline expectation of the building and environmental features a college or university should be offering that aid not just in taking the learning experience to the next level but in how the learning and living facilities flow seamlessly as they consider making any campus their home away from home for four years.

As we've moved from a service economy to an experience economy, it is vital that the institution continues to invest...and we must consider ways to create community while taking into consideration the amenities and aesthetics that students see when touring colleges and universities. Each year, the fight to attract talented students to our institutions becomes more intense. We operate in an extraordinarily competitive arena, and we must provide facilities that will allow the institution to hold a competitive place in the minds of our prospective students and families.

All things considered, this is good news not just for students and administrators but also for higher education as a whole.

Future Study

A recommendation for future study includes expanding the study's range to include institutions in other geographic regions. Doing so would increase the study's population and more accurately reflect administrator perspectives nationwide (Doom 2016). Likewise, extending the study's scope to include public institutions as well as excluded private/independent institutions would be advantageous. As noted earlier, public and private higher education institutions have different economic and sociological objectives that influence not only *how* they enroll students but also *which* students they enroll (Lederman 2013). Broadening the study would increase the likelihood of accurately depicting administrator perspectives across higher education.

Future research also might include a more sweeping variant of the Johnston (2010) study. Whereas the Johnston study was isolated to a solitary institution and directly compared student and employee perspectives on college choice factors, surveying students and administrators from an array of institutions would allow researchers to compare perspectives both individually and collectively. That is, researchers could compare student and administrator perspectives within and across institutions.

While the principal focus of this study was to learn what higher education administrators believe about the relationship between college campus environments and

students' college choice and persistence—and to compare (if indirectly) the strength of those beliefs to well-documented student beliefs—interest in operational praxes was limited. However, on the basis of themes presented throughout the literature as well as views expressed in this study's qualitative findings, students and administrators would benefit from broad-based strategic enrollment assessment. Put simply, actions speak louder than words: Future research should assess whether administrator perspectives culminate in actual changes to practice.

Additional considerations for future research that do not emanate directly from this study's findings but rather interrelate with aspects of this study pertain to campus tours. For example, a study comparing the enrollment of students who took tours versus those who did not could inform enrollment managers' and marketers' strategies relative to pre-tour activities and other factors (*i.e.* social media, websites, mailings, etc.) that may influence students' participation in tours as well as their college choice. By the same token, it would be interesting to learn how the timing of a campus tour (*i.e.*, fall semester vs. spring semester) influences student decisions on college choice (if at all). It would also be valuable to learn more about how campus environments and visits/tours influence prospective students' parents. Where parents commonly engage in the decision-making process and share their students' convictions about the environment, their perspective should not be discounted. Parents perceive and consider factors differently than students do; one parent suggested that institutions should:

...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 (Mass 2016, 57).

A final recommendation is for future research to focus on parents' role in the college choice process.

Conclusion

Student enrollments are the lifeblood of colleges and universities, and student characteristics often distin-

guish individual campuses (Kinzie, *et al.* 2004). The literature reveals that college campus environments (*e.g.*, social ethos, physical properties, and intangible aesthetics) have an arresting—even coercive—effect on student dispositions, perceptions, and comportment. A student's fondness for (or indifference to) a particular campus often determines that student's relationship with the institution. For many students, this relationship begins with a campus visit, which usually includes a formal campus tour. The tour becomes the backdrop as prospective students interact with the campus environment (*i.e.*, the ecology, climate, and culture of the institution). Campus visits and tours are also consequential for the institution. The literature demonstrates that gratifying and memorable campus visits routinely result in yield gains for institutions. Therefore, it is imperative that institutional leaders acknowledge the profound influence of campus environments and campus visits on students. They also must be proactive and reactive to ever-changing student preferences if their institutions are to prosper.

As economic concerns and technology advance, the higher education landscape continues to evolve. Whether

recruiting new students or encouraging enrolled students to persist to graduation, administrators must be intentional in their efforts to capture students' attention. They are uniquely positioned to unlock the potential of their respective campus environments. It would be impossible to control every aspect of the college choice process—including students' decision to matriculate. Nevertheless, administrators can take steps to help ensure that their campus environments and campus visits provide the information, insights, and experiences necessary to engage students (and their parents) while communicating the true and distinctive character of their institutions (Hesell 2004). By carefully evaluating current policies and practices, institutions can measure their respective campus ecology, climate, and culture to ensure a favorable "total" environment. Ongoing assessment of student needs, desires, and beliefs provides a pretext for developing, transforming, and sustaining environments that best align students and the institution. A supportive, inspiring, and sanguine atmosphere will strategically position an institution for longstanding success in its recruitment and retention efforts (Secore 2018b).

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