If You Build It, They Will Come: Motivating Factors Impacting Prospective Students’ College Selection

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Colorado State University recently announced its plan to construct a $246 million 40,000-seat football stadium. Faced with declining state funding, CSU officials believe a new facility will help build a winning football team while advancing one of the school's highest priorities: attracting more out-of-state students paying higher tuition (Bachman, 2013). Deemed out of touch by some, officials at CSU direct attention toward the University of Oregon, which has invested millions over the last 15 years to upgrade their football facilities, thanks in part to Nike co-founder and Oregon alumnus Phil Knight. The investments have coincided with a period of dominance by the football team, which has helped the University of Oregon double its number of nonresident students between 2002 and 2012 to nearly 42% of the undergraduate population (Bachman, 2013).

When examining CSU and UO from the outside, they appear similar. However, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2012), CSU actually accumulated $318 million in federal and state operating grants and contracts compared with $90 million at the UO. Officials at CSU assert that if potential out-of-state students were asked to select the superior institution, 90 to 95% would say the University of Oregon. The argument appears to be solely based on the visibility that UO receives from their football success, nonetheless, there appears to be some merit. Gary (2007) found that the University of Florida increased out-of-state applicants by almost 11% after championship seasons in football and basketball. The University Alabama experienced similar out-of-state student growth over the last five years due to their football success. Both universities were also able to choose from students with a higher GPA average and SAT score (Van Riper, 2013).

The purpose of this study was to examine prospective students’ motivation in college selection, and if athletic success changes the perception of its academic excellence. In order to meet the research purpose, two motivation theories were incorporated to determine if athletic success was important in prospective students college selection process. Several theories have been proposed in order to form a better understanding of the specific type of motivation that impacts prospective students’ choice. One theory exists that individual behavior can be either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated (Vallerand et al., 1992). In general, intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in activity purely for the pleasure and the satisfaction derived from doing the activity (Deci, 1975). Intrinsic motivation also refers to activities that allow individuals to experience feelings of competence and self-determination. This may explain why prospective college students choose to enroll at a certain college because they believe it will provide a more desirable comprehensive experience. Contrary to intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation pertains to behaviors that are engaged in doing an activity as a means to an end and not for their own sake (Deci, 1975).

The second theory utilized in this research was derived from Frederick Herzberg’s two-factor theory, which analyzes potential motivating behaviors in prospective students college selection. Also known as the motivation-hygiene theory, this theory originally examined factors in the workplace that cause job satisfaction and the factors that cause dissatisfaction. For this study, the framework was applied towards factors that may influence prospective students to apply at certain colleges. Like the workforce, there are necessary factors that prospective students desire in their college selection. Motivators may include challenging, but desired work, recognition, extra curricular activities, and institutional responsibility, while hygiene factors, may include status, job security, financial aid, and potential monetary gains from a college degree (Riley, 2012).

To examine the motivation theories, multiple focus group interviews were conducted for the robustness of the results. The participant selection was conducted through randomly assigned high school students from the Northwest region. More specifically, the target population of this study was high school students who are expected to apply to college within the next year. A total of 32 participants were divided into four groups with each containing student athletes and non-student athletes. Each focus group had eight participants, and discussed a series of
questions concerning the motives for their college selection. Focus group questions were developed over a period of several months through multiple informal interviews with college recruiters and prospective college students. The questions were designed to (1) identify specific factors that impact prospective students’ college choice, (2) to determine if athletic reputation impacted their college selection and, (3) does athletic success have a positive mediating effect on the perception of academic excellence.

To enable coding and thematic analysis from the focus group data, each session was videotaped and transcribed electronically. Hard copy transcripts were created from the video and stripped of identifying information. The collected data was analyzed with Krueger’s (1994) framework analysis. In addition, peer debriefing was conducted between researchers to clarify the emerging themes discovered through the focus group process.

The study identified ten motivational factors through saturation that impacted high school seniors’ college choice. The ten factors identified were: athletic reputation, interest in a specific sport, academic reputation, social opportunities, family tradition, economic status, programs offered, job outcomes, student services, and proximity to home. Of the ten themes, the researchers found answers from participant that could be considered extrinsic and intrinsically motivated responses for the same theme. In addition, the results suggest that there is a link between and athletic success and perceived academic quality, which impacted participants’ college selection process. Future research should assess multiple regions throughout North America for possible variances. In addition, it should examine students who actually applied and enrolled at various institutions to determine if athletic reputation had an impact on their choice and perception of academic quality.

Due to the nature of this topic, this session will 1) discuss motivating factors of prospective college applicants through the qualitative approach 2) examine the relationship between motivational factors, the intention to apply, and how it is mediated by athletic success of the institution 3) offer suggestions for improving current theoretical implications concerning prospective higher education applicants’ college choices, and 4) offer managerial implication for college athletic directors and higher education administrators.

References


