

Recruiting Chapter

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1 Introduction

Prior to the pandemic, admissions counselors from colleges and universities traveled to local high schools each year in order to meet prospective students and maintain relationships with guidance counselors at feeder schools (Stevens, 2007). Salazar, Jaquette, & Han (online first) analyzed off-campus recruiting visits made in 2017 by 15 public research universities. Surprisingly, 12 of the 15 universities made more visits to *out-of-state* high schools than *in-state* high schools. These out-of-state visits focused on public schools in affluent, predominantly white communities. Additionally, most public research universities in our sample made a disproportionate number of visits to out-of-state private high schools. For the University of California-Berkeley, for example, 155 (43%) of the 360 out-of-state high school visits were to private high schools. For the University of Colorado-Boulder, 321 (36%) of the 901 out-of-state high school visits were to private high schools.

Whereas Salazar et al. (online first) primarily analyzed visits to public high schools, this chapter focuses on visits to private high schools. More specifically, we investigate how visits to private high schools by public research universities compare to visits to private high schools by selective private universities.

1.1 Social mobility, social reproduction, and privatization

The sociologist Max Weber is credited for the insight that education has a “dual character,” on one hand, serving *social mobility* by redistributing access to privileged positions and, on the other, serving *social reproduction* by granting privileged families disproportionate access to the educational institutions that confer pathways to privileged positions (Stevens, Armstrong, & Arum, 2008).

The traditional, albeit mythologized, public good mission of public research universities is tied to social mobility and development of the state (Haycock, Mary, & Engle, 2010; Kezar, Chambers, & Burkhardt, 2005). These institutions are designated the unique responsibility of educating the future civic, professional, and business leaders of the state. Quoting 19th century University of Michigan President James Angell, these institutions contribute to social mobility by providing “an uncommon education for the common man” (as cited in Rudolph, 1962, p. 279) who could not afford tuition at elite private institutions.

By contrast, the traditional mission of selective private colleges and universities is more squarely associated with reproduction. Historically, these institutions depend on patronage from philanthropic interests – in connection with business interests and religious congregations – and depend on patronage from wealthy households who provide tuition revenue and donations (Stevens & Gebre-Medhin, 2016). In turn, selective private institutions contribute to social reproduction by providing privileged access – and the opportunities it confers – to their wealthy patrons.

Recruiting visits to private high schools are entirely consistent with the traditional social reproduction mission of selective private universities, regardless of whether the university is targeting a particular high school because of its academic reputation, religious affiliation, or the affluence of its student body. By contrast, visits to private high schools by public research universities – and particularly to out-of-state private high schools – particularly out-of-state schools – are antithetical to the public good mission of prioritizing meritorious state residents, particularly from humble means.

We argue that an analysis of recruiting visits to private high schools can contribute novel insights about the “privatization” of public research universities to the interdisciplinary literature on privatization in the field of higher education research. One strand within this literature conceptualizes privatization as a process whereby declines in government funding cause public institutions to grow alternative revenue sources, particularly revenue from tuition and research commercialization (McClure, Barringer, & Brown, 2019@; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Of relevance to this chapter, public research universities responded to declines in state appropriations by growing enrollment from nonresident students (Jaquette & Curs, 2015), who typically pay two- to three-times more than resident students. Another strand within the privatization literature conceptualizes privatization as a process whereby public institutions become more similar – in terms of characteristics or behavior – to for-profit or private non-profit organizations (McClure et al., 2019). A weakness of this literature is that few empirical studies analyze public institutions on a behavior associated with private institutions.

This chapter compares public research universities to selective private universities on a behavior – recruiting visits to private high schools – that is consistent with the traditional mission of selective private institutions and antithetical to the traditional mission of public research universities. Empirical analyses are organized around the following three research questions:

1. How does the scale of visits to private high schools by public research universities compare to the scale of visits to private high schools by private universities?
2. How do the characteristics of private high schools visited by public research universities compare to the characteristics of private high schools visited by private universities?
3. To what extent do public research universities and private universities visit overlapping sets of private high schools?

2 What do we know about off-campus recruiting visits

This section provides context for our analyses. First, we situate off-campus recruiting within the broader set of marketing and recruiting interventions in higher education and review what market research says about off-campus recruiting. Second, we review empirical scholarship from sociology that considers off-campus recruiting, emphasizing scholarship that considers the relational aspects of recruiting visits and scholarship that considers private high schools.

2.1 Situating Off-Campus Recruiting Within Enrollment Management

The “enrollment funnel” – depicted in Figure 1 – is a conceptual heuristic that identifies stages in the student recruitment process (prospects, inquiries, applicants, accepted applicants, and enrolled students). “Prospects” are “all the potential students you would want to attract to your institution” (Campbell, 2017). “Inquiries” are prospects that contact the institution, including those who respond to a solicitation and those who reach out on their own. The enrollment management industry uses the enrollment funnel to inform marketing and recruiting interventions that target specific stages. Most scholarship on enrollment management focuses on the final stages of the enrollment funnel, specifically which applicants are admitted and the use of financial aid “leveraging” to convert admits to enrollees (e.g., Alon, 2009; Doyle, 2010; Karabel, 2005; Karen, 1990; McPherson & Schapiro, 1998; Posselt, 2016; Waddell & Singell, 2011). By contrast, the enrollment management industry expends substantial resources on marketing/recruiting activities that target earlier stages of the enrollment funnel (Noel-Levitz, 2020).

Institutions identify undergraduate “prospects” by purchasing “student lists” – containing contact, demographic, and academic achievement information – from College Board, ACT, and other vendors. Universities control which prospects are contained within a list by filtering on criteria such as zip code, test scores, and high school GPA. Once prospects and inquiries are identified, they are targeted with remote and face-to-face recruiting interventions designed to solicit applications and deepen engagement. Remote recruiting interventions include postcards, brochures, emails, text messages, and targeted social media. Face-to-face recruiting

interventions include on-campus visits by prospects and off-campus recruiting visits by admissions representatives to high schools, community colleges, college fairs, etc. Institutions utilize advertising (traditional and digital) and social media to solicit inquiries and to create positive “buzz” amongst prospects (Dupaul & Harris, 2012). Given the the rise in “stealth applicants” who do not inquire before applying (Dupaul & Harris, 2012), advertising and social media enables universities to tell their story to prospects who do not wish to be contacted.

What do we know about off-campus recruiting from previous research? As is true for most aspects of enrollment management, much of what we know about off-campus recruiting comes from consulting firms (e.g., Ruffalo-Noel Levitz, EAB), professional associations (e.g., NACAC), and from practitioner-oriented publications. Market research describes off-campus recruiting visits as a means of identifying prospects and deepening engagement with prospects already being targeted through mail/email (Clinedinst & Koranteng, 2017; Noel-Levitz, 2020; Ruffalo Noel-Levitz, 2018).

Ruffalo Noel-Levitz (2018) documents the self-reported efficacy of marketing/recruiting interventions. For the median private 4-yr institution, off-campus visits were the second highest source of inquiries (after student list purchases), accounting for 17% of inquiries. Off-campus visits were tied with student list purchases as the highest source of enrollees, accounting for 18% of enrollees. For the median public institution, off-campus visits accounted for 19% of inquiries (second only to student list purchases) and accounted for 16% of enrollees (ranked third after stealth applicants and on-campus visits).

With respect to expenditure, Table 1, reproduced from Noel-Levitz (2020), shows the percentage of undergraduate recruitment budget allocated to different marketing and recruiting activities.¹ The average public university spent 16% of its recruiting budget on off-campus recruiting visits, compared to 12% of its budget on purchasing student lists and 17% of its budget on “prospective student communications” (e.g., mail, email, text, social media) targeting prospects and inquiries. An emergent trend over the past decade – partially a response to public universities seeking nonresident students – has been the growth of “regional recruiters” who target specific metropolitan areas in the US and abroad (Whitney & Schmidt, 2015). These regional recruiters may be college/university employees or they may be independent contractors who live in the metropolitan area they recruit.

2.2 Empirical Scholarship from Sociology

Empirical academic scholarship on off-campus recruiting is mostly limited to a modest number of sociological case studies, which typically analyze off-campus recruiting as part of a broader analysis of enrollment management (e.g., Holland, 2019; Cottom, 2017; Khan, 2011; Posecznick, 2017; Stevens, 2007). Holland (2019) analyzes visits from the perspective of students at two racially and socioeconomically diverse public high schools. Holland (2019) found that high school visits – including college fairs, instant decision events, and small-group representative visits – influenced where students applied and where they enrolled. This finding was strongest for first-generation students and under-represented students of color, who often reported that “school counselors had low expectations for them and were too quick to suggest that they attend community college” (p. XXX) This trust vacuum created an opportunity for colleges because these students were drawn to colleges that connected with them and made them feel wanted. For example, Holland (2019) describes a high-achieving, first-generation, African American student who was admitted by a highly selective liberal arts college but chose to attend a less selective college that “seemed to want him more” (p. XXX). By contrast, affluent students with college educated parents were less taken by such overtures and more concerned with college prestige.

Stevens (2007) and Khan (2010, 2011) are centrally important to our study because they analyze relationships between college admissions counselors and high school guidance counselors. Stevens (2007), an ethnography of the admissions office at a selective private liberal arts college, highlights the relational function of visits. Stevens (2007, p. 54) states that “the College’s reputation and the quality of its applicant pool are dependent

¹Table drawn directly from Noel-Levitz (2020) Figure 9, which is based on a convenience sample of 45 four-year non-profit institutions and 21 four-year public institutions.

upon its connections with high schools nationwide.” Therefore, during the autumn “travel season,” admissions officers visit selected high schools across the country “to spread word of the institution and maintain relationships with guidance counselors” (p. 53-54). The College tended to visit the same “feeder” schools year after year because recruiting depends on long-term relationships with high schools. The high schools they visited tend to be affluent schools – in particular, private schools – that enroll high-achieving students who can afford tuition and had the resources and motivation to host a successful visit. Whereas Ruffalo Noel-Levitz (2018) highlights the effect of recruiting visits on inquiries and enrollees, findings from Stevens (2007) suggest that the College may have valued recruiting visits primarily as a means of maintaining relationships with guidance counselors. From this perspective, recruiting visits may affect outcomes such as inquiries, applications, and matriculation through their affect on high school guidance counselors. The logic is that a guidance counselor who views a college favorably will steer students to the college.

Khan (2010) analyzed recruiting from the perspective of an elite private boarding school in order to understand “how such schools continue to get comparatively under-qualified students into top colleges and universities” (p. 98). The answer begins by considering the goals of colleges, which are represented by admissions officers, and the goals of private high schools, which are represented by guidance counselors. Colleges want high-achieving students who can pay tuition and donate. They want low acceptance and high yield rates, which are important for rankings. Colleges also want a class composed of “interesting characters” whose curricular and extracurricular strengths meet the needs of important campus constituents (e.g., academic majors, the athletic department, clubs, etc.). Private high schools want to send *all* students to the best college possible. Here, high school guidance counselors face “the pressure of making sure their school seems worth it – that . . . paying some \$40,000+, really does aid students in the college process” (Khan, 2010, p. 105).

The challenge faced by high school counselors at elite private schools is that “some of these students are slightly better than others. These students will likely get into more than one school – but they can only attend one. And this will lower the chances of your ‘second-best’ students getting into top schools” (Khan, 2011, pp. 173–174). “Luckily,” Khan (2010, p. 105) writes, “the problem for elite boarding schools matches up quite nicely with the problem faced by elite colleges.” That is, although college admissions officers receive applications from many outstanding students,

These outstanding students will also be outstanding to Princeton, Yale, Stanford, and everywhere else. How do you know the ones you pick will attend your school? You can’t quite trust applicants, as they are all likely to tell you how much they want to go to your school. And if students you accept go somewhere else, there’s not much you can do. But you can get better information – information you want – from their high school. And you can reward that school for good information and sanction it for bad information (Khan, 2011, p. 173).

This desire by colleges for trustworthy information about applicant intentions creates an opportunity for high school counselors to advocate on behalf of their students. This opportunity depends on guidance counselors having personal relationships with university admissions offices and on having small enough caseloads to advocate for each student individually.

To explain how high school counselors capitalize on this opportunity, Khan (2011) describes two hypothetical students – Susan and Billy – who both apply to Harvard and Yale. Susan is a shoo-in at both universities, but wants to attend Harvard. Billy has a weaker academic record than most Ivy League students, but has strong extracurricular activities. The guidance counselor tells Harvard that Susan wants to attend Harvard. Next, he informs Yale that Susan will choose Harvard, but Billy loves Yale and has great “character” and extracurricular activities. In the end, Harvard rejects Billy and accepts Susan, thereby, decreasing acceptance rate and increasing yield. Yale rejects Susan and accepts Billy, thereby, also decreasing acceptance rate and increasing yield.

The horsetrading described by Khan (2011) depends on a relationship where the college can trust statements made by the high school counselor and vice-versa. This relationship is the product of repeated interactions over many years. A high school that makes false statements about applicant intentions faces consequences. The college “might stop taking these telephone calls and ignore the information provided. They may even

start accepting fewer students from the school, thinking it is less than an honest” (Khan, 2010, p. 106). Because the college and the high school are mutually dependent, however, both “have an incentive to continue with a strong, honest relationship” (Khan, 2010, p. 106). Although, such horsetrading may be less pervasive now than it was in prior decades and may be less common at non-elite private schools. Additionally, college admissions officers from public universities likely have less authority to engage in these tacit negotiations because admissions criteria at public universities face greater public scrutiny than admissions criteria at private colleges and universities.

Even in the absence of horsetrading, maintaining strong relationships is mutually important for the college and for the high school. The college admissions counselor and the high school guidance counselor need to tell one another “their story” and relay that story to constituents (Stevens, 2007). The college admissions counselor explains why the college/university is a “special place” that high school students should want to attend. The guidance counselor explains why the high school is a special place, that even students with lower grades have outstanding extracurricular strengths that will benefit the college.

To summarize, Stevens (2007) finds that off-campus recruiting visits are important for the maintenance of strong relationships between a college and a high school. Strong relationships enable colleges and schools to negotiate and send trustworthy information to one another. In the absence of strong relationships, it is less likely that a college admissions counselor will “take the call” of a high school guidance counselor (Khan, 2010, 2011). Building on these findings, we reason that the presence of a recruiting visit between a college and a high school is an indicator that the college and the high school have a relationship. First, the fact that the college made the effort to visit suggests that the college wants to enroll students from the high school. Second, the fact that the high school hosted the visit suggests that the high school likely views the college as a desirable destination for some of its students. Third, the presence of the recruiting visit suggests the probability of additional interactions (e.g., phone calls).

Our broader project collected data on off-campus recruiting visits made by a convenience sample of colleges and universities during the 2017 calendar year. The data collection sample comes from three different lists of postsecondary institutions: all public research-extensive universities as defined by the 2000 Carnegie Classification (N=102); all private universities in the top 100 of U.S. News and World Report National Universities rankings (N=58); and all private colleges in the top 50 of U.S. News and World Report Liberal Arts Colleges rankings (N=47). For each of these institutions, we investigated their admissions website for pages that posted their upcoming off-campus recruiting visits. For institutions that posted such pages, we scraped the pages once per week throughout 2017. Many colleges and university only posted certain kinds of events (e.g., hotel receptions and national college fairs) but not others (e.g., day-time visits to high schools). These institutions are excluded from the analyses. Our final analysis sample consists of 17 public research universities, 13 private research universities, and 12 private liberal arts colleges.

Our analyses to date have focused only on visits by public research universities. We found that most public research universities in our sample made more out-of-state than in-state recruiting visits. The exceptions were UC Berkeley, UC Irvine, and North Carolina State University, three institutions with relatively generous state appropriations and the only three public universities in our sample that faced strong nonresident enrollment caps. Across all universities, out-of-state visits systematically targeted affluent, predominantly white schools and communities, usually within populous metropolitan areas. Most public universities also made a disproportionate number of out-of-state visits to private high schools, which tend to be more affluent and white.

These findings motivated the goal of this chapter to investigate off-campus recruiting visits to private high schools. Public research universities have the mission of providing social mobility, yet their large number of out-of-state visits to private high schools are making them more similar to private institutions. Figures ?? and ?? show the number of off-campus recruiting visits by public and private colleges/universities in our sample, respectively. A disproportionate number of out-of-state private high school visits can be seen for both public and private institutions. In this chapter, we will answer the research questions: Which types of private high schools receive visits from which types of colleges and universities? Additionally, to what extent were visits by a college/university to a private high school more likely if the two organizations were similar to one another on key characteristics? Our analyses focus on the characteristics of academic reputation, geographic region, religious affiliation, and racial composition.

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Table 1: Percentage of budget allocated to marketing/recruiting activities by private non-profit 4yr and public 4yr institutions

Activity	Private	Public
Travel	17	16
Student search (purchased lists)	14	12
Prospective student communications	13	17
Events	12	11
Recruitment publications	11	15
Web services and digital advertising	11	13
Traditional advertising	6	6
International recruitment	5	3
Transfer recruitment	4	4
Other	8	3

Figure 1: The enrollment funnel

