

**BEYOND THE CAMPUS TOUR:
COLLEGE CHOICE AND THE CAMPUS VISIT**

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Justine Rebecca Okerson

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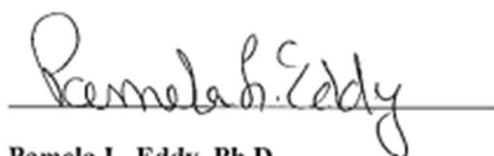
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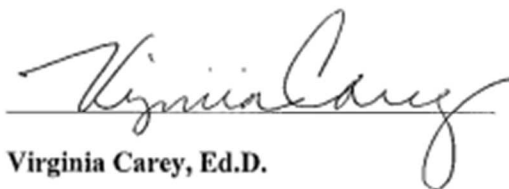
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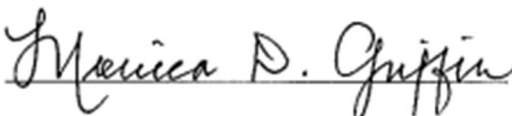


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BEYOND THE CAMPUS TOUR: COLLEGE CHOICE AND THE CAMPUS VISIT

Abstract

College choice, the decision-making process for students of whether and where to attend college, is complex. The college choice process also affects a range of stakeholders: high school students, parents, public policymakers, high schools, admission professionals, and institutions of higher education. Understanding the influences of college choice for prospective students allows colleges and universities to examine best practices in admission and enrollment management.

Even though the campus visit has a significant affect on a student's decision for application and enrollment, what remains unknown is how the construct of the campus visit is perceived among students and how students' perceptions of the visit influence their college choice decisions. Previous research demonstrates the importance of the campus visit or tour, yet this research neglects to discover what elements of a visit or tour are the most influential, and whether or not these factors are under a university's control. This study explored the campus visit from three different qualitative perspectives: interviewing recently matriculated college freshmen, assessing campus information sessions and tours, and surveying high school seniors during the college choice process to better understand the phenomenon of college choice and the impact of the campus visit.

From the findings emerged themes of the campus visit impression: aesthetics of the campus environment, community/general vibe of campus, and personal interactions. Students want a college that "looks like a college" and is a place where students are generally happy and proud of their alma mater. This research found that the factors that

most heavily influence different variations of the campus visit are mostly due to chance; the weather, tour guide, bulletin board postings, and even construction on campus can affect a student's interpretation of a campus community. These findings further justify the importance of understanding the relationship between the campus visit and college choice during a student's developmental phase. Given the importance of recruiting and maintaining students who are a good "fit," institutions and administrators should examine best practices for presenting an authentic campus community.

Keywords: aesthetics, campus visit, college choice, personal interactions

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**BEYOND THE CAMPUS TOUR:
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CHAPTER 1: THE PROBLEM AND ITS CONTEXT

In our rapidly changing economy and world, universities are quickly transforming and adopting business practices (Rossi, 2014; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). The college admission process is becoming a frenzy, as institutions of higher education seek to compete for students and increase their tuition revenues as the operating costs for higher education continue to rise (Borin, 2014) and state support for public universities drop (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). High school students receive an overwhelming amount of information geared to help them make decisions about their post-graduation plans. They collect brochures regarding four-year, two-year, and professional school options; high school students are also often subscribed to social media campaigns run by admission offices through blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Gregory, 2014; Johnston, 2010). Mailings include college viewbooks, emails, letters, and packets that all promote the college admission process.

Private tutoring/counseling and standardized testing help is also a part of the marketing efforts targeting high school students. Upon receipt of this barrage of information, many high school students must attempt to make meaning of this material and decide how to synthesize it and relate it to their college search process. Parents and families are also engaged in this process as much of the marketing is geared towards the informed helicopter parent (Howe & Strauss, 2007). The increased availability of admission-related materials online adds another layer to the process as students have the power to be informed consumers regarding selecting a college (Burdett, 2013).

In the pursuit of college choice, the pressure is on for students to find their “fit” as research demonstrates that higher education and the completion of a degree is linked to higher levels of happiness and better health (Baum et al., 2013). Additional studies have demonstrated that post-secondary education influences salary earnings, career mobility, and quality of life post-graduation (Caumont, 2014; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Currently, almost half of all undergraduate students who completed a four-year degree were enrolled at a two-year institution at some point during the previous 10 years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015). But outreach and recruitment for students attending community colleges differs markedly from university marketing efforts, in particular because the campus tour at two-year colleges is not as inclusive compared to a four-year college with residence life and significant student life components. Even though there are many different paths to attaining a Bachelor’s degree, a student who is ultimately seeking the traditional four-year environment must be both academically and financially able to attend. In this study, the focus was on students who are pursuing a selective four-year college experience because the stakes are high in these institutions of higher education for both the institution and the student making the choice to attend.

The United States once led the rankings in the numbers of 20-29 year-olds with a college education; now the United States currently holds a rank of 14th overall in higher education (Yudof, 2010). One major factor impacting this particular ranking is the barrier to access for some students due to finances as student debt levels continue to climb. Zumeta, Breneman, Callan, and Finney (2012) reported that the financing of

higher education is currently broken, as 49 states are experiencing drastic cuts from federal funding and each of those 49 states is currently spending less per FTE than they spent prior to the recession in 2008 (Hiltonsmith & Draut, 2014; State Higher Education Executive Officers, 2014). These funding cuts affect both institutions and students, as institutions are charged with finding creative methods of maintaining revenue and quality, while students must pay higher tuition and student fees (Hiltonsmith & Draut, 2014; Martin, 2011). The average tuition at four-year public schools is currently higher than the median household income in 26 states, and the shift from state support to student responsibility for paying for college begins to establish higher education as a private benefit instead of a public good (Baum & Schwartz, 2012; Hiltonsmith & Draut, 2014; Vedder, 2004). Thus, a critical challenge facing higher education today is affordability, which may undercut the nation's objective of raising college completion rates.

A problem remains as our nation is severely lacking in the desired amount of college-educated citizens to remain competitive globally (Yudof, 2010). Skaggs (2014) furthers this point, by explaining that the world undervalues the connection between education and the United States' ability to prosper as a world power in reference to economics and national defense. President Obama recently articulated a goal for the United States, that by the year 2020, we would have once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world, increasing our current college attainment rate from 40% to 60% (Lumina Foundation, 2013; White House, 2014). Obama's office advocates that the country will benefit from having a higher percentage of informed Americans for an effective democratic life, and more educated Americans to solve the problems of our future (Lumina Foundation, 2013; White House, 2014).

Because education is perceived as a necessary commodity to increase the quality of life for students and to assure national prosperity, finding a college that the student will thrive in both socially and academically is even more important. As the cost of higher education continues to rise, students and families struggle when considering which institution of higher education provides the best education, campus life, campus amenities, and location; however, these elements must be weighed against the total cost of that institution (Archibald & Feldman, 2010; Lambert, 2014). In that sense, colleges are seeking to market themselves in order to appeal to prospective students to favorably increase yield, by influencing their decision regarding matriculation.

The college choice process is best described as the decision of whether and where to attend college (Bergerson, 2009). The college search process is quite daunting for high school seniors applying to college. Conversely, admission officers are charged to find unique ways to market themselves as distinctive to develop their own brand identity as the admission process is currently a buyer's market; prospective students are in control and can afford to be meticulous throughout the process (Pampaloni, 2010). The admission competition only continues to increase in magnitude each year, despite the overall increase in college enrollment based on the growing number of applications per student. There is a fear among students and families regarding competition for a limited number of spots in a freshmen class, in particular at selective institutions.

Enrollment at public universities increased by 36% between 1996 and 2010, and similarly private universities witnessed an enrollment boom of 81% between 1996 and 2010. Yet, even with this historic growth, both types of institutions are projected to increase undergraduate enrollment only an additional 15% between 2010 and 2021

(Hussar & Bailey, 2013). This growth is due in part to the focus on increasing graduation rates, but also reflects the need for tuition dollars to support college finances in an environment of declining public support. As of 2011, approximately 21 million students were enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions (Clinedinst, Hurley, & Hawkins, 2013). These increases are also reflected in the growth of the number of applications college admission offices are receiving, which makes the application process more competitive for applicants despite the increases in overall enrollment.

In 2012, 64% of colleges continued to experience increases in the total number of applications received (Clinedinst et al., 2013). The increase in demand and competition only generates more interest in the college choice process (Clinedinst et al., 2013). For colleges and universities, steady increases in the applicant pool helps to increase their selectivity through yield. Yield is one of the more influential factors in the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings as it measures how many of the students who are accepted each year decide to matriculate. For a college or university, increasing the size of their applicant pool ensures they will not be in danger of dropping in the rankings, even if their yield remains unchanged. But while yield is important, selectivity, measured by acceptance rates, is even more influential in the ranking report. Selectivity is demonstrated by institutions that serve “typical” aged students who are high achieving and academically talented students, which also have admission requirements.

Although many researchers focus on student development after students arrive on campus (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010) the pre-matriculation decision-making is also important as it helps to shape students’ views of institutional fit, and the college or university can control many of these conceptions (Clinedinst et al., 2013). As

application numbers grow and spots become more competitive in the admission market, it is essential that colleges and universities gain a better understanding of the college search process, and how to manage their brand identity (Hartley & Morphew, 2008). According to the NACAC State of College Admission Report (2011), roughly a quarter of college bound students in 2010 applied to seven or more colleges; this number only continues to climb with the ease of application submission online. Since the Common Application began in 1975, they have continued to add additional member colleges (Common Application, 2015). In 2015, the Common Application served over one million students and offered ease of access for application purposes to 548 schools in the United States and overseas (Common Application, 2015). As seen in the figure below, the rise of students submitting seven or more applications has risen significantly over time, as students are seeking more options to choose among, in particular so they can compare financial aid/merit packages.

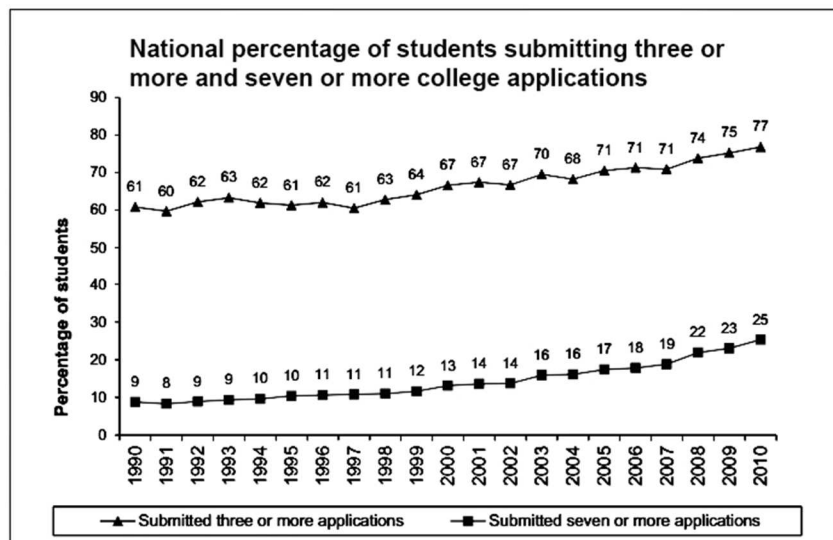


Figure A. Rise in College Application.
Adapted from “State of college admission 2011” by NACAC, (2011).

As students are applying to multiple schools, college admission offices and high school counselors attempt to discover what influences yield and matriculation. Examining different methods that influence the college choice process provides one mechanism of research in this line of inquiry. Because students are applying to more schools on average than previously, it becomes even more challenging for colleges and universities to predict enrollment and acceptance and yield numbers. If acceptance numbers rise in a given year, the institution's selectivity rating is directly affected in national rankings, which ultimately impacts the next year's prospective applicants due to changes in reputation of perceived selectivity. For students seeking out a selective higher education institution, a dip in the rankings even by a few points may impact a student's perception of academic reputation, campus resources, and career prospects after graduation. Much is at stake in determining which students will apply to a college, and ultimately which of those students will enroll. According to Furukawa (2011), there are five distinct influences on a student's college choice based on comprehensive overviews of the available literature: family, peers, institutional characteristics, institutional communication, and institutional fit, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1

College Choice Influences

College Choice Influences				
Family	Peers	Institutional Characteristics	Institutional Communication	Institutional Fit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental education • Parental influence on where to find information • Family alumnus • Parental involvement in choice process • Parent role in paying for college • Importance of other resources varied by ethnicity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student high school peer group • Peers influence perception of institutional quality • Influence motivation for attending college • Affiliations such as GLBTQ influence choice • Guidance of counselors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost of education and sticker price • Amount of financial aid • Reputation of the institution and selectivity • State policies affecting public institutions • College rankings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specific marketing strategies • Communication with parents • College catalogues and viewbooks • Online web content • Social media • Admissions portals • Investment in research and planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Institutions searching for particular characteristics in students • High-SES, middle-range academic performers view it as a rational process • Campus environment • Cultural artifacts

Note. Adapted from *College choice influences among high-achieving students: An exploratory case study of college freshmen*, (Doctoral dissertation, p. 5), by D.T. Furukawa, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, Nevada.

Furukawa (2011) expertly combined influences and aspects of various college choice models and research in order to create this visually succinct summary. Given the importance of the college choice decision by students and the desire of selective institutions to maintain their reputation and rankings, college enrollment managers are paying increased attention to all elements of institutional communication that may influence applicants' decisions.

Importance of Campus Visit

One of the main ways a student may interact with a college or university is by visiting the campus and experiencing the campus community and culture first-hand. Admission offices aim their marketing attempts, viewbooks, and high school visits to

attract students to visit campus. Research demonstrates that a student who visits a college campus is twice as likely to matriculate compared to a student who does not visit prior to applying (Brown, 2010). For the purposes of this study, the campus visit is defined as any visit, whether formal or informal, to a college campus, which may include an information session, formal campus tour, sitting in on a class, overnight visit, or admitted student program. These visits can make or break a student's decision about whether or not to apply to the college, and ultimately whether or not to attend (Brown, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Yost & Tucker, 1995). The visit allows a student to decide if they can feel comfortable on campus. Over time, research has demonstrated that the campus visit has a significant effect on a student's decision for application and enrollment, yet it is not clear what factors or influences within the types of campus visits or experiences contribute to the student's final decision (Brown, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Greenough, 2003; Hesel, 2004; Hoover, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Kuh, 2009; Magolda, 2000; Swan, 1998; Yost & Tucker, 1995).

Traditionally, students who want to visit a university may sign up for a formal information session and tour, offered by the admission office. These information sessions are led by admission professionals often in conjunction with a current student, and tend to cover facts including the history of the college, important statistics (student to faculty ratio, admission percentages, SAT/ACT test score ranges), general information about academics and campus life, and an overview of what admission offices are looking for in applications in addition to some details regarding their specific application review process. The information session is generally paired with a tour of campus, also often led by a current student. The campus tour allows prospective students and families to orient

themselves around the campus and visit the library, dining facilities, classroom, residence halls, and other sacred spots on campus. But the formal visit provided by the admission office is not the only way students interact with and visit colleges and universities.

Students and families take a variety of approaches to the campus visit. Many types of campus visit experiences exist: overnight programs with student hosts, visiting a class, shadowing a student, STEM tours, on-campus interviews, scholarship programs, multicultural programs, international programs, admitted student days, attending summer programs/camps, or even informal visits with family and friends. Hoover (2010b) argued that the campus visit is essential in the decision-making process of prospective college students, especially due to the instability of the current economy.

This ritual has never been more important, for colleges and applicants alike. In a bleak economy, tuition-dependent institutions face increasing competition for paying customers, and administrators are pulling out all the stops to recruit them. In turn, the choices applicants make have lifelong consequences—and often come with big price tags. For both parties, the tour is crucial. Research shows that nothing influences a student's decision about where to apply and enroll as much as the visit. So plenty's at stake when families pack up the minivan and drive from college to college, hoping to glean something at each stop. (Hoover, 2010b, pp. 35-36)

Unpacking the construct of the campus visit is important to provide understanding of how students are defining the experience, to determine which elements are most influential to the decision-making process, and to understand the influence of these perceptions on college choice. Even though current research on college choice demonstrates the campus

visit is the most influential piece of the college search process (Brown, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Greenough, 2003; Hesel, 2004; Hoover, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Kuh, 2009; Magolda, 2000; Swan, 1998; Yost & Tucker, 1995), there is surprisingly little research regarding the informal types of campus visit opportunities available currently for prospective students, and what elements of those visits truly matter in a student's college choice.

Selective Higher Education Institutions

For the purposes of this study, the focus was on selective four-year institutions of higher education. Here, selective colleges are defined as colleges with specific admission requirements, as opposed to open enrollment policies, and includes a broad array of colleges: public and private, large and small, extremely selective and moderately selective (Leonhardt, 2013). For the scope of this project, selective colleges were limited to *U.S. News & World Report's* 2015 list of the top 100 national universities. The range of acceptance within this group of universities varies from as low as 5.7% at Stanford University to as high as 87.7% at the University of Colorado-Boulder (*U.S. News & World Report*, 2015). Enrollment also varies widely with as few as 2,181 students at California Institute of Technology to as many as 52,059 students at the University of Texas-Austin (*U.S. News & World Report*, 2015). A selective college indicates more resources for students, higher graduation rates, and typically stricter admission criteria (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009).

Selective institutions are also tied to the concept of habitus and of social and cultural capital. Lee and Kramer (2012) explained, "social mobility through higher education is as much the process of learning elite mannerisms, behaviors, and 'rules of the game' as it is the process of gaining credentials, knowledge, or wealth" (p. 18).

Historically, elite higher education institutions and social and cultural capital have been interrelated, “these colleges are an important rung in the ladder of mobility, providing access to social capital and economic benefits” (Lee & Kramer, 2012, p. 21). Selective colleges are attached to a brand name and a desirable social status, and often have stringent admission standards even for students with stellar academic records. Because selective colleges receive many prospective visitors and applications, the selective institution cohort provides the right environment for studying the impact of the campus visit on college choice in addition to observing additional college choice influences.

Problem Statement

For decades, researchers have studied college choice to get a better sense of how prospective college students make decisions regarding whether and when to attend college (Bergerson, 2009; Chapman, 1981; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006; Vossensteyn, 2005). The first college choice models originated in the 1950s (Kinzie, Palmer, Hayek, Hossler, Jacob, & Cummings, 2004). Despite the ample research regarding college choice and existing models, individual aspects of the college choice process can be difficult to understand because the path to higher education and the influences on decision-making tend to be more personal for each student, which makes this study an excellent match for a qualitative lens. This study focused on researching the relationship between the campus visit experience and college choice in addition to examining common themes that contribute to student meaning making regarding college choice outside of the campus visit or campus tour.

This research builds on historic college choice models (Chapman, 1981; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006; Vossensteyn, 2005), which

contribute to the existing research demonstrating the impact of a student's interaction with a college campus. These models include the same general sense of flow regarding the decision-making process: making decisions about whether to apply and general predisposition to college, sorting through college material, visiting, and deciding where to apply, and finally deciding where to attend college (Hanson & Litten, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1986). Chapman's (1981) model asserted that background characteristics (family, demographics, financial considerations, and other personal factors) rather than external influences have the highest effect on a student's college choice decision. Hanson and Litten's (1982) and Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model both included background characteristics, but these researchers argued external factors such as location, financial aid, academic quality, and campus visit experiences also impact a student's final choice.

Vossensteyn's (2005) model built on this previous research even further by adding other influential factors that are instrumental in the decision-making process including personal attributes, student characteristics, high school characteristics, environment, aid and tuition policy, influencers/media, college actions, and college characteristics. Perna (2006) further expanded on previous models by studying the large sequence of post-secondary decisions that students must make in order to make their college choice decision. This research investigated the role of habitus in addition to the role of community, campus, and policy makers on college choice (Perna, 2006). Students decide whether and where to attend college, but also decide what to study, whether to persist and graduate all based on the amount of human, financial, social, and cultural

capital available to the student throughout their postsecondary educational experience (Bergerson; 2009; Perna, 2006; Salisbury, Umbach, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2008).

Although each of these college choice models explains some of the intricacies of the college choice decision-making process and grounds this particular research, there is a need for more depth and rich detail in the understanding of this particular phenomenon. Even though it is evident that the campus visit and tour exert an important influence in college choice decision-making, there is no clear understanding of what elements matter most or what particular themes may exist in these studies.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which the campus visit and various iterations of campus visitation experiences (class visits, overnight visits, information sessions, and yield programs) influence a student's college choice decision. By examining in detail the role of the campus visit in the college choice process, this study demonstrates which factors of the visit are most important to students and families based on a variety of different types of campus visit experiences. For the purposes of this study, the Mid-Atlantic region was selected for convenience to the researcher in addition to proximity of multiple schools from the list of the top 100 *U.S. News & World Report's* 2015 list of national universities. In this study, the Mid-Atlantic is defined as including five distinct regions: Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia, and Washington D.C. Within these five regions there are 13 colleges and universities listed in the top 100 *U.S. News & World Report's* 2015 list of national universities to select from for the various stages of this particular study. Data collection occurred via qualitative interviews with college freshmen regarding their application process, visitation experience, and

decisions regarding matriculation, campus visitations, and qualitative surveys for high school students. By combining these three different qualitative research components and data from high school seniors, prospective visitors, and college freshmen much can be gleaned regarding college choice and the campus visit. This research helps to better inform admission professionals, college and school counselors, families and students while navigating the college search process.

Significance of the Study

Given the current competitive market in admission to colleges and universities, it is important to better understand the factors influencing student college choice. In particular, campuses invest time and money in hosting campus visits for students, and although we know that the campus visit is an important factor in ultimate decision-making for students, what remains unknown is what aspects of the visit are most influential. The findings from this study help fill the gap. By examining the campus visit process it is evident what parts of the campus visit (traditional information session and campus tour) are shared from one institution to another, and what, if anything, makes a particular visit stand out to students and families. Understanding how students make meaning during the process of making their college choice decisions, and how students who have recently matriculated made their decisions helps to uncover pre-matriculation decision-making and relevant repeated themes for students when visiting college campuses. In addition, discovering how students who visited different college campuses or several college campuses in different ways (formal vs. informal) process that information, adds depth and more concrete information regarding what prospective students, and their families, should look for in future campus visit experiences.

Also, this study can be a useful tool for all faculty and staff on a college campus to recognize the impact of the impression they leave on prospective students and families, and how that impact ultimately influences college choice decisions. During the campus visit, all campus staff have a role in the decision-making process of students even if they may not be fully aware of how their interactions with students influences choice for admission or attendance. This study can serve as a reference tool for admission staff involved with on-campus programming efforts, and allow for a development of best practices for school counselors, admission officers, and prospective students and families. These important stakeholders may benefit from learning that an informal visit or sitting in on a class is more helpful for students than attending the information session and campus tour.

Research Questions

The following set of research questions provided guidance for the structure, data collection, and analysis for this study.

1. How do information sessions and tours compare among a subset of the national universities in the Mid-Atlantic (Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia, and Washington D.C.) listed in *U.S. News & World Report's* 2015 list of national universities?
2. How do varying campus visit types, and intricacies of each visit, influence a student's perception of an institution and the meaning they ascribe to their decision to attend?
 - a. How do high school seniors socially construct the role of the campus visit in their college choice?

- b. How do matriculated freshmen socially construct the role of the campus visit in their college choice?

Terminology and Definitions

Because the readers of this study may not be familiar with all of the intricacies of college choice and the campus visit, the following definitions are provided for clarification purposes of the terms used throughout the study.

Campus visit: Any formal or informal visit to a college campus, which may include an information session, campus tour, sitting in on a class, etc.

College choice: A process through which students decide whether and where to attend college (Bergerson, 2009)

College search process: A student's individual process of researching and selecting colleges and universities to apply for admission

Information session: A formal session held at a college or university generally led by an admission staff member, with information regarding general facts, figures, and stories about a particular institution

Matriculation: Enrolling as a member of a college or university

Mid-Atlantic Region: Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia, and Washington, D.C.

Pre-matriculation: The time preceding the first day of classes for a first-time freshman student

Selective colleges: Colleges with admission requirements; the *U.S. News & World Report's* 2015 list of the top 100 national universities

Socially constructed reality: Students' perceptions of colleges and universities are affected by how they were raised and what they were raised to believe. Students will act on their own version of reality constructed by previous life experiences and interactions with others.

Tour: Led by a student or admission staff member to give an orientation to campus, campus life, and the general feel or community of a college campus

Yield: Percent of students who decide to enroll in a particular college after having been offered admission

Yield programming: Programming for admitted students

Summary

This chapter provided an introduction to the study and the research problem. The chapter included a brief background to the literature on college choice models and context of the problem of understanding how the campus visit impacts college choice, and what visit methods were most successful for different students. This chapter also included an overview of current research on college choice. College choice is important for students seeking admission to college. Recently, the campus visit has also taken on a heightened importance both for students attempting to make a choice and for institutions trying to attract the best and brightest students. Even though we know that the campus visit is important, what remains unknown is what elements of the visit are most influential for students in their college choice decision, what elements are present in traditional campus visits provided by colleges/universities, and whether or not formal or informal visits make a difference in influencing college choice decision-making for students. The next chapter provides a more in-depth review of the related literature to the

campus visit and college choice decision-making; it also presents relevant information regarding college choice models, influences on college choice, the campus visit, and additional admission events.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In examining the literature on college choice, specifically regarding the campus visit experience, several significant areas of research emerge as relevant, including theories regarding college choice, college choice models, influences on college choice, the role of selective college admission, the campus visit, and additional admission events. These issues are explored to better understand the socially constructed meanings for applicants throughout the campus visit, and the implications of these perspectives on student's college choice decision-making.

Theories behind College Choice

College choice theories tend to center on three major questions: who goes to college, where do they matriculate, and why do they select that specific college? These college choice theories often utilize various disciplines to ground their research in theories from a diverse range of perspectives. Although many college choice models exist, more recently they have been categorized into one of three significant subgroups: economic, psychological, or sociological (Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Hossler & Palmer, 2008; McDonough, 1997; Stage & Hossler, 1989). Despite the different disciplinary perspective of college choice theories and their area of foci, many of these individual paradigms complement one another in the college choice process.

College choice models that are focused on an economic perspective view college choice as a rational decision-making process based solely on tuition costs, resources, and financial aid (Archibald & Feldman, 2010; Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Hossler & Palmer,

2008; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; St. John, Hu, & Fisher, 2010). These models rely on cost and availability of resources to illustrate what controls a student's final decision. One economic approach is an input model; it views money as the ultimate influence, and ignores any external personal or social influences on choice (Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Hossler & Palmer, 2008; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). A second economic approach is an output model, in which college choice decisions are based on the potential for financial gain in decision-making based on institutional prestige or disciplinary choice (Archibald & Feldman, 2010; Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Hossler & Palmer, 2008; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; St. John et al., 2010). Included within an economic perspective to college choice are economic theories based on financial considerations and sociological theories that combine a blend of both monetary gain and social status. Economic models are employed in a variety of college choice models as a driving force in college choice decision-making.

Other college choice models utilize psychology as a background for understanding the factors behind an individual's decision regarding college choice. These models often examine the influence of others (friends, family, and counselors), academic climate, and academic programs offered at a specific institution (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler & Palmer, 2008) on student decision-making. Chapman (1981) was unique in his approach to the college choice model as his model examined the student's background and personal characteristics to determine the effect of these variables on the student's search process. Hanson and Litten (1982) built on this foundation and identified the predisposition phase of the college choice process. This phase occurs for students early in their P-12 education and begins to set the roots for final

college choice decisions. The predisposition phase explains the connection between attending camp on a college campus and the desire to later apply to that institution, in addition to the connections a student may make between a favorite teacher's alma mater and their future applications (Gullatt & Jan, 2003; Perna, 2000). Predisposition, and the development of future aspirations, is the least studied and the least understood part of the college choice process (Hanson & Litten, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

The third lens for examining college choice is based in sociology, which enables researchers to analyze social status and its effect on future aspirations and college choice. For example, the social attainment model has been a relevant paradigm for researching educational and occupational aspiration since the 1960s displaying how the intersection of family background and resources affects a child's upbringing and eventually a child's future educational aspirations (Kao & Tienda, 1998). McDonough (1997), inspired by Bourdieu's (1986) analysis of external forces that impact an individual's decision-making process, began to examine how a student's social class dictates appropriate college choices. This research also demonstrated that every high school has its own set of acceptable values and social norms that may dictate what college choices are acceptable by the student's peer group for application and attendance (McDonough, 1997).

For students, the diversity of campus, athletic reputation, and popularity among classmates can all be factors in the admission decision (Stevens, 2009). Although research demonstrates that the likelihood of a student attending college is related to academic achievement rather than race, gender, or socioeconomic status, differences still exist, as students of color are still less likely to attend college as compared to their academic counterparts (Hossler & Palmer, 2008; McDonough, 1997). Understanding the

various disciplinary perspectives regarding college choice theories provides a foundational framework for many of the influences that affect college choice decision-making. What was missing however, are the stories and experiences of students to demonstrate how these factors all interact to inform an individual student's decision-making process. And in particular, what was missing is how the campus visit influences and interacts with the factors affecting college choice.

College Choice Models

College choice models demonstrate the various paths, stages, and influences that affect a student's decision-making process. By developing a better understanding of college choice, it is possible to enable families, high school counselors, and higher education institutions to better educate all stakeholders regarding the most influential factors in the college choice process. Throughout the decision-making process, every interaction may impact a student's final decision. The research by Kinzie and colleagues (2004) on the history of higher education uncovered college choice models originating in the 1950s. The 1940s helped set the stage for increased access to higher education with the introduction of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act ("GI Bill") of 1944 and President Truman's decision to expand community college systems (Kinzie et al., 2004).

Following shortly on these seminal acts was the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Prior to the 1950s, fewer than two of every 10 graduating high school seniors went on to college, and these students' selection was dictated based primarily on location of the college relative to the student's home and access (Kinzie et al., 2004). The increase in the college-going population forced colleges to develop a

more sophisticated process whereby college-going students had decisions to make regarding where they would attend college (Kinzie et al., 2004).

Holland (1958) was one of the first to publish research regarding college choice. His research initially strove to understand the enrollment decisions of National Merit Scholars, as these elite students were able to select from a variety of different institutions (Holland, 1958, 1959). This research demonstrated how the popularity and public image of a college made an important impact on college choice decisions by students (Holland, 1959). Richards and Holland (1965) continued this line of inquiry by studying the influences of college choice on a sample of 8,292 ACT test takers, ultimately categorizing the influences in four different dimensions: intellectual, influential, personal, and social. These four different dimensions are present in more recent college choice models, but this historic research is important to understanding college choice as it demonstrates that the weight of each characteristic's impact varies greatly between different individuals (Richards & Holland, 1965). Even though this research was certainly influential in paving the future of college choice models, it is seminal as it also demonstrated that the elements that impact college choice are both personal and complex.

Kolter (1976) created the first model of college choice by applying marketing theory to understanding of the college choice process. This research demonstrated a division of the process into seven stages: decision to attend, information seeking and receiving, specific college inquiries, applications, admissions, college choice, and registration (Kolter, 1976). Kolter's (1976) college choice model became the basis for a variety of college choice models, but this particular study also placed a heavy emphasis on the role of the institution in final college choice decisions. In the current study, I

examined a sub-set of colleges based on admissions selectivity because selectivity and institutional context may ultimately impact college choice decision-making for students.

Despite the groundbreaking work by Kolter (1976), Chapman (1981) challenged the basis of this first model and asserted that changes by institutions to their image held less influence regarding college choice for prospective students. Kolter's (1976) approach highlighted that institutions of higher education could present different ideals represented at the university to different students. Chapman (1981) claimed that a student's college choice can be separated into search and choice, and the search itself was most affected by the background and current characteristics of the student and family, rather than by external influences that a college can influence. Chapman (1981) argued that the external forces, such as fixed characteristics of the college, namely, size and location in collaboration with the college's communication efforts, do make an impact on student decision-making but not to the extent that college admission professionals may believe. Despite these claims, researchers continued instead to pursue research on the influences of colleges and universities on student choice (Hanson & Litten, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Vossensteyn, 2005). Much of the research after Chapman (1981) that focused on institutional influence on college choice eventually led to the common understanding of the impact of the campus visit on college decisions by students (Brown, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Greenough, 2003; Hesel, 2004; Kuh, 2000; Swan, 1998; Yost & Tucker, 1995).

Hanson and Litten's (1982) model was also inspired by Kolter's (1976) model. The first stage in this model, deciding to go to college, includes a student's desire to attend college, the planning process, and the decision of applying for financial aid. The

second stage, investigating colleges, contains gathering materials regarding various schools, investigating financial aid procedures, and sorting through various application materials (Hanson & Litten, 1982). The third stage, application, admittance, and attendance, incorporates applying for admission and/or financial aid, being admitted, comparing aid granted, and enrolling in college (Hanson & Litten, 1982). While later research, demonstrated that this model was relatively sound, it also created opportunities for expansion, including the further development of the predisposition phase and the effect of the campus visit in addition to inspiring further research.

Hossler and Palmer (2008) credit Hanson and Litten's (1982) three-stage model for building the initial three-stage structure for the future of college choice models. The links between the various models of choice are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Models of College Choice

College Choice Theories	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Hanson & Litten (1982)	Deciding to go to College	Investigating Colleges	Application, Admission, and Attendance
Jackson (1986)	Preference	Exclusion	Evaluation
Hossler and Gallagher (1987)	Predisposition	Search	Choice

Note. Adapted from “Why understand research on college choice?” In National Association of College Admissions Counselors, *Fundamentals of College Admissions Counseling* (pp. 44), by D. Hossler & M. Palmer, 2008, Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishers.

The natural transition from one model to the next is evident in the basic three-phase model. Jackson (1986) built on Hanson and Litten's (1982) model using data collected in a longitudinal study, but ultimately continued with the use of three categories of the choice process. Jackson's (1986) study demonstrated that the presence of college-ready

peers who also planned to attend college was one of the more influential determinants in predicting enrollment in higher education.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) developed yet another three-phase model. They named the first phase the pre-disposition phase, acknowledging the time in which a student decides whether or not to attend college (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Once a student decides to attend college, they move into the second phase of decision-making, the search process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In the second phase, the student begins to gather resources both formally and informally on colleges, and begins making emotionally driven decisions regarding specific institutions of higher education (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The last stage is choice, when the student makes a final decision. The following table (see Table 3) shows how the various factors are delineated in each of the phases (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Table 3

Three-Stage Model of College Choice

<u>Model Dimension</u>	<u>Influential Factors</u>		<u>Student Outcomes</u>
	<u>Individual Factors</u>	<u>Organizational Factors</u>	
<i>Predisposition</i> (Phase One)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Characteristics • Significant Others • Educational Activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School Characteristics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College options • Other options
<i>Search</i> (Phase Two)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Preliminary college values • Student search activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College and University search activities (Search for students) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice set • Other options
<i>Choice</i> (Phase Three)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice set 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College and University courtship activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice

Note. Adapted from “Studying student college choice: A three-phase model and implications for policymakers,” by D. Hossler and K.S. Gallagher, 1987. *College and University*, 62(3), p. 208. Copyright 1987.

This college choice model also includes many additional characteristics including location, financial aid, academic quality, and campus visit experiences and notes how these contribute to a student’s final college choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Even though the college choice models from the 1980’s are still widely used today to inform current college counseling practices, when examining the college choice research, there is still a need for further research on the extent of influence regarding each variable (Hossler & Palmer, 2008). In particular, it is unknown what features of the campus visit contribute to the institutional factors influencing student college choice.

Even though most researchers agree with the basic tenets of the three-stage college choice models, many researchers believe there are additional details and influences that are not captured in the three-stage models. Vossensteyn (2005) is an example of one of those researchers as his research set out to add additional details to the college choice model by bringing attention to the wide variety of interactions among different sectors of the college search process. His research centered on how students' college choice decision-making is affected by price differentiation, and he developed a modification on Hanson and Litten's (1982) model to demonstrate the variables that may impact a student's successive choices.

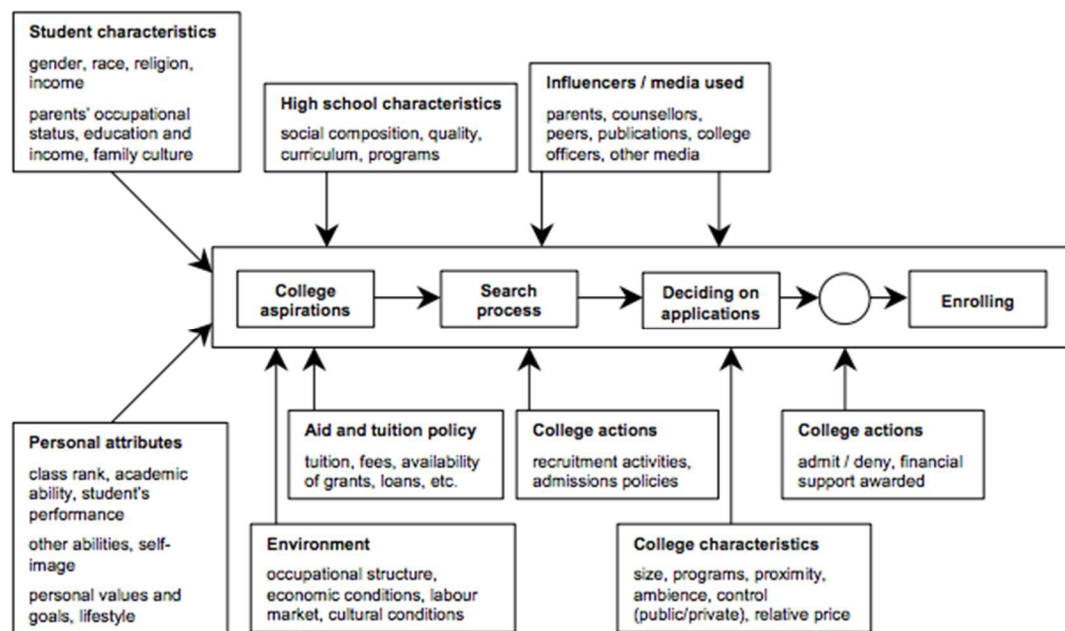


Figure B. College Choice Model

Adapted from “Perceptions of student price-responsiveness, a behavioural economics exploration of the relationships between socio-economic status, perceptions of financial incentives and student choice,” by J.J. Vossensteyn, 2005.

Research on college choice continued in the last generation with an interest in how a student's specific background impacted their college choice decisions. Perna's

(2006) research explored college choice and the relationship with individual habitus in the decision-making process. Habitus, a sociological concept developed by Bourdieu (1977) and adapted by McDonough (1994), explains how individuals develop the attitudes, beliefs and experiences that inform their decision-making related to an individual's lived experiences. Habitus is very closely related to the concept of cultural capital, as cultural capital describes the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, clothing, and degrees in order to help or hinder one's social mobility. Perna (2006) explained that habitus "conditions an individual's college-related expectations, attitudes, and aspirations" (p. 112). Habitus and the effect of a social structure and class system have a relationship with the types of institutions a particular student may consider. Perna (2006) also explained that individual student's experiences and habitus are influenced by gender, race, ethnicity, and their individual access to both social and cultural capital.

Over time, many different college choice models emerged and evolved. These early models proved helpful for admission professionals in directing high school students and determining best practices. Although each model has various differences, they all provide some insight for guiding high school students through the college choice process. But while many of the models point to the campus visit and the search/investigation phase, they neglect to describe and depict what influences are most significant in those particular phases. More research is needed to understand the impact of those particular phases of the college choice process.

Influences on College Choice

Within the college choice models and theories, 10 significant factors of influence consistently arise in the research that affects the college choice process (Furukawa, 2011). These factors include family, peers, school counselors, rankings, institutional communication, institutional fit, institutional characteristics, selectivity, institutional actions, and additional influences.

Family. Research confirms the role of family influence on college choice (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Litten, 1982; McDonough, 1994; Perna, 2000; Stage & Hossler, 1989). Examining college choice from both a psychological and sociological viewpoint, it is evident that the family's social class, values, and opinions affect predisposition to higher education and affect a student's college choice process (McDonough, 1994). From an economic perspective, family finances contribute to how the students perceive value for a college education (Perna, 2010).

Litten's (1982) research established the importance of the level of education in the family unit, as parental education is determined to be the most significant factor in shaping the nature of the college search process for their children. Parental education affected the student's use of college viewbooks, campus visits, additional resources, and information-gathering regarding higher education (Litten, 1982; Stage & Hossler, 1989). Additional research has demonstrated the education of the mother, in particular, as being most influential for children's outcomes, level of post-secondary education, and ultimate career earnings (Carneiro, Meghir, & Parey, 2013).

Research demonstrated that Hispanic students, specifically, are influenced most by their family, friends, and networks of trust (Ceja, 2006; Kiyama, 2010; Perez &

McDonough, 2008). Hispanic students from low socioeconomic status families and Hispanic students with parents who did not attend college are found to have a significant disadvantage compared to their non-Hispanic counterparts (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; McDonough, Lising, Walpole, & Perez, 1998; Swail, Cabrera, & Lee, 2004). For African American students seeking admission to an HBCU, students were also heavily influenced by their family members' desire for them to attend a specific institution and the proximity of the institution from home (McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997). Perna (2000) confirmed parental education as an influence, and in addition discovered parents' involvement in school academics and activities beginning during Middle school is directly related to whether a student will enroll in a four-year institution after post-graduation. The relationship between family members and college choice decision-making is an important part of the predisposition phase in college choice decision-making. However, although the influence of family on decision-making is important, it neglects to detail how family members influence, or are influenced by the campus visit in the search process.

School counselors. School counselors also have a significant role in the college search process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Corwin, Venegas, Oliveraz, & Colyar, 2004; King, 1996). King (1996) studied the role of high school counselors, who traditionally hold an important role in the college choice process, specifically on low-income students. Low-income students, along with first generation students, are less likely to seek out four-year institutions for their initial college choice decision (Cabrera, 2014; Hoxby & Turner, 2015). Importantly, as King (1996) found, students who meet more frequently with their counselor are more likely to plan on attending college.

Previous research demonstrated the links to the role of school counselors with the disparity in college enrollment among Hispanic, Native American, and African American students as highly disproportionate in comparison to the number of students who began elementary school (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Corwin et al., 2004). For example, Cabrera & La Nasa (2000) found that socioeconomic status was the largest influence for underrepresented students to both finish high school and enroll in higher education. Beyond income levels, the disparity is also attributed to a lack of adequate public school counseling, and counseling related specifically to financial aid and scholarships. In part, these challenges emerged because of over-crowding in public schools as well as a high ratio of students versus secondary school counselors (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Corwin et al., 2004).

In a qualitative study, that examined the problem of access to higher education for underrepresented students, one student noted, “The counselor, she’s for the white kids and the Asian kids. I mean, the Mexican kids go to Ms. Y [a teacher]” (Corwin et al., p. 452). Even though family, teachers, and school counselors all contribute in assisting students during the predisposition phase of the college choice process, all students should receive the same level of access to information regarding college choices, financial aid, and college visits. Not every student may decide to attend post-secondary college after high school, yet this information is invaluable to them throughout their life. Students who do not receive adequate advice and counseling from their high school or counselor may assume their network of trust can provide all of the necessary advice about the college choice process. Conversely for some families, they view education as a divide between themselves and their children, and want to keep their children close to their

current community and home (Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). Early access to information regarding college better informs students as they make choices throughout their high school career to prepare for their future (Hooker & Brand, 2010). The school counselor can also exert an important influence with students based on their promotion of the campus visit to prospective students.

Rankings. College rankings also influence the college choice decision-making process for students and for their family members (Kim & Gasman, 2011; McDonough et al., 1998). Even though prospective students and parents often use institutional rankings in the college choice decision-making process, educators are often quick to point to flaws in the rankings system. According to Espinosa, Crandall, and Tukibayeva (2014), “the measures used in rankings are nowhere near comprehensive and are often based on faulty data and assumptions, not to mention the misguided notion that a comprehensive measure of institutional quality is even possible” (p. 7). Another recent study found that the number of applications received by a college or university is directly impacted by changes in the annual rankings in *U.S. News and World Report* (Reback & Alter, 2014). This study found that changes in academic reputation or quality of life have a significant effect on the number of prospective students who attend campus visits and applicants for the upcoming year (Reback & Alter, 2014). Because college rankings hit so many demographic categories, including rankings regarding best value to student diversity to the colleges that change lives, the college rankings and their changes each year can make a significant impact on the number of students who take part in a campus visit and ultimately become interested in an institution. Depending on the factors of most

importance to students and their families, rankings may unfairly influence students' decisions without the benefit of further details or information that a visit may surface.

Peers. The influence of peers is also a significant theme in various college choice models (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Kealy & Rockel, 1987; Kelp Kern, 2000; McDonough, 1997). McDonough (1997) depicted the creation of meaning and ritual among peer groups in connection to their high schools, and the effect that those specific peer influences may have on college choice. Although research conflicts on the amount of influence peers have on institutional choice (Hossler et al., 1989), Kelp Kern's (2000) study demonstrated that students enroll in college because their peers are going to college of similar type and prestige, which demonstrates a student selecting a socially constructed college choice. Additional research demonstrates that a student's peer group also influences beliefs regarding institutional quality that affect decision-making for which colleges are acceptable from campus visits, to matriculation (Fletcher, 2012; Kealy & Rockel, 1987; Kelp Kern, 2000). Since peers may ultimately have an effect on the initial college search process and a student's predisposition towards visiting a specific campus, qualitative research is needed to ultimately understand how this influence is actualized.

Institutional communication. Another motivator in the college choice process is the influence of institutional communications with students (Chapman, 1981; Johnston, 2010). Colleges and universities are constantly seeking out appropriate channels to communicate with prospective students through various forms of social media, email campaigns, and text messaging. Chapman (1981) first discussed institutional communication in his model of college choice, but the methods of communication have

since expanded greatly into social media, broadcast email campaigns, and online blogs. Johnston (2010) demonstrated that emerging peer-to-peer communication strategies through various forms of social media have shifted the way that admission professionals communicate with students in order to stay relevant and reach the broadest audience possible. Gregory (2014) argued that it is necessary for every institution to have a strong digital presence that closely models the campus visit experience. This digital presence also helps to pique interest in making an actual visit to campus. Many colleges and universities offer a variety of “alternate” tour options: self-guided, audio, and virtual tours, which are an excellent supplement for students and families unable to visit campus, yet they currently do not compete on the same level of impact as a tour and interactions with current students (Burdett, 2013). Gregory (2014) argued that admission officers have to adapt to meet student’s needs by being transparent about communication methods, creating more in-depth resources online, and utilizing a balance of different mediums to communicate with prospective students. Understanding the tools and methods students currently engage in with colleges that lead them to visiting a campus and ultimately impact college choice decisions was a goal of this study. A clear gap exists regarding the impact of institutional communication on a prospective student’s desire to visit campus.

Institutional fit. The influence of institutional fit is also an important theme in college choice models (Mattern, Woo, Hossler, & Wyatt, 2010; Williams, 1986). Student-institution fit consists of a combination of student characteristics, institutional characteristics, and combined interactions among those characteristics (Williams, 1986). For years, college admission professionals have been concerned with determining “fit” in

applicants in order to select admitted students who are not only likely to attend but also are more likely to succeed in college and persist through graduation (Williams, 1986). Though many colleges, school counselors, and students place a heavy emphasis on “fit” some researchers have begun recently to question the basis of this construct.

Recently, a study was designed to test student-institution fit, matching a student’s ideal preferences for post-secondary education, including institution size, distance from home, and location setting, and ultimately compared those results to the demographics of the institution type the student selected for matriculation (Mattern et al., 2010). This research demonstrated that students rarely matriculate to the type of school they originally described as their best “fit” (Mattern et al., 2010). Some of this mismatching is due to admission decisions, cost, and even the campus visit. Even though it is certainly in a student’s best interest to examine what characteristics and qualities are desired in a college campus, the emphasis on one perfect fit for each individual is likely out of date. Through my research study, participants described what they originally wanted in a college/university and how those factors may or may not have changed over time, and how those factors were influenced by the campus visit.

Institutional characteristics. The influence of institutional characteristics is another important theme throughout college choice models (Brown, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Greenough, 2003; Hesel, 2004; Hoover, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Kuh, 2009; Magolda, 2000; Swan, 1998; Yost & Tucker, 1995). While institutional characteristics such as size, location, prestige, cost, diversity, admission rate, and college rankings, vary between colleges, each characteristic may influence students in making decisions about whether or not to visit, apply, or enroll in a specific institution. Regardless of whether or not a

student is seeking a large or small school, the campus visit allows a student to experience what the size of the institution truly “feels” like. In this study by examining student’s experiences in rich detail, additional information was discovered regarding the importance of institutional characteristics in relation to college choice.

Selectivity. High-achieving students, who are comparing institutional characteristics to choose an institution, are often focused on the level of selectivity of the institution in addition to college rankings (Furukawa, 2011; Hossler & Litten, 1993). Though college rankings including *U.S. News & World Report* have their criticisms, many institutions boast those same rankings on websites, admission materials, and viewbooks, as they are aware of how attractive they are to prospective students (Kim & Gasman, 2011; McDonough et al., 1998). High-achieving students are generally drawn to institutions known for their selectivity, brand, and cultural capital, so the more high-achieving students who attend a selective institution, the better the perception is of the academic quality and career/job placement for prospective students. Selectivity also makes an impact on higher education outcomes.

Selectivity affects graduation rates, graduate school access and success, in addition to earning potential for college students (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Wyner, Bridgeland, & DiIulio, 2007). Highly selective colleges and universities overall produce higher graduation rates, which is significant especially for low-income students. According to recent research, 90% of high-achieving students at the nation’s 146 most selective colleges and universities graduate within six years of starting college compared with a graduation rate of 70% at less selective schools and 56% at non-selective institutions for equally high-achieving students (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Wyner et al.,

2007). More selective institutions also perform better post-graduation, with higher numbers of students attending graduate school (31% from selective colleges and universities, compared to 21% overall) in addition to earning higher wages directly out of college, perhaps due to more intensive career counseling and access to bigger networks of alumni connections, internships, and recruiting opportunities on campus (Carnevale & Rose, 2004; Wyner et al., 2007). Selectivity is an important factor in college choice decision-making for both the perceived and real benefits of attending and graduating from a selective institution. In this study, the qualitative perspective regarding how student's view selective institutions and how the perceived notion of selectivity impacts their college choice decisions was valuable to have articulated.

Institutional actions. At most four-year colleges, the traditional campus visit consists of an information session in conjunction with a campus tour, yet existing research tends to focus solely on the campus tour. Though much research regarding the campus tour is positive, Greenough (2003) found that students who visited campus during off-season (summer break and holidays) were less likely to feel the campus visit was helpful, often due to low levels of activity on campus. Yet, students often experience and are influenced by much more than a campus tour during their visit. More research is needed to uncover the various types of and elements in visits, in addition to discovering what types of visit experiences are most helpful for prospective students.

At some institutions the campus visit can include participation in an audio/virtual tour, a class visitation, an overnight experience, a student shadow experience, or a faculty/staff/student panel presentation. The campus visit can also include meeting with a regional admission officer, faculty member, or current students in addition to being

recruited for targeted programs for multicultural students, athletes, and honors programs. With so many ways to visit and engage with a campus community, a gap in the research exists; our current knowledge regarding the campus visit limits all of these experiences to one form of coding—the campus tour.

In addition to various types of campus visits, most four-year colleges and universities offer yield programs specifically for admitted students, traditionally held in the month of April, after offers of admission have been delivered and before deposits must be submitted in early May. These types of programs also vary in length and style, from overnight visits, and one-day programs, to weeklong events. When students are making their final decision and visiting or re-visiting colleges they have applied and been accepted to, the post-admittance campus visit could make more of an impact than the initial college visits. In Greenough's (2003) research, one student commented that attending an Admitted Student Day event was very helpful as it made the campus and college experience less intimidating and more tangible, allowing the student to commit to a specific institution. In my particular study, it was very valuable to gain information from recently matriculated students regarding their experience with prospective visits and yield programing. Further research is needed to understand the effects of these types of yield programming and how those events may shape decisions regarding college choice.

Additional influences. Hazelkorn (2009) postulated that institutional reputation and academic reputation, or in a broader sense selectivity, are the most important factors in understanding college choice. But, in today's society with so many different and specialized schools to choose from, institutional reputation is only one factor, where academic quality, name recognition, athletics prowess, and institutional appearance also

make an impact on decision-making (Clayton, 2013). Nurnberg, Schapiro, and Zimmerman's (2012) research used longitudinal admission data at Williams College, a highly selective liberal arts college, between 2008 and 2012 in an attempt to create a yield model to determine what factors will seal the deal for matriculation for prospective students who applied and were accepted to Williams College. By looking at college choice decisions from a different angle, the researchers hoped to determine what factors might be most significant for yield, as opposed to generating applications or interest.

While Nurnberg et al. (2012) postulated that several factors are important for predicting matriculation (including net price, student's race, student's geographic region, socioeconomic status, and students' artistic/athletic talents), they ultimately concluded that other factors may be responsible for predicting where a student will decide to matriculate. For example, "perhaps it is the weather on preview day, or the attractiveness of the tour guide that attracts or repels a prospective student" (Nurnberg et al., 2012, pp. 7-8). When such tiny factors including weather and tour guides can impact college choice, and are typically out of the institutional control, it presents a significant challenge for researchers and practitioners to evaluate the phenomenon of college choice and to determine what the best practices are for preparing and addressing the needs of prospective students. At selective colleges, administrators spend both time and resources on ensuring their campus visit and tour guides are delivering on the "golden mile" or "million-dollar walk" (Hoover, 2010b, para. 15). Hoover (2010b) explains,

But make no mistake: the newfangled college tour is a more sophisticated sales pitch than ever. Behind the scenes, many tours include an increasingly large cast of participants, including administrators, professors, and students, who think long

and hard about what visitors see and hear. Traditional tours included a litany of statistics, all meant to convey the college's quality. Now, tour guides appeal to your emotions with personal stories and anecdotes. It's recruitment by eye contact. At their best, modern tours are more candid and conversational—but at their worst, they're just more artfully manipulative. (para. 11)

Pampaloni (2010) delved into the belief that organizational image, defined as the views and perceptions of outsiders, affects college choice decision-making. Pampaloni's (2010) research found that "characteristics directly associated with schools, such as programs, location, cost, tours/open house, and others [reputation, size, social life] were most influential" (p. 37). This research also demonstrated that interpersonal influences were important, but perhaps not to the same extent as tours/open houses, teachers' advice, and interviews at the school (Pampaloni, 2010). Kim and Gasman (2011) contradicted the findings of Pampaloni's (2010) research, however, in their qualitative study that including 14 Asian-American students attending a selective northeastern university. Kim and Gasman (2011) found personal interactions with family, friends, teacher, and counselors were the most influential to each student's college choice decision, yet the research was limited by the small sample size and focused on a single ethnicity in the study. The students interviewed for this particular research study were also highly influenced by the media and college rankings such as *U.S. News and World Report* (Kim & Gasman, 2011; McDonough et al., 1998). In my research study, it was important to reflect on the relevance of media and the idea of an institution "looking like a college" in assisting students with beginning their college search and making their final decisions.

Burdett (2013) examined the use of internet based resources in the college search process, which have a much larger role in the college search process than they did in the original college-choice models created in the 1980s (Kinzie et al., 2004). Ultimately, however, the research concluded that while Internet resources influence college choice decision-making, the campus tour was still the most influential component of the college choice process (Burdett, 2013). Yet even with this current research, there is no further understanding of the components of the campus tour and campus visit that are the most influential for students. The elements that need to be focused on in order to better examine college choice decisions are the relationship between the prospective student and their reactions to the aesthetics of a college campus, and the personal interactions that prospective students have with faculty, staff, and students while on campus.

College Choice and Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital, or the social advantages that assist upward mobility, provides an explanation for the current aggressive application process when students believe that obtaining their degree will yield additional capital (McDonough, 1994). McDonough (1994) used Bourdieu's (1986) perspective to explore the process of college admission by observing the dynamic relationship between college applicants and the selective institutions to which they applied. For McDonough (1994), the college application surge, which began in the 1980s, was most apparent among the most selective 100 top colleges based on admission and application data. Families feel the need to select the "right" college based on the cultural capital associated with the symbolism of the reputation of a higher education institution (McDonough, 1994). In addition, families who have high cultural capital will make every attempt to ensure that

their children will receive what may be termed a birthright. Yet, this knowledge of the college going process is not equally shared among all students. Families with higher cultural capital know about the college visit and availability of college tours, whereas lower-income families or first-generation families may not. McDonough (1994) explained that families are aware of the benefits of a college education in regards to future social standing and potential income, and fear potential downward mobility. But family value for education is not ubiquitous. Instead, some family cultures hold less value for education and some more value. What remains unknown is how family value and cultural regard for education impact predisposition and ultimately college choice, and how families from various backgrounds view the influence of the campus visit. My experience during this research study was impacted based on the amount of visible diversity with both student tour guides and current students walking around campus.

Cultural capital can serve as a proxy for the power relations inherent in the admissions process and can influence what students see as the “right” college for them. Powerful and wealthy individuals who can afford to pay for tutors, private counselors, conducting multiple college visits, networking with admission staff, expensive summer excursions for a host of campus visits, numerous application fees, and high tuition maintain a social order that leverages college graduation with social benefits and class (Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Lareau and Conley (2008) argued that class differences permeate a child’s entire upbringing including the transition to college. They explained that the intersection of child development and the college admission process reveal both privilege and disadvantage as major influences for a student’s decision (Lareau & Conley, 2008). Ayalon (2007) confirmed earlier studies that found that students with a

higher socio-economic status, or with high social and cultural capital, are more likely to enter a more selective institution of higher education and pursue a lucrative field of study. These theories regarding cultural capital are significant for students specifically in this study as cultural capital affects a student's habitus and disposition towards attending specific institutions. In the college choice process, cultural capital and the construct of selectivity are significant for understanding student's decision-making as many decisions are made based on their relationship to both power and access. Thus, a focus of this study is on the intersection of Bourdieu's (1986) and McDonough's (1994) framework for habitus and cultural capital with the admission process and its subsequent effect on the campus visit.

Influence of the Campus Visit

The campus visit allows prospective students and families to examine a four-year institution's quality and institutional characteristics (Yost & Tucker, 1995). Cohen (2009) studied 1,100 high school seniors and concluded that the campus visit was the most influential factor assisting students in deciding whether or not to apply to a particular school, assuming the students had visited prior to the application process (Cohen, 2009; Swan, 1998). Overall, the student's reaction to the campus and its appearance and, based on a series of interactions occurring during the visit to campus all contributed to influencing the decision-making process (Cohen, 2009). A three-year longitudinal study at a large state university with 23,187 students concluded that a student who visits a particular school before applying is nearly twice as likely to matriculate as a student who did not visit before applying (Brown, 2010).

Yost and Tucker's (1995) study with a sample size of 1,571 students also verified the campus visit as an influential factor in the decision-making process for prospective college students. Society has consistently placed a large emphasis on the physical appearance of an institution—for example the elite colleges are labeled the “Ivies” due to their physical appearance, not by their academic reputation. Throughout my research study, the importance of the aesthetic look of the campus, the amount of construction, and the weather during the day were repeatedly factors that impacted a prospective student's campus visit and overall impression of an institution. During a visit to a college campus, an unfriendly professor or a dirty hallway in a residence hall can quickly shape an impression and decision about applying to a specific institution (Yost & Tucker, 1995). Another research study examining college choice decisions confirmed the importance of the campus visit in conjunction with the college website and contact with faculty and students (Hodges & Barbuto, 2002). Hesel (2004), described the importance of the campus tour data,

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 reveal that the hospitable nature (vibe) 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)

The campus visit is often a sales and marketing device for prospective students, as the campus visit is a powerful tool influencing the student's decision-making process (Yost & Tucker, 1995).

Timing of the visit. One area where a distinct lack of research exists revolves around the timing of the campus visit during the college search process. One aspect that further research may attend to is the impact of the timing of the campus visit, as students can visit before applying, after applying but before accepting an admission offer, and after accepting but before matriculating. For the participants in this research study, they began to feel as if the visit was more of a glimpse into their potential future at an institution and events and interactions became more “real,” rather than a visit to decide their overall interest in applying. It is unclear how students interpret visits prior to applying versus visits after application decisions have been made. It can be assumed, however, that a student who visits and then applies to that same institution was positively impacted by the campus visit. As high school students continue to apply to more colleges, the likelihood of them visiting each school prior to applying is low. However, there is a possibility that earlier visits, including attending camps or visiting colleges with a sibling may make more of an impression on students when it is their turn to be involved in the college choice process. Multiple students in this research study mentioned attending a summer camp, summer academic program, or campus visit with a sibling at an institution they later applied to for admission.

Emotional decision-making. Other small interactions also contribute to the influence of the campus visit in the college choice decision-making process. Hoover (2009) explained the importance of emotional decision-making, or making decisions

based on feelings created during a campus visit experience. Institutions, therefore, can convey a range of types of connections available on campus and can highlight these throughout the campus visit. Many schools rely on the relationship a tour guide can make with a prospective student and his/her family to attract and connect on a personal level with prospects (Washburn & Patroshius, 2004). Listening, eye contact, and making a memorable experience are moments that tend to resonate best with prospective students (Hoover, 2009). This study sought to discover influences during the campus visit that make an impact for prospective students in the college search process.

Colleges are encouraged to create “memories” for their visitors such as touching a legendary statue on campus, creating a photo opportunity, or associating a sensory experience with their experience (Hoover, 2009). Hoover (2010a) emphasized the importance of the small details in planning admission-related events for the millennial generation’s expectations, as those details affect a student’s decision to matriculate. Distinctiveness in the campus visit and displaying unique campus traditions or features is important for a college campus to stand out in the mind of the prospective student and the visit program benefits from the attention placed on symbolic interactions.

Ritual and creation of community. With research demonstrating the importance of the campus visit, researchers also began analyzing the campus visit from the micro level, examining the rituals created on campus and their effect on college choice. The idea of “community” on a four-year college campus tour is a socially constructed concept (Magolda, 2000, p. 35). While “community” is a relatively abstract term, it relates to the feeling of a close-knit campus environment. The campus tour allows prospective students and their families to walk around campus, while familiarizing themselves with

the layout of buildings and the campus-map delineated sense of community (Magolda, 2000; McDonough, 1997). Magolda (2000) depicted an experience of rituals and traditions that are relayed on a campus tour to prospective students to orient them to campus and assist them with feeling the “community.”

Families and students navigate themselves around campus and view buildings as if they were on an archaeological dig, staring intently at signs and postings as if they were hieroglyphics (Magolda, 2000). The rituals of the institution continually create and transmit ideas about the college community, through a description of various traditions, to current and prospective students (Magolda, 2000). The student tour guide serves as a performer whose role is to play not only a guide, but also a historian and admission coach (Magolda, 2000). The tour guide is responsible for changing tone when speaking about college traditions and when discussing the college’s history or facts about campus in addition to responding to questions from both students and parents (Magolda, 2000). The campus tour is full of opportunities to break down the social patterns and codes that describe a campus “community.”

Kuh (2009) argued the campus environment, which encompasses everything physical on a campus including buildings, equipment, furniture, signage, people, and landscape, serves as a set of symbols larger than the individual items themselves. Kuh (2009) maintained that the campus environment is the most influential factor in the campus visit experience and that it functions best as a triangular relationship between ecology, climate, and culture. In this perspective, an individual’s connection to a specific environment directly affects a prospective student’s response to the campus visit and tour experience on their college choice (Kuh, 2009). Missing from this study is whether this

reaction to a college campus is just based on aesthetics or the combination of the campus environment with personal interactions with community members.

Manning (2000), discussed the rituals of community in college culture as influential for building lifelong connections. Rituals are the social glue, according to Manning (2000), that must have buy-in from all campus community members to establish social cohesion. The college campus visit includes many rituals and symbols that allow students to make meaning of their role as inhabitants of college campuses and allow an institution to differentiate their identity through a separate expression of community. In this study, students described their experiences with rituals first hand and discussed how these rituals helped to better inform their college choice.

Media. Coomes (2004) explained the importance of rituals and community for connecting the pop culture lens to the millennial experience. Rituals are even more important for incoming college students as they have witnessed the rituals of deciding on a college, moving-in, and graduating in a pop-culture lens through movies including *The Social Network*, *Legally Blonde*, and *Pitch Perfect* in addition to television shows including *Greek* and *The Gilmore Girls* (Coomes, 2004). Therefore there is much greater pressure on institutions for the lived experience to live up to its reputation (Coomes, 2004).

Conclusion

The college choice process is a complex activity that affects many stakeholders: high school students, parents, public policymakers, high schools, admission professionals, and the communities within the institutions of higher education. The literature demonstrates the complexities of college choice and the decision-making

process for high school seniors, but in the past, research has focused almost exclusively on various individual components of college choice rather than the options institutions have at their disposal to influence choice. For example, the campus visit is one of many tools that assist high school students with the college choice decision-making process, yet the area of research regarding the campus visit experience is scant.

High school students are provided with so many options and information regarding the college search that it can be difficult for them to make meaningful decisions. Having a better understanding of the college choice process and factors that influence decision-making is essential for admission professionals and counselors and research demonstrates how crucial guidance is when navigating the college admission process. What remains unknown is how students perceive the campus visit and what elements of the visit ultimately influence their final choice. As noted, the college choice process is complex and driven by individual preferences, backgrounds, and constraints. Understanding better how a range of student's experience the campus visit is critical to institutions as they retool this program in their admission arena.

The campus visit has a significant effect on a decision for a high school student for both application and enrollment; yet research is limited regarding the specifics of the campus visit experience (Brown, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Greenough, 2003; Hesel, 2004; Hoover, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Kuh, 2009; Magolda, 2000; Swan, 1998; Yost & Tucker, 1995). Although the research concludes the campus tour is influential, the literature is not clear on what components are most successful. The literature has yet to examine the influence of informal visits, as many families choose to visit college campuses without engaging in the formal information session and tour. Absent also is research and

specifics about the additional campus visit opportunities available to students including attending a class, meeting with a professor, or participating in an overnight visit program. Finally, the effect of yield programming that includes a campus visit on decision-making is lacking in the data surrounding college choice. More research was necessary to evaluate the impact various types of campus visits have on student decision-making regarding college choice.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the design and methodology used in the study regarding the phenomenon of college choice and the campus visit. In this chapter, I detail the research design and justify the use of a qualitative research approach. Included in the methods overview are the following topics: population, participants, data collection procedures, instrumentation, research design, research questions, and data analysis. The methodology examines why I made specific research design decisions and how these choices impact my overall research outcomes. Specific ethical considerations are also discussed in this chapter.

Research Design

The majority of the research in my literature review on college choice and the campus visit took a quantitative approach (Brown, 2010; Chapman, 1981; Cohen, 2009; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Holland, 1958; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Kolter, 1976; Richards & Holland, 1965; Yost & Tucker 1995), yet the personal nature of college choice and the influence of an individual's social schema and social construction of their own experience regarding the decision-making process lends this research topic well to qualitative study. Creswell (2013) explained, "qualitative research begins with the assumptions [of the researcher] and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problem addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 44). Thus, a qualitative method provided the best approach for me with this topic because it allowed me to get to know each student's

personal story related to the campus visit and college choice (Creswell, 2013). As opposed to quantitative research, qualitative research is non-positivistic and relies on the realities constructed by participants (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research is defined by the following characteristics, “characterized by the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, and inductive investigative strategy, and a richly descriptive end product” (Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 6). My position in the admission office at the College of William & Mary provides for a particular lens of perspective and can create insights into the process that others may not have without this type of insider knowledge.

In addition, qualitative research gives a voice to the experience as it also “helps us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible” (Merriam, 1998, p. 5). My study shared each of these characteristics as I am sought to understand the more individual and personal aspects of each student’s experience with college choice and the campus visit. The participants’ voices and individual understandings allowed this research to gain rich detail from the stories of participants. This research aimed to develop a better understanding of how students process various interactions with college campuses and how that affected their decision-making process to better design guidance for prospective students and programming for higher education.

Conceptual Framework

College choice is a phenomenon researchers have attempted to understand for decades, and one outcome of this research concludes that the campus visit is a critical factor in students’ final choice. Even though ample quantitative research exists that

depicts the campus visit and/or tour as having the largest influence on college choice decisions (Brown, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Greenough, 2003; Hesel, 2004; Hoover, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Kuh, 2009; Magolda, 2000; Swan, 1998; Yost & Tucker, 1995), a serious gap in the research exists depicting what components and which types of campus visit experiences are most influential for students in making their college choice decisions. The literature review from chapter two examined the current literature to demonstrate this gap and what is currently known regarding college choice and the campus visit experience.

This study aimed to explore the phenomenon of college choice and the campus visit through a mixture of phenomenology (Creswell, 2013; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Van Manen, 1990), social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), and Bourdieu's (1986) construct of cultural capital. A visual representation of this framework is seen in Figure C.

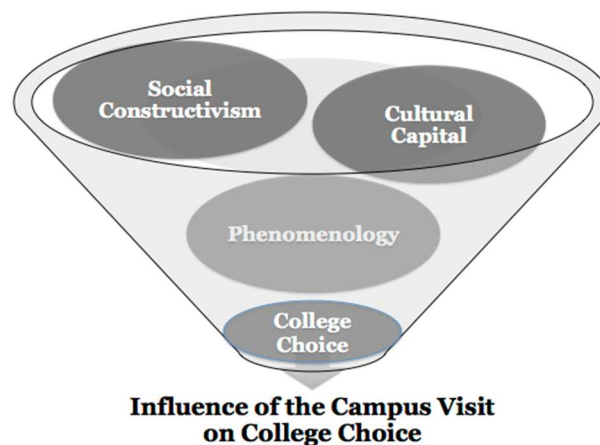


Figure C. Research Framework

This framework provided for better understanding of the qualitatively different ways college applicant's experience and understand their campus visit experience and college choice decision. Bourdieu's (1986) construct of cultural capital provided a necessary

component for this study on college choice, as the research is restricted to students seeking selective four-year universities. Cultural capital provided a framework for understanding an individual's desire to attend a selective school, while social constructivism and phenomenology provide a method of understanding the individual's experience and the essence of the phenomenon as a whole. Social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) pairs nicely with cultural capital as it allowed me to highlight each individual's perspective and lived experience as personal and based on the individual's own attitudes and perceptions.

Phenomenology (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2009; Van Manen, 1990) allows for a researcher to delve into how individuals experience a phenomenon, and permits for the development of an overall essence of the experience. Specifically, this study examined the campus visit experience first-hand to deduce common themes among different campus visits, in addition to examining the influences that high school seniors identify as critical regarding the campus visit and college choice juxtaposed against what recently matriculated students identify post-choice. This framework assumed that cultural capital acts as an input for a student's decision-making and that those preconceived and inculcated views of cultural capital viewed through the social construction of reality for students, or how a student perceives and constructs knowledge, leads this research to the best possible understanding of the lived experience, or phenomenology.

Phenomenology

Considering the importance of campus visitation on college choice, the alignment with a phenomenological approach to study individual experiences regarding the phenomenon of the campus visit and its influence on college choice is logical.

Phenomenology is a “systematic, explicit, self-critical, and intersubjective” study of a student’s lived experience of a phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990, p. 11). Patton (2002) described the approach even further by explaining that,

Phenomenologies explore the ways people make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning. It requires methodologically, carefully, and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon – how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others. (p. 104)

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to the study of experience in an attempt to make meaning out of people’s relationships to the world and to their experiences (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenology develops a composite depiction of the essence of the experience, and allows the researcher to make an interpretation based on the meaning of several lived experiences. Based on my own relationship to admission and college choice, this interpretation goes beyond the basic interpretation of a phenomenology, and extends into what Heidegger’s (1927/2008) work proposed as hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology allows for a deeper understanding and interpretation of a lived experience and places value on the researcher’s lived experience as well (Heidegger, 1927/2008).

Creswell (2013) explained that phenomenology is a useful technique when a researcher wants to focus on individuals with similar experiences of the same phenomenon. Phenomenology requires gathering comprehensive descriptions of an experience that reflect how participants view reality in order for the researcher to provide

an analysis of the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology, then, is the best approach to “understand common experiences in order to develop practices or policies” (Creswell, 2013, p. 81). For this particular study, phenomenology is well suited to the research in order to better understand the essence of the phenomenon of college choice and the campus visit, and to uncover the voice of participants regarding their lived experience.

Interpretive framework. Creswell (2013) described several interpretive frameworks to help situate the researcher in a qualitative study, and this particular study is grounded in the social constructivism framework. Social constructivism is the basis of my interpretive framework and provides a lens for analysis in this study, as this approach allows for the social construction of reality, to understand different phenomena. Social constructivism indicates that individuals develop their own understanding of their experiences and this type of meaning making is based on his or her own attitudes and perceptions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This theory of knowledge also assumes that human beings rationalize their experiences by developing their own understanding of the world and their experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hacking, 1999). Social constructivism is a dynamic and ongoing process that allows individuals to live in their perceived social reality and affects not only an individual’s orientation to facts and places, but also to beliefs, values, and events (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hacking, 1999). By delving into qualitative research and understanding the unique viewpoint of each student, research using social constructivism is able to demonstrate an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the world and to the individual’s experience of the world (Creswell, 2013; Glesne, 2006; Smith et al., 2009).

Role of the Researcher. As this research is part of a qualitative and interpretive study, it is necessary to examine the role of the researcher in the research process. The interpretive framework for this research is affected by the researcher's proximity to the topic at hand, which in this case is based on my current role in an admission office. Qualitative research is typically a prolonged and in-depth process that involves extensive interactions between the researcher and the study participants. Given the proximity to the participants themselves and the phenomenon being studied, Creswell (2013) argued that researchers must be aware of their own "biases, values and personal background" regarding how those biases might affect their investigation and study of the particular phenomenon (p. 177). Patton (2002) offered several strategies for researchers who are engaging in qualitative interactions with participants including demonstrating "openness, sensitivity, respect, awareness, and responsiveness" during interactions with participants (p. 40). Researchers must also maintain a neutral and empathetic stance while remaining sensitive to the context of the phenomenon. In qualitative studies in general, it is critical that the researcher look to analyze comparative cases rather than attempt to generalize the results of the study (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002).

For this particular study, I utilized all of the above recommendations to authenticate and enhance the understanding of this particular phenomenon. To ensure the utmost objectivity, a "researcher as instrument" statement and personal biography to address the sensitivities I bring to the study is attached in Appendix A. Rossman and Rallis (2003) explained, "the researcher needs to know who [she] is and what [she] is doing in the setting. This self-awareness allows the researcher to distinguish [her] sense-making from the sense-making of those [she] is studying" (p. 48). Recognizing the role

of researchers' own biases enabled me to better account for my effect on data collection and analysis.

As a student who attended a selective four-year college, I have my own biases and assumptions about the campus visit and college choice. My professional role in admission also gives me a unique vantage point in which I am able to talk with both prospective students and current students about their own experiences with the campus visit and how it ultimately affected their college choice. Because of the assumptions I brought to the research study, it was necessary to bracket out my own personal assumptions and experiences by engaging in ongoing reflexive writing in a researcher journal.

Philosophical assumptions. Another important element of the philosophical approach for this study includes cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu's (1986) sociological research focused on class and differences in both power and prestige. The idea of capital, including social, cultural, and symbolic, is discussed at length in reference to who holds power and how power can be gained in chapter two (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu (1986) viewed cultural capital as very relevant to entry into higher education as this cultural capital is inculcated into upper class homes, and affects a student's predisposition towards college choice. The concept of cultural capital is also relevant in the research on college choice models and theories regarding decision-making.

Perna (2006) expanded previous knowledge about college choice decision-making by demonstrating a connection to cultural capital. Her research was significant because she established the relationship between the role of habitus and the role of community, campus, and policy makers on college choice (Perna, 2006). Perna (2006) also explained

that individual student's experiences and habitus are influenced by gender, race, ethnicity, and their individual access to both social and cultural capital. Students decide whether and where to attend college, but also decide what to study, whether to persist and graduate all based on the amount of human, financial, social, and cultural capital available to the student throughout their postsecondary educational experience (Bergerson; 2009; Perna, 2006; Salisbury et al., 2008).

In this research, the construct of cultural capital is a part of the philosophical approach for this study, as this particular type of capital may affect cultural knowledge and individual social constructivism in regards to both student's experiences with the college choice process and their perceptions of various campus visits.

Summary. In this research study, the combination of phenomenology as a methodological approach and a theoretical framework is appropriate as the goal of the study is to examine the essence of the campus visit experience in its relationship to college choice. Social constructivism also aligns well with phenomenology as it permits individuals' experiences to vary based on their own perceptions of reality and the world. Lastly, the construct of cultural capital is significant as cultural capital directly relates to social constructivism and how an individual views the world, in addition to affecting the lived experience of the phenomenon of college choice. It is appropriate for this research study to employ a theory of cultural capital in conjunction with phenomenology and social constructivism as each participant in this study views the same experience: the campus visit, from a different lens, developed by cultural capital and social constructivism, that are important for the researcher to understand in order to frame that individual's personal experience of the campus visit phenomenon.

Research Questions

For this study, the research design is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do information sessions and tours compare among a subset of the national universities in the Mid-Atlantic (Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia, and Washington D.C.) listed in *U.S. News & World Report's* 2015 list of national universities?
2. How do varying campus visit types, and intricacies of each visit, influence a student's perception of an institution and the meaning they ascribe to their decision to attend?
 - c. How do high school seniors socially construct the role of the campus visit in their college choice?
 - d. How do matriculated freshmen socially construct the role of the campus visit in their college choice?

Methodology

Due to the intensive nature of qualitative research and inquiry, it is not possible for the researcher to gather the perspectives of all participants about all of the experiences related to the central phenomenon of college choice and the campus visit. For the purposes of this study, the amount of data possible to be collected within the specific timeframe of one college semester was triangulated to get at the essence of the experience of college choice and the campus visit. The research design for this study involved three distinct stages. In stage one, I conducted face-to-face interviews with recently matriculated freshmen at selected colleges in the Mid-Atlantic region during their first semester of their freshman year. In stage two, I visited four selective colleges and

universities, one in each region of the Mid-Atlantic, excluding the region of Virginia for possible bias. These site visits were designed to allow myself the opportunity to experience first-hand the most traditional form of the campus visit, the information session and tour. In stage three, I conducted open-ended qualitative surveys with current high school seniors in the Mid-Atlantic region.

These decisions regarding research design impacted the following choices regarding methods for data generation and analysis. Paton (2002) provided context regarding the difficult choices a researcher must make, including

The extent to which a research or evaluation study is broad or narrow depends on purpose, the resources available, the time available, and the interests of those involved...[these] are not choices between good and bad but choices among alternatives, all of which have merit. (p. 228)

In the following sections I detail the decision-making processes that led to the specific site and participant selection.

Site Selection. For this study, I conducted my research in the Mid-Atlantic region, which for the purposes of this study included Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. I selected this region due to my proximity for ease of visitation, familiarity with the students and institutions, contacts with potential gatekeepers, and access to a number of selective colleges and universities with the region. The high number of selective institutions in this region provided options for variety as well. Initially, I conducted a web-survey of all selective institutions in the Mid-Atlantic region to gain a better understanding of the types of visit experiences each college or university offers outside of the traditional campus visit. In this web-survey, I evaluated

the information posted regarding information sessions and tours, specialty programs, class visits, overnight visits, interviews, and individual appointments. I also took notes on the general impression and ease of use of each individual website. The conclusion of this web-survey provided me with background knowledge on each institution within the Mid-Atlantic region, and allowed me to select the individual colleges/universities to target for stage two of the research.

For the first stage of this research, understanding the phenomenon of the campus visit and college choice from the perspective of recently matriculated freshmen, I contacted all 11 colleges and universities in the Mid-Atlantic that were listed in the top 100 national universities in the 2015 edition of *U.S. News & World Report* to cultivate a larger pool for face-to-face student interviews in order to get a well-rounded picture of the phenomenon based on recent student experience. I began this portion of the research by reaching out to offices on campus, via an email inquiry, including Student Affairs, Residence Life, Admission, Campus Recreation, and the Office of First Year Experience to gain access to their freshmen student population. Some colleges/universities also allowed me to post on their Class of 2019 Facebook page to cultivate interest among potential participants, and some participants were also helpful in providing names of other interested students who met the criteria for the research study.

In stage two, evaluating the traditional campus visit, or information session and tour, I visited four different colleges, currently ranked in the top 100 colleges and universities as ranked by *U.S. News and World Report* (2015) within Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, and Washington, D.C. These institutions were selected specifically based on the web-survey of all institutions, as seen in Appendix B, and I

ensured one institution was represented from each of the possible four regions. I attempted to visit campuses that demonstrated a diversity of campus visit offerings, as I evaluated schools to visit based on their description of available visit opportunities (overnight visits, class visits, interviews, and meetings with admission staff). Even though I only engaged in the traditional campus visit (the information session and campus tour) as part of this study, I also collected brochures and packets about each institution during my campus visits. During these visits, I took pictures of items I observed during the visits and gauged the methods that the site institutions used to interact with students through social media. As noted, I opted to attend the traditional campus visit opportunity, as this option is typically the visit type that the majority of students choose. I visited the four institutions while school was in session to ensure my own anonymity within a larger group visiting the institution. Because of my professional role in admission at the College of William & Mary, I omitted the state of Virginia from this stage to maintain anonymity during the visits. For this stage, I selected four site visits, as a small number of sites is appropriate for selection in a phenomenological study, based on the rich depth of detail in an observation.

For stage three, I focused on understanding the phenomenon of the campus visit and college choice from a high school senior's perspective. I limited the high school survey to two high schools from four of the five regions. Unfortunately due to the number of college preparatory high schools and lack of response/unwillingness to participate, I removed Washington, D.C. from this stage of the research. Thus, I surveyed high school seniors at two competitive college prep high schools in the remaining four regions of the Mid-Atlantic (Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia). I made use of various

gatekeepers and contacts that I have gained through my current professional role. Gatekeepers played a significant role in the distribution of my survey instrument and promoting participation in this particular study. As student participants must be 18 to participate in the survey instrument and to ensure each of the high school seniors was immersed in the college choice and application process, the deployment of this survey took place in December of their senior year. The next section reviews participant selection and demographics.

Participant Selection. Consistent with qualitative research guidelines, the participants for this study were chosen in a purposeful manner in order to obtain students most representative of the population (Creswell, 2013). A purposeful sampling method involves gathering data to provide an in-depth exploration of the central phenomenon, rather than intent to generalize the data to a larger audience (Creswell, 2013). Within the three distinct stages of research, I hoped to gain a broad sense of the phenomenon of the influence of the campus visit on college choice across a diverse group of selective institutions.

In stage one, I interviewed 21 participants from six colleges/universities in the Mid-Atlantic currently ranked in the top 100 through the 2015 version of *U.S. News & World Report* to conduct in-person interviews with for this study. In a phenomenological study, the participant size can range from as few as one participant to 20 participants, based on the research questions and the richness of the individual cases (Creswell, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). For this study, 21 students, from six different colleges/universities, provided a broad range of experiences with the campus visit and college choice, to get at the essence of the experience. I used gatekeepers at each institution in the Mid-Atlantic

that met the criteria in order to gain access to their freshmen student population. In order to make the necessary connections, I reached out to Student Affairs professionals in order to identify prospective students to interview, and asked them to send out an email blast to freshmen explaining the three necessary criteria for participating. Once the students have made contact with me, and demonstrated their interest, each potential interviewee filled out a pre-screening form to ensure they meet the necessary criteria, of the 25 students who indicated an interest only 21 were eligible to participate.

The first criterion was that a student must be a current freshman, non-transfer student, from the Mid-Atlantic region. This criterion was met by only selecting students who are first-semester freshmen and have not previously been enrolled at another institution. The second criterion required that the students chosen for the study were admitted to multiple institutions, with a minimum of two offers of admission at different institutions. The reasoning behind this criterion was that a student who was admitted to multiple institutions versus students who applied early decision, or were only admitted to one school, likely had more factors that may have influenced their decision of where to attend college.

The third criterion was that each participant must have visited at least four colleges during their college search process, either before or after receiving their admission decisions. This criterion was important, as the student should have experience visiting various colleges to provide richer data regarding their understanding of the campus visit experience. As the researcher, I also hoped to demonstrate diversity of experience with student participants who represented diversity in regards to socioeconomic status, rural/urban diversity, gender, ethnicity, and religious diversity.

My participants for this study were able to demonstrate diverse perspectives in each of the five categories, though not to the extent that would be a complete reflection of the population of the Mid-Atlantic.

In stage two of this research study, I visited four different colleges in the Mid-Atlantic region (Delaware, D.C., Maryland, and North Carolina) currently rated in the top 100 national universities in the 2015 edition of *U.S. News & World Report*. By excluding the state of Virginia, due to my own personal bias, the research regarding the tours may be applicable to the Mid-Atlantic region. I attended the institution's regularly scheduled information session and tour as a visitor while classes were in session, and the visit experiences were big enough that I was able to blend in with the crowd.

In stage three, I selected two selective college preparatory private schools that send 96% or more of their students directly on to four-year institutions. For this particular study, an initial list of the top 100 private high schools was used to select from *Niche's* (2015) rankings. *Niche* (2015) develops their rankings from government and public data sets that evaluate academics, student culture and diversity, survey responses, and college readiness outcomes. Each high school listed also has the percentage of students going on to four-year colleges listed in their detailed descriptions. Of the regions used in this stage, Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina each have 100 different private schools on the list, in which most are sending 96% on to four-year institutions; Delaware has 21 to choose from for this study. In this phase of the research, I began by ensuring the high school met my selection criteria and I started at the top of the list to contact schools for participation in my study. For this section, I aimed to have 8 different high schools and their students represented in the survey data, with students

representing geographic, and gender diversity. By selecting schools in different parts of each state the research was able to demonstrate geographic diversity. This research was also able to show some gender diversity, with the overall 104 participants, 37 were male, 54 were female, five reported as other, and nine did not respond.

Even though online survey response rates can often be low due to survey fatigue, and survey response rates can range widely based on location, motivation, and length of the survey, Baruch and Holtom (2008) evaluated 490 studies with surveys included and found the average response rate for individual surveys was 52.7% with a standard deviation of 20.4. While this particular survey had a low overall response rates, it is difficult to know how many of the students were eligible to participate based on the age requirement. Despite the lower response rates, this survey allowed me to explore many students beliefs and experiences regarding the college choice and campus visit phenomenon that otherwise would not be possible due to time/monetary constraints (Porter, Whitcomb, & Weitzer, 2004).

Triangulation. In an effort to triangulate the data, information collected in all three of these stages of the research was combined together in an effort to better understand the phenomenon as a whole and to understand each research participant's individual lived experience and how this contributed to the essence of the phenomenon. Participant selection is critical to a better understanding of the phenomenon and essence of the experience in order to yield helpful data and themes for further research.

In addition I focused on establishing credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained that the trustworthiness of a research study is important when evaluating its contributions to scholarship. For this study, I used multiple methods, which are

recommended, for credibility, transferability, and dependability including: persistent observation, triangulation, member checking, thick description, inquiry audit, and reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability. Confirmability is a very important factor for qualitative research. Creswell (2013) offered several strategies that are essential for qualitative researchers in regards to confirmability. These strategies include triangulation of data sources, member checking, bias clarification, prolonged fieldwork, peer debriefing, and external auditing (Creswell, 2013). As detailed in the data analysis portion, this study included the triangulation of data sources, member checking of data sources, and bias clarification. I spent extensive time in the field gathering data and evaluating each student's experience of the phenomenon. In addition, I utilized peer debriefing in order to review the themes and coding to provide an objective overview of the study. Given that this study is also part of a doctoral dissertation, it underwent member checking from the chair of the dissertation committee.

Trustworthiness. To ensure trustworthiness in this study, I rigorously documented the implementation of the research methodology and made changes where necessary throughout the process of this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). For example, I recognized early on that students who were interviewing with me benefited from viewing the questions in advance, and I sent them to all participants to review prior to the interview. In addition, I checked transcripts for errors to ensure consistency, and allowed for time for member checking. Each student had a week with which to make any changes or edits to their preliminary transcript. I also utilized several graduate students to ensure the application of themes in the coding process does not drift in its application throughout

the various transcripts, in addition to limiting researcher bias (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The graduate students reviewed transcripts and coded them on their own, and I was able to compare them to my own coded transcripts. The students applied the codes in a manner consistent with my transcripts, yet sometimes struggled to code sections where multiple codes arose. Lastly, by using three different research techniques, trustworthiness of the study is increased through triangulation of the data by the combination of the three data sources collected throughout this research study. Because qualitative research is emergent and exploratory by nature, it is critical for the researcher to continuously be evaluating methods and techniques to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

Instrumentation and data collection. The data collection for this study sought to “elicit data needed to gain understanding of the phenomenon in question, contribute different perspectives on the issue, and make effective use of the time available for data collection” (Glesne, 2006, p. 31). Rossman and Rallis (2003) described data collection as a “deliberate, conscious, systematic process that details both the products—the data—and the processes of the research activities so that others may understand how the study was performed and can judge its adequacy, strengths, and ethics” (p. 179). The three sources of data included in this study provided the opportunity to juxtapose the same phenomenon, the campus visit, from three different stakeholder perspectives to ultimately approach the essence of the campus visit experience.

The data collection for this study included: qualitative observations (copies of the notes for each of the attended information sessions and tours); qualitative documents: (survey data from high school seniors, web survey of campus visitation offerings); and

individual interviews with recently matriculated freshmen (Creswell, 2013). All interview and survey instruments were piloted with current college students at the College of William & Mary to ensure the data collected encompassed all of the information the researcher was seeking. During my interview and survey experimentation, I adjusted some questions slightly to ease question comprehension. All students who participated in this study completed an informed consent form prior to participating in this research study. The evaluation protocol for the information session and tour can be found in Appendix C. The informed consent for high school seniors is located in Appendix D, with the survey questions for high school seniors in Appendix E. A crosswalk table between the research questions and survey questions is located in Appendix F. The interview questions for college freshmen is found in Appendix G, and the crosswalk table between the research questions and interview questions is located in Appendix H. The informed consent for college freshman is located in Appendix I.

The research questions asked in this research study were designed to provide an in-depth view of the influence of the campus visit experience on college choice. The data was gathered by audio recording in addition to field notes, which were transcribed for analysis by a paid transcriber. This transcriber signed a note of confidentiality found in Appendix J. After the data was collected, I also engaged in member checking to ensure the transcript of the experience aligned with the student's perceived experience by emailing the student a copy of the transcript from the interview. After all of the student interviews were completed, I also contacted the participants and shared with them a summary of the essence of the campus visit and college choice experience across the varying interviews for their reaction. This allowed for member checking of both intent

and perception. The research participants, who responded to that email request, responded favorably to the overall essence statement and confirmed that it aligned with their experience. By combining the data generation (interviews and survey data from students) with the data collection (evaluation analysis of information sessions and tours during the campus visit), the research provided a portrait of themes regarding the role of the campus visit in college choice for both theory extension and practice.

Data Analysis

The data collection process included a copy of my reflexive journal, web-survey of campus visitation offerings, transcription of notes regarding each information session and tour, an analysis of the survey data, and a transcription of each interview completed shortly after each session, to ensure that the data and the experience were fresh in my mind. For stage one of the research, I evaluated the recently matriculated freshman interviews. Creswell (2013) recommended evaluating each participant's textual and structural description of the phenomenon in order to analyze the data and reduce the data into significant themes or clusters that emerge across the data sources. In stage two involving campus visits, I analyzed the similarities and differences of my campus visit experiences, and searched for any common themes. I compared and analyzed my visit experiences with the visit experiences of students interviewed in stage one, as those ideas and experiences were fresh in my mind.

In stage three, I evaluated the survey results from high school seniors and coding developing themes in the response data, beginning with my initial list of a priori codes, listed in Appendix K, and then subsequent emerging themes (Creswell, 2013). I sorted through all of the initial coding of themes from each research phase, and then once all

individual data were coded, I organized and conceptualized the codes into themes most prevalent in the data. Finally I reported out descriptive statistics of the students' responses. In addition, using Qualtrics to build the stage three survey allowed me the ability to produce graphs and charts from the survey data for additional illustrations for this research.

Dedoose. For this research study, I made use of Dedoose to assist in qualitative data analysis. Dedoose is a fee-based subscription-only research tool designed for qualitative research, providing researchers with the ability to evaluate and interpret codes and themes across a variety of data sources. The transcripts of interviews from stage one were loaded into Dedoose to help with the organization of data, coding, and analysis of the interviews. Dedoose also allowed me to easily make notes on transcripts, code various aspects of the interview text, and detect common themes and outliers among the different interviews. In stage two, I entered all of my observation data from the observation form, as seen in Appendix C, into Dedoose so that I was able to code that data with emerging themes and evaluate the impression left on me based on certain elements of my visit experience. By using Dedoose, a computer software analysis program, it was also possible to visually represent themes in qualitative data to ensure correct analysis (Creswell, 2013).

Coding

The first stage in a phenomenological analysis involves delineation and the process of "horizontalizing" the information session and tour observation protocol, interview transcripts, and survey data (Moustakas, 1994, p. 95). The act of horizontalizing involves assigning equal value to each statement in a transcript or survey

response, which represents a different method of meaning making during the coding process. The process also includes “bracketing” out any of the researcher’s predispositions towards the research while coding in order to reduce the influence of researcher bias (Moustakas, 1994, p. 78; Patton, 2002). While coding each individual transcript, description, or survey response, I used my list of a priori codes in addition to developing emerging codes. The coding for this study used a peer-reviewed to ensure confirmability and trustworthiness of the study. To help insure the bracketing of bias, I kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process.

The second phase of the research process occurred after the initial coding was completed. This phase leads to theme development and allowed for clustering around a shared common experience. Patton (2002) explained the ideas of the essence of the shared experience in phenomenology, “these essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon” (p. 106). The goal of this study was to produce several themes regarding the experience of college choice and the campus visit through the combination of the individual expression of the experience.

Human Participants and Ethical Considerations

Ethical sensitivity is a common principle for all qualitative researchers (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). For this research study I abided by all of the ethical considerations as mandated by the College of William & Mary’s EDIRC (Human subjects form specific to the School of Education) and I maintained the highest ethical standards within my research, to assure my data were not compromised or affected throughout the research

process. I also participated in the CITI training and abided by all rules, regulations, and guidelines as defined through the IRB guidelines. All participants were asked to read and sign a consent form, in Appendix D/I, which was approved by the EDIRC prior to engaging in my research.

I protected the data with the utmost security throughout this research process. All data for this project were kept in a secure location on my personal computer, which is password protected. I was the only one with access to the data outside of the minimal reviewer-only status my peer reviewers had during this process. Data security is also addressed for this research project in the participant consent form, in Appendix L, that all participants read and signed prior to the data being collected. All data will be destroyed following the successful completion of my doctoral dissertation defense.

Limitations/Assumptions/Delimitations

The college choice process is an activity that all students who decide to attend college will enter; however, because those decisions can sometimes be so personal and intricate, it can be a challenge for researchers to tap into all of the individual pre-dispositions and biases that influence the final decision of each individual student. This limitation has been addressed in this study by examining the campus visit and college choice process from three distinct angles to triangulate the data and ensure the richness of data quality. In addition, I interviewed college freshman early in their college experience so that their connection to the college choice process would be recent. Because their experience on their respective campuses is limited, each student expressed how they ultimately made the right choice and are happy with their college choice decision. Some of this is expected by students who would self-select to participate in this research.

However this presents a limitation because each student's experience on campus is limited by his or her amount of time on campus. Students may not end up graduating from their current institution, and it may be too soon for the participants to know whether or not their college choice decision was a mistake. Another key limitation is that not all students will participate in a campus visit prior to making their college decision, so it is evident that the visit is not the only factor of the decision-making process.

An assumption of the study is that the participants were truthful and transparent during their participation about what factors may have influenced their college choice decision. A second assumption of this research study was that the campus visit does impact college choice decision-making. Lastly, there are several key delimitations of the study. First, the study was restricted to the Mid-Atlantic region. This study was even further restricted to selective colleges in the Mid-Atlantic region. In addition the study was delimited to its focus on high school students who have access to a higher than average amount of knowledge and information regarding college and higher education. Because the data are limited to this context, these findings are not comparable to other states, regions, or less selective colleges.

Conclusion

Much of the research on the relationship between college choice and the campus visit points to the visit and/or the campus tour as having the most influence on decision-making (Brown, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Greenough, 2003; Hesel, 2004; Hoover, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Kuh, 2009; Magolda, 2000; Swan, 1998; Yost & Tucker, 1995). For this particular study, I sought to explore a more in-depth analysis of student's experiences related to the college choice process, hence the use of a phenomenological qualitative

approach (Creswell, 2013). By combining the three different research activities outlined in this chapter, through the lens of the conceptual framework, I desired to uncover rich descriptions of the phenomenon of college choice.

CHAPTER 4: SAY YES TO THE DRESS MOMENT

The focus of my study was to explore the impact of the campus visit on college choice, aiming to determine what factors of the campus visit experience influence potential students. This chapter reports on interviews with recently matriculated freshman college students and presents a general essence of the phenomenon of the campus visit based on the students' experiences. Findings are reported out in the participants' own words and help explain how they narrowed down his or her college choices to apply to a select group of colleges, and how students ultimately selected their final college choice for matriculation. Each student's experience and decision-making regarding college choice varied, but an essence of the college choice process emerged as a shared phenomenon. The portraits and essence of this phenomenon are presented in thematic clusters from data collected through one-on-one interviews with the participants.

First, this chapter presents a portrait of the participants. Second, the findings are presented. The thematic clusters of perceived meaning from the student's experiences are presented following the portraits to present a better sense of the essence of the campus visit and college choice decision-making process. Four themes, initial college choice funnel, aesthetics and campus visit, personal interactions, and community vibe, emerged from the data.

The first theme, initial college choice funnel, depicted how students began and initially narrowed down their college search in order to determine which colleges they intended to visit. The second theme, aesthetics and campus visit, depicted the impact of

the aesthetics of campus on the student's impression of a college/university during their campus visit. The third theme, personal interactions, demonstrates the impact of interactions with college community members, friends, and alumni on college choice decision-making. The fourth theme, community vibe, illustrates the need for prospect students to get a sense of the "community" on campus—what students wear, how they spend their time, and their general attitude about life on campus.

Six colleges (46%) of the 13 schools contacted provided access participants for this portion of the study. The background and experiences of the participants varied. Likewise, the habitus/cultural capital also varied of the students based on their hometown, family level of education, and socioeconomic status. Of the 21 participants, 6 were male (28.6%) and 15 were female (71.4%). My response rate of women was higher than the national averages of the composition of college students, with more female than male students participating. As female students are often more likely to get involved in student groups and activities, that may predispose them to be more responsive to emails from administrators and social media posts to volunteer for different projects.

The racial/ethnic backgrounds of the participants included 13 Caucasians (62%), 4 Asians (19%), and 4 African-American (19%). This selection of students is diverse but not completely representative of the current college population. By comparing several institutions in Virginia based on their common data set, the range varied of Caucasians from 59-69%, Asians from 9-12%, and African-American students from 3-7%. There are, however several issues with this method of reporting as it splits out subgroups for students by separating any student who lists Hispanic if they list Hispanic and one other race, splits any student who lists two or more races (non-Hispanic), and students where

race and/or ethnicity is unknown. Even though the representation of participants does not perfectly mirror the general college population, it is relatively close to the average student population. Below I provide a brief portrait of characteristics of each student to help describe each participant and their ultimate college choice. Table 4 provides a summary of all interview participants and institutional characteristics. Recall, all student and university names are pseudonyms. Codes for the students' characteristics are included to help uncover any patterns. For example, the first set of codes represent race/ethnicity and gender: AA= African American; W= White; A= Asian; and M= Male; F=Female. The second set of codes represents the size of the institution: L=Large; M=Midsize. The final set of codes represent the type of control of the institution: PU= Public University; PR=Private University.

Table 4

Portraits of Stage One Participants and Coding for Ethnicity, Gender, Size, and University Type

Worthington University	Large (>10,000 Undergraduates)	Public University	# of Applications
Ryan (AM-L-PU)	Asian Male	In-State	12
Steve (AM-L-PU)	Asian Male	In-State	8
Zechariah (WM-L-PU)	Caucasian Male	In-State	16
Rachel (WF-L-PU)	Caucasian Female	In-State	8
Kavita (AF- L-PU)	Asian Female	In-State	7
Ashley (AF-L-PU)	Asian Female	In-State	8
Smithdale University	Midsize (5,000-10,000 Undergraduates)	Private University	
Adrianne (WF-M-PR)	Caucasian Female	Out-of-State	9
Haley (WF-M-PR)	Caucasian Female	Out-of-State	11
Camden University	Midsize (5,000-10,000 Undergraduates)	Public University	
Sela (AAF-M-PU)	African-American Female	In-State	15
Hunter (WM-M-PU)	Caucasian Male	In-State	7
Elena (WF-M-PU)	Caucasian Female	In-State	7
Rosemary (WF-M-PU)	Caucasian Female	In-State	3
Petra (AAF-M-PU)	African-American Female	In-State	15
Brett (WM-M-PU)	Caucasian Male	In-State	5
Helen (WF-M-PU)	Caucasian Female	In-State	4
Kane (AAM-M-PU)	African-American Male	In-State	5
Elise (WF-M-PU)	Caucasian Female	Out-of-State	5
Capitol University	Large (>10,000 Undergraduates)	Private University	
Robin (WF-L-PR)	Caucasian Female	Out-of-State	5
Western University	Large (>10,000 Undergraduates)	Public University	
Esther (WF-L-PU)	Caucasian Female	In-State	4
Allison (WF-L-PU)	Caucasian Female	In-State	2
Cyprus-Rhodes University	Large (>10,000 Undergraduates)	Public University	
Katie (AAF-L-PU)	African-American Female	In-State	5

The students participating in the first stage of this study included 10 students attending large universities relative to 11 students attending mid-sized institutions. The average number of applications each student submitted prior to making their final college choice was 7.67. This number is higher than the national averages reported out, but makes sense among students applying to highly selective institutions. Participants represented high-achieving students in four regions who are attending selective colleges that rank in the top 100 of all national universities.

Worthington University. Worthington University is a large public university in a medium town (between 30,000-100,000 residents) that provided 6 different students for the purposes of this research. Of the students, there was some ethnic and gender diversity present, 4 Asian students, and 50% male students. Ryan (AM-L-PU) and Steve (AM-L-PU), two Asian males for this study were both from the same high school and hometown and they shared their experiences of originally not wanting to attend college close to home and hoping to attend school on the west coast. Eventually as they made their ultimate college choice decisions, they both ultimately decided to stay closer to home and attend the same school, and although they were friends before Worthington University, they explained that they both decided to enroll in the university separately.

Zechariah (WM-L-PU) was likely the most intense and longest of my student interviews. He wanted to ensure that he was able to accurately portray his college choice experience. He came from a high school with great guidance for college counseling, was very focused on his intended major, and the rankings of colleges, and ultimately felt like he was choosing from great institutions. Zechariah applied to the most colleges of all the participants, 16 in total, more than doubling the national averages. Rachel (WF-L-PU)

was completely different regarding her approach to college choice. She was not sure what she was looking for in a college from the beginning, but she knew she wanted a big college feel, and ultimately felt very proud of deciding to attend Worthington. Kavita (AF- L-PU) was searching for a place to study pre-med and focused on in-state schools and STEM programs. Lastly, Ashley (AF-L-PU) attended tennis camp at Worthington University when she was in high school and her opinion of Worthington from her time at camp seemed to stick with her during the college choice process. All of the students I interviewed from Worthington University were focused to some extent on the rigor/prestige of the school they would attend, and all of my interviewees were proud to be freshman attending Worthington University.

Smithdale University. Smithdale University is a mid-size private university in a metropolitan area (over 100,000 residents) that provided two interviewees for this research project. Adrienne (WF-M-PR) was my first interviewee from Smithdale University and she explained that she was really hoping to attend college in or near a big city. Adrienne (WF-M-PR) was also impressed by colleges that had cohesive campuses, in addition to schools where sustainability was an emphasis. My second interviewee from Smithdale University was Haley (WF-M-PR) and she was truly seeking a mid-size school so that she would have the opportunity to interact with professors, have a good sense of campus life and be able to get involved with different activities, in addition to wanting a semblance of a town and things to do off-campus. My interviews from Smithdale University students were very different from my interviews with students attending Worthington University, as the students who attended Smithdale University

both mentioned the importance of being close to a city and having multiple options for students off-campus for their social life and weekend opportunities.

Camden University. Camden University is a mid-size public university located in a small town (Under 30,000 residents). For this research project, 9 interviews took place with students who currently attend Camden University. My first interview with Sela (AAF-M-PU) was extremely insightful as she had two older siblings who had gone through the process, and as a result, she was very thoughtful and intentional regarding her search. She really wanted a liberal arts school and focused a great deal on the clubs and activities present on different campuses when she was making her decisions about where to attend. Hunter (WM-M-PU) was very different, he focused solely on his intended major, and what schools could offer the most research opportunities and classes for that particular major which is what drew him to Camden University in the first place. Elena (WF-M-PU) described that location was one of her most important factors in the college search and her desire was to attend school in a college town, rather than a big city. Rosemary (WF-M-PU) on the other hand was influenced more by aesthetics and research opportunities on campus.

Petra (AAF-M-PU), Helen (WF-M-PU), and Elise (WF-M-PU) were all seeking a liberal arts school with a relatively small size so that they could engage in more professor-student interactions. Brett (WM-M-PU) was also a noteworthy interview, as his parents are both professors and the family component played a large role in his decision-making as they really pushed him to examine multiple options before finding the right fit. Kane (AAM-M-PU) was a little different from the rest of the Camden University students. Initially Kane (AAM-M-PU) was seeking a school with a big sports

program and lots of school spirit, but once he was accepted to Camden University he decided the academic value of Camden University was worth sacrificing a bigger sports program. All of the students I interviewed from Camden University were focused on academic rigor and size of the institution as compared to the students interviewed at Smithdale University.

Capitol University. Capitol University is a large urban private university (over 100,000 residents). For this research project, I was able to interview one freshman currently attending Capitol University. Robin (WF-L-PR) was originally hoping to attend a smaller school, but continued to visit larger schools that also had a sense of community within different departments or majors. As Robin (WF-L-PR) was seeking to major in engineering she knew that would limit her options for some schools. Robin (WF-L-PR) eventually decided to attend Capitol University because she enjoyed the lively and active city and found that in the engineering department she would have the smaller class sizes and community she was looking for in her college experience. Robin (WF-L-PR) also enjoyed that while she had the city to explore when she wanted to, she would only be two hours away from home. Capitol University, similar to Smithdale University was very attractive to students like Robin (WF-L-PR) because of the opportunities available for students in the surrounding areas.

Western University. Western University is a large public university located in a medium-sized town (30,000-100,000 residents). For this study I interviewed two very different students who currently attend Western University. Esther (WF-L-PU) was my first student interview from Western University who grew up in a different college town, and just knew she wanted something distinctive from where she grew up. Esther (WF-L-

PU)'s biggest focus was on financial aid and scholarships, as she would be paying for her college education. After receiving her decisions from colleges she was deciding between two different public universities, but ended up choosing Western University when an alumnus offered to pay for her education.

Allison (WF-L-PU) on the other hand was definitely sure she wanted to attend a public college for financial reasons, but at first thought she wanted a school that was artsier than Western University. Her parents kept telling her it was a good fit for her and it was close to home, but until she went on the tour she was not interested in Western University. Allison (WF-L-PU) mentioned that her tour solidified the feeling that Western University felt like home, and a place she could be very comfortable. Western University presents some different reasoning than the other colleges so far, as both Esther (WF-L-PU) and Allison (WF-L-PU) were more focused on net tuition and financial aid, then what the surrounding area or academics/research opportunities were at Western University.

Cyprus-Rhodes University. The final college studied during the interviews was Cyprus-Rhodes University, a large public institution in an urban area (over 100,000 residents). I had one interviewee from Cyprus-Rhodes University who explained her college search process to me. Katie (AAF-L-PU) was a part of the Upward Bound program in high school, which provided opportunities for student from low-income families and first generation high school students to find support in the preparation and success in higher education. Katie (AAF-L-PU) described her first college campus visit with that program and learning more about majors and how to apply for financial aid and scholarships through her experience in Upward Bound. Katie (AAF-L-PU) ended up

applying to several public colleges, but ultimately decided to attend Cyprus-Rhodes because it offered her the best financial aid package. Similar to the two students at Western University, Katie (AAF-L-PU) chose Cyprus-Rhodes as she knew it would provide her a college education at a much more affordable price. While price was certainly a factor for each of these students, they also expressed the desire to maintain a balance of academic rigor and selectivity of the institution with the net price assisting in making their final decision.

Theme Clusters

From 21 verbatim transcripts, 392 significant statements were extracted to search for themes within the interviews for this study. After arranging the codes into clusters, four important themes emerged from the interview data. Table 5 demonstrates the individual codes under emerging findings, and number of times cited while coding the data. Each group of codes developed the four theme clusters that emerged in this stage of research as seen in Table 5.

Table 5

Theme Clusters

<u>Emerging Findings</u>	<u>Theme</u>
Family- 27 Financial Reasons- 14 Friends/Word of Mouth- 17 School Counselor- 11 Location- 19 Major/Department of Discipline- 17 Reputation- 15 Website- 17	Initial College Choice Funnel
Aesthetics of Campus- 22 Negative Impression- 18 Size of School- 24 Tour- 17 Visits Blend Together-12 Visiting is Important- 18	Aesthetics & Campus Visit
Personal Interactions- 24	Personal Interactions
Community/Vibe- 24 Seeing yourself on Campus/Say Yes to the Dress moment- 23	Community Vibe & Bulletin Board Check

Theme 1: Initial College Choice Funnel

One of the first themes that emerged after the review of data was the sense of a general funnel of pre-disposition to the student's initial college search. Each of the 21 interviewees explained that they had always known they would go to college from a young age, but the factors that affected their initial list creation varied from student to student. These interviewees demonstrated a strong sense of habitus, or the embodiment of cultural capital in their interviews. Initially in interviews, when asked about how they began looking at colleges and engaging in the college choice process, multiple students mentioned reliance on a variety of sources to support them in this stage. Influencing support came from family, the location, reputation of the college, and the college website.

All of these sources helped students acquire basic information and data about different colleges and universities.

Participants in this study began the college choice process by gathering data (website, reputations, location, and size) to fuel their initial search and begin creating a list that they would later narrow down. Sela (AAF-M-PU), describes the process of beginning her initial college search,

I began the process junior year—early junior year—just to make sure that I had that time to narrow down my list. I did not want to procrastinate last minute, trying to get all the things that I needed to get in while at the same time trying to finalize my list. So I made sure that right before the Common App went live, I had a list that was complete with the schools that I knew I would most likely get into and also the schools that were the so-called “reaches” and the “dream schools.

In the year that Sela (AAF-M-PU) described as an initial sorting of her college list, she focused on gathering information regarding family opinion, financial reasons, school counselor, location, major/department of discipline, reputation, and website. This experience was common for the research participants who began by exploring different options and opportunities at different schools online prior to creating initial lists of colleges they would ultimately visit or apply to for admission.

Family. Even though the process of narrowing down institutions can be daunting, many students mentioned relying on parent/family opinions to help guide their initial search. My literature review echoes this importance of parental and family opinion in the

phase of pre-disposition to the college choice process. Ashley (AF-L-PU) explained how her parents helped in the initial stages of her college search process,

My parents were very helpful. And also of course we had like resources at home.

My mom had like college books and stuff like that. So I enjoyed like perusing those every now and then. But it was definitely helpful to have my brother. He was probably the most helpful like resource I had.

Ashley's brother is currently enrolled at Pennbrook University, and was most helpful to her because he had already gone through the college choice process himself. In addition, this demonstrates another connection to habitus. It was useful for her to communicate with her brother as he already succeeded in attending college based on the cultural capital he had at his disposal, which was similar for Ashley. Other participants confirmed the important role of family in initial interactions with a college campus. Steve (AM-L-PU) described his initial college visit experience,

The one that's sticking out in my mind the most is my first interaction with Worthington University. Just because my brother is two years older than me, and he goes to Worthington University too. So I went and visited his campus as he was like touring it for the first time. So I went with him for that. So it was the first one I'd seen, and I don't know, it stuck out in my mind as the stereotype of what a college campus looks like I guess.

Of the 21 interviews, five interviewees mentioned the influence of one or more older siblings currently in college influencing their decision-making. Several interview participants also noted the importance of family in conjunction with their first or initial impressions of a college campus. Ashley (AF-L-PU) mentioned tagging along on tours

with her older brother while he was going through the college choice process, and how these visits, impacted her impressions of various college campuses.

Family also played a role on the college search process through the level of parental education and social/cultural capital. Of the 21 interviews, two participants mentioned that they were the first in their family to attend a four-year institution. Both Elena (WF-M-PU) and Katie (AAF-L-PU) are first-generation college students. Elena (WF-M-PU) explained her parents were eager to begin the college search process aggressively during her sophomore year in high school to ensure they had enough time to help her prepare for college. In addition, Elena (WF-M-PU) also detailed that she spent more time than the typical student with her school counselor and studying admission patterns for her high school through an online resource. Katie (AAF-L-PU) similarly mentioned seeking out additional help from her school counselor, in addition to the impact the Upward Bound program had on her access to information about the college search process. For both first-generation students, additional advice and support regarding the college search process came from seeking out extra time and support from their high school counselors.

Families were influential in how students made their decisions regarding colleges and universities. For example, Kane (AAM-M-PU) explained,

Kind of since I was able to go to those [college name has been removed] games. That was just something I knew I wanted to do. And just kind of be like my Dad. He was a big role model for me in that aspect because he would just talk about like all the fun times he had in college. And it was just something that I wanted,

and to make him proud. So just from a very early age, I knew I wanted to go to college.

Esther (WF-L-PU) also reported how her dad decided to remove one potential school from her list based on their visit experience,

Okay so I went to one school up north. This is only school I went above Virginia to look at. And I was with my dad, and my dad's a very, very conservative person. And we were walking around and we saw something that was a little more liberal than he is comfortable with. And he said, "You're not going to school here." And he turned around and drove me off. I'm like oh man. And it was something that I wouldn't have thought much about, but he said "no." So we left.

But family influence and opinion were not the only factors that played a role in the initial college search.

Location. Location was the second most commonly mentioned factor in eliciting the original list of schools a student was considering. Elena (WF-M-PU) explained,

Location was important. Like really important. Because when I was first starting out, I was like I don't want to be in state, I don't want to be so close to home. But now that I am, I'm glad I am. Because I like to go home for the weekend sometimes. But I was really looking for not like a rural location. I wanted something that was like a college town but like outside of the college area. Like it was also engaging.

This student insight supports the current literature regarding how college choice and fit change over time. Other interviewees mentioned wanting to be close to home or preferring a more urban environment in their initial search and discovery of colleges and

universities. Brett (WM-M-PU) mentioned beginning his search by looking at colleges in the geographic area he wanted to work in after graduation. Robin (WF-L-PR), also described, “But for the most part, most of the colleges I looked at were like near major cities or inside of them. So I kind of wanted to be somewhere where I could still like interact with the outside world and not be completely secluded on a college campus.” Because all interviewees attending high school in the Mid-Atlantic region prior to attending college, none of the participants chose to go extremely far away to attend a college or university. While many participants mentioned applying to colleges both out of their home state and the Mid-Atlantic region, the idea of location and proximity to an area each participant was familiar with is important. Location was a central focus for many of the participants as they narrowed down which colleges they would ultimately visit and/or apply to during their process.

Economic. Another factor that played a role in the initial funnel of the college search was economic. Rosemary (WF-M-PU) described her process for selecting potential colleges and this began by “looking at the financial aspects of them, or how much tuition would be at each college.” Esther’s (WF-L-PU)’s approach was similar, “Okay so I had just really thought about what majors were offered at that school, if they were going to be ones that I wanted to look at and just like think about what location the school was, the size, the cost—things like that.” Certain students, especially the students who decided to attend Western University and Cyprus-Rhodes University, decided to apply only to in-state schools due to cost, and others shopped around based on where they felt they were more likely to receive financial aid/merit-based scholarships. The students who decided to attend Camden University and Worthington University, were mostly

applying to a range of schools including both in-state and out-of-state options. Although Camden University and Worthington University are both public institutions, the students who were looking at both in-state institutions and out-of-state institutions likely demonstrate a higher socioeconomic status. With current news stories regarding debt that college students take on after graduation, it is no surprise that financial reasons were very apparent in the decision-making of many of the participants.

Additional factors. Word of mouth from friends and alumni also played a role in the initial funnel of college choice decision-making. Rosemary (WF-M-PU) explained that she began the process by getting recommendations from people she knew to begin her college search. Sela (AAF-M-PU) stated, “I took advantage of resources, like upperclassmen and asked them how they are doing there or how they got in, et cetera.” Haley (WF-M-PR) felt similarly and stated, “and then different friends and family members would tell me about various schools and I’d check it out and end up applying.” Likewise Brett (WM-M-PU) explained,

And the other factor was that a friend of my parents, who I mentioned before, who’s prominent in the discipline, said that he thought Camden University would be the best school for the discipline in the state. And so he advised me in my decision to go there.

Alumni were often a factor, especially teachers that the interviewees knew, but often collecting opinions from others outside of family was helpful for students in building their overall impression of a college or university. Oftentimes the interview participants were getting the initial scoop from friends and gathering word of mouth from members of

their own personal community to impact their initial visit, they then rely heavily on personal interactions on campus when making their college choice decision.

School counselors also played a role in helping to shape the initial decision-making for students. Rosemary (WF-M-PU) explained, “I had—my guidance counselor, she gave us lists of different colleges in the area as well as kind of their standings in the country. And then there were visits to our school of the different colleges.” But, sometimes the extent of the impact of school counselor resources varied from student to student. First-generation students like Katie (AAF-L-PU) and Elena (WF-M-PU) leaned extensively on their school counselors for support and guidance about the college search process. While Ashley (AF-L-PU) described her school counselor as being “pretty helpful,” Katie (AAF-L-PU) described her experience differently “my senior year in high school I basically stalked and got on my guidance counselor’s nerves.” Elena (WF-M-PU) furthers this connection of the influence of the school counselor and provided resources by describing the database system, Naviance and its impact during her initial high school years,

The school had access to it, but the student also had access to it. So as students we used it because it had like scatter grams. Where it would take your GPA and your preliminary test scores until you like took the SAT. Because we started looking at it freshman year. But you could see where you matched up with people who got into a certain school in your county. So if you were to look at like Camden University, and these are the average grades and test scores that got into Camden University. And then it would show like where you are. Like I’m way above this or I’m not quite there. And so I used that a lot like sophomore and junior year.

Because I was really obsessed with knowing like okay I need to take this class so I can get this good grade in it. I need to get my scores up way high. And that was really influential as to like maybe this school is not in my reach at all and it would be a waste of time. Or I can do this. And I was obsessed with Naviance actually. It was bad. I was like really anal.

Academic reputation was another factor in the college choice search, interestingly enough one that was mentioned more often by the male participants than the female participants. Brett (WM-M-PU) mentioned he began the process “by looking at schools with academic standing,” and Kane (AAM-M-PU) similarly explained that a deal-breaker for him was the academic reputation of a school. Petra (AAF-M-PU) concurred with this sentiment and described the importance of academic rigor and wanting to attend a reputable school. Zechariah (WM-L-PU) expands on this by explaining that one of the most important factors for him was the reputation of the institution, “Like again the biggest factor for me in the entire college process was “is it reputable, is it rigorous.” Like—oh my god, this is so conceited. Like will somebody say like, “Whoa oh my god,” when I say I go there, know what I mean?” The overall ranking and academic reputation certainly made an impact on college choice decision-making.

Finally other participants, explained the importance of seeking information via the college’s website when beginning the initial college search process. Elise (WF-M-PU) described beginning by doing “a lot of independent research on colleges on their individual websites. Kane (AAM-M-PU) explained how a lot of the initial research was “independent study. So like I would go and scour the Internet just on like fun facts or just like different rankings and stuff.” Hunter (WM-M-PU) noted how a college’s

website could impact a student's decision as it can be the initial first impression for a prospective student/family; he stated

A large part of that decision was based on if the website was up to date, in terms of style, language, focus, etc. How a website looks can be an indicator of how progressive a school is, and the more effort put into a website, since it serves as a first impression for many prospective students, I believe, shows that they care about their presentation, and how people view their school. Camden University's seemed to be calm and simple -- it's what you need, and it's not geared towards a particular group per se. So like it works for prospective students, it works for alumni, and it works for current students. You can tell they've put effort into their website, their first impression. And if they're putting effort into that, it probably shows that they're putting effort into other things as well.

Hunter's (WM-M-PU) description of the importance of the website, fits directly in with the current literature on cultural capital. Students want to attend an institution that they can be proud of and one that is conscious of being forward-thinking regarding technology (Perna, 2006). Overall, multiple factors influenced each student's initial search and impacted whether or not a particular school would land on their ultimate list of schools to visit and apply to throughout their high school career. This portion of the funnel is very important to a study of college choice and the campus visit because a school must persist through the initial sorting after the screening process in order to make an impression during the campus visit phase. By far the most important factor for participants was family opinion and influence, followed most closely by the college's location. Secondary

concerns were the college's website, major/department of discipline, financial reasons, reputation, word of mouth, and school counselor resources.

Theme 2: Aesthetics & the Campus Visit

The second thematic cluster regards reactions to the campus visit in general and the aesthetics of campus. Size of the college campus was an important factor for students when deciding where to apply and how the students felt they connected to the campus once they visited. Even though some students initially stated a preference for a smaller or larger college environment, most students applied to a mixture of sizes. During the campus tour, students seemed to have a better grasp of whether the size was a good fit for them or not. Sela (AAF-M-PU) explained, "the college tour is kind of that essential precursor to seeing whether or not that school is actually for you."

Based on previous college choice research, it is not surprising that the tour itself came up as an important component of the college choice decision-making process for the interviewees. Kane (AAM-M-PU) described the tour's importance the most succinctly, "the tours—I'd have to say importance-wise it's 10 out of 10." Elena (WF-M-PU) took this slightly farther, "I think the only thing that I like—from the tour guides and prospective tour guides and just from talking to my friends about it, I think the thing that we found most important was our campus visit." Petra (AAF-M-PU) echoed the sentiment when she described how meaningful the tours were for her throughout the process,

Because for me, being able to visit the college and getting a feel of the college and seeing it with your own eyes is a really, really, really big deal. Because I guess when you go to college, if you don't like where you're going and if you

don't feel comfortable, that's going to affect you in every aspect of your life. And so it was really, really important to me. Definitely a deal breaker.

Sela (AAF-M-PU) even believed a correlation existed between the organization of the tour itself and how well the college/university was able to function. Her description of the tour's importance is telling,

So just the environment as a whole was one of the factors that stood out the most to me. I think another one was also how organized the college tour was. Because if you have an organized college tour, that means that you probably have an organized curriculum and school. It's just like if you show me that you can do a college tour well, then I know that I can put myself in this school and succeed because everything will be available to me. There'll be multiple resources and everything's just like well organized there. So the college tour is kind of that essential precursor to seeing whether or not that school is actually for you.

Overall many interviewees commented on the importance of the tour itself and seeing the campus as having an impact on their impression and gut-reaction to a particular college campus. Despite how important the campus visit was for many of the interviewees, both in how the schools stood out positively and negatively, oftentimes students remarked that the tours themselves seemed to blend together after doing several visits. Brett (WM-M-PU) discussed this phenomenon in depth in his interview,

I felt like they [sessions and tours] were more or less running together. They were talking about—they all emphasized the values of a liberal arts education and implied that they uniquely catered to undergraduate students more than any other institutions. I didn't see any particular difference. The campus tour guides who

were guiding me around, seemed reasonable well informed and enthusiastic. The presenters in sessions beforehand universally seemed knowledgeable and given the size of their audience reasonably interesting. I wasn't captivated, but I knew it was difficult to captivate me with that information, and I think they did a decent job presenting it. They addressed any questions I had before I had to ask them. So that was universal. I didn't really see any difference.

Brett (WM-M-PU) later explained that sitting in on classes was much more helpful in his decision-making, seeing both the size of a class and the rigor first-hand. Elise (WF-M-PU) had a similar experience and expressed "a lot of the campus tours I went on when I did my summer trip, everything was pretty much the same." Adrienne (WF-M-PR) focused more on the information session component, "The info sessions really blurred together because they all kind of say the same thing, just like in different ways. And I thought those were really boring." Haley (WF-M-PR) wondered whether colleges all used similar scripts, "like sometimes I thought that they almost had like the same scripts for each school, just different settings." Helen (WF-M-PU) added to this by feeling some disappointment about how similar her visits were from campus to campus in addition to the communication she received from colleges,

Like I always used to laugh because they send you letters in the mail that are like "come to our school." And they're all the exact same header. They're five paragraphs, and then they say this thing, this thing, this thing, and then it's done. And they all say the exact same thing. It's like you could take the same letter and switch out the college names and they'd be fine. Which I always laughed about because I was like I kind of want to see something different.

But while the students wholeheartedly felt as if the tours and campus visit experiences did blend together from school to school and emphasize similar characteristics, each student still felt that the campus visit experience itself was important.

Throughout the student interviews, the majority of students kept circling back to the idea that visiting the campus of a college during the college choice process is important. Sela (AAF-M-PU) described the visit and the importance of a “feeling,”

You get so much from a college visit that you aren’t able to get from information available online and on social media. So the college tour really was a valuable experience in terms of helping me learn more about a school and seeing how I would fit in that school and whether or not that school felt like it was the definite school that I would ultimately choose to attend.

Robin (WF-L-PR) also commented on the importance of the visit, “I feel like the campus visits were really important in giving an understanding of how life would turn out like actually being in that place.” Elena (WF-M-PU) described, “I think it made a difference that their day for admitted students, like people were here to talk to... And everybody’s really friendly and it was really nice...it was such a nice day as far as the weather goes. So you’re like this is it, this is the good one.” Even though many students felt the visits themselves blended together, they also identified the experience as important due to their ability to view and gauge their own personal reaction to the aesthetics of campus, the community/vibe, and personal interactions.

One of the first standout themes from student’s reactions during campus visit was directly related to the aesthetics of the campus, itself. Brett (WM-M-PU) discussed his reactions and impression of the aesthetics of the campus at Camden University, “I went

on the tour, and then I sat in on classes. And I mean the campus looked pretty nice, and that probably influenced me more than it should have.” While Brett (WM-M-PU) acknowledged that he was more easily influenced by the aesthetics of campus than he perhaps hoped to be, it certainly was a common theme among participants. Kane (AAM-M-PU) echoed the same sentiment,

Yeah so I guess the aesthetics of the campus. And I know that shouldn’t be a big one. And it’s not, but it was like one of the top ones for me, just how the campus looked. And Camden University was like really cool in that aspect. Because everything is so old, and it’s just a beautiful campus. And I liked how it was very historic too.

Rachel (WF-L-PU)’s comments best express the combination of an examination of both aesthetic attributes of campus and the community/vibe of campus. But yet Rachel (WF-L-PU) too, was very easily influenced by the aesthetics of campus,

And then Sweet Valley University, I don’t know. I mean it was so pretty out. Oh well honestly they had a piano in like the lobby of one of their like residence halls, and I thought that was the coolest thing ever. Because it was like really pretty. Like their residence halls were really nice. Also this is kind of random, but they had a bunch of swings hanging from their trees. Like rope swings. And it was just like really cool I thought. And that was like “I should go here, this is fun.”

Petra (AAF-M-PU) provided a similar sentiment,

What definitely got me excited was I guess the aesthetic of the campus. Like if it looked really pretty or not. Like for me, I wanted a college campus that was more

natural and not very urban. So like I visited Camden University and then I visited Capitol University. Capitol University is urban. Camden University is not. So I guess the aesthetics of it and like seeing how it looks to me was really, really important. And that was positive for me. Like a more natural campus was more positive to me I guess.

Haley (WF-M-PR) also mentioned, “I really liked any campus that had like really nice outdoor spaces like trails and just like nice trees and flowers or whatever. It was like nice to be able to walk around and see that between classes.”

When asked about aspects of campus visits that were very positive for the interviewees, the respondents had very similar answers about the experience and the important role of the media. The media creates an image of what an institution should look like in student’s minds. A selective institution should be stately and majestic in appearance. It also needs to have outdoor spaces that students can socialize in just as students see in portrayals of college life in both film and television. The following responses display how students pictured their college experience based on media. Katie (AAF-L-PU) explained what her initial perception of what college would be like, “I pictured college to be either straight-up work, like studying in the library all day, or just like a complete party school. Like there’s confetti everywhere, like toilet paper. That’s what I kind of thought about. Like *American Pie*.” Robin (WF-L-PR) described her lack of a pre-conceived notion, “Because I never really had like a family member who went to college, I wasn’t ever really sure what to expect from it, besides like things that happen in movies.” Petra (AAF-M-PU) also had an idealized version of college in her head prior to visiting, she described, “you know like a movie scene. With like a bunch of friends and

then like a boyfriend and then like always going out and having fun and stuff. I mean obviously studying and like working hard, but like it was kind of like a picture perfect kind of scene.” Kane (AAM-M-PU) also pictured college with more of a social life lens,

What I pictured was like everything but studying for my classes. Partying wasn’t like huge... for me I guess in high school. I didn’t go to a whole lot. I was more studying and then like focusing on sports. I ran track and played football. And so I didn’t have a whole lot of time for like weekend parties and stuff. But that was something I imagined for myself like later on.

Understanding that many participants idealized a movie version of college campuses in their heads helps to contextualize the importance of the campus aesthetic in college choice.

When asked about deal breakers, the same themes of aesthetics emerged. Ashley (AF-L-PU) explained, “I don’t know if there’s been any real deal breakers for me because all the campuses that I visited were so beautiful and great. Okay, no that [an ugly campus] definitely would have been a deal breaker.” Elena (WF-M-PU) expanded on this by depicting one of her less positive campus visit experiences,

At Smithdale, the tour guide was really bad. So I was like no. But also the campus itself was kind of depressing. Because it was all very uniform and very whitewashed like stonewalls. And it was like not pretty at all. And I think also because I think I visited in like January. So it was not green or anything.

Everything was kind of dead. It was cold. I just didn’t like the atmosphere.

Negative experiences were just as personal and impressionable by aesthetics, as Ryan (AM-L-PU) described a campus he planned on visiting but decided after driving around

the campus not to attend the information session and tour because “I didn’t like the hilly part of it.” Adrienne (WF-M-PR) described a college campus with a road running straight through campus that she did not like and explained, “okay I can’t apply here because I will get hit by a car.” Robin (WF-L-PR) explained her own unfavorable experience, “And it was like a really crappy freshman dorm. There were cockroaches and people were freaking out. So that was an interesting experience.” Adrienne (WF-M-PR), similarly, described her experience visiting a college with a negative experience,

I was on a tour at Hudson University, and it was raining. It was disgusting out. I knew the tour guide from high school and I didn’t like him. Like it was just a really bad day. And so we walked around a little bit after the tour, and I realized that there was no way I could ever go there. I felt so insignificant and disgusting. And I don’t know. It was just really uncomfortable.

Aesthetics of the campus environment are factor that play an important role in college choice decision-making. Although students like Brett (WM-M-PU) mentioned that the aesthetics of a campus should not play such a large role in decision-making, subconsciously or not, it certainly impacted the lens through which each student viewed a particular campus and college.

Theme 3: Community Vibe and the Bulletin Board Check

One of the overwhelming themes that came through multiple interviews was the desire for students to get a better sense of the overall community and vibe of a campus in addition to deciding whether or not they could see themselves on campus. Occasionally, interviewees would refer to an individual moment on their campus visit in which they felt

sure that a particular campus was the overall right fit for them. During Ryan's (AM-L-PU) interview he explained his personal search for the perfect campus culture,

So I wanted something in the middle [size] that it had like a very strong academic background but also at the same time had a lot of different areas that were still appealing to me like club-wise and sports-wise as I said earlier and just like spirit-wise.

Hunter (WM-M-PU) added on to this by explaining his family ritual, through his own lens of cultural capital, which aided him in his interpretation of meaning and construction of community across campus,

We'd walk around ourselves and go into the buildings if we could to see what sorts of things the students were doing, if they were smiling, if they were worried, if there were things going on around campus. We did the "bulletin board check," meaning that we looked at the bulletin boards around campus to see how many and what kind of events the college was hosting, to gauge how active the student body was.

Adrianne (WF-M-PR) and her family also acted out this ritual and had their own method of assessing community on campus,

We kind of like went and sat in a coffee shop on campus for most of the schools we visited. Kind of observed the students. It's sort of creepy now, in retrospect. But like we would just watch them and listen in on their conversations and see like how they were interacting and like what types of people some of them were, which I thought was really helpful.

Robin (WF-L-PR) and her family had a similar tradition, and she explained how that observation moment of community altered her opinion about one particular university,

And as we were eating, my mom was like, “There are so many black leggings here.” And I was like that’s the only thing I’m ever going to remember about the [name of University has been removed] now, is that all the girls wear black leggings everywhere. So you kind of get to see—it’s easier to see when you’re like not focusing on the info or the tour. You can see more of how actual life is. Like sitting and eating dinner, you see that there’s many, many girls in black leggings as opposed to like having to walk around campus and try to like piece together a demographic I guess.

Esther (WF-L-PU) even described the importance of going off on your own simply so that you could hear from the everyday student,

I’d sort of walk around and pretend I was a student and listen to what people were saying, and if it were positive or if it were negative. That was important to just sort of getting a feel for it not from the person who was chipper and joyous and saying, “Oh you need to come to school here.”

Helen (WF-M-PU) agreed, and mentioned that oftentimes it would be the community culture that would help a school to stand out on her list as each of them could offer a great education,

And so like at one point we were lost trying to get to this session. And this girl was like here I’ll help you, which was very nice. Like I definitely noticed the campuses where people were super friendly. Like we were walking and the tour guide was doing their tour guide thing, and someone walked past and they’re like

“oh hey how are you?” and the person was like “oh great, how are you?” And it was like “oh you know that person?” and they’re like “yeah I see them all the time.” Which was awesome. Like it’s just one of those things that like campus culture is so important to me. Because I feel like the education is really great. It’s great to get a great education. But a lot of the schools that I was applying to could offer me a great education. And I wanted to be happy and have a great education. And I feel like you have to be at a happy place to do that.

In addition to the feeling of being on a happy campus, this overall sense of the campus community and vibe helped students to sort out what the school spirit and climate were like on campus. The sense of school spirit, and going above and beyond academics, was important to multiple students and also gets to essence of the phenomenon of the campus visit. In regard to school spirit, Kane (AAM-M-PU) mentioned visiting a campus where his friends explained “like aside from like a couple basketball games, like students didn’t really like show up for anything. Like they didn’t have a football team. That was kind of like important to me. Something to rally around I guess.” Zechariah (WM-L-PU) continued to explain this idea of school spirit when explaining deal breakers regarding the campus community and vibe,

The biggest deal breaker for me was just kids that weren’t excited about the school themselves. The biggest thing, for example, at Pennbrook University I didn’t see a single kid wearing anything Pennbrook or doing anything like communal. They were all sitting on benches doing work on like a gloomy morning. So whereas at a place like Club University, everyone is in [school colors] doing [community-related] things and studying in groups and tossing like

a Frisbee and being all joyous. And so I think definitely seeing how excited the students were to be a part of the school. And the big thing is it's like so I think the student-led tour guides are by nature going to be excited about the school. Like that's why they do what they do. But it was the students I'd see walking around that were big factors.

In addition many students mentioned a feeling or time that made them confident a certain school was the right fit for them, coded as a "say yes to the dress moment." Helen (WF-M-PU) explained how frustrating this was for her mother throughout the process,

And from there it was all about just how I felt about just the school, just like setting foot on campus and being like how do I feel about this? Which drove my mother crazy. She's very much like here's the numbers, here's how it works. And I'm like no this one doesn't feel right. And it drove her bananas. She was absolutely insane by the end of the college process.

Helen (WF-M-PU) really valued her gut feeling about different institutions, and was looking for that one school that felt right. Rachel (WF-L-PU), similarly, was looking for the perfect moment to tell her that her college choice decision was right, she described it as such, "Yeah well because Sweet Valley University was the only like actually nice-weather tour I went on, I was like it's a sign!" Rosemary (WF-M-PU) had a similar experience during an admitted student campus visit where she felt like all signs pointed towards one school,

And then just everything just kind of started coming together at that point, and I just liked each school thing more and more. And then at the end of the day, I told my mom like this is where I'm going. The weather—it was a really nice day. It

wasn't too hot. I would say just the walking around and finally seeing it.

Because that day we didn't have like a tour guide. It was more of me and my mom just walking around from place to place, going to the different sessions for admitted students. And just I finally had that feeling like this is it. So it was really special just to get to walk around with her and see everything for myself without a tour guide telling me things. I got to interpret everything by myself and to see things like through my own perspective instead of through theirs.

This type of sentiment was echoed through additional interviews in which students experienced something clicking during a campus tour or during an admitted student program, and feeling at home on campus. Allison (WF-L-PU) said,

Well, Western University, I originally didn't want to go here at all until I took an official tour. And I saw the campus, and it was just like wow, it feels like home. And it just feels like this is where I need to be. And it's just a feeling that I got that this is where I need to go.

Throughout the interviews, student's desire to better understand the community and vibe of each campus was readily apparent. Most of the students felt assured about each campus they were interested in being comparable in other aspects including academics, reputation, but felt that the sense of community and vibe on campus was a distinguishing factor. The feeling that they could fit in and see themselves on campus was the tipping factor that students were looking for during their campus visits.

Theme 4: Personal Interactions

The fourth and final thematic cluster revolved around personal interactions throughout the college search process. This thematic cluster deals specifically with

communicating with stakeholders on and off various college campuses in addition to having personal interactions make the difference during different campus visit experiences. The impression that college campus community members make on prospective students can be impactful in the college search process. Elena (WF-M-PU), first depicted how personal interactions with tour guides can impact future campus visits and college choice,

And then we were at Camden University, the girl was like really peppy. She was really excited. And she was talking about her intramural soccer team. And she was like, "This place is great!" And she was so excited about it and it showed, that it made such a difference. Because she was the first tour guide that we went with because it was the first college visit that we went on. So like we compared everybody back to her whenever we did like a visit at other schools. And we're like nobody is as excited as this girl. So we're like this school must be good. So the tour guides I think made the biggest difference on my tours.

Conversely, Elena (WF-M-PU) later had a very negative experience on her campus visit, Like I visited Worthington University, and Worthington University was very serious. Like there were students there when I was there, but nobody looked like they were like, "Yeah this is so great." They were like, "I need to go to class now. Get out of my way." Like it wasn't like a bad tour. It was just I don't know if I meshed with the people. Just from my experience like seeing them like interact in their natural element. So I was like no. The people made the biggest difference. Even after a negative experience Elena (WF-M-PU) who applied to Worthington, but enrolled at Camden University, discerned that it was the people on the campus visit that

made more of an impact than the facts, history, or traditions explained during the information session and campus tour. Kavita (AF- L-PU) had a positive experience on campus visit as well when she was able to see more of the personal aspects of the campus environment,

So getting to hear about like the different community traditions. And getting to hear personal experiences from each of the tour guides was really interesting. And I guess kind of showed me—told me about like opportunities that they students have like to get involved. Like when they were saying, “Oh this is what I’m involved in, and these are the internships I’ve done,” and things like that are more of a personal and realistic level. Because colleges can tell me these are the internships that I could get and things like that, but I guess it made it seem more like possible.

Steve (AM-L-PU), also talked about how he enjoyed interacting with multiple different types of students on campus,

Like they have all kinds of people, not just what they’re trying to sell. So I liked that. And then, I don’t know. More of just like the small interactions, like seeing people. Like kind of like talking to people briefly. Just students that were there. That was one of the better parts for me, just seeing people walking around and looking.

Steven (AM-L-PU) demonstrates how this theme varies from the community/vibe theme, as he was impacted by the interactions with people on campus, not just the overall climate. Admitted student programming is another example of a campus visit experience

where personal interactions are able to make an impact, Sela (AAF-M-PU) explained more about this in her personal experience,

It was definitely the openness of the students that made a huge difference, so whether or not the students were able to answer your questions. A lot of students would actually—I think in [my] school and another school, some students that were just walking by, they asked us, “If you all have any questions, just let us know. Like let me know. I’m willing to answer it.” Students would take the time out of their schedule to introduce us more to their school. That was really nice. It was a really nice gesture, and I wish that more like admissions offices would urge the student community during this time especially to open itself up and be more willing to answer questions from the people who are touring, because the people who are touring are essentially the future of that school. So it’s like you want to give them the best impression that you can of that school because that might be like their only college visit to that school. It might actually be the deciding factor on whether or not they decide to go to that school.

Sela (AAF-M-PU) described talking to random students on campus and having them answer questions which was extremely helpful for her, in giving her a better impression of the types of students that attend a particular school and thus her potential to fit in on campus. Brett (WM-M-PU) mentioned a personal interaction with a department chair making the biggest difference for him, “I was impressed that the chair of the department was willing to talk to me about potentially coming here. And so that was extremely—it impressed me in the extreme. As it happens, he’s now my advisor.” These types of small interactions often make students feel not only special, and more than a number or

application, but also desired on campus. That feeling can definitely shape a student's perception of one school versus another. While talking to random friendly students or a department chair could have occurred at any selective university, the fact that they occurred for that one student at that particular school makes a big difference in regards to college choice. Thus a lot of college visit impressions are up to chance. Hunter (WM-M-PU) described an admitted student day as shaping his perception about a college,

Another major factor was how normal students, those who didn't have a direct involvement with the admissions department, interacted on campus, and what the energy felt like. At Camden University everybody was smiling. It just seemed like a more positive, community-based atmosphere, versus "we're students at a college with separate groups" atmosphere.... Students reaching out when they didn't need to was a big factor.

For Esther (WF-L-PU), a student who knew she would be responsible for paying for her own education, described the series of interactions with an alumnus, who is currently paying for her education that sealed her final decision. She explained,

So it's a good story actually. I worked in a coffee shop, and I had this one gentleman who was probably seventy-five-ish. I've never asked. Anyway he's older, and he went to Western University when he was younger. And every day he would come up—and he would come in probably four times a week. So I knew him and he knew me pretty well. And he's always ask, "Have you decided where you're going to school? Have you decided where you're going to school?" And one day he came up and I said, "Yeah I've decided it's either between Worthington University or Western University." And he said, "Well if you go to

Western University, I'll pay for it." Yeah. He owns his own company. But anyway that sort of made the decision.

While there are a wide variety of ways for prospective students to interact with members of a campus community or college alumni, it is clear that personal interactions and the ability to make a college or university seem more approachable and realistic to students the more of an impact a visit can make.

Conclusion

The interviews with the 21 students, who matriculated to a university of their choice, present several readily apparent themes. First, it was clear that there was some divide between the initial college search funnel and the campus visit/decision-making portion for students. The initial funnel took place earlier in the process for many students and allowed them to research and narrow down the list of potential schools to visit and later apply to in the process. The factors that influenced the initial funnel process for this group of students depended on family, location, major opportunities, and website design. It is interesting to note here that there was not a significant amount of attention regarding seeking diversity on campus, through the tours or otherwise. This lack of mentioned diversity is addressed in Chapter 7.

In the second phase of the search process—visiting colleges and assessing whether or not they would remain as contenders for the application process, the interviewees agreed on the importance of the tour and visit in general, although they also presented that oftentimes those same visits would blend together from college to college. By studying the interviews, it is clear that so much of the impression of the campus visit is left up to chance. The weather, the time of the year, the students and faculty members

that a student may interact with on any given day each made an impression on interview participants. Students and families alike enjoyed having the time and space to interpret for themselves the differences between visits. As tours and information sessions often blended together for students, they all spent time making sense of their visit based on their personal experiences and reactions. What ended up making the biggest difference for students while navigating the campus visit and college choice process was the impact of certain factors of the campus visit on them personally: aesthetics of the campus environment, community/general vibe of campus, and personal interactions.

The campus visit was not influential because of the formal elements of an information session or campus tour. Instead, the campus visit was influential because it allowed students to react to the aesthetics of the campus and evaluate the campus community first-hand. The beauty of the college campus, and whether or not the campus “looked” like a college student envision based on media influence impacted students during their college search. Students were seeking a happy campus, a place that they could see themselves thriving by evaluating the campus community and vibe. Because the students interviewed knew they could attend a four-year university, they were continually seeking out a sense of school spirit and community that could go above and beyond just the academic offerings of the institution.

CHAPTER 5: IT LOOKS LIKE A COLLEGE

The second stage of the research involved visits to four different colleges and universities to experience the traditional “campus visit” or the traditional information session and tour. I visited one school in each of the regions in the Mid-Atlantic (North Carolina, D.C., Maryland, and Delaware). Virginia was excluded from the visitations due to my personal relationships and connections within that particular region. I selected each school based on my initial web survey, as seen in Appendix B, and based the choice on the amount of information available online for each school and the types of campus visits available. Each of the schools I picked had some unique options for prospective students, whether it was the ability to schedule a coffee and chat with a current student, an independent tour of another academic department, or the ability to meet one on one with an Admission counselor. I was able to visit each college/university while school was in session to get a better sense of the overall campus community and culture. Because I visited during the fall season, prior to the semester break I was able to visit on days where the tour groups were large enough that I was easily able to blend in to the crowd and not draw any specific attention to myself as an observer. My visits had interesting similarities and differences among them. In the following section, I detail each individual visit experience, before analyzing the group of visits as a whole.

Portraits of Campus Visit Experiences

In the following section, I discuss the events and my response to each of the campus visit experiences I attended. I visited Cyprus-Rhodes University (Large Public

University), Hudson University (Mid-size Private University), Beach University (Large Public University), and Stony Point University (Mid-size Private University). Each college name is a pseudonym for the institution. While each visit unsurprisingly had some similarities, each visit also had some aspects that stood out from the general trends.

Cyprus-Rhodes University Visit

My first visit was to Cyprus-Rhodes University (Large Public University), on a weekday in November. The weather on the day of my visit was in the mid 60's and began a little gloomy and drizzly but cleared up into sunshine during the tour. The duration of the information session and tour was two hours and 15 minutes. Beginning at the Visitor Center on campus, I walked into a welcoming and beautiful space with multiple brochures and a wide variety of students on hand to answer questions. The Visitor Center was an impressive place to begin the information session and tour, and was very aesthetically pleasing. From the lobby, I was ushered into their main presentation room with facts posted on murals painted across the main walls, and a slideshow of facts and figures played on a large projection screen as the prospective students and families anxiously awaited the information session to begin. A professional staff member of the Visitor Center led the information session, rather than a member of the Admission office staff, which was different from my other visits. The presentation itself felt a little flat to me and was not engaging as the Visitor Center staff read from a scripted document with a PowerPoint. Some of the jokes also felt forced rather than organic, as it was clear the professional staff member was reading from a document. During the presentation, the staff member also encouraged the audience to document their visit with a school-specific hashtag on social media.

The highlights of the session at Cyprus-Rhodes included an overview of a map of campus (as we would relocate after the information session to begin the tour), the importance of declaring a major when applying to campus, ease of getting around campus and town, and the notion that the town itself offered a lot of opportunities for jobs after graduation. The information session lasted about 30 minutes, and then the group had 45 minutes to drive to a parking garage near the student center and relocate before the tour. During this 45-minute break, families had time to rest, visit a bathroom, and get coffee. The entire group was provided a map to help us navigate from the visitor center parking to the garage we would park in to begin the tour. Cyprus-Rhodes did not offer a van/car to shuttle visitors from the Visitor Center to the student center, so students who did not have a car would have to make use of the college bus system to transition to the next portion of the visit, as the distance was too far to walk in the allotted time.

In the time between the information session and the tour, I drove over to the parking garage recommended for the next stage of the initial visit and paid for parking. I then walked through the student center, which was a very impressive portion of campus. Clearly a relatively new fixture on campus, it featured a Cyprus-Rhodes spirit and accessory store, multiple restaurants and food options, and great open spaces for studying. Even though, I arrived in the student center prior to 11am, the student center was already packed with clean-cut students, wearing Cyprus-Rhodes gear, eating and studying together in this space. Exposing prospective students to the student center was a great way to make an impact in between the information session and tour. It was easy to see signs of campus life, what students wore, how they spent their time, and where students could commonly be found between classes. After wandering around the student

center, I began to find my way to the meeting point for the tour itself, behind the student center near an art structure. After getting a little lost, the student center staff assisted me in finding my way to the meeting point for the tour. When I asked the student center staff for directions, it seemed clear that they were accustomed to having lost prospective students who asked for similar advice.

The group for the tour seemed to diminish slightly from the group that had initially begun in the information session. Even though there were a little over 50 prospective students and family members in the admission session, only about 30 attended the tour 45 minutes later. I wondered if the time in between the two might have had something to do with this drop off in numbers for the tour or if visitors opted for a self-directed tour. When I arrived at the meeting spot, four Caucasian females met the group in matching rain jackets prepared to give us a tour. Interestingly enough, the four tour guides did not split us up into smaller groups, but gave the tour together taking turns to talk at various points on the tour.

My perceptions of the tour guides was slightly critical, because there were four of them giving the tour, I really expected more depth in their knowledge about campus as a whole and a selection of different majors and backgrounds represented. While Cyprus-Rhodes houses offers over 300 majors and disciplines for undergraduate and graduate degrees, my assumption would have been the four different tour guides would have represented vastly different majors and departments on campus. The guides had a clearly-defined script and path for the tour as they would walk to the campus library, where one of the guides would talk about the library, then they would stop at a campus blue light and another guide would discuss safety, then we would stop to visit a

classroom and another guide would discuss advising and average class sizes. Even though the tour was well-executed, I was surprised by the number of “ums” used in the tour guide’s speech as they were reciting a paragraph at each location. It also surprised me that they were not always confident in what they were discussing. Often the tour guides would say in a questioning tone to one another “awareness week, right?” or “[restaurant name] salads, right?” Other members of the campus tour asked the tour guides about choosing their majors, where to live, and about Greek life. I found the tour guides’ answers to be much more confident in response to standard questions, though not always comprehensive, and often the prospective student or parent would ask a follow-up question to gain more information. The guides also described that freshman are not required to live on campus, and that there are clubs for everyone- whether you love shoes or sleeping.

The tour itself was an hour from start to finish and showed a freedom of expression site on campus, main quads where students were tabling (sitting at tables to raise money, raise awareness, or promote an event on campus), a war memorial on campus, and classroom. While on the tour, the tour guides recommended a nearby Chipotle and Mellow Mushroom for lunch after the tour. Before the end of the tour, I asked one of the guides to recommend a non-chain restaurant near campus where I could eat, and the only place she could think of to recommend was only open at dinner. I found this to be disappointing, as so many visitors on a campus visit want to eat at the cool local spots, and it did not appear this particular tour guide had received that question before. At the end of their tour, one tour guide offered to take the group to the model dorm room to show off a typical freshman dorm room. Less than a third of the group opted to see the

freshman dorm room. The dorm room was relatively standard in size, but actually had a good amount of storage space. The common space in the dorm and the kitchen open to building residents were the most impressive points on this tour. Only about eight of us went to view the model dorm room. Some of the drop-off at this point might have been due to the approaching lunch hour.

As the tour concluded the tour guides suggested that prospective students and families could shop or eat in the Student Center to get a taste for the food on campus. Even though some of the aspects of my Cyprus-Rhodes visit were relatively standard for a typical information session and tour: reliance on facts and figures, describing alumni and impressive career statistics, and the ability for any student to make their home away from home on campus; what stood out to me most in this visit was the 45 minute break in between the information session and tour. This self-directed time allowed anxious tour groups to view what student life on campus has to offer, and what the typical student is doing on campus. Even though many tours do walk groups through the various student centers on campus, none were quite as widely utilized as the one at Cyprus-Rhodes University.

Hudson University

My second visit was to Hudson University (Mid-size Private University). This visit took place on a Saturday in November where the weather was in the mid 50's, but was crisp and sunny. Immediately I was taken with the aesthetics of the school, the gate that framed the entrance to campus gave off an impression of prestige, and the campus itself was striking and gothic. When I first arrived to campus, I was a little lost making my way to their Undergraduate Admission Office. Several families and students

accompanied me while we attempted to navigate around the campus to locate the admission building. Once our group was able to find the building we were looking for, we were told that the large size of the group visiting that day necessitated a larger room, and thus we turned away from the office and were directed to another building on campus. The walk from the admission office to the new building was less than ten minutes, but each of those minutes was critical for families hoping to make a good impression and retain as much information as possible.

I observed the frustration in others prior to the session, as navigating the campus for newcomers was certainly not an easy task. This induction to the campus could have been made much easier with student volunteers or event signage. On our way to the building for the information session we passed some unsightly construction and again got a little confused about where the new building was located. Once we found our way to the new building, we were greeted by several students at a table, who after checking us in, handed each of us our registration information (email, intended major interests, address, and phone number) on a piece of paper to make corrections with a pencil and hand in at the end of the information session. This process, I assume was to ensure our registration information for the tour was accurate so that they would be able to later email and mail out additional information to students who had already visited campus. I found this to be a little odd that a private university would hand out paper and pencils to prospective students to update their registration systems. Finally, we were ushered into a large outdated classroom to wait for the information session to begin. The bathrooms adjacent to the classroom were covered in pen graffiti and had information on sexual health promotion and rooms available near campus. The classroom itself was full of old

creaky chairs with movable tablet desk arms and dusty chalkboards. The inside of the classroom did not match my expectations based on the outside of the buildings at Hudson University.

During the information session, the Admission staff member repetitively mentioned the University's geographic location as a selling point for the school and the education they provide. The Admission officer explained the school's impressive connections, dedication to study abroad, and school spirit of the institution. Much more time was spent discussing the application process as their process is holistic, and they also discussed unique options for early action to certain graduate programs on campus. A PowerPoint with distinctive visual imagery accompanied the Admission officer's presentation, and the photos of lodging options while studying abroad impressed many audience members. Several highlights were presented during the Admission Officer's presentation: powerful figures speak at the University; the University has strong ties with well-positioned alumni in business, politics, and international relations; there are multiple internship opportunities nearby; and overall principles of the school's educational philosophy. The name-dropping of famous alumni throughout the presentation was very prominent and obvious. Even though the names were certainly impressive, it felt a little forced and excessive in the attempt to impress the visiting students and their families. The overall presentation was very formal, which matched the aesthetic of the school, however, the presentation relied mostly on facts and figures rather than stories of student experiences and growth. I left with the impression that the University was prestigious due to its history and location and that admission to the University was particularly difficult.

At the end of the 30-minute presentation, a group of tour guides came in the back doors and walked to the front of the room to introduce themselves and each stated their name, hometown, and intended major. The tour guides told us that we could join them outside and pick which group we would like to join. I was fascinated by this method of splitting up tour groups as there was certainly no way to ensure each group would be split up evenly, and tour guides who are majoring in some of the most popular majors on campus undoubtedly had an advantage. I joined a tour with an African-American female freshman from Florida. I was excited to go on a tour with a freshman, as that is often uncommon for tours, and to hear about the campus from her perspective as a relatively new student who just completed her own college choice process.

On the tour, and as is common, our guide walked backwards as she detailed some of the weekend events, traditions, and history of the University. Walking backwards is very common on tours as it allows the tour guide to seamlessly integrate stories and facts while walking around a college campus. At Cyprus-Rhodes our group inclusive of our four tour guides walked the same direction as the group, and stopped to talk to the group at certain spots on campus. By walking and stopping the feel of the tour becomes slightly less organic and natural, and more of a performance. Because the information session was so statistic-heavy, and because I was taking notes, I noticed that some of the stats that the tour guide gave were slightly off from the facts given to us in the information session. These statistical differences were small, but were noticeable to me when both listed the number of clubs and organizations on campus, and the percent of students who study abroad and do research on campus.

I liked that our tour guide was so involved already as a college freshman, and was able to talk about night and weekend events on campus, including a large dance festival that had occurred the night prior to our tour. Because the audience at the information session and tour on this particular day was so large, and all the tour groups seemed to have similar paths to guide their prospective students and families, we were often bumping into other groups throughout our tour experience. At one point on the tour, we all walked up a set of metal stairs close to upperclassmen apartments, and had to pause on the way up and on the way down because of other tour groups being so close to our group.

Because of our proximity to other groups, I found myself eavesdropping on some of the comments of other tour guides. At one point while we were walking past some of the different freshman dorm options, and having the perks of each explained, our tour guide paused to say “with great power comes great responsibility” about one of the residence halls. As we began walking to another stop on the tour, I heard another tour guide utter the exact same phrase, which disappointed me slightly as I then determined that the tour was scripted. On the tour there was a lot of airplane noise that was often distracting for several members of my tour group, but this type of noisy intrusion is common in more urban environments. On the tour parents of prospective students asked several questions about parking, transportation, and safety on campus. Safety was certainly a bigger concern for visitors attending this tour due to the college’s location in an urban area. Almost all of the buildings on campus required swipe access for entry, and our guide mentioned that the residence halls require double swipes for current students.

While we were able to walk a great deal of the grounds of the campus, I found it interesting that we did not see a classroom, the inside of a dining hall, or the inside of a residence hall on the tour. The only building we went inside on the tour was one of the student centers on campus. Much of this was due to security on campus, but it left our tour with just an impression of the outside of buildings, rather than what the buildings look like on the inside. We witnessed a salsa club having a dance practice, students studying in smaller workspaces, coffee shops, and restaurants, and a large common space with a stage for evening performances and shows. Because the day was slightly colder, we did not see quite as many students as I would have expected as we were walking around campus. At the conclusion of the tour, our guide told us to feel free to stick around if we had any additional questions. At this point, her boss, and a member of the Admission staff jumped up to give the tour guide a hug and congratulated her on giving her first solo tour. It was exciting to know that this was the student's first tour, as I was continually impressed with her ability to navigate our large group through campus and tell as many stories as she did about traditions and history, after only attending Hudson University for three short months.

Overall my experience at Hudson University was very positive. Even though the information session was slightly run of the mill and statistic-heavy, it still left me with the impression that the school was prestigious, and that any student would be lucky to be admitted. The aura of prestige, academic rigor, and impressive connections was clear throughout both the information session and tour. The beauty of the campus, the buildings, and the view from upperclassmen housing also left a lasting impression. Hudson University was historic, prestigious, and the surrounding area only added to the

feeling of exclusivity on campus. I found the campus to be breathtakingly beautiful. As media and presence play into each of our own perceptions of beauty, an argument can be made about the connection of the known prestige of the university and the perceived beauty of the campus. On this campus visit, it was not the information session or the tour that really left a lasting impression; instead it was the impressive architecture of the buildings, the neatly manicured lawns, and the sense of history of the buildings that stuck out to me most during this visit. From the information session to the tour, Hudson University made use of visual imagery throughout PowerPoint and through our walk across campus. Hudson University looked like a college should look, based on my own influence from the media and accolades of prestigious universities. The overall ambiance made prospective visitors feel as if they would be lucky to attend. In many ways, they left students wanting more. My experience at Hudson University demonstrates the research framework model of social constructivism and cultural capital. It looked like what students might expect or picture a college to look like in their head, demonstrating social constructivism. Cultural capital is demonstrated by the idea that this particular university could be the gateway to a better life, and the fact that it is so desirable to attend, with thousands of applicants vying for few spots, makes it even more desirable to students seeking a selective university.

Beach University

My third visit was to Beach University (Large Public University). This visit took place on a Wednesday in early December when the weather was in the low 40's, and was cold and windy. While driving through the campus I was impressed by how cute and colonial the college was and I loved the consistency of the bricks and appearance of

buildings across campus. I have always been partial to colleges where the buildings match, which again demonstrates the idea of beauty in the eye of the beholder. The campus itself looked historic and comfortable, a lot like what you would picture a college campus to look like, which again ties into the research framework of social constructivism. After winding through the campus, I navigated to the parking garage that I was directed to in my initial emails and confirmation from the University. After parking, I got a little lost and turned around on my way to the Admission office, and had to call the main office to get directions as students I asked on campus were not entirely sure of how to direct me to the main Admission office for the beginning of the tour and information session.

Once I arrived to the Admission Office, the aesthetically pleasing and seemingly very new and professional office building impressed me. When I came inside and checked in, the student Admission staff quickly ushered me into the presentation room. Inside the presentation room were huge windows that allowed prospective students and family members to view campus from a distance and I really loved that. It was nice to be able to see some of the campus life and buildings as the Admission officer was describing campus life and academics. The only issue with the room was that the light was so bright coming in through the windows that it made viewing the PowerPoint that accompanied the Admission Officer's talk a little difficult to view. It certainly would have been a shame to close all of the cathedral windows with blinds but I wondered whether the PowerPoint was really needed as the view from the office was already spectacular.

During the information session the Admission Officer noted how easy it was to navigate to several large and nearby cities via train and bus, and was pushing the notion

of their convenient location on the audience. The notion of convenience to multiple amenities was clearly a theme throughout all my college visits. The proximity of the college to multiple different cities for weekend trips or even interviews and internships all relates to the cultural capital of the institution. The Admission Officer even asked how many students were from states touching Beach University's regional location, and every student in the audience was from a surrounding state. In addition, the Admission Officer noted the number of research and internships available for students both on and off-campus. Research, number of student clubs and organizations, and scholarships and financial aid were also discussed in great detail. One element that was mentioned during the information session was the "scholars" program at Beach University that allows students who are designated as "scholars" based on their application to take special classes and receive access to free tutoring on campus. I found this to be intriguing as I imagine that the students who would benefit most from free tutoring likely are not the students who are designated as scholars based on their applications. It was evident that despite Beach University being a public institution, that there was ample money for students looking to attend college there. The Admission Officer also noted how many interesting and delicious food options there are for students on a street close to campus. Overall, the two factors that stood out for me during the Information Session was that, Beach University has a great location with a large number of local restaurants, and the split class system created a divide between regular and honors classes for students.

After the information session ended, the tour guides read off names of students out loud off a piece of paper, which was slightly awkward with mispronunciations, in no particular order that I could find (male/female, location, or academic interest) to go on

tours. I was paired with a tour guide who was an in-state African-American female and college senior at Beach University, and I was interested to compare her tour with the college freshman tour guide at Hudson University. My tour guide, however was not as impressive as I would have hoped. Our tour guide said “um” and “like” several times, which I found to be distracting, and she seemed to be unsure of herself. She also wore sunglasses on the tour, which made it difficult to connect with her. I also found her to be slightly unenthusiastic throughout the tour. We had a couple awkward pauses at lights while waiting to cross streets, and I would have hoped she would have taken that opportunity to have prospective students ask questions or tell us about an interesting aspect of Beach University or student life. The nice part of walking around most parts of the campus, despite the chilly weather, was seeing students in their natural element, walking around to class or to the gym and feeling what it would be like to be crossing campus after classes get out.

On the tour, our tour guide took us through the Student Recreation Center and pointed out historic buildings throughout campus. This tour, was the only tour in which my entire tour group was made up of male prospective students, which I also found to be interesting giving the intentionality of creating the groups. Because our group never discussed where everyone was from or what different students hoped to major in, I was unable to see a common denominator for how these groups were formed.

On the tour, we were able to see a residence hall and dorm room, which was a triple. The triple room was not a model room, students actually lived in the room that we saw, which was different from my other visits where we either saw a model dorm room, or no residence hall at all. The triple room actually had two of the three students on their

computers when we peaked into it and we were able to see all of their personal belongings and decorations. The students were friendly when we came into their room, but both were on their computers, so we did not ask them any questions. During our residence hall tour, we also discovered that the residence halls at Beach University are co-ed by room rather than by floor or building. None of the parents on the tour seemed upset about this, but I wondered if my tour had been composed of female prospective students, if the parents' attitudes might have changed. At the very end of the tour I asked about campus traditions, as I found it interesting that she had not talked about any one tradition/event/memory that was "Beach University" specific throughout the tour. After being asked she talked about intramural sports and playing beach volleyball against other residence halls her freshman year, but was unable to describe something that was uniquely Beach University.

After our question and answer session at the very end of the tour, our entire group concluded the tour in the Admission Office where we began the visit, close to the parking garage. At the end of the tour we could ask questions to our tour guide or to the Admission staff in the front lobby. Overall, I really enjoyed my visit at Beach University. What stood out to me on this tour was the colonial vibe of the campus and the fact that most buildings on campus matched one another. The lack of professionalism of our tour guide did make me question the academic and social preparation for graduate school and careers, as our tour guide was a senior. I enjoyed seeing the strip near campus full of restaurants and shops and liked the proximity of the town to other major metropolitan areas. I could definitely understand why students would be attracted to

attending Beach University, and why both the tour guide and information session leader continued to comment on their prime location.

Stony Point University

My fourth and final campus visit was to Stony Point University (Small Private University). This visit took place on a Thursday in early December, and the weather was in the high 40's. The day was crisp, but sunny. Once I arrived on campus and parked in the associated parking garage for the Admission Office building, I took an elevator up to the main floor of the Admission Office. The Admission office was professionally appointed, well-decorated, and impressive. I checked in with a woman who assumed I was a school counselor rather than a prospective student. There were areas for visiting students to engage with iPad's, smaller meeting rooms, bookshelves covered with impressive book titles, and interactive screens with student life updates around campus. Attached to the main waiting space was the room for the information session room, a gorgeous presentation space with quotes printed on the walls and facts imprinted on the backs of each chair in the session room. On the wall behind the Admission presenter were floor to ceiling windows that looked out onto a portion of campus, which provided a setting very similar to the room at Beach University. I found this sneak preview of student life was really a nice touch as we would see students walk by the window on their way to class, and we literally had a window to campus life. The Admission session at Stony Point University was the longest of the four visits, and lasted an hour. The interesting component of the Stony Point University visit was that visitors could choose whether they want to do a tour before or after an information session, and visitors could also add an optional class visitation or interview to their application process. The ability

to pick and choose among activities when you embarked on the visit felt very customized and allowed visitors to get exactly what they were looking for during the visit. I chose to eat lunch prior to the visit, and sit in on the information session prior to the tour, to remain consistent with my other visits.

An Admission staff member and a current student led the information session at Stony Point University. The Admission officer spoke without notes or a PowerPoint, which I really enjoyed as I felt he was able to connect more with the audience. During the Information Session the Admission Officer covered opportunities for research, discussed advising, and the potential for having multiple mentors during the students' college years. Like other sessions I have attended, the Admission Officer spent some time name-dropping notable alumni and Nobel Prize winning professors. In this instance however, the Admission Officer was able to work in the alumni in a more subtle fashion. The Admission officer also explained the value of liberal arts and the way the general distribution credits work for students at Stony Point University. Students in liberal arts colleges take classes in a variety of different disciplines that creates an environment to expand their education.

The student in the session chimed in from time to time during the information session to discuss the surrounding areas, how easy it is to get involved on campus, what to expect regarding student life events, and the history of the campus. The student also discussed the opportunities to have lunch with a professor, how easy it is to get around to "foodie" restaurants, and the arts culture building around campus. During the session, the Admission Officer and student offered several opportunities for questions from the audience. At the other three visits I attended, time for questions was only offered at the

very end of the information session, with the tour guides standing in the wings, ready to take over. The timing for a half-hour session sometimes makes asking questions tough for visitors. But since this session was an hour, and they kept asking the audience for questions, I asked the student to describe a class from the general distribution requirements that pushed her outside of her comfort zone, and the student had a very difficult time answering this question, which really surprised me. The other questions asked during the session were readily answered but the other questions were not directed specifically to the student co-presenting the session.

The professional staff member at Stony Point University concluded the session by discussing the application process and what factors are most important during the application review. He discussed their evaluation of academic character, the importance of personality in the application process, and referred visitors to their website, which contained helpful hints and suggestions for applicants. After he finished discussing all of the ways for students to help themselves stand out during the application process, the Admission Officer and student opened up additional time for questions from the audience. After the session ended the majority of the visitors arranged outside to meet our tour guides, the student who participated in the Information Session was not one of the student tour guides. Because we were able to build our own schedule, I overheard a couple families explaining that they went on the tour prior to the information session. Two students in the session also had interviews in conjunction with their application after our information session. It was exciting to see that their flexibility with scheduling seemed to be very helpful for visitors.

Different from my other college visits, this time the three tour guides, split up our group based on where we were standing. It wasn't pre-arranged like at Beach University, and we did not select our tour guide as we did at Hudson University. Once the tour guides visually divided our group into threes, we began heading out to see the campus. My initial perceptions of the tour guide leading the group I was in was that she was very well-spoken, in contrast to my visit at Beach University, and her clothing were much more urban and hipster than the dress of guides on my other visits. Throughout the tour, our tour guide maintained a relatively natural although sometimes informal tone, using the word "shit" several times with the group. She explained the grading policy and counter culture that is pretty popular with students at Stony Point University. This tour was also the first tour where I saw multiple students smoking on campus during the visit.

On the tour, I began looking around and evaluating the other members of my tour group, and I was surprised to see how they seemed much more eager towards being admitted and attentive to the information provided on this tour than the other tours I had attended. It was also interesting that all of the students on this tour were hoping to attend Stony Point University for the discipline they are most well known for on campus. Our tour guide was not involved with that particular discipline.

One of my favorite aspects of the campus was the number of non-chain coffee shops all over campus in different academic buildings, support office centers, and next to campus. Everywhere we went on campus, our group viewed students studying by themselves, in groups, or going to the library. The school certainly gave off the vibe that it is a place where its students take academics seriously and work hard to succeed. During the tour we were able to view the campus recreation center, a classroom, library,

and research facilities. The only aspect of campus we did not see on the tour was a model dorm room. On the tour, students and parents asked about parking, grades, residence halls, and meal plans. The tour guide answered questions easily and would add in her own anecdotes to solidify her point. Our tour guide was comfortable and confident with the group throughout the tour. During the tour, we also were able to view the setup for one of Stony Point University's holiday campus traditions that was taking place that night in their main quad. Even though I was unable to attend the actual ceremony and holiday celebration, the tour guide's excitement and stories of the tradition made the moment come alive for our group. Because Stony Point is a smaller school we did not see quite as many students walking around as I did at some other college campuses, yet it was still easy to see and picture where students hang out on campus and how future students could spend their day on Stony Point University's campus.

Overall, this campus visit stood out to me because of the Admission office that was by far the most lavish of my four visits, the length of the Admission session, and the non-stereotypical tour guide. I also really liked the fact that visitors could build their own schedule to create a unique campus visit. Even though Stony Point University is in a more urban environment, the campus still felt safe and slightly separate from the rest of the surrounding town.

Site Visit Findings

Overall my four visits taught me a great deal about the traditional campus visit (information session and tour) and its relationship to college choice. Driving on to different college campuses, provided an easy way to gather a quick first impression. Just in making my way to the designated parking garage, I understood more clearly what

participants in the first phase of my research described as making a snap judgment and then deciding not to tour the campus after all. After I managed to park, making my way to the starting point for the information session was often challenging, and as I asked campus members for directions, their friendliness and awareness of the campus and their personal interactions in giving directions made a big difference on my initial impressions of the campus visit.

The two main themes that stood out to me most during my campus visits was my reaction to the aesthetic look of each college campus and second my desire to see student life on each campus. The beauty of the campus appealed to what I thought typified what others might also like—a historic, stately, picturesque setting in which students were engaged with one another, special events and activities occurred, and campus members were friendly. Interestingly enough the two schools where I was most impacted by the aesthetic of the campus were the more selective two of the four total colleges. This link between selectivity and a majestic campus appeared in stage one and again in my own site visit experiences. The media and impact of name recognition has a direct link to perceived aesthetics of campus.

At my first campus visit to Cyprus-Rhodes University I was impressed by the newness of certain parts of campus, the matching bricks, and the large green spaces and outdoor classrooms for students to enjoy. I watched students tabling and observed a busy student center. My second campus visit to Hudson University impressed upon me the importance of the geographic location, and the location's amenities for students close to cute shops and restaurants, which appeared ideal for a college student. I loved that the college overlooked the water and the gothic buildings seemed to ooze history and

prestige. Even though I did not see quite as many students walking around at Hudson University as I did at Cyprus-Rhodes University, I was still able to see students studying, getting coffee, and practicing salsa in the student center. My third campus visit to Beach University, gave me insight into an even larger school than Cyprus-Rhodes University. I loved the cute and colonial vibe of the buildings, and the strips of restaurants and shops catering to college students. On the tour we saw a packed student recreation center and later we watched as class period dismissed and the empty green space and walkways flooded with students. Beach University was also littered with intramural space and sand volleyball courts around the grounds for students. Lastly, my campus visit at Stony Point continued to impress the importance of aesthetics and the demonstration of student life. Walking around campus I was impressed by the integration of technology with the interactive touch screens, the cleanliness of buildings, the gorgeous research facilities, and the hipster coffee shops around campus. As a smaller school, like Hudson University, I was not able to see quite as many students walking around on campus or gathered in one space, but during our tour the facilities staff was setting up for one of their largest campus tradition events that night on the main quad, so it was almost as if I could feel the energy of all of the students coming together.

After completing my first stage of research interviews with college freshman, I was aware of the impact of aesthetics, the community vibe, and personal interactions on campus. Thus, on my campus visits, I paid particular attention to these features of the visit. While I was on each campus, I was constantly affected by the aesthetics of campus. For example, I was impressed by Stony Point University's Admission Office, but I disliked the construction I saw at Hudson University. Of the four visits, the last one at

Stony Point University stood out to me the most, likely because it was not quite as cookie-cutter in the format for the campus visit. Unlike the other tours that were mostly scripted, my tour guide at Stony Point University was not afraid to be herself in both dress and language. I also liked that visitors were able to design their own schedule at Stony Point, which made the entire visit feel more personal. Even though my experiences were just that—my own experiences visiting college campuses, what stood out to me is that each of the tiny details that occur during a campus visit matter more to students in varying degrees.

The amount of time getting lost trying to park, the weather on the day of the visit, and the friendliness of the tour guide all influenced the feeling of the visit. Certain things stood out and mattered more to me based on the time of day, the background noise, and the length of the visit as a whole. Even if I went back to visit any one of these schools on a different day, I may have left with altered impressions. Yet, what held constant was the ways in which the overall culture of the institution was manifested in the visit. The focus on academics, research, and other student experiences set the stage for how students could image life would be if they attended. The traditional campus visit (information session and tour) is one that is hard to predict and control for responses. By putting myself back into the shoes of an anxious high school student I was able to see just how many different factors and pieces weigh into the “overall impression” of a college campus community and environment.

CHAPTER 6: MAKING IT REAL INSTEAD OF AN IDEA

The findings from the third phase of my research report out on survey data gathered from high school seniors attending high-achieving academies. I contacted eight high schools that agreed to send out my open-ended qualitative survey to their students. The schools were located in four of the five regions being studied (Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia). Washington, D.C. was not included as all of the possible schools in that region were concerned with confidentiality and privacy issues. The table below demonstrates a breakdown of each school with the percentage of graduates going on to four-year colleges, the number in the current graduating class, the number of completed surveys, and the completion rate for each school.

Table 6

High School Survey Results

School/Region	College Bound	Graduating Class Size	Survey Respondents	% Response
D1	100% 4-year	69	9	13%
D2	100% 4-year	76	9	12%
M1	100% 4-year	65	7	10%
M2	100% 4-year	112	8	7%
N1	100% 4-year	100	13	13%
N2	100% 4-year	115	21	18%
V1	100% 4-year	135	9	6%
V2	99% 4- year	133	28	21%

Even though the response rate at each school is certainly low, the number of students who were eligible at each school was affected by the requirement of each student being 18

years of age in January of their senior year of high school. I was not able to get the information regarding how many students were 18 years old at the time the survey was deployed, but a rough estimate could assume that half of the class would be eligible to complete the survey. In addition, I also was not able to gain access to the gender of each school's current student population. Appendix M is a visual demonstration of the factors that high school seniors believed were the most influential for them in deciding whether or not to apply to a specific institution.

The survey results provide the researcher insight into students who are currently going through the college choice process. It is important to note that because these students are attending elite high schools and are seeking admission to highly selective colleges, that there is an assumption about the level of academics at each of the schools that the students are visiting. In fact one respondent explained, "because I'm applying to the best schools in the country, I decide where I want to go to based on how much I like the campus and the surrounding area. The level of education at this tier of schools is extremely similar, so I know that wherever I go I will have a good education." Another important note regarding these results is the lack of any mention of desired diversity on campus, which mirrors the student interviews conducted in stage one of the project. The results of these surveys are presented in this section first in their regional context and lastly their overall contributions to essence of the phenomenon of college choice.

Delaware

The two schools that participated in the survey in Delaware are referred to as D1 and D2. A comparison of their profiles is listed in Table 6. Despite different locations in Delaware, both schools have moderately similar profiles with similar sizes (69 and 76

students in their graduating classes, respectively) and both sending 100% of graduates off to 4-year colleges. Not surprisingly then, the survey results from the two schools were also very similar. Of the respondents, a larger percentage of respondents were female (63% vs. 57%), although the total number of males/females at each school is unknown. In addition, all respondents indicated they planned to enroll in a four-year university in the fall.

When asked which types of interactions they had regarding their college selection process that they had experience interacting with colleges, every possible answer was utilized by some respondents. Notably, all respondents at both D1 and D2 attended a campus tour and a college visit to their high school. The D2 students had also all attended an information session and received college emails as part of their counseling process. When asked which methods were most influential for students in deciding on where to apply, D1 and D2 students indicated the campus tour was most influential (63% and 57%). At D2, 29% of students said an overnight visit was the most influential for them in the college choice process, as seen in Appendix M.

When asked about the most important factors in deciding where to apply to college, students mentioned academics, size, location, selectivity, and majors. But also listed “quality of life ratings,” “feel of the students (whether they are my people),” and “feeling comfortable at the school.” At both D1 and D2, all survey respondents had already done a campus visit, with a range of 5-17 visits at D1 and a range of 5-15 visits at D2. When asked about elements of the campus visit that made the student more or less likely to apply the students mentioned “walking around without a tour and seeing how friendly some students were (saying hi, asking if you need help, etc.),” “weather and

enthusiasm of students,” “eating on campus, exploring alone,” and “meeting students and the physical beauty of the campus.”

Most important memories for students during their visits included “the sense to which I felt my tour guide was genuinely happy,” “the friendliness of students to the tour group,” and “depending on the cleanliness and beauty of the campus.” Lastly I asked students how the campus visit influenced their decision to apply or attend a particular school. Student responses varied. One student explained, “some schools look amazing on paper and claim to have that community vibe, but once you get there, you don’t really see kids who talk to each other or are somewhat happy and busy. Visiting really solidifies a gut feeling that I may have experienced while reading a brochure.” Another student described, “I narrowed down my list of potential colleges from 10 or so to 1 after visits. You really need to be there to judge a college.” The survey results at both Delaware schools demonstrated similar themes to the ones expressed in stage one of this research project. Namely, students are judging campus communities during their visit and are particularly attuned to how students relate to one another, and how happy they perceive they might be on campus if they decide to attend the college.

Maryland

The two schools utilized in Maryland are referred to as M1 and M2. These two schools also represent different locations in Maryland, and both schools are sending 100% of graduates off to 4-year colleges. M1 has a slightly smaller graduating class of 65 and M2 has a graduating class of 112 students, yet both schools had a small number of respondents, 7 and 8 students respectively. Of the respondents, M1 (an all-girls school) produced 86% female respondents, with one student reporting as other, as opposed to

100% male respondents at M2 (an all-boys school), and all respondents indicated they planned to enroll in a four-year university in the fall. When asked which methods available they had experience interacting with colleges, every possible answer was utilized by some respondents, but all respondents at both M1 and M2 attended a campus tour and an information session. When asked which methods were most influential for students in deciding on where to apply, M1 and M2 students indicated the campus tour was most influential (43% and 50%). M1 students also mentioned the information session, but both M1 and M2 indicated overnight visits, rankings, and conferences with their college counselor as being the most influential in deciding whether or not to apply to specific college.

When asked about the most important factors in deciding where to apply to college, students mentioned size, location, selectivity, and quality of education. But also listed “campus culture,” “how the campus feels, in a sense that one can see themselves walking around and going to classes,” “campus tour guide personality,” and “things that make college fun and enjoyable.” At both M1 and M2 all survey respondents had already visited colleges with a range of 9-14 visits at M1 and a range of 3-15 visits at M2. When asked about elements of the campus visit that made the student more or less likely to apply the students mentioned “the feeling on walking around on campus,” “interacting with students and the enthusiasm of the people there,” and “if the campus was beautiful, having a friendly tour guide.”

Most important memories for students during their visits included “the vibe of the campus,” “hearing jokes from the tour guide,” and “trying to go to the places on campus that most schools would not show on their generic tour.” Lastly, I asked students how the

campus visit influenced their decision to apply or attend a particular school. Student responses varied. One student explained “if it’s a personal visit, [the campus visit matters] a lot.” Another student responded, “minimally, but the X University (name has been changed) tour guide was funnier than the others so he swayed the decision to X University.” Another student explained, “because I’m applying to the best schools in the country, I decide where I want to go based on how much I like the campus and the surrounding area.” The survey results at both Maryland schools demonstrated similar themes to the ones expressed in both Delaware school surveys. Students at private elite high schools are seeking more than just prestige and academics in their college choice decision. The students are only applying to highly selective colleges and with all things being equal regarding academics, want a nice looking campus and friendly students. The students demonstrated through survey responses that they truly take the time to evaluate the culture and how they would fit in at each college on each campus visit.

North Carolina

The two schools utilized in North Carolina are referred to as N1 and N2. These two schools also represent different locations in North Carolina, and both schools are sending 100% of graduates off to 4-year colleges. N1 has a slightly smaller graduating class of 100 and N2 has a graduating class of 115 students, yet both schools had a small number of respondents, 13 and 21 students respectively. Of the respondents, N1 produced 69% female respondents as opposed to 67% female respondents at N2, and all but one respondent indicated they planned to enroll in a four-year university in the fall. One respondent at N2 (the only student of 104 respondents) indicated they are planning to take a gap year prior to enrolling at a four-year institution. When asked which

methods available they had experience interacting with colleges, every possible answer was utilized by respondents, but all respondents at both N1 and N2 attended a campus tour. All students at N2 also indicated they had attended a college visit at their high school. When asked which methods were most influential for students in deciding on where to apply, N1 and N2 students indicated the campus tour was most influential (46% and 52%). The N1 and N2 respondents indicated overnight visits were also influential in deciding whether or not to apply to specific college.

When asked about the most important factors in deciding where to apply to college, students mentioned size, location, selectivity, and international programs. But also listed “general feel of the campus,” “campus size and atmosphere,” “you have to feel you belong there,” and “personality of the student body.” All but one N1 students had already visited colleges, with a range of 2-25 total visits. Even though respondents in North Carolina expressed a large range of visits, it is assumed that while some students are likely only looking at in-state schools, other students are examining institutions in-state and out-of-state. The one student who had not previously visited campuses prior to the survey completion, indicated a desire to visit and compare many visits after receiving admission decisions. At N2, all survey respondents had already visited colleges with a range of 4-20 visits.

When asked about elements of the campus visit that made the student more or less likely to apply the students mentioned “interaction with student tour guide,” “I always noticed how they [students] interacted with others on campus and how enthusiastic they were talking about their school,” and “walking around and seeing the campus to get a feel for the vibe there.” Most important memories for students during their visits included

“all my college visits were rainy except for the school I ended up liking the most,” “one school I visited had an intelligent and social tour guide, knowledgeable about the school and able to answer my questions, this was especially memorable for me,” and “emotions I had when I visited.”

Lastly I asked students how the campus visit influenced their decision to apply or attend a particular school. Student responses varied. One student explained “the atmosphere of the campus is really what truly makes or breaks my decision of whether or not to apply to a certain school.” Another student responded, “I get to envision myself living there for four years making it real instead of an idea.” One student said rather succinctly, “If I liked the way it felt, I applied.” Another student explained, “it [the campus visit] was often the make or break. If I loved the academics but did not like the campus or had a poor campus tour, I did not apply to that school.” The survey results at both North Carolina schools demonstrated similar themes to the ones expressed in both the Delaware and Maryland school surveys. Consistently, the words “vibe,” “feel,” and “atmosphere” are used as students attempt to explain the importance of the intangibles of a campus visit.

Virginia

The two schools utilized in Virginia are referred to as V1 and V2. These two schools also represent different locations in Virginia, and both schools are sending the majority of graduates off to 4-year colleges, V1 sending 100% and V2 sending 99%. V1 and V2 have very similar sizes for their upcoming graduating class, 135 and 133, respectively, yet the schools did differ in the number of respondents, 9 and 28 students respectively. Of the respondents, V1 produced 50% female respondents compared to

52% female respondents at V2, and all respondents indicated they planned to enroll in a four-year university in the fall. Both Virginia schools were more balanced in terms of percentage of male and female respondents than Delaware and North Carolina. When asked which methods available they had experience interacting with colleges, respondents utilized every possible answer. All respondents at V1 interacted with colleges through college fairs, information sessions, tours, brochures, rankings, conferences with a counselor, college visits to their high school, and college emails. At V2, 91% of respondents participated in a campus tour and an information session, and 83% viewed college rankings in order to make decisions regarding college choice. When asked which methods were most influential for students in deciding on where to apply, V1 and V2 students indicated the campus tour was most influential (38% and 48%). V1 students indicated overnight visits were also influential in deciding whether or not to apply to specific college, whereas V2 students were split regarding the information session, rankings, and overnight visits.

When asked about the most important factors in deciding where to apply to college, students mentioned majors, flexibility, food, location, and selectivity. But also listed “cool people,” “social life,” “best fit,” “feel of college campus/student culture,” and “good athletics.” All V1 students had already visited colleges, with a range of 2-25 total visits. At V2 all survey respondents had already visited colleges with a range of 3-15 visits. When asked about elements of the campus visit that made the student more or less likely to apply the students mentioned “touring the campus and watching how the students acted,” “pretty campus, nice weather, nice students (general vibe from them),”

“how the tour guide describes his/her experience, meeting with students, feeling the atmosphere.”

Most important memories for students during their visits included “the reasons the tour guides decided to attend the school above their other choices,” “the exterior of buildings,” “the buildings and grounds,” and “feeling excited when hearing about schools core values and opportunities that match what I want to do in life.” Lastly I asked students how the campus visit influenced their decision to apply or attend a particular school. Student responses varied. One student explained, “the campus visit was the most important part for deciding where I want to go.” Another student responded, “campus tours have made or broken my decisions for or against application.” Another student explained, “I am really big about liking the atmosphere of the school and the beauty of the school.” One student elaborated, “You meet the people and their community and then judge if the college is a right fit.” The survey results at all eight schools in Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia show similar themes across the various students and schools involved.

Survey Summary

While the eight schools utilized in the section of my research for the survey were from different areas of four different states, they produced similar results in terms of the themes that were presented across the various states. In Table 7, common themes are extracted from an open-ended question in which when students were asked about how the campus visit influenced their decision-making regarding where to apply or attend college. These themes are demonstrated by the schools utilized for this study, Delaware (D1, D2), Maryland (M1, M2), North Carolina (N1, N2), and Virginia (V1, V2).

Table 7

Campus Visit Influence Themes

	D1	D2	M1	M2	N1	N2	V1	V2
How has the campus visit influenced your decision to apply or attend that particular school/s?								
Aesthetics				X		X		X
Campus Community/Vibe	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Class Environment						X		X
Location		X	X		X	X		X
Personal Interactions	X	X		X	X	X	X	
See myself on campus	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Students		X			X	X	X	
Tour Guide	X			X				

Overall, the survey data was very much in line with the data from the interviews with recently matriculated freshman. Students were looking for places that they could see themselves on campus and also wanted to evaluate the vibe/campus community to assess whether or not the campus and college would be a potential match. Aesthetics came up some in the decision to apply or attend, but was mentioned more substantially in the question about what elements of the campus visit affected them most.

CHAPTER 7: RECOMMENDATIONS, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSIONS

Previous research indicated the importance of the campus visit for prospective students (Brown, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Greenough, 2003; Hesel, 2004; Hoover, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Kuh, 2009; Magolda, 2000; Perna, 2006; Swan, 1998; Yost & Tucker, 1995). This prior work demonstrated the need for research to uncover what elements of the campus visit impact students. Across my campus visits and the surveys of high school seniors several important themes emerged. On a campus visit, prospective students want to feel special and want to make a connection with a tour guide, the presenters, or with the campus during the information session and tour, and that can be hard to do if the material is scripted. Second, the more meaningful material on all of my visits was school-specific, whether it was based on traditions, history, or student life at that school. Third, the response I had to both aesthetics and personal interactions as mentioned in Chapter 5 was clearly part of my experience and response to the four schools I had not previously visited. This closely mirrored the experience that student participants had during their campus visits. From the survey data, it is clear that high school students are just as in line with college freshman regarding what held their attention and preference during their campus tours. The high school seniors all noted the importance of personal interactions, their desire to understand the community and vibe of a college campus, and the importance of the aesthetic of the college campus. All three stages of research have helped to triangulate the data with the development of the essence of the campus visit phenomenon, as discussed in this chapter.

The purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which the campus visit and various iterations of campus visitation experiences influence a student's college choice decision. The previous three chapters outlined research findings and this chapter discusses the conclusions and implications for stakeholders based on this study's results. First, the findings are summarized and interpreted in context based on the available literature. Then, the study and its methodology are critiqued. The recommendations, discussion, and conclusions in this chapter serve as an important link between my research and future research on college choice and the campus visit.

Prior to this study, a substantial amount of quantitative research demonstrated the significant effect campus visits have on a college choice decision for a high school student for both application and enrollment (Brown, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Greenough, 2003; Hesel, 2004; Hoover, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Kuh, 2009; Magolda, 2000; Swan, 1998; Yost & Tucker, 1995). However, only a limited amount of qualitative research exists to provide rich data on how students experienced those visits and eventually interpreted the visit to impact their ultimate college choice decision. The literature to date had yet to examine the influence of informal visits, as many families choose to visit college campuses without engaging in the formal information session and tour. The goal of this particular research was to delve into why the campus visit is influential and what components of a visit make a student more or less interested in a college/university. In addition, the research sought to understand whether the factors that are influential are controllable by university administrators. It was these questions that seemed best suited towards qualitative research and the study's unique research design.

In this study, I designed three distinct stages of research to analyze the phenomenon of the campus visit from different perspectives. In stage one, I interviewed 21 current college freshmen at six different colleges in the Mid-Atlantic region (Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia, and Washington D.C.) regarding their college choice decision-making. As first-semester freshmen and students who had recently gone through the process, they were able to reflect on their decisions throughout the process and give meaning and emphasis to elements that were more or less influential in their personal process.

In stage two, I visited four selective colleges and universities, one in each region of the Mid-Atlantic, excluding the region of Virginia for possible bias, as site visits to experience the most traditional form of the campus visit, the information session and tour. These site visits showcased and allowed me to experience the phenomenon with first-hand experience, and develop my own reflections on the experience after hearing from students who just finished the college choice process. In stage three, I conducted open-ended qualitative surveys with current high school seniors in four of the Mid-Atlantic regions (excluding Washington D.C.). The surveys allowed me to gather data from students who are currently going through the process of search and college choice. Even though the majority of these students had already visited colleges and applied to colleges and universities, they had yet to make their final college choice decision.

For this study, the research design was guided by two main research questions relative to students evaluating college choice based on campus visits:

1. How do information sessions and tours compare among a subset of the national universities in the Mid-Atlantic (Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina,

Virginia, and Washington D.C.) listed in *U.S. News & World Report's* 2015 list of national universities?

2. How do varying campus visit types, and intricacies of each visit, influence a student's perception of an institution and the meaning they ascribe to their decision to attend?

- a. How do high school seniors socially construct the role of the campus visit in their college choice?
- b. How do matriculated freshmen socially construct the role of the campus visit in their college choice?

The college choice process is a complex social phenomenon, and by using qualitative research, I aimed to examine the phenomenon from a more personal and reflective perspective. The research framework for this study was built on the concept of social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) combining together to build a student's mindset and perceptions of the world around them.

Bourdieu's (1986) construct of cultural capital provided a necessary component for this study on college choice, as the research is restricted to students seeking selective four-year universities. Social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) highlighted each individual's perspective and lived experience as personal and based on the individual's own attitudes and perceptions. The two concepts together demonstrate how students develop social and cultural expectations of themselves regarding how to act and what defines success. In addition, the two elements form a relationship to phenomenology and allows for the development of the essence of the experience of

college choice decision-making. By exploring the relationship between college choice and the campus visit through this framework, it allows each student to share their story influenced by their beliefs about the world and success. By combining the results from all three stages, I was able to develop an essence of the experience of college choice. In the next section, I discuss the summary of findings, the essence of college choice and the campus visit, and the synthesis across the three stages of research in context with the literature.

Summary of Findings

From the interviews with current college freshmen, the most influential part of the campus visit identified occurred on an individualized level (Perna, 2006). Namely, students commented most about the aesthetics of the campus environment, community/general vibe of campus, and personal interactions. The campus visit was not influential because of the formal elements of an information session or campus tour. Instead, the campus visit was influential because it allowed students to react to the aesthetics of the campus and evaluate the campus community first-hand. The beauty of the college campus, and whether or not the campus looked like a college heavily influenced students. It was clear that each student had a preconceived notion of what a “real” college looked like, informed by the media and siblings’ experiences. Students were seeking a campus environment that exuded a happy vibe, a place that they could see themselves thriving. Because the students in this study were evaluating and comparing highly selective institutions, the level of academic rigor was established during the initial funnel of the college search process, and was assumed fairly equal in the decision-making regarding the campus visit. This stage was very much in line with Perna’s (2006) model,

which described how the factors that affect the campus visit are personal in relation to individual habitus.

Similarly, in stage two, I embarked on four site visits in all of the regions of the Mid-Atlantic, excluding Virginia. Hesel (2004) argued that the campus visit is the single most influential source of information for college choice-decision making. With this in mind, and having just completed the stage one interviews and analysis, my visits allowed for a stronger triangulation of the data between stage one and stage two. After I completed the initial analysis and learned how important tiny aspects of the visit mattered to the college freshmen I interviewed in stage one, I was surprised to see how many similar experiences I had during my own visits that mirrored the experience of students in stage one of this study. Details such as having trouble parking, the weather, the tour guide's tone and delivery all influenced my opinions of a campus visit. My impressions of each campus were based on all of the tiny details that occurred that very day, and I realized that on another day and with another tour guide my whole experience and perception of the campus could have been completely different. While each of the tiny details mattered more to me at some schools versus others, I was surprised to see how much of an impact an aesthetically pleasing campus had on my perception of the college itself. This experience demonstrated that beauty, and our evaluation of a campus's physical appearance, is developed through both cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Beauty is in essence, in the eye of the beholder. Based on the perceptions the beholder has from media, news, and alumni connections to an institution makes a significant impact on how a prospective student or family will view an institution.

In stage three, I performed open-ended surveys with high schools seniors at two high schools in four of the regions of the Mid-Atlantic (excluding Washington D.C.). From this data, it was clear that high school seniors appreciated college visits where they felt special and felt the community welcomed them to campus. This aligns with previous research. Hesel (2004) explained that while colleges are unable to change their size or location, being able to compellingly communicate the character and distinctions of the institution was the most effective way to impact prospective students. High school students in this study were seeking to understand and evaluate the community and vibe of a college campus, were swayed by the aesthetic of college campuses and whether the school looked like a college, and were constantly evaluating personal interactions on campus and surrounding the campus visit. By triangulating all three stages of research it was helpful as themes that emerged in stage one and then to reflect on them in both stage two and stage three. Because the students in stage three echoed the same sentiments as the students in stage one, the themes that remained constant developed into the essence of the campus visit and college choice. In each of the stages, three themes clearly emerged: aesthetic of the campus, personal interactions, and community/vibe. Those themes come together to provide an essence of the phenomenon of college choice and the campus visit.

Essence of College Choice and the Campus Visit

The essence of the campus visit in relation to college choice that emerged from this research provided prospective students with a window into life on a certain campus. After narrowing down their college choices by an initial college search funnel based on academics, size, rigor, location, and cultural capital, students turn to the tour to make application and college choice decisions. Students are evaluating where to attend college

based on aesthetics (looks like a college), personal interactions (students are friendly), and an assessment of the overall campus community and vibe (fitting in). A desire for happiness and balance also exists, as students are seeking a place where students physically look happy and where students interact with one another. Students are constantly evaluating the physical space, the bulletin board postings, and the social patterns on campus to determine whether they can envision themselves on campus.

The three factors analyzed by prospective students during their campus visits are used to determine whether they will apply or attend a specific school. The essence of the campus visit is demonstrated in a visual college choice model seen in Figure D. This model of college choice demonstrates the initial funnel of research used by students seeking admission to highly selective colleges. After using the funnel to sort for initial criteria, students make an initial list of colleges they are interested in visiting and applying to for admission. During their visit, students analyze the aesthetic, personal interactions, and community/vibe of a campus to determine whether they connect with the campus environment and community. After deciding where to apply and ultimately where to attend college, students make their ultimate college choice decision.

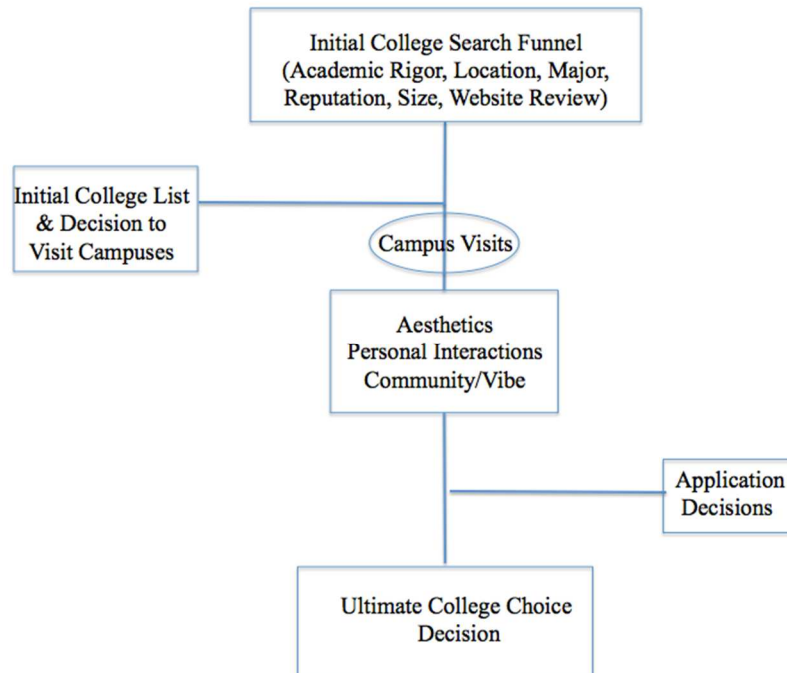


Figure D. College Choice Model

In the next section, I discuss the connections of each theme from the research study in relation to the relevant literature.

Discussion

Previous literature declared the campus visit the most influential component for college choice from a quantitative stance (Brown, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Greenough, 2003; Hesel, 2004; Hoover, 2009; 2010a; 2010b; Kuh, 2009; Magolda, 2000; Swan, 1998; Yost & Tucker, 1995). Yost and Tucker's (1995) study with a sample size of 1,571 students verified the campus visit as an influential factor in the decision-making process for prospective college students. The research outcomes from this study go beyond the original quantitative studies, to give life and detail to the stories and experiences of students. Chapman (1981) argued that the external forces, such as fixed characteristics of the college, namely, size and location in collaboration with the college's communication efforts, do make an impact on student decision-making but not to the extent that college

admission professionals may believe. In this discussion, I will further expand in a synthesis of the research on academics and diversity, aesthetics, personal interactions, and community/vibe during the campus visit.

Academics and diversity. It is noteworthy that among the results of this study, there is little mention of either academic rigor or diversity when comparing and visiting college campuses. The academic component is more easily explained, as the majority of students interviewed and surveyed for this research project were looking at high caliber schools, and because the schools that they were applying to were relatively similar in terms of the academic quality, based on rankings, the commonality in selectivity allowed for tinier details of the campus visit to make more of an impact. If the academics are relatively similar from school to school, and because it is difficult to tangibly experience the academic quality during a campus visit, students relied more on community, aesthetics, personal interactions, and locations in order to make decisions about which schools were better fits for their college choice.

The diversity component is a little different. None of the students interviewed or surveyed mentioned wanting to find a school with students who brought different backgrounds (socio-economic, religious, gender, sexual, racial, or ethnic diversity) to the college or university. The issue of diversity is also important in regards to which students and experiences students and visitors are able to interact with on their campus tour. During my four site visits, I had two opportunities to tour the campus with a student of color. But even at my larger visits with several tour guides present to give tours, there were a limited number of both tour guides of color and prospective students of color during my visits. Because the tour guide and initial visit are the initial impression for

students and families, this lack of diversity may skew the first impression for students of color.

Students also did not outwardly express a desire to study abroad or find multicultural forms of education in these specific interviews. Some of this could be due to an inherent assumption that higher education in general exposes students to new ideas, different people, and the chance to view and study in different areas of the world. Both of these topics could be prodded further in additional research. For this study, students were high-achieving students who were seeking highly selective institutions. Because students in this study began with initial research and a college search funnel based on academics, size, location, and department offerings as Chapman (1981) explained, the students in this study were in control of their college choice and could afford to be meticulous throughout the process and focus closely on other details (Pampaloni, 2010).

Aesthetics. Students quickly referred to the looks of a campus when indicating factors on the tour that were significant to them. In examining the role of aesthetics, it was clear that aesthetics went beyond the general first impression of a college campus. The first impression was still important, and often times that first impression was shaped by family/peer opinion, the media, and a quick drive around the campus surroundings or town. In some cases, the initial first impression was enough to solidify a student's opinion about a university. Ryan (AM-L-PU) described driving around a campus that was so hilly he decided not to get out of the car and actually tour the campus, and instead drove to his next campus visit instead. Society has consistently placed an emphasis on the physical appearance of an institution due to the looks of the physical buildings rather than their academic reputation (Yost & Tucker, 1995). Kuh (2009) argued the campus

environment, which encompasses everything physical on a campus including buildings, equipment, furniture, signage, people, and landscape, serves as a set of symbols larger than the individual items themselves and is the most influential factor in the campus visit experience. Conversely, even though the campus environment influenced the participants in this study, the environment was only one factor that strongly influenced participants. This symbolic aspect of aesthetics is evident in media portrayals of campus life in both film and television that often glorify campus amenities, large residence halls and dorm rooms, and the social life of students on campus (Coomes, 2004).

In this study, the beauty of a campus easily impressed students in stage one. Brett (WM-M-PU) explained, “I just noticed the campus was absolutely beautiful, I thought. And so I was just taken with how gorgeous the grounds looked.” This theme was present in multiple interviews, and Ashley (AF-L-PU) explained that the only deal-breaker for her on a campus visit would be an ugly campus. In stage two, I was also easily impressed by the aesthetic of campus. Though each of the four schools I visited had very different styles, architecture, and aesthetic, I was able to see how each campus would appeal to certain students. On every campus, I was also able to view while driving portions of the campus not highlighted on each tour. This mirrored the experience of my stage one participants, a couple even made up their mind about an institution prior to stepping out of the car. During my visit to Hudson University, an undoubtedly gorgeous campus, I strongly disliked the construction we saw on our tour and the older classroom used to host the information session. Lastly in stage three, students commonly mentioned campuses that stood out due to the “physical beauty of the campus” or “pretty campus and nice weather.”

But beauty is not just based on those individual items; it is clear in this study that beauty truly is in the eye of the beholder. Each student's view of "beauty" on a college campus is shaped in an extent due to his or her personal social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Students view college campuses based on a comparison to how they believe colleges should look based on previous portrayals in the media or news on college campuses. Often students view campuses through the eye of accolades of the particular campus. Yet students also want a college to look like a college, and have some distinct portions of campus dedicated to student life.

Personal interactions. Personal interactions were the basis of another distinct theme that emerged throughout the research data. The importance of personal interactions in all stages of this study in many ways can be explained by Perna's (2006) research. Perna (2006) explained that individual student's experiences and habitus are influenced by gender, race, ethnicity, and their individual access to both social and cultural capital. Her research investigated the role of habitus in addition to the role of community, campus, and policy makers on college choice (Perna, 2006). Students decide whether and where to attend college, but also decide what to study, whether to persist and graduate all based on the amount of human, financial, social, and cultural capital available to the student throughout their postsecondary educational experience. This backdrop helps to contextualize why interactions and advice from family, school counselors, and friends made such an impact on participants' college choice decisions. The role of family was important for students in relation to habitus as family members influenced how students viewed options for the college choice decision-making process.

For example, both Steve (AM-L-PU) and Ashley (AF-L-PU) were strongly influenced by siblings, Kane (AAM-M-PU) hoped to make his father proud at a college known for academics and athletics, and Esther (WF-L-PU) decided not to apply to a college because of her father's reaction to a campus visit.

Additionally, Kim and Gasman (2011) found personal interactions with family, friends, teachers, and counselors were the most influential to each student's college choice decision. This finding was similar to the evidence that emerged in my study, as personal interactions were important in beginning the initial college search funnel; once a prospective student visited a college campus, the personal interactions shifted to a focus on the interactions with campus community members. Hesel (2004) explained that the friendliness of people on campus has a significant impact on a student's interest in a college or university. Indeed, this was true in my study too as participants were often remarking on the students who were positive, happy, and went out of their way to make an impact on them during their visit.

In this study, the impact of personal interactions was present in all three stages of the research, and highlighted how these interactions were important to students throughout the college choice process. Students were impacted by personal interactions before, during, and after the campus visit. Interactions before the visit created an initial idea of the campus, interactions during the visit affected the idea and perception of the community/vibe, and interactions after the visit affected the lasting impression of the visit. In stage one, Esther (WF-L-PU) mentioned a school being ruled out due to her father's impression of the political climate. Multiple students mentioned word of mouth and siblings as the personal interactions that initially attracted them to an institution. In

stage one, students like Elena (WF-M-PU) described how the tour guides made the biggest difference on campus visits. Sela (AAF-M-PU) also appreciated the importance of personal interactions as she explained, “it was definitely the openness of the students that made a huge difference.” Esther also decided to attend her current institution based on an interaction with an alumni in her hometown after her visit and application decisions. In stage two, on my own personal site visits, I was impressed by passionate, friendly, and professional speakers and tour guides. I was also affected by the communication both prior to and after the visit from each college/university. In stage three, students mentioned the importance of the “friendliness of students to the tour group” and “interacting with students and the enthusiasm of the people there.” One student also mentioned watching how many students tour guides interacted with throughout the tour experience. It is clear that the research participants were continually evaluating personal interactions in order to make their decisions about where to apply and ultimately attend. Weick (1995) explains the concept of sensemaking in which individuals give meaning to their experiences. For these participants, much of the sensemaking occurred retroactively after their campus visit experiences as they compared different institutions and a collection of ideas, memories, and feelings about a particular institution. Personal interactions on campus were an important method for students and families when evaluating the campus visit and what campus life truly was like for students.

Community/vibe. The sense of community and vibe on campus was also an integral aspect that prospective students and visitors were analyzing throughout their campus visits. The community/vibe is also very closely related to the concept of habitus

and the expectations student's have for their college experience. Habitus is very closely related to the concept of cultural capital, as cultural capital describes the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, clothing, and degrees in order to help or hinder one's social mobility. Perna (2006) explained that habitus "conditions an individual's college-related expectations, attitudes, and aspirations" (p. 112). Thus, students were primed in how they constructed their visit based on their background. For example, several students commented on how their college choice was informed by their older siblings' experiences.

While on tours, students and family members are actively assessing the campus community, buildings, signs, and postings to gain a better feel for the campus life. Magolda (2000) explained that the rituals of the institution continually create and transmit ideas about the college community, through a description of various traditions, to current and prospective students. Hesel (2004) went even further to explain that the hospitable nature or vibe of a campus had a significant positive impact on a student's interest in a particular institution. Students and families alike enjoyed walking around campus on their own during their campus visits and getting a better sense for the campus climate. This type of interpretation was mentioned consistently throughout my research study.

In stage one, students like Ryan (AM-L-PU) described the attempt to get a better sense of the overall culture and school-spirit at various institutions. Adrienne (WF-M-PR) described evaluating students at coffee shops with her family and evaluating the students' conversations. Hunter (WM-M-PU) even detailed his family's "bulletin board check" that they did at each campus visit as a method to evaluate the community on

campus. In stage two, during my site visits I always ate at local restaurants near campus and got coffee at an on-campus coffee shop. I walked around each campus prior to the tour, watching students to see what they were wearing, how they looked, and what they were doing. In stage three, the importance of community/vibe was also an important factor in the college search. Students mentioned the importance of “eating on campus,” “exploring alone,” “campus culture,” and “the feel of college campus/student culture.”

Even though there were certainly many factors that were important regarding the campus visit and college choice, these factors were certainly very individualized.

Nurnberg et al. (2012) were correct that factors as small as the weather or attractiveness of a tour guide make an important impact on a prospective student’s overall impression of an institution.

Summary. Previous literature on college choice and the campus visit found that individual student’s previous experiences influences how students perceive the college will be a fit for them (Perna, 2006). The campus visit, in particular, serves as a litmus test for how students perceive they will fit in when they are enrolled (Brown, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Greenough, 2003; Hesel, 2004; Hoover, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Kuh, 2009; Magolda, 2000; Swan, 1998; Yost & Tucker, 1995). By using three separate stages and triangulating the data, it is evident that the themes of the campus visit are evident from various perspectives on the college choice process. What my students added to this literature base is the knowledge of what components of the campus visit make an impact on prospective students and families seeking admission to highly selective institutions. Students want a college that “looks” like a college; yet beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and influenced by media, family members, and personal experiences. Students

want to connect with students, faculty, and staff on campus and have positive interactions with community members. Students also want to attend college at a school with happy students who exude community pride and school spirit. The factors that make a difference for students evaluating the campus environment are the perceived aesthetic of campus, personal interactions, and community/vibe.

Implications for Future Practice

There are several important implications for future practice that have emerged from my study. These implications are intended to provide guidance for future research that may assess the relationship between college choice and the campus visit as it is clear that the campus visit is an influential component in college choice decision-making (Brown, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Greenough, 2003; Hesel, 2004; Hoover, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Kuh, 2009; Magolda, 2000; Swan, 1998; Yost & Tucker, 1995). These implications are developed for public policy makers, high school students visiting college campuses, high school counselors assisting students in their college search and developing tools for students to evaluate and compare institutions, and undergraduate admission offices building campus visitation programs.

Implications for public policy makers. Public policy makers are an important stakeholder in the college search and college choice process. As President Obama's goal is to increase the percentage of college graduates in the United States from 40% to 60%, policy makers need to address the increasing price tag of a college education (Lumina Foundation, 2013; White House, 2014). In addition, as seen in this research study, a number of students were looking specifically at colleges in their home state to reduce the financial burden for their families. Public policy makers need to address how colleges

are funded and work to support in particular the colleges that are serving communities in which students are less likely to attend college. In addition, because so many students are entering four-year institutions via the community college path, additional support should be given to colleges to support non-traditional college pathways. Public policy makers should also be concerned with fit, as students who are happier with their college choice are more likely to graduate and have a higher quality of life (Caumont, 2014; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In addition, college graduates are more likely to be engaged global citizens and make a positive impact on the world around them (Lumina Foundation, 2013). By focusing on how to help students find their best fit, it may truly be possible for the United States to meet its education goals, with 60% of the nation holding a bachelor's degree.

Implications for high school students. Among the college freshman I interviewed for this research, one important aspect, word of mouth, appeared concerning where a student should apply and ultimately attend college. Several students mentioned the advice and feedback from parents, older siblings, friends, and school counselors throughout the process. With the rise of independent counselors in the college choice arena, it is critical that students be savvy customers and gather information from multiple sources. The more students understand the college choice process and reflect on the factors and climate that are best suited to their success, the more likely students are to be successful in college, graduate, and ultimately have better career prospects and a higher quality of life (Caumont, 2014; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). In order for students to find their perfect fit, they need to learn which portions of the campus visit will allow them to evaluate the campus community and vibe. In addition,

while it appears that many factors are naturally evaluated by students: the aesthetic of the campus, the friendliness of the campus, and the student's personal interactions with members of the campus community, students really need to be seeking ways to evaluate the hard to define and describe community and vibe of campus.

My interview with Ryan (AM-L-PU) explained that something extra he was looking for throughout his campus tours, "there is like some kind of culture there rather than it just being like a sole place where you go there, you learn a couple things here and there, and then you graduate. Like there has to be like something else there. That extra oomph that it gives it." Students need to determine what it is in the culture that aligns with their expectations of college and how they might assess this feature when on the campus visit. Oftentimes students mentioned checking out the bulletin boards around campus, eating in dining halls and interacting with students, or just sitting in coffee shops during the day. It was important for students to be able to picture what their life would be like on campus, and take the visions of college life into reality. One survey respondent explained why the campus visit was helpful, "I get to envision myself living there for four years making it real instead of an idea." It was very important for students to be able to picture themselves on campus among the different types of students, and generally what was more helpful than the tour or information session was walking around campus on their own and really getting a sense for all of the different kinds of students on campus.

Prospective students should use a simple check list, as seen in Appendix N, when evaluating college campuses to decode the environment and get a better sense of the overall community: sit in both on-campus and off-campus cafes, look at bulletin board

postings, walk around areas not highlighted on the campus tour. Prospective students should also ask questions to tour guides and random students about their favorite and least favorite elements of the institution. Prospective students should ask what current students wish they knew about an institution before attending, and what the current student would change if anything on campus. Because the students in this research were seeking admission to highly selective institutions, the research on academic rigor was assumed completed. Prospective students visiting highly selective institutions, tend to be savvy throughout the process, so most have done research prior to ever stepping foot on campus. When these prospective students are on campus they are seeking out the details that go above and beyond the academic rigor and outcomes of the institution; some students are also seeking institutions with competitive scholarships and financial aid packages.

Walking around campus and evaluating the overall environment of a campus is important to prospective students, as it is a gateway into their potential future and happiness on that campus. Steve (AM-L-PU) commented on his walks around campus,

They have all kinds of people, not just what they're trying to sell. So I liked that. And then, I don't know. More of just like the small interactions, like seeing people. Like kind of like talking to people briefly. Just students that were there. That was one of the better parts for me, just seeing people walking around and looking.

For students engaging in the college search process, I would urge them to find this time to interact and engage with the campus community outside of the methods prescribed by the undergraduate admission office or visitor center. Those moments of seeing campus

life organically truly allow students to picture their potential life as a student on campus and helps them to make important decisions regarding where to apply and where to attend college.

Implications for school counselors. School counselors play an important role in the college search process as oftentimes they serve as the gateway to information for prospective students. School counselors develop materials for students to use during their college search and provide access to assist students to begin to explore a variety of different types of institutions. While the students in this particular study were looking at highly selective institutions, the advice they needed from school counselors was how to compare different highly selective colleges and universities they were interested in and how to evaluate their campus visits in order to make decisions regarding which schools to apply to for admission and ultimately attend after receiving their admission decisions. In addition, with the rise of independent counselors, it is important for them to be just as informed about the factors that impact the college choice process and ultimately assist a student with evaluating fit on a campus.

Students would benefit from having some guidance on how to evaluate the campus community. Encouraging students to sit in on a class, eat lunch in the dining hall, visit campus hot spots, schedule an overnight visit, and attend campus events are all good ways to have students evaluate campus life and whether the college or university may be a good fit for them. For students seeking a highly selective institution, many want to ensure the campus community is collaborative rather than cutthroat, and they just want a place where they can be happy in addition to completing their rigorous coursework. Helen (WF-M-PU) explains, “but a lot of the schools that I was applying to

could offer me a great education. And I wanted to be happy and have a great education. And I feel like you have to be at a happy place to do that.” School counselors can best assist this type of student who is seeking to differentiate among highly selective schools by allowing them to evaluate various locations, sizes, and feel by visiting college campuses that they are interested in to determine which factors seem to appeal more to them than others. In addition it is important for counselors to encourage students to engage with current students on campus to gauge their abilities to form those important personal relationships and go with their gut feelings.

Yet, it is also known that many schools and various areas of the country struggle with enough resources to provide students with necessary information. Multiple people present in a student’s life- family, friends, peers, and teachers can perform the counseling function regarding post-secondary options. However, these resources also assume a certain level of cultural capital among high school students. For students of color who are first generation college students, the additional resources do not exist, and they must rely on school counselors even more. School counselors should provide earlier access to information about the college choice process to all students, to increase access regarding options in higher education. By elevating our understanding of the campus visit and college choice and expanding the available resources online, additional students will benefit regardless of their access and personal relationship with a counselor. School counselors have an important role managing students’ emotional-based decision making and evaluations of campus visits to better prepares them to make their ultimate college choice decision.

Implications for Undergraduate Admission Offices. The implications for Undergraduate Admission Offices inform best practices for campus visitation programs. Several students mentioned feeling as if the campus visits blurred together from one campus to another, and students were constantly looking for schools that stood out or made them feel special. Helen (WF-M-PU) described her feelings on the similarities among different visits,

I would have liked to see something somewhat different. Because at that point I was already kind of bitter about the whole like—like it’s so systematic the way that you apply to colleges. They tell you all these facts. They lay everything out for you. You can go to 30 performances, and 90% of them will be exactly the same as the last one, you know?

Campuses need to reject isomorphism that often results in campuses becoming cookie cutter versions of one another. Different students are attracted to different elements and areas of campus. Instead of trying to be like other schools, college campuses need to examine how they can stand out and what elements of their campus are different from other colleges and universities. Just by visiting other colleges and universities, it was apparent to me that many of the themes that are commonly used in information sessions and tours are ubiquitous. Instead of focusing on telling visitors about our “community,” student-faculty relationships, and traditions, it is more advantageous to show these truths through the use of stories and anecdotes.

Campuses need to be sure that they are finding the elements of their campus that are unique and then highlighting those special and unique portions on campus. Like the students in my interviews, I was dismayed by a lack of passion in presenters during my

own campus visit experiences. I also really disliked scripted information sessions and tours. There is something about an organic non-scripted information session and tour that allows for a more authentic and genuine connection among the prospective visitors and the members of the admission staff. I would recommend relying less on facts and figures and focus on ways to make students feel both welcome and desired on campus, and let student stories shine on campus throughout the visit. Hunter (WM-M-PU) explained,

The excitement was one thing. It seemed like obviously admissions wanted to pull you in. But so did all the students here that may not have been given the fact sheet on everything that you can say about Camden University that's great, that'll pull people in. The current students were the best salespersons. It seemed as though they wanted you to be here, which was memorable because it was unexpected. The participants in the panels presented the message that "you can do this" versus "we have these things that you can do." They presented the idea that "you can choose your own path, and you can seize opportunities that we're offering," versus "these are the things that if you like, you can take." It just felt more personal.

This personal approach to admission is important for students throughout the college search process who are looking for schools to stand out to them in a variety of different ways. Sela (AAF-M-PU) suggested that admission offices should put more effort into engaging the whole student community to be open to answering questions of visitors, and connecting those visitors with the future of the school. By focusing on the ways a school actually is unique, in addition to making opportunities for students personal, getting current students involved in the process, and showing a more authentic version of the

campus and student body, institutions can stand out among various other campuses and visits.

Undergraduate Admission Offices should also be focused on the idea of a good fit for a student and a college as students who find the right fit are more likely to persist and graduate from college. Freshman retention rates and four-year graduation rates are common benchmarks that colleges are evaluated by for college rankings, and by focusing on fit rather than other admission standards or criteria, it is possible to also positively affect the institution itself. In addition if the students on campus have found a good fit and are happy on campus, the campus community and vibe are also improved for prospective students and families.

Recommendations for Future Research

As with most research studies, there were shortcomings in my study. For one, the number of women was skewed higher than the average composition for this set of colleges and universities. In addition, because my research was limited to the Mid-Atlantic region, it demonstrates views and perspectives that are not necessarily compatible with other regions across the United States. There are a number of areas of potential growth for this research topic. A recommendation for future research would be to use the same research methods and evaluate either a different region of the country or a different level of institution. area of research that could be examined is focusing in more on students who have older siblings in college and the extent to which that influences their college applications and ultimately their college choice decisions. Also, research could examine the relationship between attending a camp or summer program at a college or university and evaluating a similar impact on decision-making.

A research study could also examine in depth the relationship between aesthetics and college choice, from reactions to photos on websites to a more in-depth look at the initial first impression of a college or university. In addition, researchers might explore a different region or a different range of selectivity. The importance of location and size might vary dramatically in another region or different range of selectivity. Research might also examine institutions that are not able to enroll a full freshman class and study the effectiveness of the campus visit on student choice. Longitudinal studies might investigate how perceptions of a student's ultimate college choice change throughout their college experience. Another research study could examine the weight of different visit types (overnight, class visit, and admitted student programming) among students who had visited multiple schools. While visit types may certainly make an impact on the campus visit and perception of the campus community, research might also examine the ways in which students tour campuses and how that impacts their overall perception. Many students in this particular research visited colleges over spring break, resulting in back-to-back campus visits, which may have caused visit fatigue. Research might examine the difference between visiting colleges in a weeklong intensive trip versus visiting colleges one at a time over the course of months.

Future research might also look at the role of the campus visit for international students. Lastly, because this study was limited to traditional age students seeking selective institutions, there is an additional opportunity to evaluate the college search process and what factors change for high school students seeking to enroll in a community college, community college students seeking to transfer to a four year institution, and community college students seeking to transfer to highly selective

institutions. These differences allow for a more holistic review of the phenomenon of college choice and the campus visit.

Personal Reflections

I chose the topic of college choice and the campus visit, as it has always been my passion to understand why students are interested in applying and attending a specific college or university. My career as well is focused on tapping into the decision-making of impressionable high school students to determine what tiny factors might make the difference for a student applying and ultimately matriculating to a college or university. While ultimately the decision-making surrounding college choice is complex, each portion of the decision-making for each student is fascinating to me. Even though there is certainly a great deal of scholarship regarding college choice in the quantitative lens, the topic certainly is worthy of future research and scholarship dedicated to this topic.

During the process of this research, I learned what it is like to be in the shoes of a prospective student to a college campus. I learned that students want to know that any institution would be lucky to have them rather than making them feel as if they are lucky to step foot onto our campus. I was surprised to find out how important getting a sense of the community/vibe was for students, and I was impressed by their methods of analyzing students to decode the community and culture of an institution. I was also surprised to find out how little what the students say on the tour mattered, but rather how they say it. In my own practice, as I supervise over 130 tour guides and teach a one-credit course for new tour guides. Because of this research, I will challenge my students to remember the importance of their personal interactions and introduction to our own campus community/vibe. While I am not able to change the aesthetic of campus, the personal

interactions and community/vibe on campus are two things the tour guides have a great deal of control over during the campus visit.

Conclusion: Individual Experiences

This study was designed to examine the factors of the campus visit that may influence college choice among students seeking highly selective institutions. I found that the campus visit contributes to college choice decision-making. Prior to this study, researchers were aware of the impact of the campus visit on college choice, yet were not able to unpack that term in a helpful manner for prospective students or for admission offices. It is clear that the components of the campus visit that matter for each student vary from student to student. The themes that emerged from the three stages of research are also not components that the college or university has much control over. The aesthetics of campus, the personal interactions, and the community/vibe of a campus are all elements that can be affected by chance and can change from day to day on a college campus.

The campus visit is an interesting social construction of the college choice process as well, which provides students with an opportunity to view and evaluate the culture of campus. Some students and families found their own rituals, bulletin board checks and café observations, as a method of comparing school to school. The findings from my current research align well with college choice theory, in that the campus visit does have an impact on college choice. The family also plays a large role helping to inform and assist students in their initial college choice funnel in addition to while on campus and evaluating the campus community. As college campuses are examining their visit options to provide more personalized and customizable options for students, they

anticipate that the prospective students who visit their campuses will be impacted by that visit. My study is significant because although the research supports the importance of a campus visit from a quantitative lens, there is scant research detailing the impact of the varying types of campus visits available. There is a clear need to understand and discover the tiny details that influence prospective students and family members throughout a campus visit.

There are three critical themes that emerge given my study's findings that are important to keep in mind among students, school counselors, and admission officers. As many of the reactions to the campus visit are left up to chance, the most influential components were the aesthetics of the campus environment, community/general vibe of campus, and personal interactions. Students want to attend a college that "looks like a college" and how they have always pictured higher education and academia based on the media and their personal social constructivism and cultural capital. Students are seeking a sense of the community/vibe on campus, to ensure it is a place where they can be happy (grounded, involved, and successful) in addition to having a great academic experience. Lastly, students are seeking out meaning from their personal interactions. College-going students at highly selective institutions are seeking to ensure that the students are friendly and welcoming, that they have school spirit and pride, and that the institutions they may possibly attend are institutions they can be proud of claiming based on their cultural capital.

These themes initially emerged in my interviews with recently matriculated college freshmen, but also carried over into my site visits and personal reactions to colleges and universities. I was surprised by how much personal interactions and

aesthetics colored my view, and those of the student participants, of a university. In addition, I really enjoyed observing and assessing student life on campus, from where students were spending time, how they looked and were dressed, to the expressions on their faces as they moved across campus. The surveys with high school seniors demonstrated the same themes that appeared with the recently matriculated college freshman, but in addition described the importance of wanting to feel special and wanting to make a connection with a tour guide or campus community member.

The role of the campus visit and college choice is one that deserves additional attention. For high school students, this choice is often the first one they make on their own in their transition to adulthood. Friends, family, school counselors, and admission officers all play a role in developing the impression a prospective student will form regarding a college or institution. By going through the college search process with support and guidance, and having a critical lens to evaluate college choice options, high school seniors can find a number of institutions that they can thrive and grow at during the best four years of their life.

APPENDIX A

RESEARCHER AS INSTRUMENT STATEMENT

As far back as I can remember, I have been fascinated with the idea of choosing a college. This passion has led me to my research topic of college choice and the campus visit. I grew up spending a great deal of time on the Memphis State campus (currently the University of Memphis), as my mother was working there while pursuing her Ph.D. in History. So it is of course no surprise that I work at a college, and am pursuing my Ph.D. My mother was a role model for me as a single mother who was able to effectively balance work and life. Once a week my mom ate lunch with her history colleagues in the campus marketplace. I loved tagging along during the summer and answering all of the history questions they asked me, correctly of course, while enjoying Pizza Hut breadsticks. I was only an elementary school student at the time, but really valued knowledge and learning. My mom also took me with her to battlefields, libraries, and museums in Ohio during her research on Blue Jacket for her dissertation. My mom also remembers distinctly my fascination with Defiance College located in Defiance, Ohio, as it was one of the first schools (outside of Memphis State) that I visited at a young age. This experience of growing up on a college campus and personally viewing research had a big influence on me both personally and professionally. From elementary school forward, I truly valued education and was intrigued by life on a college campus in addition to the idea of pursuing my own research topic.

My sister had spent a few summers while in high school attending TIP (Talent Identification Program) at Duke University, so I had tagged along to help move her in and out of her dorm rooms (from the summer after 2nd grade to 4th grade). This was

enticing to me as I could only picture getting to live with a best friend in a dorm room and going to classes and social events. I also heard her stories of eating in dining halls, getting to choose between waffles and over 10 different kinds of cereal-- to me this sounded like paradise! I could not wait for my turn! I also loved reading books about students going to college or summer camp at a college or university- the more information I could put my hands on, the better!

Later, when I was going into the 6th grade, I traveled with my mother and my sister to look at a variety of colleges for my sister's prospective applications. I remember being enamored with the ivy growing on buildings at Princeton but hating the nearby surroundings of Yale. This trip made me realize that many of the factors that would impact my search would be aesthetic in nature. When we came home from visiting a variety of colleges and universities, some that my sister liked and some that inevitably were crossed off of her list of applications, I spent hours dissecting VHS tapes and admission materials from college to help her with her decisions. It is amazing how cheesy some of those promotional materials were looking back on that experience from my current position!

As I continued growing up, I was always very creative- dreaming up imaginary vacations, starting various clubs, and picturing a larger family with multiple siblings. I think what attracted me most to college is my idea of it being like summer camp, living with all of your best friends in a world of choice regarding how you would spend everyday. But even better than summer camp, I was in control of where I might live for four years of my life- it could be Maine, California, Virginia, or Florida!

The very first college to ever send me any mail was Pacific University, and because they sent me an information packet (in the 9th grade) they remained on my long list, for quite some time. Feeling as if they were recruiting me personally made me like them even more. Something about that part of the college search makes students feel so special and excited. Your whole future and new life in college is waiting for you, but you are in charge of where that future begins- choosing your own adventure.

It was not long before I began attending my own summer dance programs on various college campuses including Stevens Point in Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and Michigan State University. I fell in love with the vibe I felt on a college campus. I loved the large green spaces covered with leaves and students walking to class- it seemed both romantic and quaint at the same time. I also love the college town portion of a campus- with gorgeous bookstores (I collect t-shirts from every college that I visited), coffee shops, and boutiques.

I grew up in Memphis, TN and attended a private high school from Kindergarten- Graduation. There were only 36 students in my graduating class, many of whom I had known since I was only five years old, so I was even more excited to branch out and not only meet new people from around the world but also live somewhere completely outside of my bubble. I really enjoyed going on vacations and being the only person from Tennessee or the only person from the South. I tended to make friends quickly, so I was not at all nervous about moving to a brand new place to call home. I was looking for adventure but also a place to make my own.

At the beginning of 9th grade, I started to feel like a “big kid” at my high school. I became acquainted with the high school college counseling office, and the big bulletin

board listing college acceptances and scholarships from the previous year's class. I remember anxiously waiting for the college process to be my turn (typical as the younger sister and baby in my family). I of course was super excited when a letter came home regarding a college preparation workshop geared for freshmen at my high school. My mom and I attended this workshop (I even skipped dance class!) to learn more about what we should be doing to prepare for this transition. Not surprisingly, different teachers and staff members spoke about the importance of developing your writing skills, the SAT/ACT, keeping up your grades, and involvement in varied extracurricular activities. Then came the good stuff. Our school counselor introduced us to the *Princeton Review Guide To The Best 311 Colleges*. She encouraged us to purchase this book or one that was similar and spend some time with our parents coming up with a list of 8-10 colleges we may be interested in attending. This would help us to start thinking about the process and learning more about the intricacies and differences between different colleges. I was so excited- this book was going to be my Bible of Colleges. And to be honest, this book really changed my life.

I have always enjoyed that “introverted research” of spending time pouring over decisions regarding restaurant selection, hotel options, and planning vacations/parties/events. So it was no surprise that I really took to this assignment. I came back to my next meeting with my school counselor with a list of 107 colleges and universities I really liked and thought may be a good fit for me. I think she was both surprised and impressed by my dedication to the college search process. I was also really disappointed when many of my classmates did not have the same zeal towards this

assignment- and I tried to help them suggesting colleges that I believed would be a good fit!

The problem for me in attempting to select as a school was that I was interested in everything- L.L. Bean runs at Bowdoin/Colby/Bates, the hippy culture at UC-Berkeley, dancing at Julliard, potentially becoming the first female Navy Seal, and the ghost stories at schools like Washington & Lee. I wanted to live in the north and south, and pursue marine biology and interior design. To this day, I think I would be an excellent career student. I want to learn Italian and take Business School courses! I also hope to learn how to cook and learn Karate in my lifetime. My school counselor calmly suggested that I visit a couple of college campuses and get a feel for what things I really liked and did not like in person. This was the best part of the journey!

Luckily for me my private school had class trips every year. Our freshmen year we did a service trip at Mud Island in Memphis, our sophomore year we went white-water rafting at Nantahala, and our senior year we went on a class cruise to the Caribbean. But the junior class trip was the one I anticipated the most! Our junior class trip was a tour of colleges anywhere in the country. Some classes before mine had taken trips to Florida, Mississippi, and Illinois to look at colleges, but as a class we were responsible for voting on this process. I was clearly the most excited of the 36 in my class about this trip, and as a coercive leader, I set out to campaign for a trip to North Carolina and Virginia because by the end of 10th grade, I was pretty set on the College of William & Mary being my first choice. And as it turns out, it was not too difficult to persuade them so we set out on a trip to visit William & Mary, University of Virginia, Radford, Roanoke College, Duke, UNC-Greensboro, Vanderbilt, and the University of

Tennessee- Knoxville. This was a great trip! We went in the fall of our junior year and after each private tour and campus visit, we were able to eat in the dining halls and visit the campus bookstores for souvenirs. I loved experiencing a campus and its students first hand. I asked random students in the dining hall about their experience, and judged each campus by how students interacted and how vibrant the campus community felt.

Later that year my mom and I took a couple college trips of our own. Our first trip was focused on the north, over my spring break, where I immediately eliminated Bates (they did not mention academics on their tour), Middlebury (their residence halls were designed by architects who designed prisons), and Boston University (too big with no campus feel). In the summer, we took a trip to Virginia to visit University of Virginia and William & Mary again, in addition to Washington & Lee and University of Richmond (eliminated based on boys and girls living across the lake from one another, in addition to the ever present spider mascot). At the end of my junior year, it was time to make some decisions about which schools would make the cut for my application process.

I was 100% sure that the College of William & Mary was right for me (and I still believe this), so I applied Early Decision in my senior year of High School.

Unfortunately, I was deferred from Early Decision, but was ready for regular decision with a list of great schools. There were 17 total schools I applied to for admission. The Northern Schools: Colby, Bowdoin, Tufts, SUNY-Purchase, NYU, Columbia, Cornell, Williams, and Dartmouth. The Southern Schools: Duke, University of Virginia, George Washington, Washington & Lee, and William & Mary. The Mid-Western Schools: Ohio State University and Michigan State University. The Western School: UC-Berkeley. So

although it sounds like I was all over the place, I really felt like I would enjoy and be successful at each school. Some schools appealed to me for opportunities for dance, some appealed to me based on location, some based on the programs offered, and some based on the experience of my campus visit. I had visited Colby, Bowdoin, SUNY-Purchase, Williams, Dartmouth, Duke, University of Virginia, Washington & Lee, William & Mary, and Michigan State- 10 of the 17 schools. Still to this day I wonder if I would be a vegan hippie if I went to UC-Berkeley or a snow lover at Bowdoin or Colby!

When I received my final college decisions the choice was clear between two top schools UC-Berkeley and the University of Virginia, as I liked them the best of the schools I received offers of admission. I was unfortunately denied admission to the College of William & Mary, but I would persevere and eventually make my way back to Williamsburg- ☺. I was also waitlisted at Dartmouth and still wonder how my life would be different had they gone to the waitlist that year.

My mom and I flew to California to visit Berkeley, as we had not visited in person prior to submitting my application. We flew to California to attend their Day for Admitted Students. While I was certainly interested and invested in many of the seminars and panels that I attended, I ultimately decided not to attend Berkeley as they do not guarantee housing for freshmen and the campus was very difficult to navigate. So I paid my deposit and enrolled at the University of Virginia, and waited to begin what would inevitably be the best four years of my life.

During my time at the University of Virginia, there were several key moments where I would again run into my love of college choice. First, the admission office reached out to me, and asked me to meet with potential students who were interested in

dance but were concerned by the lack of a formal dance program- which was really exciting for me as one girl I met with eventually chose UVA over Princeton after our tour. Second, I was heavily involved with pursuing the development of a dance minor and creating the syllabus for the proposed minor, which helped me to realize how much difference one student can have on a college campus. Third, I went to meet with career services about an internship and they suggested I would be a great match for student affairs jobs, and should pursue an internship with Greek life at UVA. At the time I thought only professors work at colleges, so I brushed it off. How silly, that seems looking back!

After graduation, I was a little lost. I applied to seven law schools my first year out of college- University of Richmond, Elon, UNC-Chapel Hill, University of Miami, University of San Diego, Chapman University, and University of Memphis. But eventually, I was most impacted by the wise words of a family friend- that law school changes the way you see the world. I did not want to change the way I saw the world, I am a little bit stubborn, and I could not picture myself enjoying the day-to-day life of a lawyer. It was unfortunate that I made this discovery after getting my acceptances, but I still really enjoyed the experience of going through the application process, and learning more about myself.

After deciding not to go to law school, I worked several different jobs that taught me that what I enjoy most in a career is working with people and developing programming. I also really missed the buzz of excitement on a college campus. I applied for a job in Alumni Events and Programs at UNC-Wilmington, while I was living and working there. While I did have the opportunity to interview, I did not end up getting the

job. I contacted the search chair (Andrea Weaver) for constructive criticism, and she told me that I either needed a Master's Degree in Higher Education or more experience. I had never heard of this Master's Degree before, so I contacted my past Greek Life advisor from UVA for advice. She told me that she had graduated from William & Mary's program and absolutely loved it as she was able to get multiple experiences with different offices through assistantships, internships, and shadow opportunities. I also pursued an internship with UNCW in Student Activities. I applied to six schools for the Master's Degree- University of Florida, Florida State, University of South Carolina, UNC-Greensboro, Vanderbilt, and William & Mary. When I came back to William & Mary to interview for graduate assistantships, I immediately fell in love with the campus again, enjoyed the small cohort size, and looked forward to close relationships with professors. So I was finally off to William & Mary!

During my Master's Program, I was a graduate assistant for campus recreation, a graduate intern for orientation at UCF, and a graduate intern with the Office of Undergraduate Admission. My first class in the program, Administration of Higher Education, included a project where we were encouraged to pick an office on campus to study and I chose the Office of Undergraduate Admission. This contact made me more excited to pursue an internship in their office. I had to work hard and continually contacted members in the office to get an internship opportunity, as the Admission Office was very concerned about graduate students, who were not alums, being involved in the process.

During my second year in the Master's program, I was very confused when applying for jobs. I loved student activities, orientation, campus recreation, and

admission. Although I ended up taking a job in campus recreation, it simply was not the right fit. Although I love fitness and working out, I wanted that to be my hobby not my career. I was at a fitness conference when Kim Van Deusen, Associate Dean of Admission, told me of the job opening in Admission and the rest is history!

I absolutely love working in admission and helping high school students at such a pivotal time in their lives. Admission is the perfect fit for me career-wise as the cycle is always changing from travel to reading to yield programming to brainstorming in the summer. Just when you feel you might be getting burnt out, it is time to move on to the next cycle. My skill set is best for programming opportunities and student development and that is exactly what I do! I am also responsible for planning Day for Admitted Students, and while that is the most hectic day of my year, it is also my favorite. Though it may have taken me 27 years to figure it out, it was worth the wait! I love visiting colleges in random towns when I am on vacation and eavesdropping on the comments students and parents make. I also have made my mother pick up brochures at a college fair I was working, to learn more about additional schools and review their materials.

Because I am responsible for all of my office's on-campus programming efforts, I am very invested in how different types of programming can affect a student's decision. While there is already research regarding college choice and how students' make their decisions, there is very little research regarding the effect of different types of programming. Multiple research studies demonstrate that the campus visit is the most influential component for application and enrollment, but rarely do these studies unpack the "campus visit." If a study mentions more than the campus visit, it usually only mentions the campus tour. While I do not dispute that the campus tour is important, all

of this research neglects the multiple types of campus visit programming. Campus visits can include panels, information sessions, shadow experiences, and overnight visits. Athletics, honors programs, and/or multicultural events for different campus programming may recruit students for visit opportunities on campus. Students can also sit in on academic classes, eat at a dining hall, meet with faculty members, or speak with their regional admissions officer. This is all in addition to yield programming for admitted students who are trying to decide where to attend after receiving admission officers. There is so much more research to do in order to improve best practices in campus visit programming. While my research interest is personal, I also believe that this research can help admission officers and programming at other colleges and universities.

Beliefs & Values

One of my beliefs is that choosing a college is a very important decision, and I believe that students should make their own decisions regarding college choice. Because I value my mom's opinion, I believe a student should also value their parents' guidance and support, but be responsible for the decisions they make. I also believe that a campus visit makes an impact on a student, whether it is positive or negative. I value making our campus visit a priority from facilities requests to customer service to providing a top-notch visit experience. I believe that an unfriendly professor or a dirty hallway can make an impact on a student's decision to apply or enroll. I believe that many elements of the campus visit are outside of the Admission Office's control but that every school should make a dedicated effort to getting buy-in from the campus community. I believe that as an office we can affect the decisions that students make everyday by being courteous

with emails or patient on the phone. I value the time that I am able to spend with high school students via email, on the phone, or at high school visits and college fairs. I believe that high school students truly struggle when making college choice decisions. I am a vocal advocate of education and of taking the time necessary to do research regarding student-institution fit. I believe there are multiple schools that a student could excel and thrive in, and that students get out what they put into their experience.

I truly value all of the people who make programing possible at William & Mary. From our fabulous professors to dining hall staff to student volunteers in our office, there are so many people who make our campus programming possible. I also value the history, tradition, and student experience at William & Mary. I believe that William & Mary changes lives.

Expectations

With this study, by performing interviews and getting to know several students stories and piecing their study into a phenomenological format, I was able to discover how different aspects of campus visit programming affect a student's college choice decision. I found that there were lessons to be learned from institutions that leave an exceptional impression in addition to those institutions that leave less than favorable impressions. I fond that a student who decides to attend a school after attending yield programming like Day for Admitted Students at the College of William & Mary is impressed by aspects of the programming and the administrative effectiveness of a given institution, perhaps speaking with a faculty member or a current student, or something completely different. I also knew that there would be surprises along the way. I am grateful to have learned more about the campus visit in general in addition to the

complexities behind college choice. In addition, this project allowed me to learn what attending a campus visit is like from a different perspective. I enjoyed hearing about the challenges and frustrations of navigating the college admission process, and the joys of being admitted and finally making a decision. Because of my personality I empathized with other individuals, but I did not let that affect my objectivity in the analysis. I also believe my strong beliefs regarding the importance of the campus visit could have affected my objective analysis of this proposed research, and this made it all the more important to me to ensure my objectivity. Others are not quite as enthusiastic about college, visits, or the application process in general, so it was important to make use of my reflexive journal throughout the research process in addition to remembering that each individual has a different lived experience and socially constructed view of the college choice process.

Discoveries

I was willing and interested to discover how students make their decisions and initially become attracted to various institutions. I already knew that some students make their decisions without attending yield programs, and instead base their decision on other forms of the campus visit. I was also willing to discover that William & Mary or the University of Virginia is not the right fit for every student, and that like any other school they can leave an equally negative impression on students. I was especially interested to learn how a student manages all of the different impressions they have of a school- perhaps based on an initial visit, peer communication, parental guidance, institutional communication, and the application process. I enjoyed finding out what factors play a role in a student's final decision. Learning about which elements of a campus visit are

turn-ons and turn-offs for them, and if those elements are components that are static or dynamic was fascinating for me. I was also excited to compare the difference between formal and informal campus visits. It was thrilling to take my research on college choice further through my own research outside of my initial literature review. Discovering my own research methods is exciting, and I hope to discover new knowledge through the process.

I was not willing to discover that a campus visit (of any kind) does not make an impact on a student. Whether positive or negative, whether extreme or slight, I believe that any form of a campus visit, including a visit to a college's website, makes an impact on a student's opinion and beliefs regarding an institution. Even though many students may view the visit as a means to an end, or only focus on the academic components, I believe students' leave a visit with an increased or decreased, even slightly, interest in that particular institution.

Outcomes

I was hoping to discover what elements of the campus visit experience, information session, tour, informal meetings, formal programming, and yield events, are most crucial for a student's college choice for enrollment. I conducted a phenomenological research study with a social constructivist framework to gather several students' stories and better understand the phenomenon of the campus visit. I hope this research is able to illustrate important themes and impressions that may also be more generalizable through future quantitative research. I am hopeful that this research may help colleges and universities when planning campus visit experiences to better understand what is worth spending time and resources on, to better educational practices.

This research may also help to develop a better system of uncovering what types of schools may be a good fit for different types of students.

Even though the research scope is limited in a phenomenological framework, my ideal outcome is that this project will launch a larger project beyond my dissertation in addition to inspiring other future research. Every piece of research regarding campus visit experiences is useful, due to the limited amount of research regarding the campus visit. While researchers are aware that the campus visit is important, future research is needed to illustrate different types of visit experiences. I hope that my research is able to contribute to college choice and campus visit research, and is able to make a difference in best practices for campus visit programming.

APPENDIX B

WEB SURVEY OF COLLEGES

College Name & Size	Information Sessions and Tours	Specialty Programs	Class Visit	Overnight Visit	Interviews	Individual Appointments	Notes
Pennbrook University Mid- Size Private University	Daily on weekdays (9:00 and 2:00), some select Saturdays (9:00 and 11:00). Information Sessions (45 minutes) followed by student-led walking tours (90 minutes), reservations required. Also offer group Tours. No residence hall on tour	School of Engineering Tours, Large Group Tours (10-50), Marine Lab	Student must peruse list of courses and contact professor themselves	Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday from mid-September to mid-November	With Alums in hometown- not part of campus visit	Can schedule individual appointment with faculty member or ROTC on their own	I really like the ease of viewing all of the different on-campus activities for prospective students. Easy to see numbers and stats, student blogs
Stony Point University Mid-Size Private University	Weekdays and select Saturdays (10am). Info sessions are 1 hour (10am and 2pm) and are led by admissions representative and tours with a current student (11, 1, and 3pm). Due to security, campus tours will not enter residence halls. Total visit is 2 hours. Offer group tours for 15 or more.	Group Tours for 15 or more students. Engineering tours offered at select times throughout the year. Offer fall open house event, summer breaking down the college search workshop s, and summer preview events.	Class Visit not current on website as of September 4th.	Four nights are offered for current high school seniors.	On-campus interviews from September-February are offered in addition to alumni interviews off-campus for current applicants.	Not mentioned on campus visit pages	Website a little long and clunky. Would have liked to see slightly more cohesion across the campus visit opportunities . Though it is September, not everything is up to date.
Hudson University Mid-Size Private University	Information session (35 minutes in length), followed by a student-led campus tour, which is approximately 1 hour. Tours are held at 10:30 and 2:00 p.m. Saturday sessions begin at 10am and 11:15 a.m. Two hours total for visit. On weekdays and	Offer group visits, information sessions by the school of business/foreign service, visits to the school of nursing and health studies, and graduate	Certain classes available for prospective students, not on website as of September 4th	No overnight visitation options listed	Alumni conduct interviews, not part of campus visit	Suggest contacting faculty regarding class visit program	I love that they offer coffee and chat with a current student and try to match students based on interests. I wonder how many students take them up on this program...

	Saturday mornings. Offer group visits for High School groups.	school tours. Also offer coffee and chat with a current student.					
Sweet Valley University Mid-Size Private University	Information sessions and tours are offered most weekdays and select Saturdays during the academic year. They are held at 9am and 2pm on weekdays, and 9am on Saturdays. Group visits for 10-40 students.	Discovery Days-half-day program with simulated class. Conversation with the Dean-inside the Admission process. IB Diploma open house. In-state students program. They also advertise their programs in other cities across the U.S.	By department only, must schedule on your own.	None	Performed by members of Admission committee, either face to face or via web-cam	Not mentioned on campus visit pages	Like the vibrancy of the main page, student blogs, info on town and area hotels
Club University Large Public University	Information sessions and tours twice daily on weekdays at 10:30 and 2:30pm. Info sessions are 45 minutes long, followed by a 75-90 minute tour. Offer Group visits for 10 or more high school students, and special visits for high school counselors.	Offer group visits, a chance to meet with a current student, pharmacy/journalism/music info sessions. Also offer tours through visitors center about the town in general.	No information on website-must schedule your own.	None	None	Not mentioned on campus visit pages	Empty tweet feed, hard to navigate website, little description about campus visits. Page to meet a student not current, with no date for when it will be updated. No fall weekend tours? Very surprising
Regency University Large Public University	Offer five information session and tour times per day-9:00, 10:30, 12:00, 1:30, and 3:00 pm. 45-minute information session and tour and a 75-minute	Offer tour/video option, information session and tour, shadow a student days, group visits, and	Only through the shadow a student program.	None listed.	None.	No appointment necessary! Meet with a staff member between 11-4 with questions-WOW!	Like the multiple possibilities and the ability to meet with an admission officer on a first-come, first-serve basis!

	walking tour of campus. Select Saturdays for tours. Also offer the option of a video/tour without an information session.	personal appointments.					
Capitol University Large Private University	Information sessions and tours are offered of both campuses twice daily Monday-Saturday through most of the school year. Tours are offered at 10am and 2pm daily.	Information sessions and tours of two campuses, engineering and applied science tours, school of business tours, interviews, group visits for 15 or more high school students, and the option of meeting with a professor or attending a class.	Must submit request for attending a class to admission office.	None listed	Offer interviews on-campus and off-campus.	Can schedule individual appointment with faculty member, coach, or other campus resource staff member.	Easy to use schedule a visit tool, nicely laid out website with a variety of different options available.
Smithdale University Mid-size Private University	Offer information sessions and tours in addition to full day visit options (with the ability to eat lunch in a dining hall and sit in on class). Information sessions and tours at 10am and 2pm daily-no information on length.	Offer on-campus informational interviews, preview days once a semester, and Showcase events, which highlight different schools and majors. Some are day programs and some are overnight programs. Also offer group visits and counselor visit options.	Can register for a full day visit, by indicating academic interest and what components interest the prospective student.	Overnight programs with the Showcase event, and multicultural overnight programs.	Offer personal interviews on campus, but they are non-evaluative and informational in scope. Transfers and prospective freshman may register for interviews on campus.	No information on campus visit pages.	Must sign up with school in order to view and interact with visit calendar-name and password monitored.

Cyprus-Rhodes University Large Public University	Offer information sessions and tours for prospective freshman in addition to prospective transfer students. Session and tour are both one-hour in length. Also offer select Saturdays for visit options. Tours offered at 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.	Offer group visits for high school students-both self-guided tour and formal tour option.	Contact department on your own to schedule class visit.	None listed.	None.	Several academic programs host their own tours, other programs list a contact for interested students to engage with to find out more about that academic area.	Lengthy webpage and hard to find information. Would have liked more descriptions and condensed offerings.
Beach University Large Public University	Offer two information sessions and tours for prospective students daily at 10:00 AM and 2:00 PM. Some select weekend events for fall open houses. Information sessions are 30 minutes followed by a 90-minute campus walking tour. Offer self-guided tours for Sunday visitors.	Offer transfer student events, extended weekend events, and group visits.	None listed	None listed	None listed	No information on campus visit pages.	Easy to view options, but wonder what other options may be available for admitted students, multicultural students, scholarship recipients, etc.
Worthington University Large Public University	Offer two information sessions and tours on weekdays at 10:15 a.m. and 1:15pm daily. Total visit last two hours and fifteen minutes. Select Saturdays have information sessions at 9:15 or 10:15 a.m. Can sign up for tour and information session or just tour.	Offer admission sessions and tours, attend a class, overnight visits, and group visits. Also offer tours of specific schools-nursing, business, engineering, arts, kinesiology, or architecture.	Select a class and email professor to set up. New shadow a student program to sit in on a class with a student.	Overnight program with current students.	None	Can schedule appointment on their own	Like all the specialty tours and programs for students with specific interests.
Camden University Mid-size Public University	Information sessions (35 minutes) and tours (1 hour and 15 minutes) in length are offered weekdays and select Saturdays throughout the year. They are	Fall Weekend Days, fall preview event. Spring and Summer Weekend Information	Offer to shadow a current student and to sit in on both registered classes and classes you contact on your own.	1 Fall Prospective Student Event	On-campus interviews offered in the summer and fall of a student's senior year with a current college senior.	Suggest contacting faculty regarding classes outside of traditional class visit program.	Like the menu option of visits and tours offered. Clear on what options are available and local/area resources and maps.

	held at 10am and 2:30 pm on weekdays, and 10am on Saturdays. Group Visit for 10-50 students	sessions. Also offer class visit, tribe shadow, interviews , transfer days, admitted student programs, and stem panels.					
Western University Large Public University	Information sessions and tours are led twice daily with the option of a separate tour only in the middle of the day. Information sessions and tours begin at either 8:30 AM or 1:30 PM, and the optional tour only is at 11:30 AM daily. Select weekend programs, offer group visits for larger groups.	Offer information sessions and tours, open houses, and group tours for 10 or more students . Offer open houses for both freshman and transfer students. Also offer multiple information sessions by various departments and colleges on campus for students seeking a certain major or specialization.	None listed	None listed	None	Can contact faculty on their own especially if they are planning to attend an information session by a select college or department.	Nice that students have the option of visiting and learning about many of the different departments and schools on campus prior to applying.

APPENDIX C

EVALUATION PROTOCOL FOR INFORMATION SESSION/TOUR

DATE:

TIME:

OBSERVATION NOTES:

OBSERVER COMMENTS:

Description of Site/Weather:

Aesthetics:

Perceptions of Tour Guide:

Common Themes:

Observed Experiences of Others:

Summary of Questions Asked on Tour:

Key Points Covered:

Photos of Visit:

APPENDIX D

INFORMED CONSENT FOR HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

Purpose of the Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore campus visitation and college choice decisions.

Participants

You are being asked to participate because you meet these criteria: you are a current high school student that is 18 years of age or older.

Procedures

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following: answer open-ended survey questions about your college search and post-secondary decision making

Benefits of Participation

There may not be direct benefits to you as a participant in this study. However, subjects may increase their awareness of activities that motivated their choice of college and find other ways in which they can be engaged in their college experience.

Risks of Participation

There are risks involved in all research studies. This study may include only minimal risks. You may feel discomfort in answering some of the questions from the survey, but the amount of discomfort should be limited.

Cost/Compensation

There will be no cost or financial compensation for participating in this study. This study will take approximately 10 minutes of your time.

Contact Information

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study you may contact Justine Okerson at 757-221-3995/jrokerson@wm.edu or Dr. Pamela Eddy peddy@wm.edu. If you have any additional questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact, anonymously, if you wish, Dr. Tom Ward at 757-221-2358 (EDIRC-L@wm.edu) or Dr. Ray McCoy at 757-221-2783 (rwmcco@wm.edu), chairs of the two William & Mary committees that supervise the treatment of study participants.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. You may withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with the study. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at any time before or after the research study.

Confidentiality

All information gathered in this study will be kept completely confidential. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. All records will be stored for 3 years after completion of the study. After the storage time the information gathered will be shredded.

Participant Consent

I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I am at least 18 years of age. I understand that this survey data will be analyzed and destroyed after evaluation of the data.

INITIALS

DATE

IRB Approval #: EDIRC-2015-08-07-10529

APPENDIX E

OPEN-ENDED SURVEY QUESTIONS FOR HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

1) Please select the item that best represents you:

- a) Male
- b) Female
- c) Other

2) Please select the option that best describes your post-graduation plans

- a) Take a year off/gap year/deferred admission/study abroad
- b) Work/seek employment
- c) Attend technical/trade school/community college
- d) Attend a four-year institution

3) Please select all of the methods you have interacted with colleges at this point in your college search process

- a) College Night/Fair
- b) College Visit-Information Session
- c) College Visit- Campus Tour
- d) College Visit- Class Visit
- e) College Visit- Overnight Visit
- f) Catalogues/Brochures
- g) College Guide Books
- h) College Rankings
- i) Individual Conferences with a College Counselor
- j) College Visit to your High School

k) College Emails

l) Other (fill-in available)

4) Which one of these methods will be/is the most influential for you in deciding whether or not to apply to a specific college/university?

a) College Night

b) College Visit-Information Session

c) College Visit- Campus Tour

d) College Visit- Class Visit

e) College Visit- Overnight Visit

f) Catalogues/Brochures

g) College Guide Books

h) College Rankings

i) Individual Conferences with a College Counselor

j) College Visit to your High School

k) College Emails

l) Other (fill-in available)

5) What are the most important factors to you in deciding where to apply to college

(selectivity, size, location, majors, etc.)?

6) Have you already visited any colleges/universities?

If YES

7a.) How many colleges/universities have you visited?

8a.) Please describe an element of the campus visit that made you more likely to apply or less likely to apply (meeting with a student, sitting in on a class, etc.)?

9a.) What has been the most important memory you have of your campus visit/s?

10a.) How has the campus visit influenced your decision to apply or attend that particular school/s?

IF NO

7b.) How many colleges/universities do you plan on visiting?

8b.) What elements of a campus visit might make you more likely to apply or less likely to apply (meeting with a student, sitting in on a class, etc.)

APPENDIX F

CROSSWALK TABLE FOR SURVEY QUESTIONS

Research Questions	Literature	Greenough (2003)	Nurnberg et al. (2012)	Pampaloni (2010)	Hesel (2004)	Hoover (2009)
How do information sessions and tours compare among the <i>U.S. News & World Report's</i> 2015 list of national universities in the Mid-Atlantic?	Question 8a	X			X	
	Question 9a	X	X	X	X	X
	Question 10a		X	X	X	X
	Question 11a	X	X	X	X	X
How do varying campus visit types, and intricacies of each visit, affect a student's perception of an institution and affect their decision to attend a particular university?	Question 1		X			
	Question 2		X			
	Question 3		X			
	Question 4	X		X	X	
	Question 5	X		X	X	
	Question 6	X		X	X	
	Question 7	X			X	
	Question 8b	X			X	
	Question 9b	X	X	X	X	X

APPENDIX G

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR INDIVIDUAL STUDENT INTERVIEWS

- 1) Tell me about your college search process- for example how did you create a list of potential schools, what were you looking for in a college/university, and how did you begin the college search process?
- 2) Describe the guidance or support you had in your college search process (family, guidance counselors, websites, and college search books)?
- 3) What do you remember as your first interaction with a college campus- perhaps attending a camp, a sibling's college, or a family member's homecoming? Please describe it.
- 4) At what point in your upbringing did you know you would be attending college?
- 5) What factors (size, location, majors, etc.) were important for you in deciding where to apply to college?
- 6) What did you want out of college? How did you picture your college experience?
- 7) How many colleges did you apply to for admission?
- 8) What were your reasons for applying to those specific schools?
- 9) How did you decide what colleges to visit?
- 10) When did the visits occur? What time of year did you visit, did you visit with a school group or family, and was it part of a larger college tour trip with friends or family?
- 11) How many schools did you visit prior to applying? How did you pick those school visits? Did you visit campuses after you received your decision letters? Had you already visited the campus? What changed in your perceptions between visits?
- 12) Describe your typical campus visit.

- 13) Tell me a little about your experience formally visiting college campuses (attending the campus run information session and tour)?
- 14) Tell me a little about the informal aspects of your experience visiting college campuses (walking around on your own, meeting someone you knew on campus, driving around campus, etc.)?
- 15) What elements of the campus visit stood out to you as positive and negative aspects of the experience- what was a deal breaker for you and what got you excited to apply?
- 16) How did your campus visit factor into your perception of various colleges and universities?
- 17) What ultimately made your decision to attend your current college?
- 18) What other comments do you have that will help me understand better the role of the campus visit in college choice decision-making?

APPENDIX H

CROSSWALK FOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Research Questions	Literature	Greenough (2003)	Cabrera & La Nasa (2000)	Mattern et al. (2010)	Hesel (2004)	Hoover (2009)	Brown (2010)	Hossler & Gallagher (1987)
How do information sessions and tours compare among the <i>U.S. News & World Report's</i> 2015 list of national universities in the Mid-Atlantic?	Question 10	X			X	X	X	X
	Question 12							X
	Question 13	X			X	X	X	X
How do varying campus visit types, and intricacies of each visit, affect a student's perception of an institution and affect their decision to attend a particular university?	Question 1	X		X				X
	Question 2		X					X
	Question 3			X				X
	Question 4	X		X				
	Question 5	X		X	X	X		X
	Question 6	X	X	X	X	X		X
	Question 7	X						
	Question 8						X	
	Question 9	X			X	X		X
	Question 11						X	X
	Question 14	X				X		X
	Question 15	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Question 16	X						

APPENDIX I

INFORMED CONSENT FOR STUDENT PARTICIPANTS

Purpose of the Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to explore campus visitation and college choice decisions.

Participants

You are being asked to participate because you meet these criteria: you are a current freshman in good standing, you applied Regular Decision, you were admitted to more than one institution, and you visited a minimum of five colleges/universities.

Procedures

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following: participate in an interview to discuss areas that may have influenced your college choice decision. The interview will be audio taped.

Benefits of Participation

There may not be direct benefits to you as a participant in this study. However, subjects may increase their awareness of activities that motivated their choice of college and find other ways in which they can be engaged in their college experience.

Risks of Participation

There are risks involved in all research studies. This study may include only minimal risks. You may feel discomfort in answering some of the questions from the interview, but the amount of discomfort should be limited.

Cost/Compensation

There will be no cost or financial compensation for participating in this study. This study will take approximately 1 hour of your time.

Contact Information

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about the study you may contact Justine Okerson at [757-221-3995](tel:757-221-3995)/jrokerson@wm.edu or Dr. Pamela Eddy peddy@wm.edu. If you have any additional questions or concerns regarding your rights as a study participant, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact, anonymously, if you wish, Dr. Tom Ward at 757-221-2358 (EDIRC-L@wm.edu) or Dr. Ray McCoy at 757-221-2783 (rwmcco@wm.edu), chairs of the two William & Mary committees that supervise the treatment of study participants.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. You may withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with the College. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at any time during the research study.

Confidentiality

All information gathered in this study will be kept completely confidential. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. All records will be stored for 3 years after completion of the study. After the storage time the information gathered will be shredded.

Participant Consent

I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I am at least 18 years of age. I understand that this interview will be audiotaped and destroyed after evaluation of the data. A copy of this form has been given to me.

Signature of Participant

Date

Participant Name (Please print)

IRB Approval #: EDIRC-2015-08-07-10529

APPENDIX J

TRANSCRIBER CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I agree to participate as a paid transcriber in the doctoral dissertation for Justine Okerson. I agree to maintain the utmost confidence and security throughout the transcribing process by not sharing or disseminating in written or electronic form the transcription of the student participant(s) in Justine Okerson's study or any information discovered through the review process without written consent from Justine Okerson. Additionally, I will destroy all transcription work in June of 2016, after successful completion of her dissertation work.

Signed: _____

Dated: _____

APPENDIX K

LIST OF A PRIORI CODES

Admitted Student Programming

Aesthetics of Campus

Close to Home

Comparing Schools

Cultural Capital

Cuspy/Middle Schools

Daunting Process

Day for Admitted Students

Desire to be unique

Faculty/Staff Relationships

Family

Financial Reasons

Formal Visit

Friends/Word of Mouth

In-State

Informal Visit

Information Session

Major/Department of Discipline

Negative Impression

Out of State

Pressure

Rankings/Guidebooks

Reaches

Regional Search

Religious Affiliation

Research Opportunities

Safety Schools

School Counselor

School spirit

Seeing yourself on campus/Say yes to the dress moment

Self-Awareness

Size of School

Social Media

Top Choices

Tour

U.S. Search

Visit after Decision

Visiting is important

Website

APPENDIX L

PEER REVIEWER CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I agree to participate as a peer reviewer in the doctoral dissertation for Justine Okerson. I agree to maintain the utmost confidence throughout this peer review process by not sharing or disseminating in written or electronic form the transcription of the student participant(s) in Justine Okerson's study or any information discovered through the review process without written consent from Justine Okerson. Additionally, I will not use any of the data I am checking for my own personal research.

Signed: _____

Dated: _____

APPENDIX M

STAGE THREE: IMPORTANT FACTORS IN APPLYING

	D1	D2	M1	M2	N1	N2	V1	V2
Which one of these methods will be/is the most influential for you in deciding whether or not to apply to a specific college/university?								
College Night/Fair								
College Visit-Information Session	13%		14%		15%	5%		13%
College Visit- Campus Tour	63%	57%	43%	50%	46%	52%	38%	48%
College Visit- Class Visit						5%	13%	4%
College Visit- Overnight Visit	13%	29%	14%	13%	23%	19%	25%	13%
Catalogues/Brochures								
College Guide Books						5%		
College Rankings			14%	25%	8%		13%	13%
Conferences with a College Counselor	13%	14%	14%	13%	8%	10%		
College Visit to your High School								4%
College Emails								
Other						5%- Summer Program	13%- Students	4%- College Website

APPENDIX N

CHECKLIST FOR HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS

Special/School-Specific:

After you arrive on campus turn your attention to evaluating all aspects of your campus visit.

Are the students and administrators welcoming?

What stood out to you in this visit compared to other visits? What if anything about the college/university appeared unique (designing your own major, co-op programs)?

Search for any theme/s that may stand out during this visit (history, research, study abroad, etc.)?

Aesthetics:

Write down two-three points of interest from your tour and take photos to remember the campus

Observe your reactions to the general scenery and aesthetics of campus? What did you like? What did you not like?

Personal Interactions:

Pay special attention to your campus tour guide and stories of traditions and favorite memories on campus. Don't be shy-this is the time to ask all of your questions.

Evaluate the random students you see throughout your tour and when walking around on your own. Do they appear happy? Are they smiling? Are they with friends?

Community/Vibe:

Spend some time walking around on your own, and chat with random students. Check out the campus bulletin boards and visit a campus coffee shop- watch how the students and faculty interact on campus.

Look for students who are wearing their college gear to gauge school spirit.

Ask students what their favorite and least favorite aspect is of their college/university. Ask students how they would describe their community. Is it collaborative or competitive?

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