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Running head: **COLLEGE SELECTION**

What Prospective College Students Say Matters during the College Selection Process

A Thesis Presented to The Faculty of the Department of Communication
Rochester Institute of Technology

In Partial Fulfillment of the Master of Science Degree in
Communication & Media Technologies

by

Kari L. Steger

December 1, 2005

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To my family, thank you for always believing in me and for always being there for me. I love you.

To Christopher, thank you for your support and humor. Your pushing means the world to me, as do you. I love you.

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Abstract

For most prospective college students, selecting a college is a highly involved, lengthy process. While past research has examined how high school students determine their college choice subsets and what information sources they use most during the college selection process, further research is needed to determine the most effective means of reaching prospective students. The current study employs focus group research to examine students' college selection processes to gain a better understanding of the types of information students seek during their college selection process, the media they use to find it, and the people whose guidance they seek when making their decisions.

Determining which institution of higher education high school students will attend is a serious decision. It is a process that many students are deeply involved in. Some begin thinking about it early in high school while others wait until application deadlines approach. But, no matter when students embark on the process of finding a college or university to attend, it is a process that involves a number of different research resources for students to use and a process that students can approach from different angles.

Part of the college decision process involves determining an initial set of institutions, careers, and academic majors to consider. Progressively, students narrow their options to a few select schools to which they will apply. The final stage in this process, after all research is complete, is to choose one school to attend upon admittance. Throughout this process students must sort through all sorts of institutional information. They receive this information in the mail, via television commercials, from their friends, parents, and/or guidance counselors, or on the Internet. The information ranges from academic majors offered to the best clubs to join.

Previous research (Bradshaw, Espinoza, & Hausman, 2001; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983; Hodges & Barbuto, 2001; Rosen, Curran, & Greenlee, 1998) has sought to understand prospective college students' college selection processes, from determining the initial choice subsets they will examine, to the criteria they use to judge colleges, to how they make their final decisions. The present study adds to this body of knowledge, most specifically to our understanding about the means by which students seek and receive information about colleges during their selection

process. It also adds to the literature about what resources, both people and media, high school students find to be most influential throughout their college selection process.

Rationale

The current study is designed to provide both researchers and academic officials a means of understanding how high school students make their college selections. For college recruiters, understanding how students determine the institution they will attend will help them to refine their design of promotional materials and better select media channels they use to interest and reach prospective students. For researchers, the present study provides answers to past hypotheses about evolving media formats used to disseminate information about colleges and the effect the changes have had on communicating with high school students researching colleges (Hossler, 1999; Strauss, 1998), as well as future avenues of investigation that may be explored more empirically employing larger samples to extend the findings and generalize to the population. For both recruiters and researchers, student enrollments are important to the survival of tuition driven institutions and academic programs. Knowing what interests potential students, what draws their interests, and what influences their decisions about college selection can result in planned growth and expansion of academic programs.

Literature Review

Studies about the college selection process cover a range of topics, from examinations of students' development of college choice sets and decision making (Bradshaw, Espinoza, & Hausman, 2001; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989;

Zemsky & Oedel, 1983), to college recruitment (Hodges & Barbuto, 2001; Hossler, 1999; Rosen, Curran, & Greenlee, 1998) to specific aspects of marketing, such as the use of the direct marketing and the Internet as marketing communications tools (Kittle & Ciba, 1997; Kittle & Ciba, 1998; Strauss, 1998; Poock & Lefond, 2001).

For the purposes of the current study, it was important to examine not only the process of how prospective college students develop lists of potential educational institutions and the factors that influence their decision making, as well as the marketing perspectives of college administrators and marketers and the approaches they use to reach students involved in the college selection process. College selection is a process that involves both prospective students and college administrators. While students are attempting to determine what schools best fit their needs, administrators and enrollment managers are attempting to determine the best way to reach prospective students and the best means for making their appeals. The college selection decision is the key moment for prospective students and colleges to communicate with one another.

A number of studies focused on student choice in the college selection process have been undertaken, and numerous models have been developed as a result. Zemsky and Oedel's (1983) study is of particular importance as it functions as a guide to understanding how students begin to make their decisions and how enrollment management works to reach prospective students. The study's intent was to help colleges and universities determine the best method for communicating with prospective students. Zemsky and Oedel (1983) discuss the topic of market segmentation. They stress its importance in aiding recruiters to understand who the best students are to recruit, as well

as whose needs are best be met by the educational institution and where the best places to find the students are. They suggest that to communicate effectively with prospective students, it is important to know individual factors such as financial, social, and family backgrounds. It is clear that those interested in effectively reaching students must know first who they are targeting and where to find them.

Anyone wishing to develop an effective communication campaign must know that they are targeting the correct population. Colleges and universities are marketing and selling a “product,” that being both the education students will receive and the experiences they will gain. If what college marketers communicate does not fit the needs of the audience, the communication will be ineffective and of no use to either the audience or the institution. As with any product being sold, one must know the audience to know if the product is desired by the audience.

The Zemsky and Oedel (1983) study, while somewhat dated, is useful to the current research as it outlines important aspects of marketing a college. The discussion they have about college choice and marketing provides a framework for understanding how to first find the appropriate students to address and, second, how to learn what factors must be kept in mind when communicating with the appropriate prospects.

Another study that provides a valuable frame of reference for understanding student decision making and choice is that of Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989). A key point of the research is that student college choice is important for not just the students, but for society as well (1989). This observation highlights the importance of the college decision process and reminds us that communication that draws students to a

particular college will eventually lead them beyond the classroom. This emphasizes the weightiness that this decision carries for prospective students and underscores the depth and seriousness with which students tend to approach the college selection process.

The Hossler et al. (1989) study provides an outline for understanding the literature about college choice, covering models that include socioeconomic backgrounds and predispositions students have for making a college selection. Important in this literature is the discussion of a three-stage model of student college choice, which provides a framework for understanding the selection process. Included in this model are the following stages: predisposition, in which students determine whether or not they will continue their education beyond high school; search, in which students look for particular aspects of educational institutions and evaluating the colleges' attributes to determine the institutions' relevance to their own needs; and lastly, the choice stage, in which students determine the institutions to which they will apply and which they will attend.

Hossler et al. (1989) suggest further examination of factors that influence a student's predisposition for making a college choice. Important for the current study, however, are their suggestions for research regarding both the search stage and the choice stage of the decision process. Regarding the search stage the authors suggest the following questions: "How do students find out about postsecondary educational institutions? How do they go about collecting information about them? How do they discover the relevant attributes to consider when evaluating postsecondary educational institutions? During the choice stage, how do students evaluate their application set?" (p. 280). These questions are examined in the current study.

Hossler et al. (1989) emphasize that not much is known about how students find potential postsecondary institutions and what factors are involved in evaluating them and making decisions based on what they have found. This sentiment, in conjunction with the emphasis Zemsky and Oedel (1983) placed on knowing the target market, leaves room for the development of a clearer understanding of students. This also leads to a better understanding of how to communicate effectively with students. The age of these studies is a drawback. Since these studies were published new ways of reaching students have emerged, or have at the very least been greatly improved upon—specifically the World Wide Web – and students have new means of obtaining information about colleges. However, the questions and points of the Hossler et al. (1989) study raise provides relevant questions that can be explored even today.

Sanders (1990) drew three conclusions regarding the influential factors on students' college choices: both students and their parents expect similar things and examine colleges together; they are looking for adequate skills to obtain employment upon graduation, and subsequently, to be economically mobile; and that students' guidance counselors' views about what college students need and should look for vary widely from that of the students and their parents.

Sanders (1990) emphasizes that an important part of the students' inquiry stage revolves around looking for schools that will allow them to meet their future employment and economic goals. While this study does not provide an overly broad or complete background surrounding the college decision process, it does provide more insight into some of the important factors that weigh on prospective students' minds when making

decisions about potential postsecondary institutions. This highlights the importance of presenting information about the value added projections for the institution or academic program early in the college decision process. Sanders' (1990) research presents information about a more focused aspect of students' college choice process.

Broekemier and Seshadri (1999) further the discussion about what college students, as well as their parents, include in their college choice criteria. They point out that one important aspect of college choice criteria for both students and their parents is the value added expectations of a potential postsecondary institution. Broekemier and Seshadri (1999) examined important factors in college choice for students. Students were asked to rank the importance of criteria after being given a list of potential criteria. Ranked in the top of both lists of important college choice criteria are program of study, cost, financial aid, job placement after graduation, facility quality, and the safety of the campus (Broekemier & Seshadri, 1999). The authors conclude that successful marketing will involve the incorporation of the criteria that students find to be of most importance in college marketing communications.

Sevier and Kappler (Retrieved September 10, 2004) discussed the results of two mail surveys of college-bound students; the surveys focused on who helped students decide which college they should attend, what college choice factors were of most importance during their decision making process, and the recruiting and marketing strategies that students found most effective. The authors highlight important characteristics that factor into students' college choice decisions. Students were asked in a survey to rate the significance of 39 college choice characteristics. The top 10

characteristics students reported as being significant were quality of faculty, the availability of specific majors, campus safety, the quality of academic facilities, the availability of scholarships, residence life, the cost of attendance after financial aid, friendliness, teaching emphasis, and the academic reputation. Two limitations to this study concern the use of survey research: students were limited in the options they could use to answer and they may have given socially desirable responses rather than what they actually thought was significant. However, to effectively communicate with students, it is important to consider the characteristics study participants reported as significant alongside those highlighted in other studies.

Sevier and Kappler (Retrieved September 10, 2004) found that students report the most influential people on students' college choice process are parents and guidance counselors. This information is pertinent, as it suggests that marketing communications must not only be directed toward students, but these other influential individuals as well. Sevier and Kappler (Retrieved September 10, 2004) also examined what types of college recruitment strategies students thought were most effective. The most influential recruitment communication device was a scholarship brochure, followed by academic viewbooks, departmental or divisional brochures, and WebPages. In the discussion of these results, the authors suggest that a multimedia recruitment strategy should be used. They reason that as the quality of technology is improving, the use of the technology will increase. Thus, the use of a multimedia can encompass a broader range of possibilities in terms of the ways in which messages are delivered to prospective students.

The factors that Sevier and Kappler (Retrieved September 10, 2004) highlight provide further information about the types of criteria that are important to prospective students and the ways in which they find it most effective to receive the information. The information provided is important to consider when determining what students are looking for and the ways in which they will look for it. While the study does not go into great detail, it is a reasonable addition to the framework presented in the previous studies on college choice factors.

Bradshaw, Espinoza, and Hausman (2001) add to the literature with their discussion of the decision-making process of high achieving students. The authors interviewed students and requested information about college choice, their decision to attend college, what colleges they considered, the materials that they used throughout the search process, influential people throughout the search process, the role of scholarships in their decision process, and the role of one particular institution in the recruitment process. They found that students were looking for institutions with strong academic programs and that to find these programs students reported starting their search by reviewing college rankings. Within their initial search stage students considered at least five schools. One difference between the students interviewed by Bradshaw et al. (2001) and other researchers is that the students in the former study felt predisposed to the concept of attending college. Whereas some students must begin their college choice phase by first determining whether or not to attend a postsecondary institution, the students surveyed had always planned on attending college. This may be important when considering the types of information sent to high achieving students such as those in the

Bradshaw et al. research. Thus, recruitment communications students committed to attending college receive should address the reputation of the institution.

Bradshaw et al. (2001) suggest that institutions would benefit from providing students with targeted information about the school, specific academic programs, and the overall quality of the undergraduate experience. An institution that is well ranked should certainly consider these factors when developing and delivering its recruitment information. Criteria highlighting the “name brand” attributes of an institution might draw students to an institution.

After building a conceptual framework for understanding some of what student college choice involves, it is possible to begin looking at the general process of student recruitment. Rosen, Curran, and Greenlee (1998) include both college choice and recruitment in their view of the college choice process as a type of brand elimination and recruitment strategy of postsecondary educational institutions. They (1998) assert that students’ college choice is a high involvement situation, as the students involve the “identification of a problem, information search, evaluation of alternatives, choice, and some form of post-purchase evaluation,” (p. 75) within their choice phases.

Rosen et al. (1998) suggest that students become involved in extensive problem solving, searching for the information that will suit their needs and meet their criteria, such as that outlined in Broekemeier and Seshadri (1999) and Sevier and Kappler (Retrieved September 10, 2004). Further, the choice process involves the development of various sets of higher education institutions, which become reduced as the research and decision process develops. The sets go from the inclusion of all institutions of higher

education to schools that draw the students' attentions, to schools that students want to consider, to those to which they apply, and finally, to schools in which the students enroll (Rosen et al., 1998).

The Rosen et al. (1998) study is useful because it highlights clearly what students think about the usefulness and effectiveness of the information they receive in the mail. It was determined that college guides, guidance counselors, friends, and parents were very helpful in development of sets of schools of which students were aware. At this stage, students in the study noted that they were being inundated with unsolicited mail from colleges and universities and were overwhelmed and annoyed by it. Rosen et al. (1999) quoted one student as saying "...I feel that every school in our country has sent me their complete libraries of information...As far as what I did with this information, the majority of it is packed away in the basement serving as a perfect fire hazard" (p. 82). It is clear that while unsolicited mail might increase students' awareness levels of colleges and universities, the fact that they are bombarded with mass quantities of the mail reduces their attention to it and thus, its effectiveness.

Rosen et al. (1998) also determined that students reported using college guides 78.6% of the time when building their choice set and brochures 53.4% of the time. Other information sources used include guidance counselors (64.1% of the time), friends (49.5%), mothers (46.6%), fathers (37.9%), and college fairs (33 %). The development of the choice set is the key time at which students narrow their selections to schools to which they will apply. As the decision process advances, parental advice is ranked highest, followed by that of guidance counselors, friends, personal contact with the

schools, and teachers' advice (Rosen et al., 1998). Knowing this gives insight into which information sources are used and which are not as the decision process advances. In relation to the present study, knowing that brochures are not really looked at during the decision process suggests that it is pertinent to deliver them early in the information search process rather than later.

Rosen et al. (1998) highlighted the top 10 criteria students reported as important to their college selection process: majors offered, location, cost, financial aid, social life, school reputation, career placement, institution size, athletics, and campus visits. These criteria vary somewhat from those in other studies, further suggesting that what students report as important and what they really use may vary. However, the criteria Rosen et al. (1998) report as important provide further evidence of the types of information students value.

An important finding in the Rosen et al. (1998) study is that students spend more time considering information from schools in which they are interested than schools from which they received unsolicited mail. Thus, recruitment communication will be most successful if schools and academic programs target interested students rather than a general population. If unsolicited mail is sent, Rosen et al. (1998) suggest that it be brief and focused on the factors that students look for when narrowing their choice sets. Overall, the Rosen et al. (1998) study highlights the types of information that are most often used and when they are used. This is important, as it will aid in the development of relevant recruitment communication that will target more effectively the students' needs. This is especially important to the current study.

Adding to the means of effectively recruiting prospective students is the Hossler (1999) study. Like Rosen et al. (1998), Hossler (1999) suggests that a key to effective recruitment is to target the right group of students and give them the information that they are seeking. The author also suggests that building an applicant pool by increasing institutional visibility via integrated marketing is an effective means of recruitment. Such marketing includes the use of print media, such as direct mail pieces and magazine advertisements, as well as electronic media, such as the radio, television, or Internet. The use of such tools, Hossler (1999) suggests, may also increase the awareness of the institutions not only for students, but community leaders, parents, and other influential people. Building awareness, not only with students but with the community, allows individuals to pique students' interest and possibly influence their decision process.

Hossler (1999) suggests that direct mail pieces are the best means of attracting younger students who are beginning to formulate institutional awareness sets. Like Rosen et al. (1998), the author suggests that direct mail pieces are most effective when the information included in them is succinct and relevant to what the students are seeking. As students begin to make the transition from colleges they are examining to those to which they will apply, Hossler (1999) suggests that a marketing communications plan incorporating direct mail, email, the Internet, telemarketing and on-campus recruitment events should be employed to reach students effectively. Students look in many places for their information, and it is important that information be made available to them in a variety of resources, not just one.

Along with utilizing an integrated marketing campaign, Hossler (1999) suggests that personalizing the communication sent to students and sending it at the appropriate times is key. The personalization of recruitment communications can make an institution stand out from the rest and really make a student take notice (Hossler, 1999). The timing of recruitment communication is essential (Hossler, 1999). If an institution or academic program misses the time at which students are seeking information, they will likely miss a chance to be viewed and considered fully by a prospective student. Knowing when to target students and send them the information they desire is an essential part of the recruitment communication process.

In relation to the current study, however, probably the most important aspect of recruitment Hossler addresses is the use of the World Wide Web and the Internet as a recruitment tool. While direct mail may be one of a number of seemingly permanent fixtures in the recruitment process, the use of the Internet is a relatively new way of communicating with prospective students. Hossler (1999) notes that many students at the time of the study were using the Internet during the initial stages of their search process as a tool to search for general information about colleges and universities. As their search process narrowed they used the Internet as a source of further information. Hossler (1999) states that there are a number of possibilities that the Web holds in terms of increasing personalized service for prospective students, offering a more time efficient means of information delivery, and doing this at a lower cost. However, if a site is poorly designed or the information that students are looking for is unavailable, it is likely to

produce a negative impression (Hossler, 1999). If a site provides information students are seeking, in a neat, efficiently-designed format it is likely to be highly successful.

Hossler (1999) suggests that the use of both email and the Internet as recruitment communication tools will increase and with both of these media comes great potential for effective communication. Hossler's (1999) discussion of effective recruitment efforts, as well as the insight he provides about the use of various marketing tools, particularly the Web, benefits the current study in building an understanding of the tools that to be used in recruitment communication. Hossler (1999) highlights important points regarding both effective and ineffective communication and provides a basis from which to develop a better understanding of the types of communication tools that are effective in recruiting prospective students.

Some of the literature stresses that as technology becomes more efficient and readily available, the means by which recruitment communication is managed will change (Hossler, 1999). There are a growing number of studies devoted to the use of the Internet as a recruitment communication tool. Before focusing on the Internet as a recruitment tool, it is necessary to briefly address the use of direct mail as a source of information. Institutions generally develop mailing lists through the use of a testing service, such as The College Board (Phillips & Morgan, 1990). After a list of prospective students is generated, institutions generally mail some type of introductory literature, such as a brochure or viewbook, for the prospective students to examine. Included in such a piece is a response card (Phillips & Morgan, 1990) or, more recently, the World Wide

Web address of the institution or academic program, to allow students to inquire about further information.

Phillips and Morgan (1990) emphasize the visual appeal of direct mail pieces such as brochures and viewbooks. The paper used, the style of the writing, the alignment of information, the graphics, and the timing of distribution among a number of other qualifications, are important factors to consider when delivering direct mail pieces. In essence, it is critical that printed pieces follow standard design principles.

Phillips and Morgan (1990) note that the package design, the name recognition of the institution, the reputation of the institution, and the students' perceptions of the institution affects the response rate of direct mail pieces. Phillips and Morgan (1990) highlight that what might be considered a first contact with an institution may really not be at all. Prospective college students may have a partial or long-standing familiarity with the campus from previous visits, personal contacts, or previous information from other individuals.

The information Phillips and Morgan (1990) highlight is valuable because it gives a brief illustration of what is involved in just the direct mail pieces that are used as recruitment tools. Because direct mail pieces have been a permanent staple of the recruitment communication process and will continue to serve as a valuable tool, it is important to understand how they are used and what they should have in order to be effective.

While the future of direct mail is not exactly clear, the use of the Internet as a recruitment communication tool is increasing and becoming an integral part of the

recruitment process, both for prospective students as well as for administrators. The Art & Science Group, a consulting firm used by institutions of higher education, has conducted a number of survey studies related to the college market and college recruitment. Their research indicates that the growth of Internet usage has steadily increased each year. In 1996 the Art & Science Group indicated that 31% of the market had access to the Internet; it was projected that another 38% would have it within a year's time. In 1997, the Art & Science Group reported an increase of over 40% in Internet access, with 72% of survey respondents reporting access to the Internet and an additional 22% having access in the following year. In a 2000-2001 publication by the Art & Science Group, it was reported that 94% of the people interviewed in a survey reported having access to the Internet. It was projected that 100% would have Internet access in the next year. Of 500 students interviewed, not one reported lacking access to a computer (Art & Science Group, 2000-2001).

These statistics indicate that the Internet is becoming an evermore integral part of people's daily lives and is accessible to a large percent of the population. The Art & Science Group (2000-2001) reports that, as access to the Internet has increased, the digital divide among high school seniors planning to enter college and the college market, has decreased and has essentially almost closed. Of high school students planning to attend college most have access to computers and the Internet, implying that most of the college market has access to the information provided on the Internet. This report suggests that the use of the Internet should be ubiquitous among prospective college

students, including students from families of lower and higher income levels or varying SAT/ACT levels (Art & Science Group, 2000-2001).

The 2000-2001 Art & Science Group report found that in the first stage of the college selection process, the Internet is the second most used source of information resource, with 37% of respondents reporting Internet use. Guidance counselors were reported as sources of information by 48% of the respondents (Art & Science Group, 2000-2001). Other resources students reported using during the first stages of information gathering include (in descending order) friends, guidebooks, college catalogues, direct mail/brochures, and parents (Art & Science Group, 2000-2001).

The Art & Science Group (2000-2001) also reported survey results concerning information resources that influenced the students' application decisions. Again, guidance counselors ranked first, used by 20% of the respondents, followed by the Web (15%) college catalogues (9%), college guidebooks (9%) college visits (8%) and direct mail/brochures (5%).

When it came to the actual decision to enroll, campus visits ranked as most influential, as reported by 69% of the respondents (Art & Science Group, 2000-2001). Parents and other family members were ranked most influential by 46% of the respondents, current students enrolled at the school of choice ranked at 32%, while resources such as Websites ranked alongside college admission staff. Other resources used, in descending order, included viewbooks, catalogues, and other print materials, graduates of the school, and friends (Art & Science Group, 2000-2001).

The statistics reported by the Art & Science Group (2000-2001) are more current than those presented in some of the previous literature. The inclusion of the Web as a source of information has, it appears, changed the significance and value of some information resources, such as traditional print media. These reports demonstrate that as students begin the process of college selection, they are often using the Internet as a starting point and as a resource throughout the process. Concurrently, as the value of the Internet as an information resource is highlighted, the issue of how to direct students to this particular source of information arises for college recruiters and marketers.

The Art & Science Group (2000-2001) briefly addresses the process of directing students to the Internet as a source of college selection information. It reports that at the time of the study guidance counselors had the most significant influence on leading students to the Web, with 68% of students surveyed reporting this. Other resources included Internet search engines, college brochures, surfing, friends, teachers, advertisements, a link from another Website, and reference books. These statistics provide some insight into what is effective in driving students to a Website and what resources will be most beneficial for college marketers and advertisers to employ when developing recruitment materials designed to direct students to a Website.

Strauss' (1998) research encompassed the elements of college selection and the tools used for recruitment and selection. Using the 1987 Hossler and Gallagher three-stage college choice model (illustrated in the review of Hossler, 1999) Strauss (1998) examined the use of the Internet as a source of information during a student's college selection process and the use of traditional information sources during the college

selection process. Of the students surveyed, the majority used college publications and mailings as an information source a great deal during the search stage of the college selection process. Other references included campus visits, parents, current students at the college, guidance counselors, reference books, college alumni, college admissions representatives, teachers, the Internet, and videos. Strauss (1998) reported that even when not used a great deal, students did use these information resources to some degree during their process of college selection.

During the choice stage of the college selection process, Strauss (1998) reported that most respondents used college publications and mailings a great deal. Following college publications and mailings, during the choice phase of the college selection process, students relied upon campus visits, teachers, parents, current students at the college, reference books, guidance counselors, alumni, the Internet, and videos as information sources. These findings, similar to some of the research previously discussed, suggests that as the college selection process progresses the information resources relied upon by prospective students changes. For instance, personal communication with parents takes on a more important role as the selection process progresses.

In terms of the types of communication that are presented to prospective students these findings are significant. Strauss, among others, suggests that college publications and mailings are most important in the initial development of the choice process. Students use such information to begin gathering and assessing colleges and programs in which they have an interest. As the process evolves, the information might be

supplemental to their research, but Strauss' research suggests that other resources become more important.

Strauss (1998) concluded that if students have access to the Internet, they do use it to search for information about colleges during the college selection process. He also concluded that the Internet is used more frequently as an information resource during the search stage than the choice stage (Strauss, 1998). He suggests that it is possible that students view the Internet as a place to find introductory information about colleges and academic majors. He asserts that the Internet is a more effective introductory resource than a final resource in the college selection process and adds that because students reported using traditional resources, such as college publications, more frequently than other resources during the search and choice stages of the college selection process, it may be because it is more accessible to them as they address personal sources, such as their parents. It is easily accessible because colleges tend to do the work of recruiting students via this method, rather than students actively seeking out the information.

The information Strauss (1998) reports is beneficial to the current study as it highlights the types of information most frequently used and offers some reasons for why it might be used as it is. One drawback of Strauss' (1998) study, when considering his findings about the use of the Internet as an information resource, is the age of the research. At the time of the study it may have been easier for students to wait for mailings to arrive in their mailbox rather than seek out on the Internet. Today, however, it is possible that some of these assertions no longer hold up, as most students report having access to the Internet and use it with great ease (Art & Science Group, 2000-2001).

However, Strauss (1998) does provide useful background information about the types of resources students use throughout the college selection process and the points at which the various resources are utilized.

Strauss' (1998) final assertion is valuable regardless of the date of the research. Some information resources, such as college publications and mailings, are used consistently throughout the various selection stages. He (1998) suggests that the process of gathering information may be "seamless" (192), thus asserting that students do not distinguish between the various types of information they consult during the various stages of the selection process. Rather than select one resource for one part of the process and another for a later part of the process, students choose the sources they wish to use and continue to use them throughout the selection process. In relation to the current research, Strauss (1998) makes a number of valuable assertions, which provide a strong framework for understanding the types of resources students use throughout the college selection process, and thus, what types might be best applied by college marketers and advertisers.

Based on the findings of the previous research, there is a fairly clear understanding of the stages students go through when making a college selection. Evidence suggests that students most commonly seek certain criteria when searching for either an institution or academic program. There is valuable information about the resources students most commonly use to determine these criteria to judge decisions. The previous research has built a firm foundation from which further study can be built. Following the framework developed by the previous literature, the current study seeks to

extend our understanding and replicate earlier findings about the college selection process and the resources students utilize. The following questions will be addressed:

- From whom or what do students first learn about the higher education institutions they will investigate during their college selection process?
- What information resources and media do students say they use to gather information about higher education institutions during their college selection process?
- What types of media do students find to be most helpful and beneficial in providing information during their college selection process?
- Who do students say is most influential on their college selection decision and at what point in the process?
- What criteria do students say they use to make judgments and decisions about and ultimately to apply to, higher education institutions?

Method

Previous research surrounding prospective college students' choice selection process has often used surveys as the method of data collection (Hodges & Barbuto, 2001; Strauss, 1998; Rosen, Curran, & Greenlee, 1998; Broekemier & Seshadri, 1999). Strauss (1998) noted in the limitations to his research that a quantitative study allows for no discussion about the questions asked; the answers are thus limited by their brevity. Strauss (1998) suggested as a future improvement the use of a qualitative method such as a focus group to allow room for discussion and the observation of behaviors.

Participants in previous research (Hodges & Barbuto, 2001; Strauss, 1998) have been enrolled in and were currently attending college. These respondents were asked to reflect on their college selection process and what they recalled doing during their search process. To improve upon these studies and to more accurately gauge what is important to students during their selection process, it was important to use students currently active in the college selection process.

The current study, following Strauss' (1998) suggested use of a qualitative method, employed focus groups comprised of high school juniors and seniors from three high schools in the Rochester, New York and Finger Lakes regions. A total of 32 students participated in three focus groups; one group was comprised of three students, one of five students, and the third of 24 students. The groups were run during the students' regular school day; the first and second focus groups ran for approximately 40 minutes, the length of the students' regular class periods. The third focus group ran for approximately one hour and 20 minutes, the length of that group's normal class period. The guidance counselors and principals from the participating schools were contacted for both permission and assistance in student selections. The students involved in the study were selected based upon their year of study, their college aspirations, and for the groups of three and 24 students, their participation in marketing/college related classes. It was determined that such students would have an active interest in the topic of college selection and, being currently involved in the college selection process, would be aware of the criteria they maintain for college selection.

Because the participants of the study were minors, permission to perform the study was sought from the principals of the participating high schools and subsequently from the parents of the students selected to participate in the study. The focus groups were held at the participating high schools in classrooms in which the students regularly attend class. The purpose of using the school setting was to make the students feel more comfortable by being in an environment they were used to. Refreshments were also offered to the students as an additional means of making them feel comfortable.

The focus groups were videotaped for reference and note taking purposes. At the beginning of the interviews the purpose of the cameras was explained to the students. Following that, the researcher introduced herself and the purpose of the study and then asked the students to introduce themselves. After introductions, the central points of discussion began. The interviews were semi-structured, as they followed a general set of questions that the researcher had prepared as a guideline. The questions were structured in such a way that they left room for open-ended answers and follow-up questions to be asked of the participants.

Following introductions, the opening portions of the interview focused on when students started looking at colleges and where and how they learned about the colleges they were researching. This segment led to later questions regarding the information and media resources the students were using, after which the students were asked about the people who influenced their selection processes. Throughout the questions and answers, students were encouraged to expand their answers and to add additional information that may not have been asked about specifically. If a student's answer to a question seemed

like it was going to lead to pertinent information, s/he was asked follow-up questions to expand the information. In an attempt to generate further information, the participants were encouraged to respond to one another's commentary as well. Upon completion of the question and answer sessions, the students were thanked for their participation and then dismissed.

As soon as possible following the interviews, notes were taken to cover important topics brought up during the interviews. This was not possible during the interviews given the fact that there was only one moderator present. After generating the initial notes, transcripts were then made of the tapes from the interviews (see Appendix). The transcripts were reviewed numerous times to assess the information and generate results and conclusions about it. The responses were categorized according to the relevant research questions which they addressed. If responses did not fall into a specific category, notes were made and they were assessed individually regarding their significance and possible relevance to the study. The categorization and analysis of the responses were used to present the results of the study.

Results

Students' reports of how they learn about the colleges they investigate

When asked about how they learn about the colleges they investigate during their college selection process, students were quick to respond, citing a number of different sources. Before discussing where exactly they found out about the schools they were going to investigate, a number of students reported that they began their search based on

the academic area in which they were interested in studying. One student reported that she was interested in majoring in Native American studies, thus she had to base her selection around a limited number of schools offering that particular degree. Another student reported “I want to go into business, so my dad bought things like *U.S. Weekly Review*, and *Time*, with top 40 lists.” From there, the student reviewed the lists herself and wrote schools for further information about their programs.

Other students reported taking different approaches. Two students reported visiting college fairs, where they picked up information from the booths of schools that had attended the fairs. One of the two students reported: “I happened to be at the mall one night and there was a college fair, so I stopped at some of the booths and picked up some information.” The other student knew what he was interested in studying, thus he reported that he found out what colleges offered the major he was interested in and he visited their booths.

A few students reported that they visited the college first and then began looking at it as a place to consider. One of these students reported that he had originally visited the college he was interested in to see friends of his. After visiting his friends, his experiences led him to look further into the college and later, to apply there. Another student reported that he stopped at the college of his choice on a trip to drop his sister off at school. This visit prompted him to examine the college further. However, later in the conversation, it was noted that the student had first learned of the college through their sports program and their championship-winning teams.

Other students reported that they first learned of the colleges they investigated after they had taken their SATs and received mail from related listings. Others reported using the college selection books available to them in their guidance office. The remainder of the students reported that they learned about the colleges they investigated initially through Internet searches. One student said: “My friend told me about a college that he wanted to go to, so I kind of looked it up and liked it.” Another said: “I go to Google, and then I put in college search engines and they’ll all come up, and then I fill out the surveys. Or sometimes, you’ll see something in magazines. Like, I’m going for dance so in the dance magazines you might see something for a college.”

Overall, the students reported learning about the colleges they chose to investigate using a variety of resources. As the discussions developed, and will be reported later, the ways in which the students utilized these resources became clearer.

Resources and media used to gather college information

When asked to tell about the resources and media they use to gather information about colleges, the students’ responses again reflected the use of a variety of resources. However, overwhelmingly, it seemed that the Internet was the primary source from which the students gathered information.

Before reporting about the students’ Internet use, it is important to examine the other resources the students reported using. A few students reported that they used the college books provided by the guidance counselors at their schools, such as *Barron’s* or *The Princeton Review*. One student said she liked the books because students have the ability of going through them and quickly identifying information. She reported: “A lot of

them have SAT scores most students have. Then you can size up what most of the student body is like. What are the kids like and then it's something you can strive for in your SATs and your GPA. I like when the requirements for applications are in there too." The students mentioned having access to the books in their guidance counselors' offices, which is where they tended to browse through them in their initial search stages. Other students said that they spent a lot of time reviewing the pamphlets they received in the mail from colleges. One student said that she had acquired a shoebox full of information that she reviewed whenever she was bored. She said: "If something looks interesting I'll use that. At least three times a week I'll get stuff from colleges. It'll be like blank college or university is here for you. I might as well look them up." From that point on, this student and others said that they would continue their search on the Internet. Other sources cited as information resources included magazines, television commercials, campus visits, and word of mouth.

Whether students viewed a television commercial featuring a college, saw an advertisement in a magazine, or received a pamphlet in the mail, the students reported that they then turned their searches to the Internet. With the exception of one student who said she did not use the Internet once for her research (who shortly after mentioned using it to look at photos of a campus) the remainder of the students all mentioned using the Internet for various college search purposes. The ways in which the students utilized the Internet varied. Some students reported that they began their search there, going to sites such as Google, Ask Jeeves, and Yahoo and typing in search terms for college search engines, or names that they had heard of and were curious about. One student said:

“If I like how a college looks in a pamphlet I’ll go on the Internet and go to a Website and try to find it.” Another student mentioned having heard about a college on a television commercial and then turning to the Internet to look up the college for more information. Similarly, one student mentioned that she received mail from colleges, which she would review and then, depending on her interest in it, turn to the Internet to find out more in-depth information. Students did not go into great depth about the qualities of the print media that drew their attention, but they did mention design and the information contained in the material as being characteristics they paid attention to that drew their interest.

Most useful resources throughout the college selection process

Students mentioned using a breadth of resources to perform their college selection research. Pamphlets were cited as being important in offering initial information, as were television commercials and books. Students also mentioned utilizing pamphlets and books for more in-depth research. Overwhelmingly, however, it was the Internet that was mentioned repeatedly by students in all focus groups as being used, and for being used for a variety of purposes.

Some students reported using the Internet as the place at which they began their college selection process, where they went to search Websites such as Google or Yahoo and used terms related to their area of academic interest or a college name they might have heard of. One student said: “The Internet gives you more information about what it’s about – what the college is about.”

The students reported that they use the Internet to research the various criteria they find important. They also said they use it to do serious research before they make more important decisions about their college selection process, such as one student, who reported: “I went to the Internet first because of most of the schools I was looking at were in Pennsylvania. I didn’t want to make the six-hour drive without knowing.”

The students use the Internet not only to find out background information about the schools they are considering, but also to make human contact and to observe. A few students noted that they had used college Websites that offered the option of speaking with a student ambassador online. Others who had not done that said that if they had found a site that offered that option, they would have used it. Along the same lines, a few students mentioned that the college Websites they had visited posted videos featuring views of the campus, or in one case, documented “days in the lives” of students who attended the college. One student who had reportedly used this said that this “...showed what they did outside of class too. It was a good indication about the school.” Aside from campus visits, which a few students did mention as being very important to their college selection process, the Internet was mentioned most often as the source of information the students consulted during their college selection processes.

As it became clear that the Internet was the media resource students reported using most often, the participants of the second and third focus groups were asked about where they access the Internet. As noted earlier, students in the second focus group reported that they were allotted class time to perform Internet research in the school computer labs. It was also reported by the second focus group that there were computers

available for their use in the guidance office at school. Participants of the third focus group collectively said that they used the Internet at home. When asked if they could use it at school, they said that they would get in trouble if they used it in the library. The librarians, they reported, would kick them off of the computers if they were found using one for anything other than a project they were supposed to be working on. When asked if there were computers available for such purposes in the guidance office, they replied that they thought there might be some there, but nobody to their knowledge ever used them. One student, when responding about the use of the Internet at home, said that he found it more comfortable to use it at home. Another student quickly agreed. There was a consensus among the students that it was easier to do the searches when there were not people watching what they were doing.

Criteria used during the college selection process

The criteria the students were using for their searches while using the information pamphlets, books, and Internet is important, as it gives indication about what the students were using the media for. A number of students noted very quickly that a primary criterion they were looking for was their area of academic interest. This is particularly important as some of these same students mentioned that they would not even begin their search process until they had determined what it was that they wanted to study. One student said:

Speaking from a personal point of view, I was not really into the whole college search thing sophomore and junior year. I was kind of anti-college. Not that I didn't want to go, because I do and I did. I don't know, I was too stressed out

about having to pick one because I didn't know what to do and I didn't really feel like I could pick a college because I really didn't know what I wanted to study.

So, I guess once I started to think about it more and started to realize what I wanted to do it was easier to start looking. But, I didn't really start looking seriously for colleges until I guess probably this summer. I couldn't pick a school if they didn't have the major I'd eventually want. I didn't want to pick a school that wouldn't have the major that I'd eventually want.

This sentiment was shared by a number of other students. One student said that he didn't think people should even look for a college if they did not know what they wanted to study, as he thought searching for a major was more difficult than searching for a college. One student followed this comment with the suggestion that: "I think a lot of us who don't know what we want to do go to a school like MCC [Monroe Community College, Rochester, New York] where you take a lot of different classes and then you can figure it out from there."

It is clear from these statements that the academic study area in which the students are interested plays a major role in their decision process. To further emphasize this, however, is the fact that a number of students began their search by looking for schools that offered the major in which they were interested. One previously mentioned student said that she began her search by examining lists of schools ranked in the top 40 for her specialty. She developed a list of schools she wanted to research based on their rating on the top 40 lists. Similarly, another student mentioned that path as the one he took when attending a college fair. He only visited the booths of colleges in attendance that offered

his intended major. Another student reported that she was looking for a school that had a wide variety of majors in case she changed her mind, but regardless, she was focused on schools that offered the areas that interested her. Many of the students mentioned similar thoughts, emphasizing the fact that for many of them, what they were interested in drove their college selection process.

Other criteria that the students reported as having a bearing on their college selection process include the ratio of women to men on campus, opportunities such as study abroad programs, the size of the college or university, the location of the college or university, and the criteria for acceptance to the school. The interest the college or university expressed in the student was also a criterion some students used, as was the student to teacher ratio and interest teachers expressed in their subject area. Students were also interested in knowing facts about life outside of schoolwork, such as where to hang out and what they could do on weekends with their free time. They said they would be interested in receiving such information from students who would give them the facts about the college life outside of the standard brochure information.

The students noted that they are aware of the fact that they are being marketed to by colleges and universities. Because of this, they are judging colleges and universities not only by the content of the information they send students, but the quality of the method by which it is delivered. One student taking a marketing class noted her awareness of marketing and said about the pamphlets she receives:

I just started taking this class and when I got a box full of things from colleges, some of them are really good. There are some that will give you a really thick

book telling you about the college and its history and then there are some that will just give you a folded piece of paper. Just like the Websites, if they're not spending time marketing themselves with the pamphlets and books, why look there? They don't have the kind of quality information about the college, then you're not getting what you really need and what you really want.

Clearly, this student judges colleges and universities not only by the classes they offer, but also by the quality of the materials they send to the students. Similar to this, one student reported that if she visited a Website and it did not have the information available that she thought was important, or she viewed the site as bad, she ruled the school out immediately. She said: "If they can't even take the time to make a nice Website, then why should I spend the money to go there? That was huge for me when I was looking. When I was looking online, you can tell when they put time in their Website or when they were just throwing bits of information together. For me that was a huge thing." Another student mentioned that she had visited the Website of a school that she had been seriously considering and thought that it was horrible. She said it was messy and only offered a listing of majors and sports students could be involved in. She compared this to the Websites of other universities that offered a multitude of options, including the opportunity to view webcams and virtual tours of the campus.

Relating to the way in which the colleges market themselves to students and the quality of the information that they send students, some students noted that the care that a college takes to spell their name right or the effort a college goes to show their interest in a student is important to them. One student said: "They always spell my name wrong.

Like I want to go there [sarcastically].” Similarly, another student noted that he pays attention to the interest a college shows in him. He said: “You can go there and it seems nice and everything, but I want to see what colleges are interested in me and what the people there are interested in.”

From these comments on the quality of college information resources, it can be concluded that students deemed the quality of them to be highly important. Their first impressions of the information resources they used were greatly affected by the quality of the designs and of the information they were able to access.

Another criterion students consider throughout their college selection process is finances. This can range from the consideration of the cost of a school to whether or not they will receive financial support from their family or other sources. One student noted that she would be attending a community college because she would be paying for her college education and would not receive financial help from her parents. She said she chose a community college because she could afford it. Another student cited a reason that he was choosing to look at colleges within the state was because in-state tuition would be cheaper than out of state tuition. One student reported that in her consideration of the financial aspect, she was also factoring the availability of work-study programs available and part-time job opportunities surrounding the campus so she could assist in paying for her education. These comments suggest that when the students are restricted by factors such as cost and financial aid, their overall potential college choice set and search is also restricted.

Throughout the discussions some students noted that there was information and aspects of the college that they wanted to see more of. Students in the first group noted the importance of photos, not only of the campus, but of the area surrounding the campus. The students said they wanted to see more photographs not only in pamphlets and books, but on the Websites as well. Two students reported they wanted to see more photos of the dorms and of the campus. The photos that do appear in pamphlets, one student reported, can turn her off a bit because she feels they are too posed. Students are aware, she reported, that these are not the people you would really see on campus. For her, it was more important to see the area in which she would be living rather than the posed people. These two particular students carried their conversation further, saying:

I'd like more pictures of the environment around the campus. What's downtown, what's down the street. I want to know what's around it because I'm going to be in a central to urban area what's around there, what kind of examples can I see.

That would be good. I went to visit U. Conn. and the campus is great, but Stores is like a dot on the map. I guess I just wasn't expecting that. I knew it wasn't Boston or Hartford, but I didn't know when you stepped off campus there was nothing to do.

Similar sentiments were shared by participants of the third focus group. One student in that group emphasized the importance of the look of the campus. She said she wanted to go to a campus. For her, that was almost more important than the major. Her reason for this was because she would be spending four years of her life there and did not want to be

in an “ugly” environment. From what they reported, it is clear that the students find not only what the campus offers but what the area surrounding the college offers equally important.

While not mentioned as a specific criterion when they perform their college selection searches, students did report that they take serious notice of a college if it goes beyond regular marketing method of a standard format letter and pamphlet and offers them something tangible, or at the very least, well-designed.

... when schools are sending letters, I tossed every single one. I didn't check them. But, if the envelope looked cool or there was something tangible inside, like they tossed in a free patch, or pen with the Website name, and you're writing with the pen and then you're writing and there's the Website. If they're marketing with the stuff, I don't – maybe something like that. Or like, how to get their name across.

I know for me personally it's not that it doesn't have a lot of information that bothers me about pamphlets, you can tell if they want you. Some say they'll send you more information but they don't or they don't even put their name of their Website on the pamphlet. You can tell if they want you to know about them. But, if they're giving you their Website and they really want you to check it out, then that's one thing. But if they're just sending you a white piece of folded paper telling you when their open house is, we're not going to go.

These statements were followed up by students who told about some of the things they had received from colleges that had really attracted them. One student reported that she had received a desk clock from a college. The receipt of the clock prompted her to look seriously at the college, and subsequently, she reported that at the time of the focus group she had visited the school about six times. Another student reported that he had received a change purse with the school's hockey jersey printed on it. He said: "Stuff like that sticks with you." His statement was immediately followed by another student who said: "The free stuff makes all the difference in the world." From the discussions amongst the students, there is evidence that it is not only the information that the schools send them that they examine, but the manner in which they present it. It was attention getting and enticing for these students to receive information that was outside of the standard format.

Who influences students' and their decision during the college selection process

Students were asked about the people they think are important to their college selection process. Other comments the students made regarding their college selection process led to information about the people who influence them. In one student's very first response regarding how she came up with the colleges she examined throughout her college selection process she mentioned that her dad bought her magazines to go through and find information. Later, the same student reported that her father had organized weekly meetings with her to discuss her selection process and had guided her through much of it.

While some students reported that they were the only ones who had any bearing on their college selection process, most of the participants mentioned at least one other person whom they found to be influential on their selection process. A few students reported that their teachers, guidance counselors, or principals had participated in their search process. One student mentioned that her principal kept suggesting she look into his alma mater, so she did and decided to apply there. The participants of the second focus group mentioned that their guidance counselors had been prompting them to perform college searches during class time, whether by browsing college guidebooks or by devoting a class to the use of a computer lab for the use of the Internet. Another student mentioned that she was participating in a special program through school through B.O.C.E.S. in which she would have the chance to visit some colleges. She reported that her counselor for this program had been helpful in her search process.

Students also reported how their friends and peers influenced their college selection process. A few students reported that what their friends were doing did not really matter to them and their decisions, although they did note that if there was a chance that a large number of students from their high school were to all attend the same college, they might opt not to go there as they are looking for a change and to meet new people. However, other students noted that their friends, either through what they said or where they were attending college, did influence their decisions in some manner. One student noted that if a friend of hers mentioned a school that was considering in her selection choice set, she herself might be inclined to look it up, but the reason she would research the school would be "...because it might be a good match for me, not because they're

going.” Another student reported that because he had friends attending a particular college, he became interested in it. He said: “I think it’s made my decision a little easier. Ever since I visited I’ve wanted to go there. It makes it easier because you know people. It’s less scary I think, the fact that you know somebody.” A fellow participant followed that statement by explaining that if she had to choose between a few schools, it would be easier to pick the place where there was somebody she knew than a place where she did not know anyone because it would be easier than starting over. To counter this sentiment, however, one student reported that he did not think friends were a deciding factor. He said he believed that part of the experience of college is meeting new people and forming new relationships. For him, what his friends were doing did not matter.

The aspect of how friends influence a student’s college decision is the report from one student that she had not cared about college and did not plan on going until her boyfriend and a friend of hers began their own college careers. She noted that after observing their experiences, she had determined that she was very interested in attending college and began talking to her boyfriend to find out more about it. For this particular student her friends’ influence prompted her to begin her college search. Similarly, another student reported that listening to her friends talk about colleges and what they were looking for helped her to develop her own criteria and know more about what she herself was looking for.

As was briefly mentioned previously, a number of students reported that their parents influenced their college selection process. One student, noted earlier, reported that because her parents would not be paying for any of her college, her college selection

process was based on what she could afford on her own. Thus, her parents very directly influenced her college selection process by not offering financial assistance. Another student stated that if she did not study what her mother wanted her to study in school, she would be on her own in terms of paying for college. Similarly, another student noted that because her dad would be helping her pay for school, part of the criteria for her search process was the availability of work-study programs to aid in covering the costs of her college. For her, the parent's financial contribution directly influenced her college selection process.

Students reported other ways in which their parents influenced their college selection decisions that extended beyond only the financial aspect. One student reported the following when asked with whom he had been discussing college:

My parents 'cause my mom wanted me to not go far away, but that was not her decision. I think distance was a big factor in schools because that's the main thing of conversation with my mom. Like how far away, how she was going to get there, if she wants to visit me how long is it going to take. For her, I think that was one of the big things about choosing a college. When we were deciding on everything else, we were told it doesn't matter – no matter how much money the school is, it's an investment. If you like everything the school has and everything about it then it's an investment you're making. The types of jobs you'll get outside of it from going to the school and the reputation of it. Distance was probably the big thing with my parents.

And you're saying your parents were major influences in your decision?

Yeah, they were big influences on my decision because they're paying for it. This student, in his response, elaborated very specifically about the ways in which his parents influenced his college selection decision. This same student mentioned prior to this answer that his mother had prompted him to look at various programs when attending a college fair. For this student, his parents were a major influence on his college selection process.

From the results of the discussions with the high school students it can be said that students find a number of different people to be influential on their college selection process, from guidance counselors to friends to teachers, but it is the influence of their peers and their parents that is most important. Peer influences tend to guide them to their initial choice set they will review, while parents' ideas about where their children should attend and how much financial help they can provide their children with most certainly provide students with guiding factors they must consider when researching and deciding on the college they will attend.

Of the criteria that students listed as being important in their college selection process, a criterion that stands out as being different from that mentioned in past research, such as academic major, cost, or location, is that the overall impression a college or university gives students with the appearance of the media they use to attract students, whether it be a brochure in the mail or a website, is paid very close attention by the students. They examine not only the content and whether it meets criteria they have used in their selection, but also the layout, design and visual impact of the communication. The perception a student has when viewing the media will either entice them to look

further into the school, such as requesting additional information or visiting the school, or to stop their research about the school altogether. The students are marketing aware and savvy, and they weigh this knowledge along with the other criteria they consider as they pursue information about colleges and universities.

Another key finding that is a reassertion of previous research (Strauss, 1999) is that students rely heavily on the Internet as their primary communication medium when researching information about colleges. It is a starting point in their searches; prospective college students use it to develop lists of schools to research and it is a tool they return to time and again throughout their research process to look further into colleges, from finding out the basics such as majors offered to actually speaking with students via email or Internet chat sessions. Aside from campus visits, high school students reported that they found the Internet to be the most helpful of all research tools utilized when moving through their college selection process.

Discussion

This study provides further evidence of the ways by which students begin and carry out their college selection process. It affirms the results of previous research regarding how students develop the lists of schools they examine, the criteria they use to judge schools, as well as the media resources they use to perform their college selection research. This study extends the results of previous research through its discovery of the extent to which students use the Internet as a media resource in their college selection process.

Previous studies, due to the timeframe in which they were performed, offered limited results surrounding students' use of the Internet during their college selection process. While limited by the lack of quantitative data, the results of the current study suggest that students are using the Internet as a research tool throughout their college selection process more than in previous studies, such as Sevier and Kappler (Retrieved September 10, 2004), where Internet usage was ranked fourth behind scholarship brochures, academic viewbooks, and departmental brochures. The results show that prospective college students are using the Internet to develop their initial choice sets, such as when they begin a search online based on a particular major they are interested in. They continue to use the Internet throughout their search process, returning to college websites they found interesting to find more information about common search criteria, such as housing, classes or student ratios, as well as to begin contact with educators or even students who attend the institution. The Internet serves not only as a beginning source of information, but one that students refer to throughout much of their college selection process.

The current study provides some support for what Sevier and Kappler (Retrieved September 10, 2004), Hossler (1999), and Strauss (1998) anticipated happening. Their studies suggested that students would utilize a number of media outlets, but as their access to the Internet increased, their usage of the Internet during their college selection process would also increase. These studies also suggested that future college marketing campaigns would be most successful if they used integrated marketing campaigns. Based on the reports of the participants in the current study, it seems these previous proposals

have merit. The results of the current study suggest that students use direct mail marketing pieces, other media resources, and suggestions from peers and others in their social circle to first acquire information, but then turn to the Internet to find more in-depth information. The students are not only using the Internet to perform research based on traditional criteria, such as class size and the availability of majors, but also for information about such things as “the day in the life” of enrolled students and what they can really expect while attending college. This statement confirms Hossler’s (1999) assertion that students would be using the Internet not only for the initial stages of their search process, but after they had narrowed their searches down, more in-depth information.

The current study also supports Hossler’s (1999) and Phillips’ and Morgan’s (1990) assertions that the visual appearance of the marketing devices colleges utilize is important. Hossler (1999) noted that a poorly designed Website or one that lacks information would be viewed negatively, while one that was efficiently designed would be viewed favorably. Similarly, Phillips and Morgan (1990) asserted that the visual appearance of direct mail pieces is very important. A number of participants in the current study noted that the way a brochure or Website looked could lead them to either investigate it further or discard it immediately. The students were clearly aware that they are being marketed to by colleges and expect that the materials and information they receive will reflect the time and effort of the college. The marketing communications utilized by colleges and universities can be the first impressions students have of the institution. The students noted that they expect a school on which they will spend a lot of

money over the course of their education will make the effort to present itself well. The results of the current study suggest that in conjunction with overall combined marketing efforts, to be effective, colleges and universities must present students with information that is presented in a well-designed format.

The current study also adds further examples of who influences the college selection processes of high school students. While a few students answered that they were the sole influences on their college selection process, a number of students highlighted the extent of the role that their parents played in their decision making. From the responses given, parents appeared to be the most influential people on the students' decision making, followed by counselors and their friends. One observation relating to this is the fact that parents influence students not only through conversation and suggestions, but also through the financial assistance they offer their children. Some of the ways in which counselors influenced students that were reported include prompting the students to visit Websites and actively participate in the college search during their class time, as well as providing students with resources in their offices to perform searches. Counselors were also noted as directing students through college preparatory programs. Friends' influences took the form of general discussion about colleges that prompted the students to look further, as well as the students' observations of their friends' experiences in college, whether it be because of a campus visit or a discussion with friends. The current study thus extends previous research by providing insight as to how various people influence students' college decision processes, as opposed to only

providing statistics regarding the percentage of students who report counselors, parents, or others as influences.

The present research also contributes to the knowledge about the criteria by which students judge higher education institutions. Previous research, such as Broekemier & Seshadri (1999), has reported students' criteria based on survey research of a limited number of possible responses. The present study was able to extend these results because students were responding not based on predetermined criteria, but their own thoughts about what they examine. The students reported various criteria such as location, the cost of the institution, men to women ratio, student to teacher ratio, and finance as being important during their college selection. However, college major was perhaps the most often cited criterion by which students judge colleges. The availability of a particular course of study would be an initial factor in the beginning stages of the college selection process. Students noted as well that as they narrowed their selection choices, the quality of the programs schools offered and the varying aspects of the programs became important.

An important observation that was made during the discussions surrounding majors and potential courses of study is the fact that of the students who mentioned it as a criterion they use, most said that they could not and did not start their searches until they had determined their prospective major. This observation highlights the importance of college major and the programs available at colleges and universities. Knowing the weight students place on majors and college programs during their selection process, enrollment marketers should place emphasis on the available programs at their schools,

and at the same time, get specific academic departments to become active in recruitment efforts. While students reported other criteria as being important, the most emphasis was placed on college major, suggesting that this needs to be an area of focus when developing marketing communications for prospective students.

While not specifically a criterion by which students judge a college, some time was spent discussing various recruitment efforts and the alternative ways by which colleges and universities attempt to reach prospective students. From their discussion, it became evident that students take note of recruitment efforts that utilize alternative marketing and communication formats, such as stickers, pens, and in one case, a clock. The students demonstrated a great deal of enthusiasm when talking about the alternative materials they had received and how that makes them take note of schools. The students noted that when they receive information in alternative formats they are more apt to take the time to look at it than if they receive information in a standard format, such as a brochure. When asked about it, the students noted that these items can and do draw them to look further, such as to visit a Website if that is what the marketing piece is advertising.

From the discussions about alternative marketing and communication efforts it is evident that students take note of college marketing efforts that extend beyond the ordinary. The students' discussions also highlight the impacts of push and pull media on their searches. The brochures sent out in mass mailings, the pens and stickers, the television and radio advertisements, all forms of push media, are found to be useful by the students to a limited extent. The push media arrives in students' mailboxes or during

commercial breaks; they do not seek it, but it does make some impact on their decision process. However it is pull media, mainly the Internet, which the students reported as being their primary communication method. Students reported push media, such as brochures, often persuaded them to further examine a college by visiting their website. Thus, the students actively sought out the pull media of the Internet. The students had to make the conscious decision to visit a website and perform research. Students' use of push and pull media may incline college enrollment recruiters to consider using non-standard methods of communication to reach prospective students and send them in the direction recruiters want them to go. If, for instance, enrollment marketers would prefer to utilize their webpage as a primary source of information, they should seriously consider sending information to students about their pull media webpage via alternative formats, or push media. The students noted that what appeals to them most are items they can use or will look at often, such as pens or magnets. This is not to say, however, that if students were to become inundated with such information they would not become immune to it and disregard it. After receiving the push media, such as brochures, pens, or magnets, it is the intention that students will then choose to visit the website (pull) of the school who sent them the push media. Such an issue would need to be researched after there is an increase in such marketing materials. Given the current information from the students, however, the use of alternative marketing formats would be a positive and effective marketing recruitment tool it tied in with other media, specifically, the Internet.

Limitations

There are limitations to the current study. A primary limitation of the study is its design. Because the research was performed using focus groups the results of the study cannot be generalized. Given the nature of focus groups and the fact that a small fraction of a given population is investigated, the results are confined to the groups studied. Focus group research will also not necessarily generate repeated results. If another group of similar individuals were to be asked the same questions at a later point the responses and overall outcome of the study could be very different from the current results.

Another limitation of the current study is the inexperience of the researcher in focus group moderation. Because the researcher was new to focus group research it is possible that the direction of her questions, follow-up questions, and the group as a whole were limited. As the series of focus groups progressed her familiarity with the process and ease of moderation progressed, but the initial inexperience may have caused her to miss the opportunity to lead the students to generate deeper, more revealing thoughts.

Along with the inexperience of the researcher, the students and their demeanor are also a limitation to the study. Some students were somewhat reticent to answer questions, and when they were prompted to answer, did not go into great depth. The second focus group in particular fell under this limitation. The students gave short responses to the questions, leaving little from which to generate any significant results. The group dynamics of the three focus groups are also a limitation to the study. As the students became progressively more comfortable their answers became more substantive, but until they had reached their comfort level both with themselves individually as well as with the

group, their answers were limited. This could be attributed to the anxiety of speaking in a group setting, self-consciousness before others, or the inexperience of the moderator. Because of the reluctance to speak, responses were limited, thus leaving at some times little from which to generate results.

What students report doing and what they actually do is also a limitation of the study. While they may report performing their college selection process in a particular way, what they actually do may be different. For some students who had already completed their college selection process, they were reporting on what they recalled doing. Similarly, for those who were in the beginning stages of their selection process, they may have been reporting about what they figured they would do in the future but had not yet done. Also, their interpretations of the questions and the researcher's delivery of the questions may have caused a variance in answers, both among students and among the groups as a whole. This could have led to some inconsistencies with the types of responses students gave to particular questions among the three focus groups.

While subject to limitations, the present study does present opportunities for further research. Given the results of the present study in contrast to the results of previous studies about students' college selection processes, it is clear that there needs to be further research performed that focuses on students' use of the Internet as a research tool. The present study uncovered some of the means by which it is used in conjunction with other media resources. Because it was a focus of many of the students' responses relating to a variety of questions, students' use of the Internet as a primary media resource should be investigated further. Tied in with this, further research should look

into the possibility of the Internet and the criteria by which students judge colleges. As they use the Internet progressively more it will become beneficial to examine whether or not the criteria they focus on remains traditional, such as selection of a major and financial ability, or will it progress into focusing on other areas, such as presentation and marketing efforts.

The results of the present study suggest that it would be beneficial to college marketers and those wishing to communicate with students to examine students' awareness level of marketing and what qualifications they place on advertisements and marketing communications. The participants of the current study placed an emphasis on the appearance of the marketing communications they receive, as well as the various types of communications they receive. While studies have touched briefly on this subject, the results of the present study would suggest that this may be an area on which students focus and because the recruitment process greatly involves marketing efforts, it would be beneficial to examine exactly what students know and think of college marketing efforts.

The college selection process is a process in which students become very involved. The present research offers insight about how students begin their search process, what they look for in their searches, who their searches are influenced by, and what media they use to perform their research. It opens a number of avenues to pursue, primarily surrounding students' use of the Internet during their selection process and how that affects their search processes. As the Internet is used more and more frequently it will become an ever more prevalent and integral aspect of prospective college students' college selection processes.

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Appendix A

February 28, 2005

Dear Parents and Students:

My name is Kari Steger. I am currently completing my Masters degree at Rochester Institute of Technology in Communication and Media Technologies. As part of this degree, I am performing research for my thesis, which is focused on the college choice selection process of prospective college students.

I am interested in interviewing students in a focus group setting during their school day to ask them questions about their college selection process. I will be taping the session for my reference only and will be providing refreshments. The session will last for the length of a regular class period.

If you are interested, please sign this form and return it to Ms. Lake.

Thank you,

Kari Steger

Student Name

Student Signature

Parent/Guardian Signature

Appendix B

Focus Group Questions (used as an outline for the group sessions)

Opening:

1. Tell me your name and grade.

Introductory:

2. Are you currently searching for a college to attend?

Transition Questions:

3. When did you start looking at colleges?
4. What schools have you been looking at?

Key Questions:

5. Where did you first find out about the schools you've been looking at?
6. Where have you been looking for information about colleges and universities?
7. What type of information are you considering about the colleges?
8. You've been receiving a lot of information about colleges in a variety of forms.

What form of communication do you find most helpful to your search process?

9. Can you think of any way that the information could be presented that would be more interesting or would make you more apt to search for more information by, for example, visiting the school's Website?

Ending Question:

10. Is there anything else you would like to add about your college search process?

Appendix C

Focus Group: Moravia Central High School, Moravia, NY

Are you looking at colleges?

Yes

What colleges are you looking at?

- 1 Canisius, SU, Nazareth, SUNY
- 2 Boston University, SUNY, St. Johns
- 3 SUNY, Penn State, Lincoln Tech

When did you start looking at colleges?

- 1 Beginning of last year (*junior year)
- 2 Last year, around SAT time
- 3 June and then more over the summer

How did you go about looking for colleges?

- 2 Internet (immediate response)
- 1 I want to go into business, so my dad bought things like U.S. Weekly Review, and Time, with Top 40 lists. I went through the top 40 lists for business and wrote postcards to all of them asking for info about their business programs. Syracuse has a good business program, so I went and had an interview with the Dean of the business college last winter
- 2 I got mail from colleges. The ones that looked interesting I looked into. I looked on the Internet and found stuff out about them.

(Follow up to 2's answer): *When you use the Internet are you using the schools' Websites?*

- 2 I went to them, but I thought the Princeton Review was very helpful

(Answer to: How did you go about looking for colleges?)

- 3 Colleges sent me information over junior year. I'd reply with the postcards and I used the Internet over the summer. When school started I used a lot of the books provided by the guidance counselors.

(Follow up to 3's answer above) When you used the Internet was it also the Princeton Review or colleges' Websites?

- 3 I kind of just did a search and then went to the college's Website.
- 1 I didn't use the Internet once. I used all the mail I get and then books. I used it once to look at pictures of Canisius' dorms and that was it.
- 2 There's stuff on the College Board too and other sites like that. There's another site my brother sent me I don't remember what it was. They wanted to get me interested in finance or something, so they sent me there.

When you get mail and it looks interesting, what information is interesting to you?

- 3 I look at the student to teacher ratio. I don't want to go to a big university where there's like a 1000 kinds in one class and there's no personal contact. I don't want that, so I really look for that. I look for if they actually have my major. I mean, some people send you information that has nothing about what you want to do.
- 2 Location. If I get sent a thing about college in Nebraska, in the garbage. I pretty much look at schools on the east coast.
- 1 I have criteria. My dad is all into the college selection process. Since last year we've been meeting monthly and going through and deciding. I want to stay in New York State within a few hours drive, so if it's outside that it gets thrown. If it doesn't have business it gets thrown, too small gets thrown, too big gets thrown, all girls gets thrown. I have these criteria I follow.

Is there any other criterion about schools that you feel is important?

- 2 Ratio of guys to girls. I like balanced schools.
- 3 I want a school that does a lot of internships so I'm ready for the job force and like overseas summer programs.
- 2 Yeah, study abroad

Business is important to you (1). But, is a liberal arts college versus a more science based college important to you at this stage?

3 Well, I'm going in for architecture, so the art aspect is important.

2 Most of the schools I'm looking at have a wide range of majors and a lot of different schools within the university. I like that in case I change my mind about what I want to do. The schools I'm looking at definitely have what I'm interested in.

How did you become interested in the majors you're thinking about?

1 I had no idea what I wanted to go into, but I had a yearbook class last year that was really cool. You get a project and you have to work together as a team, and put it out. I'd like to get into marketing or advertising.

2 I like to write a lot, I'm interested in journalism, I like to travel. I pretty much thought about what I like to do and how I could do that for a job.

3 My dad builds a lot. I've seen that my whole life, so I thought it would be neat to apply my math and create something.

Who do you find to be most influential in your college selection process?

1, 3 Me

2 Yeah, me too

2 A lot of people talk about how their parents help them, but my mom is really passive about that. She says it's whatever you want to do. My brothers try to help me and find schools that might be good for me, but it pretty much comes down to what I want.

1 My dad will make suggestions, like oh yeah well this school looks good, but I don't want to go there, so it gets thrown out.

3 It's up to me. My parents aren't involved that much. I mean, I know I want to stay within a certain distance of home, like not more than half a state away and they're okay with that.

Are your peers an influence to you at all?

2 They make you interested. I might be interested in checking out a school someone is talking about because it might be a good match for me not because they're going.

1 If I find a good friend is applying to a school I'm interested in I might think it's cool they're going, but say they're applying to something I haven't heard of I don't think it'll make a difference.

3 I know some other people who are interested in architecture and we share information. But, just because they go there doesn't mean that I have to.

Do you want to go somewhere where nobody else from your class is going? Do you want a completely new experience?

2 Yes

3 It's like starting fresh.

2 I see the class from last year, where 2, 3, 4, 5 might have gone to the same school, usually SUNY schools and I think that I don't really have any interest in that. I wouldn't mind going with one of my friends, but I do like the idea of starting over.

1 If someone I don't like is going, it's big enough that I can avoid them.

Do you think that your guidance counselor or your principals have been having somewhat of an affect on you?

1 Sort of. Canisius – Mr. Morgan went there, so he says you have to apply, you have to apply. She looked at it and saw that it had what she wanted, so she thought, okay, I'll apply.

2 I don't know. I'm not really feeling it. I haven't heard many suggestions. But, I guess I haven't talked with them much about it.

3 I don't think so either

If you were to get something from a school in an alternative format, outside of your standard brochure what would you like to see?

1 I like it when they have actual information. A lot of them say something like our school is set in the quaint village of blah blah and everyone enjoys playing blah. I remember one where they had it perfect. They had it so this was one major, this

was one major, this was one major, and they had all of the information on it. I was like alright, I can sit here and look at the business major and look at it. And it tells you what you need to know without all this other b.s. like it's so pretty and it's historical significance. It's knowing that they have my major, the information about the major, and what it costs.

- 2 I look at the departments. Like, when they have a lot of schools within the university. I like it when they separate it out and talk about what each school offers. Cost, stuff like that.
- 1 There's extracurricular things like I play field hockey and if I go to a D3 school and they have field hockey I'll play. A lot of them are just like "We have extracurricular activities."
- 2 Yeah, or they'll say "We have over 100 blah blah blah organizations"
- 1 I like when they list the main ones. They don't have to list all 75, but just the main ones.
- 3 More facts and less fantasy. I mean like half of them don't list the majors they have. If I fill out the postcard and then send me information, like this one college keeps sending me an application and they don't even have my major.

Are the information books you have (like Barron's and the Princeton Review) helpful?

- 3 I think they're helpful. There are a lot of facts in there.
- 2 You can identify things really quickly. That's what I like. A lot of them have SAT scores most students have. Then you can size up what most of the student body is like. What are the kids like and then it's something you can strive for in your SATs and your GPA. I like when the requirements for applications are in there too.
- 1 I think they're good. I think they would have been more helpful last year. I've gotten beyond the point. Those books are like open it up and look at all the schools that have business. I'm way beyond that point. I'm not trying to find new schools – I've narrowed it down and am not trying to find something new. But now we've gotten them out and I'm not looking at them because I'm past that point.
- 2 You're ahead of the game though.
- 1 Yeah, since my dad is really into it I've been looking at it and I'm just past that.

- 2 Speaking from a personal point of view, I was not really into the whole college search thing sophomore and junior year. I was kind of anti-college. Not that I didn't want to go, because I do and I did. I don't know, I was too stressed out about having to pick one because I didn't know what to do and I didn't really feel like I could pick a college because I really didn't know what I wanted to study. So, I guess once I started to think about it more and started to realize what I wanted to do it was easier to start looking. But, I didn't really start looking seriously for colleges until I guess probably this summer. I couldn't pick a school if they didn't have the major I'd eventually want. I didn't want to pick a school that wouldn't have the major that I'd eventually want.
- 3 I thought the college search thing was intimidating last year. I didn't really want to start because I didn't know how far away I wanted to go. I needed to straighten it out. Last year a book wouldn't have helped me much. This year I'm deciding that I want to stay within New York or Pennsylvania, so now I can look. There's so many colleges out there. To narrow it down to two states, that still leaves tons of colleges to look at.
- 2 I think we started getting mail sophomore year.
- 2 I didn't want anything to do with it. When you're a sophomore, you're not thinking about it. You still have to get through two more years.

If you got something from a school, say a bumper sticker, a window sticker, or something you could iron on a t-shirt and it was from a school you were thinking about, would you use it?

- 2 It's cool when they give you free stuff.
- 1 Yeah, that would be cool.
- 3 You get stuff from the Army and you have to fill something out and you'll get a free bag. I think that stuff is cool.
- 1 It takes your attention to that school more cause all of a sudden it's like, oh wow, free stuff, I might as well look at it. And something I could iron on a shirt, that would definitely be cool.
- 2 I'd be impressed that they don't do the same thing as other schools.
- 1 It makes it look like they're a better school because they can do that. Like there was a college fair in Auburn and there was one school that had pens.

3 Yeah, Lincoln Tech, because I got some too.

1 I made sure I went over there and got all their stuff. And I filled out their card because I got free stuff. And that was definitely a big draw because I was like, whoah, I got a pen.

3 That school sounded really good to me.

2 Some schools send out CD-roms too.

So these things make you look a bit more.

2 Yeah, because they stand out from other schools.

Would you use an iron-on, or a static cling? If you got one of those things, what would you like?

1 Iron-on, because I don't have a car. Say I put it on my window, you wouldn't see it. But, if I got an iron-on and put it on a t-shirt, then I'd have new clothes. I love clothes, so if I had a new shirt I'd be really excited.

2 I guess I think of the stickers if you go to the school because we had those for my brothers' schools because they went there.

1 Pens are good too.

3 I don't think I'd like a bumper sticker. I don't put them on my car, and if I don't really know if I want to go there, I don't want to put it on my car.

It sounds like you'd like stuff you can really use.

2 Yeah

3 You're going to use a t-shirt.

1 Yeah, I went to S.U. and got a t-shirt and I thought it was awesome.

Do people still use backpack patches? If they sent you a patch with your school on it, would you use it?

2 If it's cool. I don't know if I'd put it on my book bag, but I might use it.

3 I don't know, I'm not really a patch person.

2 If I like it, maybe.

Is there anything I haven't addressed that you've maybe found helpful or anything you wish you could find out more about in your search process. Anything I haven't mentioned that you think is important?

3 I wish more colleges would come to rural schools. I talk to people at college fairs and they say they won't get to your school. It's not considered.

2 It's hard to get exposed to schools unless you go to the school or something.

1 I wish the schools would give you more of the stuff you really want to know when you're deciding on a college. You probably don't care about the Frisbee club, but you want to know about the social life. If there was some way to get that information, like if you could write to a student, and get the real info, like does the food taste good, are the dorms really nice.

2 I wish you could get more pictures. I hear about schools that are really good and I think, oh that's nice, but I could only decide to go there if I could really see it. That comes with visiting, but I wish you could see more pictures of the dorm rooms and the campus. That would be cool.

1 There are some books that have that stuff. There's one book that tells you real stuff, like bring a fake I.D. What are you really going to do on a Friday night... It would be good to know stuff like that.

3 One school actually had a student call me. But, it turned out that I'd filled out one of those cards and they didn't have my major. So, I wasn't interested because they didn't have my major.

If you knew a student ambassador was available online to chat with, would you do that?

2 Yeah. You could ask them real questions and since they're a student, you wouldn't feel like you have to censor your questions.

You've gone to look at some campuses. Have you felt reserved about some of the questions you've asked?

1 It's like the ones you ask on your tour are like, what classes do you have. It's not like how many girls are there, are there a lot of guys.

2 I guess it depends on whether the tour guide is stiff or comfortable.

2 I think time is an issue. It feels like you're pressed. You're walking around the school.

If you wanted more pictures, would you like to see them on the Internet or in a viewbook?

1 I think a pamphlet because you could have more.

2 Plus, the pictures they send you in pamphlets look professional and set up. I don't really like that. I like knowing what the buildings look like and stuff. I'm not really interested in the happy smiling faces of the kids.

The people can turn you off a bit?

2 I don't feel like they're real pictures.

1 I don't really notice them because they're all like the same thing. I don't look at them because they don't show anything...

3 I'd like more pictures of the environment around the campus. What's downtown, what's down the street. I want to know what's around it because I'm going to be in a central to urban area what's around there, what kind of examples can I see.

2 That would be good. I went to visit U. Conn. and the campus is great, but Storrs is like a dot on the map. I guess I just wasn't expecting that. I knew it wasn't Boston or Hartford, but I didn't know when you stepped off campus there was nothing to do.

Is there anything else that they could tell you or that would make enticing?

2 I think they should send you information about their open houses more in advance. And have some in the summer too. They're all in the fall. It would be nice if you could go to the campus and check it out in the summer.

3 They don't give you much notice. They're really far away. There's no way with two weeks notice I could go for a weekend all the way to Philadelphia. And some want you to stay for the weekend. I'd rather know farther than 2 weeks in advance. I'd like to plan. I don't want to just get in the car and go down there.

Is there anything else you'd like to say about your college selection process?

(No real answer)

End of focus group.

Appendix D

Focus Group: East Rochester High School, January 24, 2005

7:50 am – 8:30 am

Introduction to the Focus Group

Explanation of the research, college selection process

Are you currently considering any colleges?

Yes (as a whole)

Can you tell me about some of the schools you're looking at, or is more broad right now?

1 Within NY State

2 Parson's School of Design in New York City

3 Basically now in New York State

4 Colgate and Dartmouth

5 Syracuse, Nazareth, and U of R

When did you start looking at colleges?

Last year, when we started doing PSATs (yeah)

How did you come up with the schools you're looking at right now?

1 You look at the program you want to go into and then you compare it to what that school is good for.

4 SAT scores. Who's most competitive, social life and atmosphere

2 The program that I was looking into

5 Anything that was related to what I wanted to study

4 The things that are known for it (*it is known for)

It seems like you're all going into your college selection process with what you want to study in mind. Did you pick your major based on your current interests or based on someone you know who does it...?

4 I want to go into science and it's just narrowed down into what I want to do. I also want to major in Native American studies and there aren't many colleges in the country that have that major.

1 I'm not sure what I want to study

5 I've worked with kids a lot. I've worked at day care and my mom's a teacher, so I think I want to go into education.

3 Mine's just really broad because I don't know what I want to go in for.

2 I've always been interested in architecture, so I've been looking for good architecture schools.

Part of my interest is the media you are using to do your college searches. What are you using most to look for your information?

4 Books.

5 The Internet (after that they all said internet)

1 Books too.

Where are you most apt to do your Internet search?

5 At school

4. Yeah

1 Not at school

4 I like fastweb.com

Are there any other search engines you've found helpful?

5 They told us to go to collegeboard.com – that's what they've been forcing you to do.

If you go to these search engines, what are you putting in as your search criteria?

1 A school I've heard about or something

So you're going by name first?

5 Or what I'm looking at or interested in.

4 Yeah, most of the time I get a form letter in the mail, from the SAT, so I get those things and I look it up in books and weed through all the colleges.

2 Yeah, I get those things too sometimes

Do you find those helpful or is the Internet more helpful?

3 The Internet is more helpful.

4 I find them really annoying because you get the same things over and over again.

5 The Internet gives you more information about what it's about – what the college is about.

Okay, so you're finding the information the Internet is providing is more helpful and easier to follow?

Mm hmm.

What criteria do you consider when you're thinking about the schools. I've heard that academic programs and area of location are important. Is there anything else that is important?

4 Size.

5 Yeah, we come from a really small school so we just want to get out

4 I definitely want to go to a big school where I won't know anyone.

1 I consider like if they have certain clubs and stuff. That also is important.

5 Yeah, things that you can join and look into.

Cost or financial aid, is that important to you right now?

Collective: Yeah

1 Not right now, but when I think about it later it's going to be

4 I look at colleges that give a lot of financial aid to students.

When you're doing your searches, what would be the most important thing you'd want to find out about right off the bat?

4 Right off the bat if they have my major.

5 If they're big into what I'm looking for yeah.

So, if a college sends you information, would you rather get information about the whole college or would you rather get information about information about the program?

Collective: both

So you would like information about your majors or areas of interest pretty quick.

Yeah.

Who is important in your college selection process right now? Who is influencing you?

2 My parents and the guidance counselor

4 Myself

How have your friends influenced your decisions about what you're thinking about right now, or do they?

Collective: No.

So, it doesn't matter if your friend is going to Nazareth.

1 No. I don't want to go where any of my friends are going.

Collective: Yeah.

Do you know how your friends are going about your college selection process?

All my friends are in this room.

Is everyone using the Internet?

2 I think so.

I brought some things from RIT for you to look at. The Communication Department is expanding. They are considering, when advertising the program, how you would prefer to get the information. They're trying to think of ways other schools haven't used. A little gimmicky, such as a window sticker for your car. Would that make you look at them a little bit more?

5 It makes them stand out more.

4 I like stickers.

1 Not really for me. I'd just think it was an additional thing.

2 I might like it if it was a magnet for the fridge. I'd see it every few days and be reminded of it.

You'd prefer to have something more useful than a piece of paper.

Mm hmm.

Would you think just a web address and a tagline for their program would be better or would it just be another piece of information?

1 Better, more concise

3 Better

These are some of the ideas they are thinking about. Tell me what you think.

Does this seem to be something that would catch your eye more than a standard brochure?

4, 5 Yeah, definitely.

1 No, not for me. It would just be something else.

2 Usually you just get a picture of the school and the name at the bottom.

5. This is more different.

If you got something like this in the mail, what format would you prefer to have it in?

Postcard, pamphlet?

5 Like (2) said, if you got a magnet you'd see it all of the time.

1 Sometimes the art schools send cool stuff.

4 I don't really like the pamphlets. They all look the same. If it was a letter with this, that would be cool because it would be concise information.

Ok, so then you would see the web address and you would go there?

Mm hmm.

Do you like to be more in control of your search process than getting inundated with all of the information?

5 It pushes me to get started on all of this. I wasn't looking until all of the mail started to come.

So the mail does sort of push you to look.

5 Yeah.

Of the things you've been looking at, what do you think is the best way to learn about the colleges?

1 An admissions counselor visiting. When they give you statistics and stuff

5 It's more to the point – you can ask what you want to know.

So human contact is good. Since you are using the Internet, if you had the option of going to a school's Website and finding an IM name, would you consider contacting them if it said you could do that?

Yeah.

4 Yeah. I did that with Utica College.

Did you find that useful?

4 Yeah, I found out a lot.

5 Most of us are on AOL a lot, that's how we communicate, so that might be easier for us.

1 I like the phone

5 That would be too awkward for me

4 I like to instant message.

Have any of you gone and visited colleges yet?

Yeah.

So maybe having the opportunity to talk to someone after you visit would give you another option.

Yeah.

How often are you actually performing your searches?

1 Not too often because I spend so much time on work.

4 Yeah, one week my grades might be good so I'm looking at colleges and then the next week they aren't, so I'm going to MCC.

5 Yeah, I just registered for the SATs, so that got me a little bit more motivated.

Would it be more of a once a month thing or once a week?

Collective: Once a month.

A few of you are doing that search here. Are there computers in the library, or in the guidance office?

4 There are computers everywhere.

2 There are computers in the guidance office and in the library.

4 They're everywhere in the school.

So you can use any computer and do it.

(1) You're doing it at home? Is anyone else doing it at home?

Yeah.

2 Sometimes guidance will come in and take us to the lab and go to collegeboard.com. A couple days after we did that I did my own search.

5 We get started here.

Is there anything I haven't asked you that you think is important about your search process?

1 Reputation of schools.

When you learn about a school's reputation, is it word of mouth or something you've read?

4 Word of mouth.

1 Sometimes what the college sends.

4 Sometimes colleges will send information saying they are going to visit a certain area. Sometimes that motivates me more and impresses me to think that they're going to a different state to talk to people.

A lot of schools try to get their name in the newspaper. Is that something you notice?

1 When it's good.

2 I've noticed it before.

Are you more apt to look at a school that you've seen in the paper? Does it seem more reputable than a school you've never heard of?

Mm hmm.

5 When I was registering for the SATs they gave us a list of school. Half of them I hadn't heard of, so I crossed them off and didn't even think about them.

Is there anything else?

Not really.

To recap, you're using the Internet, you like to look at your academic programs and location, and your parents and your guidance counselors are most influential.

Mm hmm.

Appendix E

Focus Group – Greece Athena High School, March 9, 7:20 am – 8:45 am

24 Students

Introduction

Name, Grade, Whether or not you've started looking or applied to colleges

About half of the students were juniors, half were seniors, and one was a sophomore

For those of you who know where they're going, can you tell me when you started looking at college?

I started looking at colleges the summer between my junior and senior year, but I didn't really narrow anything down until probably October.

January of my junior year. I started getting a lot of pamphlets after I took my SATs and that brought it to my attention.

How about the person who is going to St. Bonaventure?

Well, I've known I wanted to go there since like the end of 10th grade. I know I wanted to go into business and my friend's brother goes there and my friend's friend goes there so I know from that.

How about Ohio State?

I started looking around my sophomore year when we took my sister to college. We stopped there because it was on the way.

One of the things I'm wondering about, and a few of you have already answered it, but when you started looking at college or those of you who are just starting looking, you have colleges in mind and you go look at it. Where have you first learned about the colleges that you're looking at and are interested in?

(Ohio State student) On the Internet. Now, you said you stopped there on the way to visit your sister. Did you know about it before then...?

Yeah, for them winning their sports championships and that stuff.

So did you start looking at it before after your visit there?

I'd say after.

My friend told me about a college that he wanted to go to, so I kind of looked it up and liked it.

The Internet and the samples from the SATs that they send out.

Well, there were all those Websites you can put stuff in and say what you want. That's how I found most of the ones I've looked at.

T.V. commercials. You can see what the college looks like

My friend and visit to the college.

Now, for those of you who said you went to the Internet – would you say you're going and looking blindly? Some of you seem to have already something in mind. Before you went to the Internet, you have the T.V. commercials, friends...is there anything else that might have prompted you to look?

There are college books in the guidance office downstairs. I remember going and flipping through those and thinking about what I wanted to do.

I happened to be at the mall one night and there was a college fair so I stopped at some of the booths and picked up some information.

When you're using the Internet to do your research, where would you say you're doing the most research? Where are you getting on the computer to do your searches?

At home

At home

At my house

Yeah

At home

Is anybody using it at school?

There are library Nazi's and you can't get on the computer unless it's an emergency. If you're not working on a project, after 35 seconds they'll say you need to leave.

It's more comfortable to use it at home.

Yeah definitely.

Are there computers for you to use in the guidance office?

Yeah, you could.

There are some there, but I don't know if anybody uses them.

So it's more comfortable to do it at home.

Yeah.

How are you finding the information on the Internet to locate it?

Ask Jeeves

Google

Google

Google

I Yahooed it.

There are college search sites where you can type in the things you're looking for, and the major, and come up with a list of colleges that are right for you.

If you go to the Internet and you're just starting your search and you go to Google, what are you typing in? Are you typing in names you've heard of and then going from there, or what?

I go to Google, and then I put college search engines and they all come up, and then I fill out the surveys. Or sometimes you'll see something in magazines. Like, I'm going for dance so in the dance magazines you might see something for a college.

I just kind of put in a college I hear about in the little search thing.

Is there anything you do?

I'll give you an example. I'll say type in Marymount University and a Website will come up and then different things so I'll look at that and see what is.

How would you have heard about Marymount before then?

Uh, I just went to uh a college fair and they had a whole bunch of colleges there. I want to major in communications so they said what colleges were for communications, Syracuse, Ithaca, and gave me information about colleges with communications.

A number of you have said you've gone on and searched – and you've done it by saying what you want to do and one person said you were having a hard time because you didn't know what you wanted to do. I'm curious to know if you're looking at what you're interested in and then you look from there.

You have to know what you want to do before you look, or it's easier, because you find something that specializes in that.

Where do you come up with ideas for what you want to do?

Just what I like to do. I hate English, I like to do business stuff, so I'd do something with that.

I kind of want to do Psychology. I've never taken a psych course, but I like to talk to people and understand problems. I like to help people solve problems. Either that or a social worker. I like dealing with people.

I just tried to decide what I wanted to do by what I've always done. What have I always liked to do. We took surveys in a life skills class to help us figure out what we wanted to do. That really helped.

For those of you who don't know what you want to do, have you thought about broader areas that you want to look at?

I think you shouldn't be looking at colleges if you don't know what you want to do. I think it's harder to know what you want to do than looking at colleges.

I think a lot of us who don't know what we want to do go to a school like MCC where you take a lot of different classes and then you can figure it out from there.

For those of you who have opted to go to MCC or plan on it for the future, can you give me a reason why you opted to go to MCC.

Because I can afford it. A lot of the colleges I visited and spoke to teachers, but a lot of them are really expensive. MCC is cheaper. When I want to do my bachelor's or master's I'll get scholarships, or the government, or the military to help pay for it. But for now I can't afford it because I'm paying for it myself. It depends on how much money I can come up with and how much I can do.

What criteria when you are doing your college searches are important about a school that makes you think about it?

When I went and looked at schools, there aren't many culinary schools out there. I might look at how the campus was and how the life was going to be outside the classes was too. While you're there to learn, you are going to be there to do other things outside of learning too.

I like to look at the amount of people that go to the school because I want to go to a big school. I also look at the sports they have.

I want to go to a pretty school. I don't want to spend four years at a place that looks like a dump. I also look at dorms. Forget about the major.

The size of the classes. I don't want to be in a big lecture room.

Class size.

Yeah, there are some classes that have 150 students in them and you're like a number. At a smaller school you're not just a number. It's more personal.

I'm guessing academic major is important to a lot of you, right?

Yeah.

How about location? Is that important to you as well?

Yeah, I want to get far away.

Going in state is cheaper than going out of state. I might feel comfortable going to a state where I have family, but if I don't have family there, I won't be comfortable.

If you're going for, say like a teaching thing, and you find a state where they are in need of teachers, it might make sense to go there so you could intern and then get a job there.

A lot of you have said you've been doing your searches on the Internet. What other sources of information are you using to learn about colleges?

I went to a college night at the mall and I got a shoebox full of stuff. I went to every table. Whenever I get bored I go through that. If something looks interesting I'll use that. At least 3 times a week I'll get stuff from colleges. It'll be like Blank college or university is here for you. I might as well look them up.

They always spell my name wrong. Like I want to go there.

I just started looking at colleges. I'm probably going to go to RIT. My brother-in-law used to go there and he said it was a good school. I'll probably go there for Computer Science.

Some people have mentioned pamphlets, TV commercials, books in the guidance office? Say you see a TV. commercial or you look at a book in the guidance office. Is that all that you're looking at or does that make you go look further for information?

If I like how a college looks in a pamphlet I'll go on the Internet and go to a Website and try to find it. Yesterday I got an email from ___ university and they told me to send them an application. They wanted to know if I was an international student and I told them I wasn't, so I told them to give me more information.

I think one of the best ways to find out about a college if you're really interested in it is to take a trip down there, no matter where it is. Because, if you're going to be spending all this money to go there you might as well take the trip there and talk to students and see how it really is. Most students that I talked to answered questions. There really was no problem.

Before you take the trip, because taking a trip shows a good amount of interest, how would you have learned enough about it to make it worth your while to take the trip.

There's like online chat rooms where you can actually chat with students on there and ask them questions, or get information off their Website, or what everyone else has mentioned.

Is there anybody who would just look at a book or would you look at the book and then go to the Internet?

I use a pamphlet. I've got some letters from colleges too about sports.

So if you get a letter from a college saying come play for us and you don't know very much about the school, have you left it at the letter? What have you done if you've wanted to learn a little more about the school?

The Internet.

Would you guys say then that the Internet is the most important source of information for you at this point?

Yes, other than the actual school itself.

For those of you have made your ultimate decision, would you say the Internet is where you got most of your information?

I went to the school first.

Me too.

I went to the Internet first, because most of the schools I was looking at were in Pennsylvania. I didn't want to make the 6 hour drive without knowing.

I went to the school to visit my friend's brother. I didn't go thinking I was going to go to college or anything, but then I thought about it.

So that peaked your interest.

How did you (CIA student) learn about that school first?

I went to a college fair. My mom wanted me to go into computer science booths. I ended up at the CIA booth and I got curious about that. I didn't know what I wanted to do. It made me interested. You have to do an apprenticeship before you go. The college fair was where I learned. Then they have open houses and a career discovery program over the summer, where you stay there and go to classes with the students. It was interesting. I applied and I got in.

I'm still curious about the criteria you use to judge colleges. Ultimately, what would you say is most important to you when you're deciding on a college? Major, financial aspects have been mentioned. Can you tell me what you think would be most important to you?

Financial.

I'd say like the size of the school.

The majors.

Majors.

Major

When you've been looking at schools, who you have been having conversations about college with?

My parents cause my mom wanted me to not go far away, but that was not her decision. I think distance was a big factor in schools because that's the main thing of conversation with my mom. Like how far away, how she was going to get there, if she wants to visit me how long is it going to take. For her, I think that was one of the big things about

choosing a college. When we were deciding on everything else, we were told it doesn't matter – no matter how much money the school is, it's an investment. If you like everything the school has and everything about it then it's an investment you're making. The types of jobs you'll get outside of it from going to the school and the reputation of it. Distance was probably the big thing with my parents.

And you're saying your parents were major influences in your decision?

Yeah, they were big influences on my decision because they're paying for it.

Different student, response to question about who have been speaking with

I know last year that I didn't care about college; I didn't want to go and then my boyfriend and my other friend went to Geneseo. After seeing their experiences and the college, I really want to go to college now. With him talking about the classes he's taking, even though it's hard, I really want to go because I'll be learning about something that I want to learn. So I usually talk to him about it and ask him questions. The main person I talk to about it is my dad. The farthest distance I'd go is Pennsylvania, the closest is Buffalo. The factor of my dad telling me his experiences of going far away to Michigan when he went and then the cost and how he could come visit me and how he'd rather I stay in New York because it would be cheaper and more close by.

Pretty much my mom came to the conclusion that wherever I go to college it won't matter because she's going to move there anyway. I've been trying to find a school that is known for what I want to major in and financially. Location is no factor in my decision.

Who else would you say has been an influence on you besides your mom?

Um, I think friends and what they like about their colleges and what they don't like gives me something to look at in colleges. She (*indicating one of the students in the room*) is really excited about it. She has a countdown.

And just so you know, February 28 was a year until college for all juniors.

My counselors help me. I've been going to New Visions next year, so I'll go to Brockport and look at it next year and see if that's something I'm interested in. They've helped me use that program.

My parents. College counselors too.

My parents and my family.

Do you feel that your friends are any influence on your decision at all, or doesn't it matter what they're doing?

(Saint Bonnie student) I think it's made my decision a little easier. Ever since I visited I've wanted to go there. It makes it easier because you know people. It's less scary I think, the fact that you know somebody.

To go along with that, I don't think for me it was the deciding factor or anything like that. When it came down to a couple schools and comparing them, it's always easier to go to someplace where you know people instead of starting all over again.

I think part of the experience of college though is going and meeting new people and forming new relationships. I don't know many people who are going to a culinary college, so friends wasn't a deciding factor. It wasn't going to make that big of a difference who was going there because it was what I was doing there. I wasn't going to just tag along just because.

Do you find yourself talking about school at all with your friends though?

Those of you who have decided, did you find yourself talking about it a lot with your friends?

They have a wall up in the cafeteria that says where everybody is going.

They do?

In the cafeteria there are a lot of posters that show where seniors are going and where they've applied to. I think that's easier than asking everybody.

How about some juniors? After the SATs it seems like your mailbox is stuffed. Have you been talking about it to anybody in particular or are you still not at that point?

Has some people's experiences been similar or has anybody had something different happen or have you gone about it completely different?

Pretty much the same.

So what media have you been using most to look at colleges?

The Internet.

Who have you been talking to?

My parents and guidance counselors. My parents have been most influential.

Mine have been similar.

Another thing I think is important about the Internet – I know for me when I'm looking at a site for a school and I'm not getting the information that I need or their site is really bad, I rule that school out. If they can't even take the time to make a nice Website, then why should I spend the money to go there? That was huge for me when I was looking. When I was looking online, you can tell when they put time in their Website or when they were just throwing bits of information together. For me that was a huge thing.

I know what she was saying. I was looking at Lockhaven in Pennsylvania and I was looking at their Website and it was horrible. It was so messy and they have no towards, they have no pictures. All they have is a list of majors and minors and sports clubs. I went to Medaille and Fredonia on the Internet and they have everything from virtual tours and webcam taking you around the halls. Even though I really wanted to go to Lockhaven that mattered.

When I was online they had the option to watch students while they were at school. They had a day in the life of that you could watch. IT showed what they did outside of class too. It was a good indication about the school.

If you're in Hickville, USA they're not going to have a lot of things going on. When I went to Geneseo they had everything. Even if the college is great, there are some that are in the middle of the forest. If you want to go hiking for 4 years of your life, that's great, but otherwise if they don't have stuff to do that matters.

So things to do outside of college are important.

If you go to a Website and you're looking for further information about the college, what information besides location and size, what other information that you would find is important, or the lack of information? What info would you like to find out about on a college Website?

The requirements to get in to the school.

Yeah, your SAT scores, your GPA.

Student to teacher ratio. Class size and how much attention you're going to get from the teacher.

I've read a few things about students ranking faculty highly in their decision. Is that important to you, or not right now?

IT doesn't matter what you're going to get. You're going to get a least one teacher that's not so good.

When you're trying to decide on two colleges, then you might start looking at that more and comparing it.

Now say you were narrowing it down, what are the criteria are you balancing here? What says this is what I want to do one more so than the other?

I think the programs they offer. You can major in communications, but there are so many areas that you can get into. For me it was what kind of program is it – the way that they go about it is important.

The major, like if they're a business school.

So say that you've only looked at schools that have your major and now you've narrowed it down. Then what?

Maybe like if it's a nice school you'd pay more attention than not a very nice school.

This is more for my secondary school, but one thing that made me decide was job placement or where they went to college after. IF one didn't do anything and one became a corporate lawyer or a CEO, I'm going to go to that one, where the graduate is doing something.

If you've picked 3 comm. Schools, what would be important after that?

Probably to see which college is more interested in you. You can go there and it seems nice and everything, but I want to see what colleges are interested in me and what the people there are interested in. Are the teachers interested in what they're teaching. If they're not, then I'm not interested in going there.

A primary interest of mine is the media that you're using. The Internet seems to be most important. IS that true across the board?

I think not just the Internet, but the pamphlets you get. I just started taking this class and when I got a box full of things from colleges, some of them are really good. There are some that will give you a really thick book telling you about the college and its history and then there are some that will just give you a folded piece of paper. Just like the Websites, if they're not spending time marketing themselves with the pamphlets and books, why look there? They don't have the kind of quality information about the college, then you're not getting what you really need and what you really want.

If you get a skinny pamphlet that is designed to have you go to the Website, would that make a difference to you?

Yes. Uh, when schools are sending letters, I tossed every single one. I didn't check them. But, if the envelope looked cool or there was something tangible inside, like they tossed in a free patch, or pen with the Website name, and you're writing with the pen and then you're writing and there's the Website. If they're marketing with the stuff, I don't – maybe something like that. Or like, how to get their name across.

I know for me personally it's not that doesn't have a lot of information that bothers me about pamphlets, you can tell if they want you. Some say they'll send you more information but they don't or they don't even put their name of their Website. You can tell if they want you to know about them. But, if they're giving you their Website and they really want you to check it out, then that's one thing. But if they're just sending you a white piece of folded paper telling you when their open house is, we're not going to go.

I check to see if I get anything in there. I got one that was pretty interesting that had stuff about all their sports and everything that you would go to their Website to look for, like all of their majors and minors. If they say you're the right type of person for this college, they don't even know anything about you, so they're just going to say that. But the one that had everything about the college on one side of the piece of paper I was pretty interested in.

I'd like something like the thick pamphlet that gives you a lot of information.

One school sent me airline tickets to visit the school. They didn't have my major, but it shows that they were interested.

You said a pen might be something you'd like. Schools are trying to come up with catchier ways to attract attention. It's hard to differentiate yourself from your competition. The college market is competitive. They're trying to get you and your money. They are trying to come up with other ways that they can reach you. What other ways would you like to see information? Something to send you to the Internet, or a bumper sticker, or what?

Saint Bonaventure sent me they sent me a huge thing that had a CD in it. That was cool.

If you can tell that they're spending money to make you come to their college, then that draws attention.

One admissions office sent me a little desk clock. I started looking at the school and found that it was something I was pretty interested in. In the past month I've probably been there like six times. That clock was the main reason that I looked at that school.

I got something in the mail after I went through this one program. I got a change purse that I gave to my mom that had the jersey of their hockey team on it. Stuff like that sticks with you. They sent me a bunch of other stuff, like cool pens with spiral things on it. I like pens like that.

The free stuff makes all the difference in the world.

If you get a regular table you set it on the table and are like whatever, but if you get a cool envelope then you have to find out what this is.

It's like Christmas!

So if you got something in the mail that was not just a piece of paper, you'd probably go and look more at that school.

Yeah.

Some people have said they don't like that because that's where my money is going.

If it's just a pen, then that's fine. Maybe not airline tickets, but a clock would be okay.

They had a lot of things to apply online. The ones that you could apply for free, that was great. You might as well apply then.

Where I'm going, they actually send the admissions officers out to high points in the state where they get a lot of responses from. They set up appointments where you can fill out your applications with them, which is really cool. I met up with a person in Buffalo and we went over everything. I decided early, but they go over everything with you there. Then they tell you if you've been accepted or not. I was early decision I think. I think if you're going to meet up with them they have a good idea that you're going to get in.

So applying for free is nice then too?

Yeah.

Did knowing you were going to get financial support from your parents for college, or not get it, influence your decisions at all?

My mom wanted me to go into computers and stuff then she'd pay for it. For a while I was thinking about it, but then I decided that wasn't wanted to do.

If I go against what my mom wants, then I'll probably be mostly on my own.

I'm getting my cosmetology license and my dad's paying for school. The reason I'm doing the cosmetology thing is that I can work through college. I'm looking for salons around college so I can help pay for it with my dad. Job opportunities around the college and if they have work study.

So that's another way then that your parents influence your decision then.