UNDERSTANDING THE BEHAVIORS OF STEALTH APPLICANTS
IN THE COLLEGE SEARCH PROCESS

by

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ABSTRACT

Successful enrollment management uses predictive modeling to achieve specific goals for admission rates, yield rates, and class size. Many of these models rely on evaluating an applicant’s interest in the institution through measures of pre-application engagement. Recent increases in the number of applicants who do not visibly interact with universities prior to submitting an application complicates existing predictive models. These students, whose applications for admission mark their first recorded contact with the university, are commonly called “stealth applicants.”

In 2010, stealth applicants represented 30% of college applications (Noel-Levitz, 2010), yet little research addresses the ways that stealth applicants search for colleges. This qualitative case study includes interviews with students who were stealth applicants at a private, selective, mid-sized university in the southwest United States. A consumer behavior framework of the search process illustrates the use of traditional search methods by stealth applicants in college search. These students exhibited high levels of stress and fear about college, and skepticism and mistrust of university marketing materials. Technology facilitates stealth applicant’s anonymous search for information and their quest for third party authentication of marketing messages. Recommendations for practice address technology, modern search methods, and the role of parents in the college decision process.
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I was a stealth applicant to the Executive Ed.D. program at the University of Alabama. I did not visit campus before applying, send copies of my test scores, call to request materials, or make contact with faculty or staff. Instead, I followed a pattern common to stealth applicants. Late one winter evening I searched online for a program I vaguely remembered reading about in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. At the time I didn’t recall the name of the school; I remembered the program attributes were appealing – a program that was not online, but that brought a cohort of working professionals together for an intensive, fast-paced Ed.D. After retrieving the article, I visited the University of Alabama’s web page to learn more, and used Google to identify similar programs for comparison. My first trip to Tuscaloosa was on the first day of class.

Three years later, I am grateful for the support of so many and humbled by their faith in me. Personally, professionally, and intellectually, this experience exceeded every expectation. Two decades experience in higher education gave me a strong professional foundation; the Ed.D. program added the philosophical, academic, and historical perspectives that I lacked. None of this would be possible without Dr. Michael Harris, a man whose intelligence and generosity of spirit are immeasurable. I am deeply indebted to him for his guidance, direction, and benevolence. In class he pushed me to reexamine my assumptions about higher education; outside of class his clear and timely feedback guided the creation of this study. There are no superlatives adequate to describe my gratitude to Dr. Harris. I also thank the members of my
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO STEALTH APPLICANTS AND ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

The headlines tell the story. “Colleges sweat out admissions this year” (Zernike, 2009). “Stealth applicants are changing the admissions equation” (Hoover, 2008b). “College admissions’ wrenching ins and outs” (Perez, 2009). “This year, colleges recruited students in a hall of mirrors” (Hoover & Supiana, 2009). “Stealth applicants increase enrollment pools, decrease yield rates” (Earlham College, 2008). As illustrated by these headlines, in the early 21st century a shift occurred in the higher education marketplace. This shift left enrollment managers scrambling to apply the models historically used in predicting enrollment to a group of applicants whose behavior did not fit these models. These applicants, initially called “secret shoppers” (Noel-Levitz, 2007, p. 1), conduct their college search outside of universities’ awareness. Instead of visibly gathering information through traditional channels – requests for information, attending on- or off- campus recruiting events, and meeting with admissions representatives at their high schools – they make their first contact with the university when submitting an application for admission. While some of these students may receive information from university search programs, they do not visibly respond to these mailings. Their college search process is invisible to universities, and they do not initiate contact with universities through traditional and traceable mechanisms. These prospective college students and their under-the-radar search processes are now known as stealth applicants.
Shifting demographics make enrollment planning difficult, but the changing behavior of prospective students presents a greater challenge to enrollment planning. Aided by technology and expanded access to information, increasing numbers of prospective students abandon the traditional pathways used to seek information on universities during college search. Enrollment modeling transformed what was once an art into a science during the 1980s and 1990s, however enrollment management is not infallible. The methods used to model decisions in enrollment planning become irrelevant when a subset of the applicant pool does not follow predictable patterns. This is the challenge created by the college search behavior of stealth applicants. While underrepresented in the academic literature, stealth applicants receive increasingly extensive coverage in popular press (Hoover, 2008b; Perez, 2009; Zernike, 2009). Higher education consultants address the impact of stealth applicants as a contributing factor that impacts universities’ ability to manage enrollments (Cappex, 2009; Ingles, Dalton, & LoGerfo, 2008; Mager, 2009; Next Student, 2008; Noel-Levitz, 2007; Noel-Levitz, 2009a). Admissions professionals discuss how best to plan for stealth applicants (D’Orso, 2009; Earlham College, 2008). Retention managers consider existing studies of student behavior linking early conscious action with academic success (Ford, Stahl, Walker, & Ford, 2008; Tinto, 1993; Weiss, 1999) to ask if stealth applicants represent greater risks for attrition (Stratton, O’Toole, & Wetzel, 2007). These stakeholders agree that the stealth applicant phenomenon directly impacts enrollment management.

Technological innovations including the growing acceptance of common applications, online applications, and ‘fast apps’ facilitate stealth applicant behavior and the submission of multiple applications per student (Ingles et al., 2008; Kodrzycki, 1999; Noel-Levitz, 2007). Over 80% of applicants to public four-year universities and 72% of applicants to private four-year
universities now submit applications electronically (Noel-Levitz, 2009a). Technology facilitates anonymous search by allowing students to “browse, formulate impressions, and make decisions with no formal interaction with the school” (Cifarelli & Cullen, 2004, p. 147). Technology also reduces the effort required to submit an application to a simple point and click. The Common Application simplifies and facilitates the submission of applications to multiple universities in expanded geographic regions. Students who use the Common Application complete one application form which they submit to any combination of the 392 member institutions. This technology allows students to apply to multiple schools without contacting those schools for their university-specific application forms. Some stealth applicants may use this new technology to apply to a school on impulse, with limited understanding of the characteristics of the institution (Noel-Levitz, 2009c).

Technology also impacts the business processes of the university, making possible the mass processing of applications while facilitating the use of more mechanistic communication and decision making models (Thelin, 2004). Additionally, technology facilitates the development of more targeted outreach to large groups of prospective students and creates new data management tools in support of enrollment modeling and research. Technology-driven mass marketing creates the appearance of personalization in a process less adaptable to individualization through systems that generate bulk mailings and mass emails on predetermined schedules.

While technology facilitates multiple applications per student, the number of high school students has also increased (Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, 2008). As more prospective students and multiple applications per student enter the college application pipeline, achieving specific, often budget-driven, enrollment targets becomes more difficult
At some schools, these enrollment targets directly impact the university’s daily operations. Admissions must meet enrollment targets to ensure the university’s fiscal solvency (Alon, 2005; Zhang, 2007). The investment in consultants, secret formulas, jazzy materials, DVDs, web sites, and promotional gimmicks results in an ever-escalating admissions arms race (Zemsky, Wegner, & Massy, 2005).

**Statement of the Problem**

Traditional applicants actively and interactively seek information about colleges and universities prior to applying through interviews, campus visits, online interactions, meetings with local admissions representatives, and requests for more specific information about academics, extracurricular activities, housing, scholarships, and financial options (Schmidt, 1991). Stealth applicants, however, do not visibly interact with a school prior to applying. After applying, traditional applicants continue to build measures of interest and engagement, while stealth applicants move back up the admissions funnel to behave as information gathering prospects. Regardless of their intentions, stealth applicants may unknowingly disadvantage themselves through their inverted sequencing of the college search process by making application decisions based on more limited information about the school than a more traditional applicant, and by failing to signal their interest to the university’s admissions committee (Perez, 2009).

Universities track prospective student interactions to model and predict movement from prospect to applicant, and routinely use levels of engagement to predict movement to the next stages in the admissions process. Traditional admissions models demonstrate that the more contacts an applicant initiates with a school, the higher their interest in attending (Goenner &
Pauls, 2006). A student with multiple contacts is perceived as more likely to enroll if admitted. For schools whose goals include low admission rates coupled with high yield rates, applicants with “high interest,” as represented by multiple contacts with the university, become more desirable candidates for admission.


Stealth applicants do not send the normal signals to a school that they are likely to enroll (Cole, 2006; Hoover, 2008b). By delaying visible search activities, stealth applicants fail to participate in programs designed both to educate them about the university and to give them a mechanism through which an admission committee can better gauge their interest in enrolling (Hoover, 2010). The lack of pre-applicant participation is easily perceived by admissions offices as a lack of interest, a perception echoed by the general belief among practitioners that stealth
applicants, like online applicants, yield at a lower rate than applicants who submit traditional applications (Noel-Levitz, 2007). While limited research exists to test this hypothesis, the belief creates an operational bias that disadvantages stealth applicants in the admission process. Stealth applicants may discover that their lack of early and visible engagement may have a negative impact on their application if their behavior is perceived as a signal that the school is not their first choice (Perez, 2009).

Much of the empirical work in enrollment modeling relies on pre-applicant contacts to predict enrollment, research that cannot be applied to applicants who omit or re-order the search sequence. Goenner and Pauls (2006) model enrollment behavior starting with prospects to identify factors that predict enrollment and, more successfully, non-enrollment. These models consider actions such as how test scores are sent, interactions with the university (campus visits, attending programs), and methods of requesting information (calls, emails). As a result, Goenner and Pauls’ model possesses only limited applicability for potential students who seek information outside of these traditional pathways. The difficulty of studying the unseen search actions of stealth applicants highlights a core challenge in understanding and predicting stealth behavior.

Consumer behavior research provides an avenue for framing and mapping the college search behavior for applicants. Consumer behavior documents a sequence of steps performed by consumers prior to purchase decisions, beginning with the search for viable options. Enrollment management research models the college search in a consumer behavior framework to understand how prospective students identify viable college options (Kotler & Fox, 1995). The careful study of stealth applicants grounded in consumer behavior may help enrollment managers better predict applicant behavior and achieve enrollment and retention objectives in a changing
environment. Institutions have a “vested interest in understanding the factors that influence students’ application and enrollment decisions” (DesJardins, Dundar, & Hendel, 1999, p. 117) to increase the “fit” between students and the institution (Figure 1). “If individual goals and institutional factors are not congruent, recruitment may be ineffective and retention problems may ensue” (DesJardins, Dundar, et al., 1999, p. 117).

Enrollment success requires the ability to predict applicant behavior. Currently, prediction methods include demographic profiling, historical modeling, and tracking contacts to gauge applicant interest through pre- and post-application behavior. Pre-application behavior includes making contact at a college fair or high school visit, attending a campus or off-site program for prospective students, contacting the school via phone or email to request materials, responding to a College Board Student Search Service (PSAT) mailing or ACT’s Educational Opportunity Service (PLAN) search piece, or having standardized test scores sent to the school. Post-application measures of interest include school visits, participation in interviews, campus visits, traceable online activities (online chats, personalized web pages, etc.), and requests for more specific information on academics, extracurricular activities, housing, athletics, scholarships, and financial options. Historically, the more engaged a prospect or applicant with the school, the higher the probability of enrolling at the school if offered admission, therefore institutions study and track interactions with prospective students (Pagano & Terkla, 1991). While the aggregate effects of multiple interactions and collective contacts make difficult the determination of the impact of a single activity in the ultimate enrollment decision, as a composite the weight of these interactions increases the likelihood of enrollment. Universities report a recent increase in the number of applicants who enter the admissions pipeline at the point of application, instead of as prospective students (Earlham College, 2008; Next Student,
The difficulty in predicting stealth applicants’ enrollment behavior rests in applying existing methods to applicants who do not follow the traditional search process or compile a portfolio of pre-applicant interactions. This study examines stealth applicants and their impact on enrollment management.

Admission Practices in Higher Education

Elite universities and the media have long perpetrated the myth that admission to ‘prestige schools,’ schools that admit less than 25% of applicants, has always been elusive (Karabel, 2005; Sperber, 2000). The popular press bemoans the perfect grade point averages and test scores of students denied admission to Harvard, Yale, or Princeton each year. Yet a review of these institutions’ histories demonstrates that for the first several hundred years of their existence, admission to prestige schools was highly attainable – for students from desirable backgrounds. Admission practices in higher education have long been impacted by discrimination and exclusion based on class, race, and religion, and are often applied behind closed doors, away from public scrutiny. Until the early 1900s most universities, even those considered elite, practiced forms of open admission (Karabel, 2005). Enrollment concerns during this time centered on the limited supply of students from socially and economically desirable backgrounds. Many schools relied heavily on tuition revenue, but balanced their institutional needs for tuition generation with concerns about having the ‘right’ students as defined by class, race, gender, and academic preparation. More than 300 years later, enrollment managers continue to focus on enrollment, demographics, and wooing the “right” students, but with demographic preferences for diversity and inclusion instead of the homogeneity and exclusion exhibited in the early era of American higher education (Tierney, 2006; Wolniak & Engberg, 2007).
The growing demand for higher education from an increasingly diverse population in the early 1900s led to new admissions methods at elite institutions that combined objective and subjective factors. These admissions processes, while overtly concerned with academic merit, were developed in part to exclude applicants with academic merit who were socially, economically, and racially undesirable. When the creation of standardized admissions examinations did not correct what Dean Frederick Keppel called the “Jewish problem” at universities like Columbia (Karabel, 2005, p. 87; Thelin, 2004), elite universities developed stated or unstated quotas to restrict Jewish enrollment under the premise that too many Jewish students would lead to a decline in more desirable applicants (Karabel, 2005). The creation of the College Entrance Examination Board and, later, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), coupled with a focus on race and social standing, signaled the beginning of selective admissions processes. Elite universities expanded recruiting to the national stage (Thelin, 2004), and even public universities broadened their markets beyond state boundaries (Geiger, 2004).

As the demand for admission to elite schools exceeded space, the admissions function expanded beyond the preparatory school feeder system to include selection based on testing, high school records, interviews, recommendations, athletic skills, legacy status, and demographic profiling. This list of criteria still exists in various rubrics in current admissions processes. The “defining feature of the new system was its categorical rejection of the idea that admission should be based on academic criteria alone… [because] relying solely on any single factor… would deny control over the composition of the freshman class” (Karabel, 2005, p. 2). This was the birth of competitive and holistic admissions. The legacy of this system continues as universities admit students based on institutional priorities, possibly excluding more academically capable candidates in favor of others who possess preferred characteristics. When
approached directly, this is a startling concept. “Viewed from both a historical and comparative perspective, the admission practices of America’s top colleges and universities are exceedingly strange” (Karabel, 2005, p. 1).

The rise of the enrollment management model in university admissions expanded the toolbox of skills applied to the admissions process without changing the central role of admissions, a role directly connected to the contradictory and dual functions of inclusion and exclusion, often occurring within a black box of secrecy (Karabel, 2005). Modern admissions frenzies focusing on competitive admission at elite universities obscure the availability of space in the American higher education system and the powerful role students play in selecting the school that they will attend (Manski & Wise, 1983). While 36% of four-year colleges and universities are highly selective, admitting less than 50% of applicants, these institutions enroll only 18% of first year students (Clinedinst, 2008). “Although a few schools reject a large proportion of applicants, most applicants are admitted to their first-choice schools” (Manski & Wise, 1983, p. 6). The National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC) releases a list each summer of four-year universities with space available in their first year classes, residence halls, and financial aid budgets for new students; in May 2010, 240 of 1,200 NACAC member institutions surveyed reported space available for entering freshmen (NACAC 2010 Space Availability Survey, 2010). In 2009, 25% of responding institutions surveyed reported space available (NACAC 2009 Space Availability Survey, 2009); in 2008, 23% of respondents reported space available (NACAC 2008 Space Availability Survey, 2008). While Bound, Hershbein, and Long (2009) report that “it has become increasingly difficult to gain entry into an American four-year college or university” (p. 1), their research focuses on admission rates without adjusting these rates in consideration of the number of students who submit
applications to more than one university. High school students apply to an increasing number of colleges, submitting on average 7 applications (Hoxby, 1997; Kiecker, 2004). As applicants apply to more schools, there is a related decrease in admission rates. NACAC’s annual report of space available in the higher education system suggests the availability of adequate space in the system for American high school graduates, however space does not always equate to access for all students to all institutions. The methods used to allocate space evolved over time, but the core admission functions of inclusion and exclusion remain evident.

Wars and economic concerns significantly impact the functions of admission and enrollment management. During World War I, university admission processes changed to comply with new federal guidelines and also to ensure fiscal solvency, overtly connecting universities’ financial stability to the admissions function. World War II brought the G.I. Bill and a flood of new applicants, making increased selectivity in admissions practices possible for a growing number of schools. After World War II, many universities aggressively expanded their admissions outreach as they entered a marketplace changed by the new mobility of student financial aid (Apodaca, 2009; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Private colleges began offering need-based financial aid and need-blind admissions, and a national competition for the best talent ensued (McPherson & Schapiro, 1998; Thelin, 2004). Desegregation and a focus on access increased the demand for higher education in a larger and more diverse demographic population. The increased number of applicants necessitated changes in the mechanics of application processing. The University of Iowa created the American College Testing Service (ACT), and the SAT transitioned to a multiple-choice examination that could be quickly and mechanically scored. These examinations made possible the mass processing of applications necessary in a mass education system. Expanding enrollments driven by baby booms, combined with changes
in the mission of higher education, moved the American higher education system to a new paradigm: education for the masses.

A period of contraction in the number of students available followed this period of expansion in higher education. Schools began to compete directly and more aggressively with each other for students to fill the space they had created during expansion. College selectivity entered public awareness, resulting in increased media attention and the college guidebook industry. The latter half of the 20th century brought integration, desegregation, and affirmative action to campus. With the inclusion of these new populations on campus and the changing political landscape, universities considered demographic factors from a new perspective in the admissions process. Even during this time, however, many elite schools still practiced de facto open-enrollment for students from the ‘right’ backgrounds. Harvard “virtually guaranteed admission” to applicants from feeder schools, admitting 46 of 48 applicants from Groton, St. Paul’s, and St. Mark’s in 1950 (Karabel, 2005).

Significance of the Problem

Over time, the admission office’s role in the generation of tuition revenue expanded, with intense pressure on admissions to recruit, admit, and enroll the right group. University presidents, budget offices, and admissions directors required reliable methods to predict enrollment behavior in an increasingly competitive and high stakes environment. Student enrollment provides colleges the financial and intellectual raw materials necessary for the function of the institution in the generation and dissemination of knowledge. Additionally, university admission decisions have the power to correct injustice by providing access and opportunity to underrepresented groups. Admission decisions balance the fiscal needs of the institution with broader goals, and are often value laden.
The enrollment management movement of the 1980s and 1990s signaled a change in the visibility and importance of admissions to university operations. The development of enrollment management marked an intellectual revolution in admissions. Enrollment management often heralded the integration of admissions and financial aid functions, with strategic financial packaging to compliment admissions goals and consultants to help create enrollment strategies (St. John & Paulsen, 2001). Enrollment management recognized that the reputation and financial stability of the university rested, in part, in recruiting and enrolling a class, and created new tools to improve the predictability of enrollment (Alon, 2005).

Successful enrollment management requires predicting enrollment by managing the ratio of offers of admission to desired class size. Enrollment managers historically rely on various models to make these predictive decisions, including tracking contacts and gauging applicant interest through pre- and post- application behavior and demographic research (Alon, 2005; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2006; Goenner & Pauls, 2006; Hanson & Litton, 1982; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983). Enrollment managers consider many factors in admissions decisions, including academic preparation, aptitude, potential contribution to university life, legacy status, academic interests, athletics, institutional fit, and financial need. In making admissions decisions, they also consider the likelihood of an applicant attending if admitted, commonly called yield. Tracking prospective students’ level of interest is one way to predict their probability of enrollment. While over 90% of private universities track contacts with applicants, nearly 30% of all university applicants make no contact with the university prior to submitting an online application (Noel-Levitz, 2009a, 2009c, 2010b).

Yield served as a staple of national ranking systems for many years (Hoover, 2009c). In 2003, *U.S. News and World Report* removed yield rates from their ranking analysis in response
to concerns over universities’ gaming the system by over-investing in high-yield early decision programs or by intentionally denying more qualified applicants based on the presupposition that the more qualified applicant, if admitted, would choose not to enroll and negatively impact the university’s yield. While the exclusion of yield from ranking methodologies initially reduced the focus on yield in the admissions process, admission rates (the percent of applicants admitted) are still factored into rankings and perceived across the industry as a measure of a university’s quality. *U.S. News and World Report* subtly reintroduced yield into the rankings by creating a separate ranking of “most popular” universities based solely on yield rates (*U.S. News and World Reports, 2009*). This focus on admissions rates and yield, combined with the need to predict enrollment behavior, leads an admissions committee to wonder: “If we admit her, will she attend?”

Enrollment management represents a new label for recruiting and admissions functions, new tools, a new language, and more quantifiable and empirical methods for recruiting and admissions operations. Data analysis holds increasing importance in the new enrollment management model. In 1983, Zemsky and Oedel commented that “five years ago enrollment planning was a non-subject on most American campuses… (now) enrollment research has become something of a growth industry” (p. ix). A growing cadre of consultants emerged as enrollment managers focused on predicting behaviors, managing enrollment, and building a class, all while simultaneously leveraging financial and merit aid (*Hoover, 2009d*). Enrollment management recognizes the fiscal importance of enrollment. By incorporating financial aid and scholarships into choice models, enrollment management seeks ways to impact applicants’ decisions through the use of financial packaging. The new tools provided by data driven enrollment management help admissions offices expand and explain their role on campus and
compete in a growing marketplace for the right students to support the university’s mission and goals.

Enrollment management enhances the strategic recruitment, admission, and matriculation of the freshman class. Accountability to internal and external constituencies remains a central concern. “An admissions policy is a kind of negotiated settlement among contending groups, each wishing to shape admissions criteria, and the actual selection process to produce the outcome they prefer” (Karabel, 2005, p. 6). At many schools, university prestige and financial stability are intrinsically entwined with the first year class; success in one area requires success in the other.

Colleges and universities operate in an environment in which they compete with each other to attract students. … Enrollment Managers are typically tasked with increasing the academic ability and ethnic diversity of the entering student body. Such lofty goals are increasingly difficult to achieve in an era in which institutions of higher education are expected to do more with fewer resources. (Goenner and Pauls, 2006, p. 1)

Admissions officers must balance the diverse needs and demands of their institutions and constituents. Institutions have mission- and function- critical reasons for focusing on enrollment management. Many issues pale in comparison to the challenges of managing enrollment while balancing the needs and demands of the institution in its unique context.

*Challenges Facing Enrollment Management*

Despite the increasingly sophisticated tools and professional skills of admissions offices, shifting demographics and changing student behaviors in the admission process create challenges in enrollment planning. Prospective students understand their power as consumers in an educational marketplace (Black, 2004). As students become more sophisticated, the need for enrollment managers to continually hone and refine their methods increases. Successful enrollment management models require constant retooling to meet the demands of the modern
admissions market. The careful study of applicants and efforts to understand applicant behavior helps enrollment managers better predict behavior to achieve enrollment objectives. During a time when “many educational institutions are faced with contracting resources, new financial pressures, and/or declining enrollment” (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 146), meeting these goals is critically important.

Focus of the Study

At its core, enrollment management remains a study about choice. Extensive research on choice models related to students’ decisions to attend college exists in the academic literature. Existing models of choice focus on the decision to attend college, and only begin to approach the preceding issue of how students decide which colleges they will apply to and ultimately attend. For the purpose of practical application, models need to also explain how schools enter students’ choice sets. The consumer behavior and marketing literature may prove useful here.

Enrollment management and retention will become more important in the coming decade as universities prepare for changes in the number of high-school seniors and changing demographics within that pool. Studying the behavior of stealth applicants improves enrollment managers’ ability to predict enrollment behavior and directly impacts a university’s reputation, growth, future, and solvency. The behaviors of stealth applicants as a subpopulation of the overall applicant pool impact an enrollment manager’s ability to achieve class targets; understanding this growing group will be vital in the coming years of change in the higher education market. Stealth applicants represent an environmental threat (Kotler & Fox, 1995) to the institution, which may “harm the institution unless the institution takes action” (p. 97). This study examines the decision processes employed by stealth applicants during their college search. The research questions addressed include:
1. How do stealth applicants search for college?

2. Why are a growing number of applicants entering the application funnel at the point of application, and not participating in the traditional college search process that makes them visible as prospective students to the colleges in their choice set?
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The college search process brings together prospective students as consumers of higher education and admissions offices as the public voice marketing the university in a competitive higher education marketplace. At this intersection of college and commerce, the office of admissions applies the research based tools of enrollment modeling and enrollment management to try to understand and predict the prospective student’s behavior as a consumer.

Enrollment management refers to a department, set of tools, or administrative process that impacts a university’s enrollment (Hossler, 1984; Hossler & Kalsbeek, 2008; Hossler & Kernerer, 1986). Developed at Boston College in the late 1970s in response to projections for falling enrollments (Hossler, 1984; Lay, 2004), enrollment management quickly expanded beyond university recruiting and admissions. As a strategy, enrollment management studies how institutions can best manage enrollment; as a practice, enrollment management applies tools developed through research to create processes that more effectively predict and manage tuition generation through student selection, enrollment, and funding. The underlying philosophy of enrollment management suggests that every aspect of university operations has the potential to impact students’ decisions to apply, enroll, and persist through graduation (Lay, 2004).

As universities grew in size and scope from the 1950s through the 1970s, projections of declining enrollments created concern about universities’ abilities to fill their expanded campuses (Coomes, 2000; Hossler & Bean, 1990; Hossler & Kalsbeek, 2008; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Paulsen, 1990). These concerns were pragmatic, as adequate enrollment was needed to
generate enough tuition-paying students to maintain fiscal solvency (Geiger, 2004; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983). Revenue concerns, anticipated declines in enrollment, and the increasing professionalization of the admissions function fueled the development of enrollment management (Bassin et al., 1997; Duffy & Goldberg, 1998). Touted as a way for universities to manage undergraduate enrollment through the strategic application of research (Lay, 2004), enrollment management applies market research, economic forecasting, and consumer behavior to higher education.

By encompassing many areas that influence the student experience, enrollment management expands the admissions and recruiting functions beyond the first year class to consider the longer relationship between students and universities (Hossler, 1984). The higher education literature includes over two decades of research in enrollment management (for a history of enrollment management, see Coomes, 2000; for an overview, see Hossler & Bean, 1990), but this research is in constant need of reexamination and renewal (Trusheim, Crouse, & Middaugh, 1990). Macro-level demographic, public policy, and economic changes, micro-level changes related to individual and institutional behaviors, and changes in technology create an ongoing need to update the tools enrollment managers employ to deliver a class that meets the university’s goals for tuition generation, as well as more specific institutional goals which may include student quality, demographics, and abilities (Davis-Van Atta & Carrier, 1986; DesJardins, Dundar, & Hendel, 1999; Paulsen, 1990). These at times contradictory goals (Hoover, 2009b) complicate enrollment management, and are compounded by the complexities of college choice (Hossler, Schmidt, & Vespt, 1999) and the “temporal context of student decision making” (Fuller, Manski, & Wise, 1982, p. 491). Understanding enrollment management requires understanding the factors and processes that impact if, when, and where a
student goes to college and considering the various lenses through which these decisions are viewed and experienced.

The Importance of Enrollment Management

Enrollment management integrates the functions that bring students to a university with those that impact retention and graduation (Hossler, 1984). As such, enrollment management may include offices focused on recruiting, marketing, admissions, financial aid, scholarships, orientation, new student programs, housing, student academic support services, academic advising, registration, and retention (Lay, 2004; Hossler, 1984). At some universities these offices are combined into a specific division under a single director; at others they remain freestanding units (Lay, 2004). Little agreement exists on the best structural model, as each institution’s unique setting and circumstances determines the structure appropriate for that environment (Hossler & Kalsbeek, 2008). Regardless of the physical or institutional structure, there is growing awareness of the interrelated roles that multiple areas within the university play in enrolling and retaining a viable student body (Hossler & Kalsbeek, 2008).

Admissions, a field long dominated by personality, storytelling, and folklore (Zemsky & Oedel, 1983) with decisions based on mental modeling, instinct, personal experience, and field experience (DesJardins, 2008; Desjardins, Dundar, et al., 1999; Moogan & Baron, 2003), evolved over time through the use of strategic and empirical enrollment management. While lived experiences and field-tested expertise have value, the use of forecasting based on economic and sociological models expanded the admissions toolbox (DesJardins, 2008). Demographic modeling and market segmentation allow admissions offices to fine-tune their activities, strategically target specific markets based on their likelihood of attendance and apply new tools to meet goals for subpopulations within their classes (Kotler & Fox, 1995).
While the early hope was that these tools would reduce marketing costs, marketing budgets continue to increase as schools engage in ever-escalating competition for the best faculty and students (Goenner & Pauls, 2006; Pagano & Terkla, 1991, Zemsky & Oedel, 1983). Enrollment management recognizes that in the current education marketplace, schools must work smarter and more effectively in a “resource-constrained environment” (Kotler & Fox, 1995). Admissions offices “need to direct their marketing budgets and personnel more productively, by doing the right things as well as by doing things right. This requires having a clear and intelligently planned strategy” (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 163).

Colleges and universities invest significant financial resources in admissions. Private four year universities spend an average of over $2,100 per enrolled student in recruiting and admission activities (Clinedinst, 2008; Noel-Levitz, 2010a). The total operating budget for undergraduate recruiting and admissions increased at 61% of private universities and 50% of public universities from 2005 to 2006, with many universities spending 50% more on university marketing in 2006 than in 2000 (Lipman Hearne, 2007). Higher education researchers identify an escalating arms race and increased spending on marketing (Geiger 2004; Lee & Clery, 2004; Zemsky, Wegner, et al., 2005). Increasing budgets and competition demonstrate the need to understand which factors prospective students use to evaluate institutions and to structure their decisions. “The college marketer must understand the information gathering and evaluation activities of prospective consumers. The marketer’s task is to help students learn about the key attributes of colleges, their relative importance, and the standing of the particular college on the more important attributes” (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 253).

Student’s decisions as consumers of higher education “directly affect the institution” (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 242). The centrality of enrollment in the success of the university
establishes enrollment management as a vital function in securing a university’s fiscal and academic success (Curs & Singell, 2002; DesJardins, 2002, Barnes & Harris, In press).

Enrollment management and strategic marketing provide the tools for universities to compete strategically and aggressively, but a “clear and intelligent” strategy (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 163) also requires understanding the behavior of prospective students as consumers. As the cost of recruiting students and filling the class increases, failure to use the tools of enrollment management causes “budgetary distortions, excess costs, and misdirections in strategic planning” (Alon, 2005, p. 134). Research shows that enrollment management helps admissions offices meet targets for student quality (Curs & Singell, 2002), develop models for market segmentation (Sevier, 2000), expand specific academic programs (Anderson-Rowland, 1996), and improve retention (Ford et al., 2008; Stratton et al., 2007; Weiss, 1999). The successful application of enrollment management allows admissions offices to meet their enrollment targets while also meeting broader institutional goals.

Enrollment management recognizes that a large part of the reputation and financial stability of the university rests in the hands of the admissions office (Alon, 2005; Zhang, 2007). For elite schools and those seeking prestige, increasing the number of applications, becoming more selective, and meeting enrollment targets directly influences perceived quality (Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2004). “The ability of a college to meet its enrollment target – given demographic trends and the size and quality of its expected applicant pool – is perhaps more important than the target itself” (Duffy & Goldberg, 1998, p. 3). The first year class often represents the most visible public marker of institutional quality through which universities project prestige, balance budgets, and facilitate the transmission of knowledge from faculty to students (Alon, 2005; Kotler & Fox, 1995). Additional research suggests that reputation more
than quality improves the perception of prestige, aiding success in enrollment, faculty hiring, and grants (Garvin, 1980).

An enrollment manager’s goals focus on enrolling the right number of students, with the correct balance of tuition revenue and tuition discounting, with the desired academic, ethnic, geographic, and gender profile, with the appropriate distribution of academic interests to support the university’s programs, with students who will be academically successful, and with the necessary mix of running backs, National Merit Scholars, oboists, artists, and children of alumni, donors, potential donors and friends of the school (Alon, 2005; Bassin et al., 1997; Duffy & Goldberg, 1998; Goenner & Pauls, 2006). These multiple and conflicting goals and the direct relationship between admissions and the university’s prestige and fiscal health creates a high-stakes environment for enrollment managers.

The Foundations of Enrollment Management

Theoretical Frameworks

Two broad models, both based in applied social sciences, dominate prior studies of enrollment management. One model is based in economics and quantitative research while the other focuses on qualitative research with foundations in sociology, psychology, and human behavior (Fuller et al., 1982; Jackson, 1982). Some approaches study enrollment management with a macro view, exploring the behavior of large groups and the impacts of broad national issues, such as the U.S. economy, on enrollment. These models use market segmentation and market research to examine how macroeconomic issues and enrollment activities impact a subpopulation within a group, for example, how changing the ratio of need and merit based financial aid impacts the socio-economic profile of the incoming class (DesJardins, Ahlburg, et al., 2006). Other studies, more closely aligned with social research, focus on individual decisions
and the factors, both large and small, that impact those decisions (Litton, Sullivan, & Brodigan, 1983; Paulsen, 1990, 2001).

Economic Models

The economic models, led by the work of Stephen DesJardins, consider the decision to attend college in terms of cost-benefit analysis, human capital theory, future income, opportunity costs, and return on investment (Cassuto, 1996; Curs & Singell, 2002; DesJardins, 2002; DesJardins, Ahlburg, et al., 2006; Fuller et al., 1982; Paulsen, 2001; Weiler, 1994). According to these theoretical frameworks, college decisions are based primarily on perceived individual economic benefits. Students choose to go to college, delaying entry into the work force, largely based on cost and anticipated future benefits. Students also seek specific colleges based on the perceived advantages of a specific school with a focus on cost and institution-specific outcomes, such as financial aid packages, institutional reputation, and career placement statistics.

Studies in this theoretical framework are normally quantitatively based and utilize large scale surveys, demographics, and geomarket data to identify factors impacting application and enrollment decisions. This line of research provides extensive quantitative data applicable to a variety of institutions. While quantitative research creates successful enrollment models, this research may underestimate the unpredictable, individual, and human nature of college choice. “The fact that student choice behavior is more complex than can be explained in economic theories alone is well established in the field of Higher Education” (St. John & Paulsen, 2001, p. 560). Research in this framework also focuses on the first and last decisions made in the college going process: the pre-application decision to attend college and the post-admission decision of which specific school to attend. These economic models do not adequately account for the complex steps that occur in between, as prospective students make decisions on where they will
apply. By omitting or compressing these stages, economic models may fail to account for the impact of the college search process on the final college choice.

Sociological Models

Sociological models also study factors that influence the decision to attend college. The sociological choice models are more often qualitative in nature and are best represented by the work of Don Hossler (1984, 1991, 1999). While based in the study of human behavior, they also consider economic impacts and larger demographic trends in the college application and decision process, but they remain focused on individual attitudes, experiences, and decisions. In the college search and choice process, attitudes carry significant predictive power as they signal “the importance the individual attaches to a specific attribute of a college or university and the belief that a specific institution possesses that attribute” (Trusheim et al., 1990, p. 301). Prospective students’ attitudes about a university’s quality, programs, and reputation have direct correlations to application and enrollment decisions (Kealy & Rocket, 1987; Trusheim et al., 1990). Hossler et al. (1999) explains the first step in college search, deciding where to apply, is often impacted by individual sociological and economic factors, including family background, grades, and family income. Better grades, higher family income, and educated parents create more opportunity, resulting in students who have more choices but who cannot narrow their choice set as quickly as those from less advantaged backgrounds (Hossler et al., 1999).

Sociological models add an awareness of the individual and human nature of choice but, like economic models, they also focus on pre-application and post-admission decisions. Some researchers attempt to merge the benefits of the two primary schools of thought to include economics, psychology and sociology in the study of enrollment behavior (Lay, 2004; Moogan & Baron, 2003; Trusheim et al., 1990). Combining these methods to understand economic
concerns and impacts, predictive demographics, and the power of attitudes and experiences provides a more robust understanding of the beginning and ending stages of college choice, but a gap remains in the research on the steps that occur between the decision to go to college and the choice of a specific institution.

**Practical Application: The Admissions Funnel**

Admissions officers use historical data to predict how students progress through the search and enrollment process. The admissions funnel remains the most common method for studying the enrollment process, regardless of theoretical framework (Litten et al., 1983). The admissions funnel tracks the movement of prospective students through specific stages: prospect, applicant, admit, and matriculant (Figure 1). A larger, harder to define group, often called admissions suspects, precedes the prospective student stage. Traditional applicants enter the admissions funnel through predictable patterns of behavior as active prospects. By tracking contacts with these prospective students, university admissions officers predict, based on the behavioral patterns of previous pools, how many prospects who enter the funnel through a specific method or combination of methods will ultimately apply for admission and matriculate (Goenner & Pauls, 2006). Studying the progression of prospective students helps enrollment managers “understand how the best students evaluate and select the schools they will attend” (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 243), making possible the school’s ability to “attract the strongest prospects” (Kotler & Fox, 1995). Understanding the process requires evaluating the steps potential students take as they move from prospect to enrolled student, as understood and experienced by prospective students. This knowledge allows enrollment managers to better predict applicant behavior, which aids in their ability to meet enrollment and retention objectives (Kotler & Fox, 1995).
Universities use admissions funnels to direct an extensive, tiered, and carefully developed marketing plan designed to improve the flow of prospective candidates by maximizing contacts between the student and institution (Finnegan, Webb, & Morris, 2007). As prospective students move through the search process, they are asked to take progressively more in depth steps in response to university contacts (Tucciaronne, 2007), advancing from sharing limited biographical information on a response card, to completing a full application for admission. Effective admissions funnels include a call to action at each step (Seiver, 2000). These responsive actions help universities gauge the probability of enrollment of prospective students. Funnels are also designed to provide appropriate information to students at key times in the college search and application process. This information helps students define their preferences to create a college “choice set” (DesJardins, Ahlburg, et al., 2006) by analyzing where they fit in a university’s
profile and self-evaluating their admissibility and probable financial aid (DesJardins, Ahlburg, et al., 2006).

Demographic, behavioral, and technological trends challenge the reliability of the admissions funnel, the common metaphor for the measures used in enrollment management (Bassin et al., 1997; DesJardins, 2002; Duffy & Goldberg, 1998; Jackson 1982). Technological innovations in the application process assist students in applying to multiple institutions. While the number of high school graduates has increased (WICHE, 2008), prospective college students are also applying to more schools (Ingles et al., 2008; Kodrzycki, 1999; Noel-Levitz, 2007).

The theory at most colleges is that the more applications they receive, the more likely the college is to meet or exceed its recruitment goals. That approach may not work anymore. Colleges received a record number of applications this year, and yields decreased dramatically. So colleges, in their push to get more applicants, are making their jobs harder, with questionable results. (Van Der Werf & Sabatier, 2008, p. 28)

Enrollment management uses various metrics to meet goals, including demographic research, tracking contacts, and gauging applicant interest through pre- and post- application behavior during their progression through the admissions funnel (Alon, 2005; DesJardins, Ahlburg, et al., 2006; Goenner & Pauls, 2006; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983). Enrollment modeling expanded the tools available for understanding and impacting this process, but these tools become inadequate when the traditional models cannot be applied to a significant subset of the applicant pool.

For many students, the flow through the admissions funnel begins in the junior year of high school when they take the Preliminary SAT / National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test (PSAT) or ACT’s college readiness test (PLAN) and agree to participate in the PSAT and PLAN search programs. At this point in a traditional enrollment model these students are suspects or pre-prospects existing at the periphery of a university’s awareness. The candidates become active
prospects through a variety of self-initiated actions or by responding to university outreach. This is where stealth applicants are demonstratively absent. While traditional, visible prospects reply to the PSAT or PLAN search piece, go online to request information, make contact at a college fair or high school visit, attend a local recruiting event, or go to campus for a specific program, stealth applicants begin as invisible prospects whose college search activity is not visible to the college. Traditional and visible prospects receive more detailed communication over time, including invitations to special events, reminders of upcoming deadlines, application materials, and personal outreach from faculty, alumni, and current students. Many traditional prospects have more than one contact with the university before they submit an application for admission. This information gives prospective students additional resources through which they can make more informed decisions about their college choice set. The exchange of information between a prospective student and the university engages the prospect with the school, creating points of connection and opportunities for prospects to express their interest through action and involvement. Traditional prospects, then, enter the pipeline through predictable, traceable, visible, and interactive patterns of behavior.

Colleges use trend extrapolation from prior experiences as an enrollment management tool to determine future enrollment outcomes. Trend extrapolation has strengths and weaknesses (Kotler & Fox, 1995). The historical data on which trend extrapolation bases its models “can prove faulty if forces affecting demand should change” (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 192), weakening the usefulness of enrolment predictions based on trend extrapolation during periods of change. Universities are not structured for rapid change in response to new trends, and have organizational structures that promote stability and slow change when contrasted with the fast pace of change in technology and human behavior (Bess & Dee, 2008; Kotler & Fox, 1995). The
lack of synchronization between the rate of change in prospect behaviors and university processes results in enrollment models that in many cases hold only limited applicability.

While enrollment management generally predicts the behavior of a notoriously unpredictable population, American teenagers, enrollment management cannot be considered a perfect or infallible tool. An increasing number of applicants forgo the exploratory period as visible prospects and research anonymously (Noel-Levitz, 2007, 2009a, 2009c). Noel-Levitz reported a 4% increase in stealth applicants at public four-year universities and a 2% increase at private four-year universities from fall 2006 to fall 2007. These stealth applicants now comprise 30% of the applicant pool at public universities and 22% at private universities (2007). These anonymous searchers do not flow through the traditional admissions funnel from prospect to applicant to matriculant. They enter the university’s awareness in the middle of the funnel, where they present new challenges in predicting yield. The admissions funnel that served as the foundation of enrollment planning for the past two decades is beginning to show its age. “We can no longer act out the archaic funnel metaphor that centers on the idea that if you begin with enough prospects at the broad end of the funnel, enough matriculants will dribble out the narrow end” (Sevier, 2000, ¶2). Past enrollment models were built on understanding and tracking pre-applicant interaction, including how test scores are sent, participation in on-campus events, and methods of requesting information (Goenner & Pauls, 2006), but these models cannot be applied to applicants who do not follow these traditional methods of search. “With the increasing trend of students gathering information anonymously on the web, even students with model scores may prefer to remain anonymous until applying” (Noel-Levitz, 2008). In effect, the admissions funnel is broken, and the historical tools used to predict the outcome of the funnel have lost relevance (Mager, 2009; Noel-Levitz, 2009a).
Challenges in Enrollment Management

Troubling enrollment projections propelled enrollment management to the forefront in the late 1970s and early 1980s. “Faced with the prospect of declining enrollment, private colleges developed new academic and financial strategies that enabled them to compete better with public colleges for prospective students” (St. John & Paulsen, 2001, p. 560). While the drastic declines predicted in college populations in the 1980s were not realized, significant demographic changes are again predicted within the high school aged-population in the next decade (Anderson, 2005; WICHE, 2008), with more first generation, minority, and lower income high school graduates entering college. To prepare for these demographic changes, admissions offices consider the impacts of new technology, the rise of the common application, increased market competition, and increasing numbers of applications per student (Whiteside, 2004). This understanding requires a study of the foundations and processes of strategic enrollment management.

The application of strategic enrollment management is not a guarantee for enrollment success or a panacea for university admissions offices. The academic literature on college search and enrollment management reflects ongoing concern with the challenges of understanding choice, reaching students who are viable prospects to build a pool of applicants, and timing communication through the admission process (Davis-Van Atta & Carrier, 1986; Jackson, 1982).

The institution’s task in each case is to determine how current and prospective customers make their decisions, including what factors they consider, how they weigh the relative importance of these factors, the process by which they arrive at a decision, and the influences that operate on that process. (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 244)

As universities, like businesses, use past experience to predict future outcomes (Kotler & Fox, 1995), changes in the higher education marketplace make the ability to accurately predict enrollment behavior more important and more challenging. Growing competition between
universities for students, despite the fact that there may be adequate numbers of prospective students, leads to aggressive fights for a small and increasingly national subset of students (Barnes, 2009; Bound et al., 2009; Geiger, 2004, McPherson & Schapiro, 1998). Changing demographics in the college age population will result in fewer applications from traditional applicant pools. Innovations in technology and transportation expand the search and competition for students beyond regional geomarkets. These new technologies, changing demographics, and the evolving nature of college search and marketing create new challenges for enrollment management (Sevier, 2000).

Technology

The rising tide of technology directly impacts the search and admission process for both students and institutions. For this generation of applicants, “digital is more than the tools and technology they use – it is, quite frankly, a way of life” (Watkins, 2009, p. xiv). Technology changes the physical process of submitting an application for admission, and impacts search behaviors by increasing the amount of information available in independent search. The use of the web during college search allows prospective students to gather information on their own terms and makes possible a more anonymous search process, but the way admissions offices use technology may not match the college search preferences of prospective students (Noel-Levitz, 2009d). Admissions offices often use technology that moves in one direction, pushing information out through web pages and e-card campaigns, but current prospects prefer two-way technology and search experiences that are interactive and “make the process feel more personalized, focused, and on-demand” (Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2009, p. 27). Only 13% of prospective students use published urls to locate information on a school, preferring instead to use search engines and interactive sites like the College Board to identify potential schools, yet
admissions offices continue to publish urls in their print publications instead of investing in ways to ensure their school’s easy identification in web search engines (Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2009).

The non-linear structure of online search and the search preferences of this generation bring technology to the forefront of modern enrollment management. Web based information has the benefit of being on demand but the disadvantage, for marketing managers, of being nonsequential. Prospective students use and respond differently to web materials than print publications, using the web more frequently when they have specific, preexisting questions (LeFauve, 2001). Through print publications, universities sequence the flow of information to prospective students in predetermined stages, closely managing and building on a carefully developed message. The web allows prospects to search in a self-determined fashion, skipping information they find irrelevant or uninteresting. These navigational choices allow them to overlook university defined key marketing messages. On the web, students search freely in any sequence they prefer, moving from web pages designed for external users to those for internal users and back again. The web gives students the ability to decide what information they want to retrieve and when they want it, and also gives access to information about the university from third party sources. Large communities of users engage in information sharing and dialog about universities outside the university’s control (Cifarelli & Cullen, 2004).

While technology increases the quantity of information available to consumers during search, the availability of more information does not always benefit the consumer. Excess information negatively impacts a consumer’s ability to remember and retrieve specific information (Jacoby, Chestnut, & Silberman, 1977). Information overload, enabled by modern technology, leads to consumer confusion and lower quality decisions (Lurie, 2004). The early promise of technology and web based publications as a cost savings measure has also not been
realized (Noel-Levitz, 2009b). Universities create electronic media to reduce their print publication costs, only to find that technology requires a large and ongoing capital commitment. “Admissions offices struggle to balance their resource investment in the web and traditional publications while prospective students must find ways to cut through the mass of information available to them” (LeFauve, 2001).

Technology changes how people gather prepurchase information, even when shopping for expensive and infrequent purchases such as colleges, automobiles, and real estate (Cifarelli & Cullen, 2004; Fletcher, 2004; Ratchford, Talukdar, & Lee, 2007). The number of people shopping online for real estate, a comparable high cost and high risk purchase decision, increased by 18% from 2003 to 2004, with “more people than ever buying a home, or at least making an offer on one, without ever stepping foot in it” (Fletcher, 2004, ¶2). The expansion of search reflects the increase in the amount of information available to consumers (Lurie, 2004). Online search lowers the financial cost of search for the user, but has not reduced the amount of time spent in search and may not have improved the outcome of search (Ratchford et al., 2007). Prospective students are not immune to this behavior. “While it seems unlikely that a student would select a college without engaging in an extensive external search, it is well known that students will enroll in a school sight unseen” (Kiecker, 2001, p. 124).

**Timing**

As early as 1983, in the infancy of strategic enrollment management research, there was an acknowledged deficit of understanding what information prospective students wanted and when they needed information to make decisions about schools to include or exclude from their college choice sets (Hanson & Litton, 1982). Students as consumers in the higher education market may appear to operate on a predetermined timeline coinciding with their high school
graduation date (Galotti & Mark, 1994), but even within the finite window of the junior and senior year of high school they operate at different paces. Timing plays an important role in the college search process (Hossler, 1984), but represents a difficult to manage role because of the intrinsically individual nature of search.

At any one time, some members of the potential market for a product or service are unaware of its existence; some are aware; some are informed; some are interested; some are desirous; and some intend to buy. The distribution of people over stages of readiness makes a big difference in designing the marketing program. (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 221)

The timelines used by universities to disseminate information are based on the belief that the admissions office understands what information prospective students want, and when. However research has demonstrated the difficulty in determining the “stage of readiness” for information for traditional applicants; understanding the timing and receptiveness to information for stealth applicants may be impossible (Kiecker, 2004; Kotler & Fox, 1995). Understanding an individual prospective student’s readiness to receive information, and what information the prospective student wants creates an ongoing challenge in enrollment management.

This is not a trivial issue. Cumulative research (of which there is little) and conventional wisdom (of which there is more) suggest that when an admissions office reaches a junior who is ready to begin a more serious exploration of colleges, these campuses will have a competitive advantage in moving the student from a prospect to an applicant. However, if these efforts start before they make this transition, prospective students are less likely to read or respond to more detailed print materials or other recruitment activities. (Hossler, 1984, p. 18)

A well-timed flow of information arrives as students are ready to receive the information. Fifteen years ago, “search and application behaviors were carried out according to a somewhat predictable timing sequence and with varying degrees of commitment, depth, and breadth of effort” (Paulsen, 1990, p. 44). A combination of factors makes the timing of pre-applicant behavior less predictable. A national trend toward earlier engagement in the college search process results in students beginning their search at different times. The internet facilitates “on
demand” search, and the Common Application facilitates submitting applications to multiple schools. College search and pre-applicant behaviors can no longer be called predictable and rarely follow a “well defined schedule” or pattern (Galotti & Mark, 1994, p. 590). To be successful, “enrollment managers need to have a firm grasp on the timing and nature of the search process, which information sources are preferred, and which institutional characteristics are most important when a student decides which college or colleges to apply to” (Paulsen, 1990, p. 45). As universities use technology to automate national and mass-marketing recruiting programs, they create a standard timing model often inconsistent with the individual nature of the search process.

**Demographic Changes**

Dramatic demographic changes are anticipated in the college-aged population in the coming decade, with increasing numbers of minority students and a geographic shift to the south and west (Clinedinst, 2008; Glenn, 2008; Marks & Diaz, 2009; WICHE, 2008). These demographic changes challenge enrollment managers to balance goals related to enrollment, quality, access, and diversity (Anderson, 2006). “By 2022, nonwhite graduates of public high schools in the south will be in the majority” (Wright, 2009, ¶14). Public funding for higher education and university endowment income are in decline, increasing the focus on student-generated tuition dollars in planning schools’ institutional budgets (Barnes & Harris, In press 2010; Hoxby, 1997).

Enrollment-generated revenue has become an increasingly important part of university budgets as financial burdens have shifted from federal and state governments to institutions and students … Given the increased reliance on tuition revenue, the pressure to enroll more high-ability students, and the desire to have a diverse student body… recruitment and enrollment of students is an even more important function than it was a decade ago. (DesJardins, 2002, p. 1)
As the economy fluctuates, fewer students may be able to afford many four-year universities. These factors will only elevate the focus on enrollment management in the coming decade and will require constant reevaluation of enrollment models to ensure their relevance to the current market.

*Competition and the Marketplace*

While adequate numbers of prospective students are available to meet university enrollment needs, prestige-seeking universities compete aggressively for a small subset of these students to enhance institutional standing, creating market competition between universities for students (Bound et al., 2009; Duffy & Goldberg, 1998; Geiger, 2004; Goenner & Pauls, 2006; Harris, 2006; Pagano & Terkla, 1991). Four-year universities benefitted from increased applications in the past decade, but may have fewer applicants in the coming years as the number of high school graduates who fit their traditional profile declines, leading to higher admission rates, lower selectivity, lower rankings and a loss of prestige (WICHE, 2008). Institutions are rewarded for increased selectivity by the public, who view selectivity as a measure of value, and by rankings methodologies that value low admissions rates and often act as a “proxy for quality” for college searchers (Lay, 2004, p. 10). This adds to the level of competition among schools for students, and among students seeking admission to the best schools (Geiger, 2004; Harris, 2009a; Speyer, 2004; Zemsky, Shaman, & Shapiro, 2001). In this competitive environment, managing selectivity requires understanding the behaviors of prospective students; the lack of understanding about stealth applicants creates gaps in this understanding.

Innovations in technology and transportation have blurred the traditional geographic boundaries between schools. While clear connections between college choice and geography remain (DesJardins, Dundar, et al., 1999), prestige seeking universities recruit nationally to
ensure the best possible applicant pool, shifting the market “from one that is regional in focus to one that is national” (Bound et al., 2009, p. 3). The percentage of students applying to out of state institutions doubled from 1972 to 1992, and the percentage of students attending in-state institutions fell by 10%. Over 35% of colleges now draw students from 40 or more states, up from 10% of colleges in 1972 (Hoxby, 1997).

The Process of Enrollment Management

As a process, enrollment management represents a series of steps that move students from prospects to matriculants and, for universities with more comprehensive enrollment management models, on to alumni (Hossler, 1984). The admissions funnel represents the college search and choice process as the beginning of this broader enrollment management model. Significant links exist between search activities, college fit, and retention, making the college search process impactful for issues beyond initial enrollment (Hossler, 1984; Strauss & Volkwein, 2004; Tinto, 1993). As a best practice, enrollment is managed from the initial contact with a prospective student through the point of graduation, as the cost of recruiting a replacement student exceeds the cost of retaining a student (Hossler, 1984). In a true enrollment management model, retention may be as important, if not more so, than recruiting and enrolling students (Hossler, 1991). A college search process that helps students make better decisions can mitigate issues with retention. “If the individual’s goals and institutional factors are not congruent, recruitment may be ineffective and retention problems may ensue” (DesJardins, Dundar, et al., 1999, p. 117). Students who do not gather adequate information before making their college choice are at greater risk of attrition.

Researchers have developed multi-staged models of the college decision process (Curs & Singell, 2002; DesJardins, Ahlburg, et al., 2006; Hanson & Litton, 1982; Jackson, 1982; Seiver,
Twenty-five years of research shows some similarity in these stages (Table 1). While some models contain pre-applicant behavior in one stage (Davis-Van Etta & Carrier, 1986) others separate the pre-applicant behaviors into multiple steps (Hanson & Litten, 1982; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Sevier, 2000; Weiler, 1994). At the most basic level, the process can be broken into three stages: the aspiration to attend college, application to colleges, and the enrollment decision.

Table 1

*Common decision models in the college search, admission, and enrollment process.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Stage 1</th>
<th>Stage 2</th>
<th>Stage 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jackson, 1982</td>
<td>Preference</td>
<td>Exclusion</td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Define aspirations, assess</td>
<td>Consider options and</td>
<td>Consider options based on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>resources, create criteria</td>
<td>resources; exclude schools</td>
<td>benefits; limited by homogeny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for evaluation of alternatives</td>
<td>to create a “choice set”</td>
<td>of choice set</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanson &amp; Litten, 1982</td>
<td>Decision to participate</td>
<td>Researching options</td>
<td>Applying and Enrolling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop college aspirations</td>
<td>Search process, information</td>
<td>Apply to chosen schools, enroll in best option</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>gathering, impacted by public policy and personal factors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis-Van Etta &amp; Carrier, 1986</td>
<td>Inquiry Decision Process</td>
<td>Applicant Decision Process</td>
<td>Enrollment Decision Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Student:</em> Gathers information, forms opinions of “realistic market,” assesses image</td>
<td><em>Student:</em> submits applications to a subset of school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Institution:</em> Defines potential market, performs outreach</td>
<td><em>Institution:</em> Tries to convert prospects to applicants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hossler &amp; Gallagher, 1987</td>
<td>Predisposition</td>
<td>Search</td>
<td>Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decision to pursue college, not simply intention</td>
<td>Seek out information</td>
<td>Applicant and enrollment decisions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Weiler, 1994  |  Predisposition / Aspiration  |  Investigation and Search  |  Choice  
|-----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------
| Decision to apply to college  | Gathering information, building consideration set  | Decision to apply and, if admitted, enroll  |

Sevier, 2000  |  Beginning to look  |  Becoming more insightful  |  Applied / Accepted  
|-----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------
| Identify college choice characteristics and develop early choice set  | Seek detailed and customized information; reduce choice set  | Try to distinguish between relatively similar schools. Focus on “fit”, financial aid, and the “cool quotient”  |

Goenner & Pauls, 2006  |  Predisposition for higher education  |  Search for potential schools  |  Selection based on choice set  
|-----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------
| Intention to attend college. Influenced by family, friends, ability.  | Gather information – the “most important stage for institutions to increase applications and enrollment”  | Socio-economic factors play a key role in this stage.  |

The first stage of these models includes the predisposition to attend college, college aspirations, and the beginnings of search. Studies of this stage may be based on demographics, using factors such as income, family educational background, academic preparation, or other market segments to determine the probability of college attendance (DesJardins, 2002, 2008; Duffy & Goldberg, 1998). Within this stage, research focuses on the first step, deciding to apply, and how sociological and economic factors, including family, grades, and income, impact this decision (Hossler, Schmidt, et al., 1999; St. John, Paulsen, & Starkey, 1996). The second stage combines search and inquiry; the third stage focuses on application and enrollment. These stages are impacted by many diverse influences; research in these areas is equally diverse. Economics, demographics, sociology, anthropology, and psychology are all lenses used to examine the college search and decision process.
In one of the earlier and most commonly cited models, Jackson (1982) defines the three stages in the college search and choice process as preference, exclusion, and evaluation. While his model presents the college search process in logical and sequential steps, Jackson acknowledges that the model may oversimplify the decision process. His stages suggest that students have a level of understanding of their options, which allows them to consider, include, and exclude institutions in a logical and sequential manner. Jackson (1982) qualifies his process by acknowledging that

One might expect students to consider all available colleges, reject . . . those which are unfeasible, and gather information to evaluate and compare the substantial remainder. The limited evidence available suggests that accurate information about colleges is difficult to come by and that students typically exclude from their choice sets colleges they ought to evaluate…. exclud(ing) colleges as unfeasible based on partial information when more information would lead them to do otherwise. (p. 240)

Jackson’s model works specifically through the exclusion, not inclusion, of schools, which suggests that students have a comprehensive awareness of their college options when search begins. In his model, students identify preferred attributes and then exclude schools based on limited, incomplete, and at times inaccurate information. Students begin with a college choice set in mind prior to the first stage of Jackson’s model. In other models, students create choice sets through the identification, comparison, and inclusion of like programs. In doing so, students risk making decisions based on faulty or incomplete information, resulting in the inclusion of unviable options and the exclusion of viable options from their choice sets (Jackson, 1982).

The search process is not always logical or sequential, and different sources of information have greater impact at various times during search. The traditional sources of information for prospective students are university publications, high school counselors, family, and friends (Hanson & Litton, 1982). In the exclusion stage, university information and publications are a strong variable in the decision to apply (Jackson, 1982), and a lack of accurate
information about the college may result in exclusion from a choice set. Stealth applicants do not request current information from a university, and may base their college choices on out of date materials, secondhand, or inaccurate information. University publications are a strong variable in the exclusion stage; the absence of these publications during this stage of search may lead to the exclusion of appropriate schools from the choice set (Jackson, 1982). Students may also experience a search process failure common to consumer behavior, the failure to successfully evaluate the accuracy or relevance of recommendations from other sources in the context of their individual college search (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007). This study seeks to better understand the search stage and, as a result, help clarify the search process used by stealth applicants. By acting as secret shoppers, stealth applicants in effect eliminate their only ‘official’ source of information on the university, and make life-altering decisions based on information gathered through unofficial and perhaps unreliable sources (Noel-Levitz, 2007). Applicants in direct and earlier contact with the university may also make selection errors based on incorrect perceptions, however the materials received from the university provide them more complete, current, and accurate information on which to base their application decisions.

Many enrollment models focus on students’ perspectives as they transition from aspirant to enrollment. Hossler (1999) also considered enrollment management from the institution’s perspective as a process of developing a pool of prospective students and converting prospects to applicants, and then to students. Hossler’s three-stage, school-focused process involves recruiting potential students to apply, enrolling students who are admitted, and retaining those students who enroll. Models that explore student perspectives prior to the formation of choice sets are underrepresented in the literature, as most research examines market segmentation and predicting the enrollment behavior of known prospects. This study of stealth applicants will
connect Hossler’s school-focused approach and Jackson’s student-focused approach through the framework of consumer behavior and commercial marketing research.

**College Choice**

At its core, enrollment management remains a study of choice. While most studies analyze the final choice, where a student will attend college, the decision to attend a specific college represents a “sequence of choices” (St. John, Asker, & Hu, 2001, p. 423) involving both the student and the college in alternating decisions. “Each student seeks to find that single institution…that best fits that student’s personal and educational objectives (while) each institution…seeks to enroll that group of students…who can best benefit from that institution’s educational program” (Davis-Van Etta & Carrier, 1986, p. 76). According to Manski and Wise (1983), the initial creation of the college choice set may be the most powerful determinant in this process, yet incomplete information impacts both sides of the decision process as students make choices without a full understanding of the institution or educational enterprise and universities make choices with an imperfect ability to predict student success.

Students and families have become more savvy consumers of education (Black, 2004; Coomes, 2000; Kiecker, 2004; Kotler & Fox, 1995). These sophisticated consumers and their extensive college searches elevate the role of marketing and consumer behavior in the landscape of higher education, marking college choice as a “consumptive decision for many students and parents” (Clark & Hossler, 1990, p. 80). Once applied primarily in business, universities now apply the four P’s of marketing (Clark & Hossler, 1990) to discern if they offer a viable mix of majors (products), set tuition rates comparable to their competitors (pricing), plan advertising campaigns (promotion), and develop alternate physical locations and new delivery methods (placement). All of these factors play a role in the college choice process as students perform
college searches. Universities hire brand consultants, advertising firms, and marketing consultants to help them understand and improve their position in the higher education marketplace and to influence student choice (Armini, 2010; Duffy & Goldberg, 1998; Harris, 2009b), while applicants hire personal college consultants to help them craft a marketable application package (Zemsky, 2009). Marketing is not new in higher education, but with the growth of enrollment management and competition for students, faculty, and resources, marketing has reached a place of prominence in university planning, illustrated by Kotler and Fox’s (1995) “six stages in the evolution of marketing applied to enrollment.” In these attitudinal stages, universities move from the belief that marketing is unnecessary, to “marketing is promotion, marketing is segmentation and marketing research, marketing is positioning, marketing is strategic planning,” and, finally, “marketing is enrollment management” (p. 10-12). Universities and their stakeholders may be at different stages in this hierarchy of attitudes, but the move to market places all universities somewhere on this scale. Marketing, market research, and a market driven vocabulary have become common, if not accepted, in academic circles (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Lay, 2004; Lewison & Hawes, 2007; Litton et al., 1983). Consumer behavior and commercial marketing practices are a highly integrated part of the college search and enrollment management process for both students and institutions.

While “higher education is not a product in the way people traditionally think of products” (Clark & Hossler, 1990, p. 80), the decision to participate in higher education has implications consistent with consumer marketing. As a product, higher education is elusive to define and evaluate. Higher education is a one-time, high investment purchase with outcomes that “cannot be measured before matriculation nor, with much precision, even after graduation” (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 43). Brewer et al. (2004) present “higher education as an industry in
which consumers are often under-informed in the sense that they cannot objectively evaluate the quality of the service before they actually purchase it” (p. 19). Universities market the service of education, the degree as a product, and the transformative experience of going to college. This combination of service, product, and experiential marketing illustrates the complexity of marketing higher education (Litton et al., 1983).

College choice is “difficult to study because it is complex, longitudinal, interactional, and cumulative” (DesJardins, Dundar, et al., 1999, p. 123). The decision to apply to a college is often driven by perception, reputation, and external messages that are difficult to manage. The decision to attend is complicated by the diversity of consumers’ decision models (Kotler & Fox, 1995) and by the homogeneity that occurs in a college choice set built by students as they self-identify a group of schools that share preferred attributes and the perception of access (DesJardins, Ahlburg, et al., 2006).

Parents and students talked about how difficult it is to figure out how one given college is different from another. Students typically narrow down their choices to institutions with similar attributes, and when they have that final list of colleges, many of them seem interchangeable because they all claim to offer the same things. (Lipman Hearne, 2009, p. 8)

With these commonalities, smaller factors, experiences, and attitudes may become elevated in the decision process. “When the consumer’s primary objective is to make a decision, he or she may use trivial attributes to help finalize the decision” (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007, p. 239). Choice is complicated and multidimensional (Hossler, 1984), yet “an understanding of student enrollment decision-making, or college choice behavior, is a primary need for effective student recruitment” (Paulsen, 1990, p. 1).

One theoretical framework applicable to understanding student choice approaches higher education from the perspective of consumer behavior (Kiecker, 2004; Kotler & Fox, 1995). The
growing application of commercial marketing techniques in higher education processes includes services marketing, brand awareness, choice modeling, consumer behavior, and product differentiation (Jacoby, Chestnut, & Fisher, 1978; Litton et al., 1983; Lurie, 2004; Midgley, 1983; Nedungadi, 1990). These marketing lenses provide theoretical frameworks for understanding the institution’s perspective as choice impacts the development of a cohort of prospective students, and can also be used to examine how prospective students develop their choice sets as pre-prospects. This process, often occurring before visible search begins, is elusive to understand, manage, and track.

Conceptual Framework: Consumer Behavior

Consumer behavior helps commercial entities identify and understand the patterns consumers follow as they search for product information and make purchase decisions (Midgley, 1983). Understanding the search patterns of prospective students may prove equally valuable to colleges and university. “Now, in the age of the Internet, developing an understanding of how information-rich environments affect consumer decision making is of crucial importance” (Lurie, 2004, p. 484). While Hoyer and MacInnis (2007) explain that “external search follows a series of sequential steps that can provide further insight into the consumer’s decision” (p. 215), the current reality in admissions is that more and more prospective students search in non-sequential ways (Hoover, 2008a, 2008b; Jarrell, 2007; Next Student, 2008; Noel-Levitz, 2007).

The search for a college is a high involvement decision as determined by the inclusion of one or more of the following factors:

1. The consumers’ decision will reflect upon his or her self image and could have long term consequences,
2. The cost to carry out the decision involves major personal or economic sacrifices,
3. The personal and social risks of making a “wrong” decision are perceived as high, or
4. There is considerable reference-group pressure to make a particular choice or to act in a particular way, and the target consumer is strongly motivated to meet the expectations of these reference groups. (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 245)

Clearly, the college choice is a high involvement decision based on all four of these criteria. High involvement decisions are made after a search process, which involves both internal and external search (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007; Kotler & Fox, 1995). Stealth applicants may not visibly participate in search prior to applying, but consumer behavior research demonstrates that stealth applicants will perform search.

One approach to understanding the impact of markets on higher education to improve enrollment management is through the adaptation of business concepts to the higher education marketplace (Kotler & Fox, 1995). The extensive body of consumer behavior literature dating from the 1970’s studies the “acquisition, consumption, and disposition of goods, services, time, and ideas by decision making units” (Jacoby, 1976, p. 332). Under this definition, prospective students are decision making units in the search, acquisition, and consumption of higher education. Higher education operates in a marketplace, populated by buyers and sellers, with all of the related trappings of marketing and market-driven functions found in commercial enterprises. “Student consumerism and the national market are mutually reinforcing” (Geiger, 2004, p. 245). Consumer behavior search processes represent:

A dynamic, ongoing process subsuming several subprocesses of varying importance and temporal duration. The central notion common to all these models is that man, qua consumer, is an information processor having information storage capacity in long-term memory and is capable of storing and using information via feedback loops and recall mechanisms. (Jacoby, 1976, p. 340)

Consumers follow a relatively sequential series of steps as “information processors” (Jacoby, p. 340) in making buying decisions. While there are multiple models of consumer
behavior sequences, Figure 2 shows the four common building blocks of these models: problem identification, search, decision making, and outcome evaluation (Berning & Jacoby, 1974).

Figure 2. Consumer behavior decision model, adapted from Hoyer and MacInnis, 2007.

These four stages can be contrasted with the three stage models of the college decision process shown in Table 1. Consumer behavior adds a fourth stage, outcome evaluation, which is absent from the three-stage college decision process models. As in the college decision models, researchers suggest a linear and sequential process (Capon & Davis, 1984), but others contend that patterns of movement are difficult to articulate and subject to multi-directional forces and influences (Jacoby, 1976; Midgley, 1983).

In commercial consumer behavior, as in the college search process, the first stage is problem recognition and identification. At this stage consumers identify or confront a need, for example, when a high school student realizes college as one of the multiple options available after high school (Kiecker, 2004). If “problem recognition is the perceived difference between an ideal and an actual state” (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007, p. 195), the ideal future state for the prospective student is attainment of their preferred post high school plan, be it work, military service, or college enrollment. For those who plan to attend college, the actual state as a college seeker who may not have the information needed to identify or gain admission to the ideal college (Stage 1) creates the need for search. The problem and identification of a possible
solution leads to a period of information search (Stage 2), examined more closely in the following section, then to decision making (Stage 3), and finally to an analysis of the outcomes of the decision (Stage 4).

Information Search

To the extent that prospective college students operate as consumers in the higher education marketplace, research suggests that as consumers, students follow traditional behaviors during information search (Kiecker, 2004). During search, the prospective consumer gathers information to aid in decision making.

The high-involvement, extended decision-making process related to college choice implies that student prospects (and their parents and other influencers) collect as much information as possible, both from memory and from outside sources. (Kiecker, 2004). In doing so, students use internal and external search to unconsciously try to align what they perceive to be true about a product or choice with the new data they are gathering (Jacoby, Chestnut, et al., 1978). Search comprises an ongoing, individually directed, and self-reflective process (Brucks, 1985). Despite the best efforts of marketers, “the consumer has complete control over the quantity, order, and type of information acquired” through search (Jacoby, Chestnut, et al., 1978, p. 533).

Two types of consumer information search, internal and external, normally occur sequentially (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007). During internal and external search, consumers evaluate their skills and compare them to the skills needed to master the product (Burson, 2007). In commercial transactions, this may determine if a consumer purchases an iPhone or a Jitterbug. This self-reflective “matching” is inherently biased by the consumer’s estimation of their own ability (Burson, 2007). During the college search, just as in consumer behavior, prospective students attempt to evaluate their academic compatibility with a school, gathering information on
average test scores and high school grades. This information may not provide a complete or realistic basis on which consumers can determine a skill match. A student’s ability to utilize accurate information in this facet of the search process necessitates contact with the school. Invisible prospects are especially prone to making an application decision based on limited contacts with the university, so their self-assessment of product skills match may be especially incomplete (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007).

**Internal Search**

During the internal search process, the consumer recalls prior experiences, feelings, and impressions about possible solutions to the problem. Internal search is extremely difficult for marketers and researchers to influence and track. For consumers, the ability to retain and recall information limits the effectiveness of internal search. “Much empirical evidence supports the view that prior knowledge affects information processing activities” (Brucks, 1985, p. 1). Individual biases reflect the tendency of consumers to remember information that reinforces their existing beliefs and ideologies (Jacoby, Chestnut, et al., 1978). If a prospective student already believes that a large state school is impersonal, for example, they may more easily remember experiences that reinforce feelings of impersonal treatment. Prospective students as consumers retrieve four types of information from personal memory during internal search: information on brands, attributes, evaluations, and past experiences (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007; Kiecker, 2004).

*Brands.* There are over 3,000 colleges and universities in the United States but, like most consumers, students will consider only a fraction of the available choices during internal search. Consumers normally recall between two and eight brands during internal search (Hauser & Wernerfelt, 1990). The pool of possible brands constructed by the consumer during internal search becomes the consideration set, evoked set, or relevant set in commercial marketing terms.
(Hauser & Wernerfelt, 1990); or the college choice set in admissions search literature (Jackson, 1982). Normally the brands recalled are what marketers and brand managers call *top of mind* brands that carry a high level of awareness. Kleenex, Coke, and Xerox are all top of mind brands, as are Harvard, Yale, and Berkeley. Brand identity is closely equated with image, and not always based in an institution or product’s reality (Kotler & Fox, 1995). Identifying a choice set represents the beginning of the search process for consumers, as top of mind brands may not be viable options. Even when the consideration set includes several good options, consumers perform additional search to narrow down those alternatives (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007).

Brand awareness represents a powerful factor in choice, as “it is a truism in marketing that brand awareness is a necessary precondition for choice” (Nedungadi, 1990, p. 264). The choice set of college brands may be influenced by a wide variety of inputs and experiences. Brands are not only built by institutional activity, but also based on others’ opinions (Li & Bernoff, 2008). Even before the expansion of the internet, Kotler and Fox (1995) called individual voices the “best promoters of the institution. Their good and favorable word of mouth reach others and make it easy to attract and serve others” (p. 36). Technology increases brand visibility in the marketplace, but also makes brand image increasingly difficult to control in the age of the Internet, Twitter, Rate-my-Prof.com, Facebook, MySpace, CollegeConfidential.com, and other online networks (Cifarelli & Cullen, 2004). Companies and institutions no longer solely own and manage brands; instead brands are built by the voices of thousands of external participants (Barnes, 2009; Li & Bernoff, 2008). There is no turning back from this technology, which is ubiquitous to the wired generation (Barnes, 2009).

High school students currently engaged in the college search process are part of the first generation to grow up with the internet and use it extensively for educational, business, and social purposes. Another study described this generation as technology “omnivores,” who use gadgets and services to participate “voraciously” in cyberspace, express
themselves online and do a range of Web 2.0 activities such as blogging or managing their own web pages. (Finnegan et al., 2007, p. 20)

Colleges who try to manage and control brand identity in the face of the rising tide of technology will soon realize that “you don’t own the conversation anymore. You have to let it go” (Lipka, 2009, ¶ 4). Technology changes the scope and control of university marketing messages (Cifarelli & Cullen, 2004).

Attributes. Attributes recalled during internal search might include details about rankings, majors, or facilities, but information on attributes retrieved during internal search is often generalized or simplified because of the consumer’s limitations of recall (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007). Specific attributes recalled are often linked to the consumer’s personal goals or interests (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007). A football player may have better internal recall of a football program’s attributes than of the school’s music programs, just as a music major may recall the specific profiles of faculty in their instrument, but not in other areas. The recall of specific attributes helps refine the choice set and aids the decision process.

The recall of attributes in search also limits the decision process. The prioritization of attributes is limited by the ability to recall specific information and by a search that may not focus on issues researchers have identified as central to the college decision process. “At these early stages of awareness and interest, many traditional elements of competition such as quality and actual cost do not even come into play” (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 176). Internal search structured around desired attributes also leads to homogeny in the college choice set.

Evaluations. Positive and negative preferences combine to create an evaluation of the product or school. Likes and dislikes are easier to recall than specific details because they are personal, but are equally subject to memory lapse and product confusion especially among products that have similar attributes (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007; Kretchmar & Memory, 2010).
This presents challenges in higher education, where educational programs exhibit many similarities. Colleges and universities encourage this lack of differentiation by using associative marketing, self-identifying and defining their place in the market based on real or aspirational similarities to other schools, such as identifying themselves as a public ivy (Lull & Thieblot, 2004) or as “the independent ivy” (Steinberg, 2002, p. 67). While schools attempt to build these associative connections, the consumer ultimately determines the current positioning of the school (Kotler & Fox, 1995).

Experiences. Internal search also involves recalling specific experiences with the brand. In college search, this may involve remembering a middle school field trip or recalling homecoming events attended at a parent’s alma mater. Just as in evaluation, mood and memory lapse impact or limit the recall of experiences. Personal or especially positive or negative experiences are easier to recall (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007). Both traditional and stealth applicants may have prior experiences to recall that involve direct interactions with the institution or its representatives, but traditional applicants build upon this base of experience when entering external search while stealth applicants postpone additional direct experiences with the university.

Research in consumer behavior demonstrates that any product search is impacted, positively or negatively, by the searcher’s bias toward information that confirms preexisting beliefs (Jacoby, Chestnut, et al., 1978), and by the limited amount of information gathered versus the quantity of information available (Jacoby, 1976). Bias may be expected in internal search because of the close connections between personal preferences and memory, but bias also exists in external search as consumers “search for external information that confirms rather than disconfirms their overall beliefs” (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007 p. 215). Consumers, then, recall facts
in internal search that reconfirm their beliefs, and seek information in external search that confirms those beliefs.

External Search

Most consumers perform external search as well as internal search, especially when making high-cost or high-risk decisions, or decisions for which the final outcome is difficult to predict (Kiecker, 2004). Consumers “go beyond their own internal resources” on decisions considered significant (Jacoby, Chestnut, et al., 1978, p. 541). Despite the motivations for extensive search, the “amount of information sought is typically small relative to the amount of information available” (Jacoby, 1976, p. 340). This may reflect the consequence of information overload during the search process (Lurie, 2004).

Pre-purchase external search utilizes external sources, such as friends, family, teachers, counselors, print and electronic publications, advertising, and retailer or campus visits to gather information before making product decisions, or in this case, before making decisions about applying to a specific college. External search may be grounded in a combination of university controlled information and personal networks (Murray, 1991) or, as Kiecker (2004) explains, may be developed through the prospective student’s “socio-cultural environment” (p. 122). Pre-purchase external search “occurs in response to problem recognition; the goal is to make better purchase decisions” (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007, p. 206). Some external search behaviors are familiar to admissions officers, who often track participation in more visible external search activities including campus visits, requests for information, and correspondence with an admissions officer as a way to gauge prospective students’ interest in attending (Lay, 2004).

There are clear parallels between the five types of external search in consumer behavior and information gathering and the college search process (Table 2).
Table 2

External search categories in commercial and college search. Adapted from Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Commercial Search</th>
<th>College Search</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retailer Search</td>
<td>Visits or calls to stores</td>
<td>Campus visits, calls to admissions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Search</td>
<td>Advertising, web, and other marketing materials</td>
<td>Review of view books, web pages, and other publications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Search</td>
<td>Advice from friends, relatives, neighbors, coworkers, and/or other consumers</td>
<td>Advice from friends, relatives, teachers, counselors, and current students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Search</td>
<td>Contact with independent sources of information</td>
<td>Guidebooks, ranking publications, web sites, social networking, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiential Search</td>
<td>Product samples, service trials</td>
<td>Class visits, overnight visits in residence halls</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The five common categories that define external search are retailer, media, interpersonal, independent, and experiential search (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007). As shown in Table 2, the methods consumers use to gather information during external search have direct equivalents in the college search process. The retailer search becomes the initial college search; the media search includes reviews of colleges’ web and print publications. Independent search involves all of the rapidly growing non-university managed publications, including social networking sites (CollegeConfidential.com), web pages (YOUUniversitytv.com), and rankings publications (U.S. News and World Report). Interpersonal search includes conversations with family, friends,
teachers, and counselors. *Experiential search* encompasses the college visit, attending classes, eating at the dining facility, and staying overnight in a residence hall. Each method may be used at different stages and with varying levels of influence in the external search process.

In the early stages of search, media and marketing play a significant role (Berning & Jacoby, 1974). Media and marketing are the search features most directly managed by the company or school, but this control may work against the perceived credibility of the information. Online information retrieved in independent search from blogs or social networking sites may be perceived as more credible simply because it is not controlled by the retailer (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007). Tracking the specific relationships between individual units of information gathered during search and the final consumer decision is difficult. As Jacoby, Chestnut, and Silverman (1977) find:

> Considerable evidence exists to demonstrate that there is no one-to-one relationship between information provided and the impact, if any, of this information on the recipient. For any one of a number of reasons, there may be no impact whatsoever; what impact there is may not be overt or observable; or the impact might be observable but different, perhaps even opposite, from that intended. (p. 119)

The use of personal sources, such as information and opinions from family and friends, occurs more frequently late in the search process (Berning & Jacoby, 1974). Midgley (1983) reports that consumers who have less knowledge about a product, or who feel that their decision will be judged by others, perform more extensive interpersonal search. “In the absence of objective standards for judging a product, group pressure can be an important influence on individual choice” (Midgley, 1983, p. 75). This may explain what field practitioners call the “hot high school” phenomenon, when a college experiences a surge in applications from a particular high school. In recruiting students, institutions “must gain a sound understanding of the individuals involved in making decisions about college choice and persistence, and we must
understand the forces that consciously or subconsciously influence them” (Davis-Van Atta & Carrier, 1986, p. 74). Applicants’ individual choice of where to apply to college and which colleges to include in their choice set may be impacted by the group dynamic at their high school or by peer pressure (Hoover, 2009a).

Differences exist in how consumers from varying socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds participate in search, suggesting a relationship between search and socio-economic status (Capon & Davis, 1984; Jacoby, 1976). “Consumers who are members of subculture groups and not culturally assimilated …tend to conduct a wider search of external sources” (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007, p. 207). Consumers with low or high levels of perceived knowledge search more than those who have a moderate knowledge of the product, creating an “inverted U relationship between knowledge and search” (Brucks, 1985, p. 3). Using identified search behaviors as a way to determine an applicant’s interest when making admissions decisions disadvantages students from subcultures and lower socioeconomic groups. Cognitive ability and information processing strategies also impact consumers’ ability to collect and analyze information about product choices (Capon & Davis, 1984). Prior knowledge inconsistently impacts search; having extensive product knowledge may limit search because of the expectation that the consumer already has the information needed to make a decision, or it may expand search because the consumer has learned the right questions to ask (Brucks, 1985). Bias may be expected in internal search, as bias is closely linked to personal preferences and memory, but bias also exists in external search, as consumers “tend to search for external information that confirms rather than disconfirms their overall beliefs” (Jacoby, Chestnut, et al., 1978, p. 215).

A variety of factors impact the breadth and depth of consumer search, including the level of risk associated with the decision (Jacoby, 1976; Midgley, 1983; Murray, 1991), the level of
self-confidence the consumer has in their pre-search knowledge, and the size of the problem (Brucks, 1985). “External search activity is greater when its perceived benefits are high relative to its costs” (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007, p. 210). The financial cost of traveling to campus, missing high school classes and social activities, and the stress of college visits creates strain for the consumer. In general, search will continue until the value of search is seen as not outweighing these search costs (Jacoby, Chestnut, et al., 1978).

For many students, the college search and decision process represents the most significant and high risk decision they have faced, with long term personal and professional consequences (Abrahamson & Farrell, 2009). “Consumers have higher motivation to search if the consequences are more serious, such as those entailing high financial or social risk” because “one of the key components of perceived risk is uncertainty regarding the consequences of behavior” (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007, p. 210). Many researchers include issues related to cost in their assessment of consumer behavior and risk (Black, 2004; Huddleston & Ivanova, 2004; Murray, 1991), but in the search process “price” represents more than cost. During search, price suggests quality and value, and it often serves as a marker of product prestige (Jacoby, Chestnut, et al., 1978; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Striping, 2009). Higher cost may be a proxy for the perception or inference of being a “better” product (Bagwell & Riordan, 1991; Erickson & Johansson, 1985; Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007). This presents challenges in college choice, as high cost may result in a school’s exclusion from a college choice set and extensive price discounting through scholarships makes difficult the accurate comparison of the costs between different universities (Hesel & Williams, 2010). Price becomes another factor that requires extensive consumer research.
The risks and challenges of college selection motivate prospective students to perform an extensive search for the appropriate college. The risk of making a poor college decision is high because of the uncertainty surrounding the final decision. From a marketing standpoint, higher education is often aligned with services marketing (Harris, 2009b; Litton et al., 1983); thus a services marketing framework is consistent with the higher level of search involved in educational decisions. Consumers search more when they are evaluating services rather than products (Murray, 1991). Higher education, like service industries, is “characterized by relative high degrees of intangibility” and “inseparability of production and consumption” (Litton et al., 1983, p. 20). Furthermore, higher education is “infrequently purchased, somewhat expensive, has a high degree of personal importance, and a relatively small number of alternatives” (Litton et al., 1983, p. 21). Litton, Sullivan and Brodigan define higher education as a “credence good,” or a product that cannot be easily evaluated. Consumers use external search as a way to reduce the risk of their decisions, but find that to evaluate the quality of higher education today they must possess the very tools that will be attained through higher education in the future.

External search may be motivated by brands, attitudes, or discrepancies in internal search (Kiecker, 2004). If the internal search does not identify a clearly preferred and attainable brand or contains multiple attractive options, search will continue (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007). Some people also enjoy the search process; their positive attitude toward search results in an expanded and ongoing search. Search also continues when the consumer encounters discrepancies, positive or negative about available products (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007). If something does not fit – a big school feels small and personal, for example – consumers are motivated to continue searching to resolve the discrepancy.
Prospective college students learn how to behave as consumers from various social networks, and engage in the college search process both as individual consumers and also as members of family and social groups (Mangleburg & Birstol, 1998). Increasingly, teens and parents act as co-seekers and co-purchasers of colleges (Abrahamson & Farrell, 2009; Kiecker, 2004; Shoham & Dalakas, 2003). This complicates marketing for universities, as they must simultaneously communicate with and appeal to two different consumer groups.

We know one thing for sure: as parents have become more influential in driving their children’s college choice, it has become all the more important for colleges and universities to figure out what type of information parents are seeking about schools, and just how much sway they hold over their child’s final college decision. (Lipman Hearne, 2009, p. 1)

The interplay between teenagers and parents in consumer decision making has been examined in the commercial marketplace, and demonstrates the impact that teenagers have on family purchases, with older teens and those with higher high school academic performance exhibiting a greater impact on family purchase decisions (Palan & Wilkes, 1997). Just as adolescents have an impact on family purchase decisions, parents have an impact on teenagers’ purchase decisions. Parental involvement in a child’s college search most frequently occurs during the development of a choice set or during the final decision (Lipman Hearne, 2009), acting as a frame to the student’s search at the beginning and end of the college process. Parental involvement often acts as a mechanism through which the search can be focused to address specific issues, such as affordability, placement, and outcome measures (Lipman Hearne, 2009). The parental impact in search promotes differentiation and choice through examining measurable factors such as price and outcomes.
Conclusion

The goal of enrollment management remains attracting and retaining a class; attainment of this goal requires understanding behaviors, communicating relevant benefits, and meeting expectations. “Successful enrollment management can … be seen as the effective control of a set of distinct but interrelated processes” (Davis-Van Atta & Carrier, 1986, p. 73). The term enrollment management suggests that practitioners have some level of control over enrollment from the initial contact point onward, but even at the advent of enrollment management Hossler (1984) recognized that “influencing enrollments may prove to be a more accurate term” (p. 10, emphasis added). Prospective students who operate outside the normal methods and changes in technology, demographics, and market behavior complicate the university’s ability to predict and manage enrollment.

The core challenge in studying stealth applicant behavior rests in the reliance in much of the empirical work in enrollment modeling on tracking pre-applicant contact and movement through the admissions funnel. This work cannot be applied to applicants who omit or re-order the sequence or who are not visible as prospective students. Goenner and Pauls (2006) model enrollment behavior beginning with prospective students to identify factors that can predict enrollment and, more successfully, non-enrollment. Their study focuses on prospective students who inquire, or who are known prospects, tracking the manner and number of inquires and interactions between the student and the school to demonstrate a relationship between the number of contacts and the probability of attendance. The benchmarks they employ – “campus visits, internet telephone and mail inquiries, fill out an information card, attend a college fair, or attend a campus program” (p. 937) - are often the very steps that stealth applicants omit. Davis-
Van Atta and Carrier (1986) also structure the process from prospect to applicant, again relying on traditional flow to ask

At which point in time following initial inquiry did the non applicant exclude the institution from his or her narrowing set of choices? This is a critical assessment to make. The college selection process is, foremost, a process. It occurs over time, and choices must be made throughout. Once made, these choices tend to be irreversible. (p. 81)

The literature on enrollment management demonstrates ways to predict behavior for 70% of the applicant pool. The behavior and choices of the other 30%, the invisible prospects who become stealth applicants, occupy this research.
CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a single case design to better understand the college search and decision process from the standpoint of the stealth applicant. Through this research, institutions gain a better understanding of the motivations of this growing applicant pool and develop strategies to better connect with these applicants earlier in the admission process as well as post-application. In this study, as in most market research in consumer behavior,

The institutions’ task is to determine how current and prospective customers make their decisions, including what factors they consider, how they weight the relative importance of these factors, the process by which they arrive at a decision, and the influences that operate on that process. (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 244)

Managing the university’s admission and yield rates defines enrollment management ‘success.’ Some studies connect marketing spending with improved yield rates (Lipman Hearne, 2007), but in an era of increasing budget awareness any work that helps explain applicant behavior could save marketing dollars and benefit institutions. Many schools invest significant financial resources in marketing and recruiting.

The impact of marketing activities on the application process should be grounded in research to identify which activities positively impact application generation (DesJardins, Dundar, et al., 1999). The behaviors of stealth applicants as a subpopulation of the overall applicant pool directly impacts an enrollment manager’s ability to achieve class targets; understanding this expanding group will be vital in the coming years of change in the higher education market.
Methodology

Stealth applicants represent a new phenomenon not previously addressed in the academic literature. As noted in Chapter 2, extensive research on applicant behavior exists, but the limited research on stealth applicant behavior provides an inadequate basis for administrative decision making. While heavily reported in the popular press (Hoover, 2008a, 2008b, 2009a; Hoover & Supiana, 2009; Perez, 2009; Zernike, 2009), examined by consulting and marketing agencies (Cappex, 2009; Jarrell, 2009; Noel-Levitz, 2007, 2009a, 2009c), and studied internally by universities (Earlham College, 2008), stealth applicants represent the type of new phenomenon best examined through qualitative research. Methodologists recommend a qualitative research approach as a first step when little or no prior research on the topic exists (Kotler & Fox, 1995). Understanding stealth applicant behavior also requires understanding an individual experience, another hallmark of qualitative research that:

Can be used to probe deeply into consumers’ underlying needs, perceptions, preferences, and level of satisfaction; to gain greater familiarity with and understanding of marketing problems whose causes are not known; and to develop ideas that can be further investigated through quantitative research. (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 79)

Qualitative research centered on individual experiences creates richer data through which the stealth applicant experience can be examined.

A qualitative case study best informs this research because the study concerns “process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation” (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). “Case study is appropriate when the object of an evaluation is to develop a better understanding” (Merriam, 1998, p. 39), and when the research focuses on “how” and “why” research questions and contemporary events (Yin, 2003). These “how and why questions are more explanatory, and are likely to lead to the use of case studies” (Yin, 2003, p. 6).
Site Selection

Southern Methodist University (SMU) is a mid-sized, private, selective, comprehensive, Doctoral I university founded in 1911 by the Methodist Church and located in Dallas, Texas. Now home to seven distinct colleges, SMU consistently ranks in the top 70 universities by U.S. News and World Report and has an endowment valued at over one billion dollars. While the undergraduate program is geographically diverse, with over 50% of students from outside of Texas, the student body presents a relative homogeneity both ethnically and socio-economically. Only 34% of SMU students qualify for need-based financial aid. Over 40% of SMU applicants attended private high schools, which normally have more in-depth and personalized college counseling processes. This wealthier group of students had greater access to college counseling resources to guide them through the college search process. Half of SMU’s students are from outside of the state of Texas. 51% of students are female, 75% are white, and 20% are minority.

The Methodist church continues to hold a significant presence on the Board of Trustees, with a requirement that 50% of board members are Methodist, however chapel attendance has not been compulsory since 1940 and the largest self-reported religion on campus is Catholicism. SMU is a school “free from enforced secularism” (The Master Plan of SMU, 1969). SMU features a core liberal arts curriculum, traditional instructional style, residential campus, and classic Georgian architecture. The campus has over 70 red brick buildings spread across 210 acres. The main campus is located at the intersection of Highland Park, Texas and University Park, Texas, two of the wealthiest communities in the state, five miles north of downtown Dallas. A second, seasonal campus operates on over 300 acres located in the Kit Carson National Forest, seven miles south of Taos, New Mexico.
Academically, all SMU students share a common core curriculum based in the liberal arts. While the liberal arts occupy the central core of the institution, the enrollment and prominence of the business and engineering schools steadily increased over the past decade. SMU’s undergraduate classes are offered in traditional formats, with very limited evening course offerings and no online or distance options. Over 90% of undergraduate students enroll full-time. Residentially, all first year students live on campus. A strong Greek system dominates university social life. Over 35% of undergraduate students participate in fraternity or sorority life. As a Division I school, football plays a significant role in student life.

SMU has an endowment of over $1B and an annual operating budget in excess of $320M. Over 65% of the annual operating budget is generated through tuition revenue. SMU’s President, Dr. R. Gerald Turner, reports SMU is “closely bound to tuition as the single most important source of income” (SMU Faculty Senate, 2000). SMU awards over $21M in merit-based scholarships and $32M in need-based scholarships and grants annually, some of which also have merit-based criteria. SMU has 656 full time and 378 part time faculty, and 1,585 staff. Over 70% of faculty serve in tenure earning lines. In the past seven years, over $353M has been spent on building-related expenditures, the majority of which were funded through a $585M capital campaign. The Second Century Campaign launched in September 2008 with a goal of $750M for teaching, research, scholarships, and faculty support. In December 2008, SMU was selected to become the site of the George W. Bush Presidential Center; the $500M campaign for the center will be managed by the center foundation but will run concurrently with the Second Century Campaign.

SMU receives approximately 8,500-9,000 applications a year for a targeted first year class size of 1375. The admission rate fell dramatically in the past decade, from over 80% to
50%, classifying SMU as a competitive university for admission. SMU’s extensive recruiting and customer relationship management programs track interactions with prospective students on the university’s data management system, access.SMU (a PeopleSoft product), and in RecruitmentPlus. Over 5,000 people each year attend SMU’s daily campus tours, over 3,000 visitors attend formal on-campus admission programs such as preview days, and an additional 2,000 attend off-campus programs. Fifteen admissions counselors travel nationally to meet with prospective students at their high schools and at events in the students’ hometowns. Admissions counselors, alumni, and other university staff also attend several hundred college fairs each year. Processes exist to record and track contacts and visits with prospective students. On campus, the majority of visitors preregister their visit on the SMU web page; these registrations are coded into the university’s database to create prospective student records. Visitors also complete a short information form prior to the campus tour that becomes part of the prospect record. The majority of daily visitors pre-register on the SMU web page. A smaller number make reservations by calling the admissions office; a handful come as drop-in visitors.

SMU was selected for this study for reasons both practical and purposeful. Practically, the researcher’s long tenure at SMU resulted in direct access to data, interview locations, and research subjects. Purposefully, SMU is one of many mid-sized, four-year private universities. SMU is neither a member of the Association of American Universities nor a university that is struggling to survive. As such, research at this specific site offers data applicable to many similar institutions. The stealth applicant phenomenon occurs slightly less often at private universities than public universities (Noel-Levitz, 2009a), suggesting that the higher cost of attending a private university may encourage a larger pre-application investment in college search. This
would align with consumer behavior research, which suggests that consumers spend more time researching high-investment decisions (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007).

SMU competes in a national marketing space, recruiting globally to develop and increase its applicant pool, with a goal of 10,000 applications by 2012. Half of SMU’s undergraduate students are from Texas, and all fifty states are represented in the undergraduate student body. SMU accepts applications submitted through the online Common Application, Apply Texas, and SMU web page in addition to printed applications. Applications are considered for non-binding early and regular decision application options. SMU does not have a binding early decision application process, which represents a pre-admission agreement that the student will attend if admitted and which would reduce the spontaneous application behavior that may be anticipated in some stealth applicants. An applicant pool that is predominantly electronic and made up of students who apply to multiple schools provided ample opportunity to explore the stealth applicant phenomenon, including the impacts of technology, national recruiting, and admissions methods on applicants’ decisions.

Data Collection

Data collection centered on the college search process viewed retrospectively by a group of current students whose first recorded contact with the university was the submission of the application for admission. The unit of analysis was the institution, with data collected through a series of interviews and expanded through document analysis. The primary method of data collection was a series of interviews with stealth applicants. The pool of students selected for interviews enrolled at SMU as first-year students in Fall 2009, and had no prospect record pre-dating their application for admission. Nationally, 22% of private university and 30% of public university applicants have no prospect record at the time of application (Noel-Levitz, 2007). For
Fall 2009 entry, 1,505 of 8,271 SMU applicants (18.19%) have a source code of “APPL,” indicating that the applicant’s first contact with the university was the submission of the application for admission. 572 of these applicants were admitted for Fall 2009; 166 enrolled as first year students in Fall 2009. Students who have special circumstances – international students, for example, and recruited athletes – were excluded from the interview cohort, resulting in a pool of 121 first year stealth applicants from which candidates for interviews were identified. The group was further restricted by the exclusion of students who were identified as pre-business majors to mitigate possible bias in the interviews (Table 3).

Table 3
Selection and limitation of the interview cohort.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SMU first-year applicants for Fall 2009</td>
<td>8,271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stealth applicants to SMU</td>
<td>1,505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stealth applicants admitted to SMU</td>
<td>572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stealth applicants enrolled at SMU</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusions: International, recruited student athletes, pre-business majors</td>
<td>-80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final interview cohort</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Attention was paid during the purposeful selection of interview subjects to possible contributing factors including in state/out of state residency, public or private high school, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background, but no special manipulation or outreach to interview candidates was employed to create a representative sample (Table 4). As a group, SMU’s stealth applicants
and those interviewed were more often out-of-state, minority applicants who applied during the regular action admissions cycle, between November 2, 2008 and January 15, 2009.

Table 4

Demographic profile of SMU first year students, first year students who were stealth applicants, and stealth applicants who were interviewed for this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SMU First Year Class</th>
<th>Enrolled Stealth</th>
<th>Interviewed Stealth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Geographic</strong></td>
<td>In state</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Out of state</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial</strong></td>
<td>% with financial need</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major</strong></td>
<td>Arts/Communication</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Humanities/Science</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnic</strong></td>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
<td>&gt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Application Date</strong></td>
<td>Early Action</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Regular Action</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spring Decision</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High School Type</strong></td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Profile</strong></td>
<td>SAT - Math</td>
<td>629</td>
<td>595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SAT - Verbal</td>
<td>614</td>
<td>585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ACT - Composite</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High School GPA</td>
<td>3.403</td>
<td>3.225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Admit Rate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yield Rate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Initial data collection consisted of interviews with twenty-three of these students (Appendix A) to discuss their college search process. These interviews were designed to “suggest factors that play a role in the marketing problem” and “emphasize uncovering new qualitative information rather than obtaining quantifiable results” (Kotler & Fox, p. 79). All subjects were over the age of 18, and signed an informed consent document approved by the University of Alabama Institutional Research Board. At SMU, 99% of first year students live on campus, so interviews were held on campus for their convenience. Due to the different search processes for recruited athletes, international, and transfer students, the students interviewed were domestic first year undergraduate students. Narrowing the interview group in this manner made trends related to stealth applicants more visible.

Selection of this group began by identifying applicants to SMU with identical dates of creation for the electronic application file and prospect file. This indicated that the submission of the application for admission represented the first recorded contact between the applicant and the university. This list was then reviewed and applicants who did not fit the criteria for this study were excluded. SMU has a separate data process for recruited athletes; their applications are often entered after multiple contacts with the athletic office. These contacts are tracked by the athletic compliance office, not by the central admissions office. International applicants also follow a separate application path through the International Admissions Office. International applicants are less likely to visit campus, attend recruiting programs, or experience the same types of pre-applicant contacts with the university as domestic applicants. Finally, some applicants who are initially identified as stealth applicants may actually reflect omissions in data processing through the duplication of names and other processing errors. An effort was made to remove duplicate records by cross referencing event attendance rosters for SMU’s four primary
recruiting programs – Mustang Mondays, Mustang Matinee, Previews, and Springfest – and through interview questions. None of the stealth applicants interviewed reported attending these events. Several attended the Mustang Days program for admitted students, or visited for a campus tour during the spring semester, after they had already submitted an application for admission.

Interviews

Working from this modified list, the primary element of the case study was interviews with twenty-three stealth applicants who enrolled at SMU in Fall 2009. These students were recruited via multiple emails sent to their campus email address, with follow up through direct telephone calls as needed to schedule the interviews. Interviews were in depth and adaptive, allowing the student to address a variety of open-ended questions. Through in depth interviews “the participant reconstructs his or her experience within the topic under study” (Seidman, 2006, p. 15). As topics and experiences common to multiple subjects’ college search experience were revealed during early interviews, the interview protocol for subsequent interviews with other subjects was amended to add specific questions relating to these emerging themes, such as trustworthiness (see Appendix B). Sufficient data was collected in single interviews to render follow-up interviews unnecessary.

All interviews were audio taped and transcribed. They interviews occurred from January 2010 through March 2010. This timeframe ensured that the subjects would have a close reference to the time of their search. After each interview, the researcher summarized the interview experience, noting the setting, tone, body language, or other behavioral flags relevant when reviewing the transcripts.
Document Analysis

Document analysis added additional insight to understanding SMU’s marketing process. The university’s communications continuum and recruiting events were evaluated to explore how the admissions office contacts prospective students and what responses they expect to receive from these contacts. These plans and programs illustrate the university’s significant investment in recruiting and the use of the traditional admissions funnel model. Stealth applicants often operate outside the visible scope of the traditional admission funnel. Interviews with students explored if and when students encountered university marketing materials during their college search and decision process, and the possible impact of these materials on the student’s decision to apply for admission or attend SMU.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was ongoing and concurrent with data collection. First, the interviews were transcribed into a Microsoft Word document. The transcripts were coded by subject, and the coded transcripts were combined, reordered, and broken into thematic groupings to identify key phrases and codes for analysis. The development of thematic groupings was informed by the internal and external search methods structured in consumer behavior research, considering brand awareness, understanding of college attributes, the individual evaluation process, and pre-application experiences in internal search as well as information gathering from external sources including family, friends, teachers, counselors, reference materials, electronic resources, and social networking. The methods used by these students to gather information pre- and post-application were compiled to examine how their information collection methods compare to the visible interactions tracked in admissions. The concurrent data analysis and collection technique allowed the researcher to adapt interviews to explore themes as they
developed across interviews. Concurrent analysis and adaptation also allowed the researcher to use interviews to triangulate information from prior interviews, and to explore topics identified in previous interviews.

The constant comparative process (Merriam, 1998) was employed throughout this research. Instead of waiting to compile and compare all data at the end of the collection period, Merriam recommends an on-going review process, which allowed for aggregation of data through the search for “recurring regularities in the data” (Merriam, 1998, p. 180). The identification of recurrences led to categories and themes. As themes emerged during concurrent data analysis, future interviews were refined to explore these categories in greater depth. This method provided greater focus in data collection over time, and greater depth in data analysis.

Limitations

All research is constrained by limitations of time, resources, context, and design (Upcraft, 1996). This study was limited in many ways by the duration of the study. The students interviewed were in their first year of college, but may have begun their college search process three or four years earlier. Their recall of decisions made in the past can be corrupted over time and confused with search experiences and activities with multiple schools. Ideally, this study would become a longitudinal study that follows a cohort of students through the search process, from high school through matriculation. For an example of a study of this nature, see Hossler, Schmidt, and Vespter’s *Going to college: How social, economic and educational factors influence the decisions students make* (1999). Hossler, Schmidt, and Vespter’s research focused on the predisposition to attend college, however it predates technological innovations such as the Common Application that make possible new behaviors, specifically invisible prospecting and stealth applicants. Continuing to follow the students past college graduation, when they could
examine their experiences in college and how those experiences aligned with their expectations, could also provide valuable information on how well these student consumers were able to evaluate the anticipated benefits of higher education. Adding this perspective expands the project to a decade-long program, well beyond the duration of this research.

The students interviewed also made the independent decision to participate in this study, a participatory decision which may reflect a shared believe system or personality type. Students who volunteer may have stronger positive or negative experiences to share, or could seek participation in interviews as a mechanism to build relationships. During the interviews, a number of students were hesitant in describing the outcome of their college search, suggesting that these students have reservations about the successful outcome of the college search and decision process. Self-selection for participation also impacted the ease of engaging students to interview. Multiple emails were necessary to recruit a robust interview pool.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher in a qualitative study is the filter through which data is processed (Merriam, 1998). As such, an understanding of the researcher’s background is appropriate. My background includes thirteen years in admissions, six at a small, private university and seven at the SMU. This experience includes graduate, undergraduate, international, and transfer student recruiting, admission, scholarships, and program management. My experience also includes six years in undergraduate academic advising at a mid-sized private university and two years as a part time advisor at a community college. I am a member of the National Association of College Admissions Counselors, with conference presentations at the state, regional, and national level. I have also been a member, officer, and conference presenter for Nafsa: Association of International Educators, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions
Officers, and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AASCB), and completed a variety of professional education programs and workshops, including the Graduate Management Admissions Council’s three year Professional Development Program.

As a current college admissions director working in the Cox School of Business at Southern Methodist, I had ready access to the data necessary for this study but also acknowledged personal biases related both to my professional background and to my perception of the institution. My personal bias as an insider to the study institution was counterbalanced by the advantage of a thorough understanding of the institution’s recruiting processes. Steps to limit bias in my personal perspective included triangulating my perceived knowledge with existing academic and popular literature, conferences with key staff at the institution, and document analysis of marketing materials.

I purposefully selected interview participants to limit the possibility of bias during the interview process. First, by interviewing students who are not business majors, I was able to mitigate biased responses from subjects who may have worked with me during their freshman year at SMU. As stealth applicants, these students would not have attended the college-specific pre-applicant programs at which I normally present. Interview questions about their pre-applicant search did not require them to reflect on interactions they had with me or the school of business during the course of my professional responsibilities.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness, or validity, of the research was ensured by using triangulation, peer examination, and acknowledging researcher bias, three of the six techniques recommended by Merriam (1998).
**Triangulation of Data**

Multiple interviews allowed for triangulation of interview data. Individual interviews with multiple students reflected each individual student’s reality, but also reinforced shared experiences and activities. Additionally, document analysis provided a university perspective on the college search process. Triangulation is necessary in qualitative case studies, and in fact is a major strength of this type of research (Yin, 2003). Through multiple interviews and document analysis, this case study sought “convergent lines of inquiry” (Yin, 2003, p. 98) to understand the stealth applicant experience from the perspective of many participants. Multiple interviews also checked for distortion or exaggerated responses (Merriam, 1998). This layering of data provided validity to the research. “Observing life from separate yet overlapping angles makes the researcher more hesitant to leap to conclusions and encourages more nuanced analysis” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 4).

**Peer Evaluation**

Peer evaluation was employed throughout the research project. First, the research topic itself was discussed with peers in admissions and enrollment services at multiple universities. Peer review of interview questions during the development of the interview protocol ensured clarity, richness of elicited responses, and identification of possible bias. Early data from interviews and emerging themes were also shared with peers. The ongoing peer evaluation in this study ensured descriptive and interpretive validity throughout the study as well as enhancing the validity of the interview questions (Johnson & Weller, 2001).

**Bias**

The trustworthiness of the subjects interviewed was also considered when analyzing the data. Students may have a bias toward their selected institution, which could impact their
retrospective on the college search process. Students “enrolled in the institution may rate their school or college somewhat higher than those not enrolled” (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 179). This suggests the possibility of consumer bias toward the selected product as a reaffirmation of the buying decision. This bias was exposed in interviews through tone, specific responses to questions, and other behavioral cues such as nervous laughter, which were noted during the analysis of the data.

The students interviewed also focused their answers to questions on their SMU experience, and on interactions with SMU that occurred after the student applied for admission. Care was taken during the interviews to shift the focus of the interview toward the college search in general, and specifically toward pre-application interactions between the student and any college under consideration.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

This research addresses two core questions in understanding the college search process of stealth applicants by examining how these applicants identify schools to which they may apply, and why they search in ways that delay the visible expression of their interest to the schools they are considering. The descriptions of how stealth applicants searched for colleges and the tools they used to search are presented here to examine the college search process of stealth applicants. The literature on the college search process utilizes a variety of economic, sociological, and business based frameworks. This study explores the search process through two frameworks: the admissions funnel used in enrollment management, and consumer behavior models from the commercial marketing and business literature. Through these frameworks, a series of interactions between universities and students comprises the college search, including internal and external search behaviors as characteristic of a high involvement decision making processes.

The findings reported below examine search from the perspective of the institution and prospective students, beginning with a review of how the study institution reaches out to prospective students. The motivations of the college search process for students, how these specific students searched for colleges, and why their search was conducted in a less visible fashion are then examined, leading to the discussion of factors that contribute to stealth behavior as both barriers and aids to the search and application process.
How Colleges Engage Prospective Students

Prospective students encounter SMU in multiple ways. Friends and family may have attended the school. Attendance at a past sporting event or concert might provide exposure. The university and the colleges on campus advertise extensively in print and radio advertising, on television, billboards, and light boards at regional airports. Prospective students initiate contact with SMU by calling, emailing, or writing to join the university’s prospective student mailing list. SMU also reaches out to potential students through mailings and email to high school juniors and seniors on the university’s mailing list and from lists purchased for recruiting. This university-initiated contact begins with a small brochure and flurry of emails. As students respond to these initial mailings and emails, the size, quantity, and frequency of mailings, publications, and emails increases. SMU aggressively uses print and electronic media outreach to prospective students, culminating in the spring of the senior year with at least four physical mailings or emails to admitted students each week during March and April. SMU’s outreach strategy includes coding prospective students as no interest, low interest, medium interest, and high interest based on student-initiated contact with the institution and student responses to university-initiated outreach programs. Stealth applicants exhibit no interest in SMU when evaluated through this metric. While they may receive an initial mailing through the PSAT search program, their lack of response results in their exclusion from additional outreach.

Private four-year universities spend significant sums on their admissions and recruiting budgets (Noel-Levitz, 2010a). In addition to the publications and search mailings managed and funded in the university’s central admissions office, each college at SMU also recruits students through their own marketing offices and independent recruiting budgets. The decentralized nature of recruiting expenditures at SMU makes difficult the estimation of the total resources
allocated for print, electronic, and new media, but the scope of outreach to prospective students is extensive.

The university’s first mass outreach to high school students occurs through the College Board’s College Search Service, through which SMU purchases over 250,000 names of PSAT test takers annually. The arrival of college search mailings in mailboxes nationwide begins the university-initiated college search process for high school juniors each spring. Heidi, a white female theater major from Florida, recalled the beginning of the stream of college mail:

Whenever I got things in the mail, especially starting junior year from colleges, it was a reality check. It was like ok, I’m getting this and from schools I didn’t sign up for and so …they might be interested in me.

This starts an exciting time for some students. They receive large quantities of colorful mail, some cleverly personalized, all designed to make the student feel desired and important as Winona, a female American Indian engineering major from Oklahoma, described:

Especially when you live in the middle of nowhere, you get mail you’re excited, you’re going to read it. But then, as my senior year drew to a close, I was getting stacks of mail a day. Like I just looked at it and “oh, not going there, not going there either.”

Several students reported that the impact of unsolicited mail declined over time. Thomas, a white male computer science major from Texas, found that:

Most of time I just threw the mail away. I just checked it and was like “is this a school I’ve heard of? No, no, no.” If they were a really small school or in some state I would not want to live in I was like “nope” and it was gone.

Some students were very conscientious about the mail they received. Aram, a male first generation student who moved to the United States when he was 8, reviewed his mail carefully:

One thing I know, the one thing is every school that sent me an email I would at least take the time to go and look at their websites. I was like “all right if these people are taking the time to send me something I might as well be respectful and see what they’re offering.” And even the really small schools which I knew I wasn’t going to go to, I would still go to their web page and look at the things, look at the different majors they offered, look at what was special about them.
In recent years, many universities seeking to reduce their mailing costs increased their use of email, and actively utilized email in addition to physical mail to contact prospective students. However, this practice created confusion and annoyance among students. “I personally didn’t like getting all the mail. And I get a lot of emails, too. I’d get actual mail and email from the same school and I was like, why do you need to send me both?” asked Thomas. In general, emails met with mixed responses from the students interviewed. Lewis, a high achieving white male from Ohio, pointed out that “it is becoming increasingly difficult with the increasing amount of bulk mail for a college … to stand out to a student in the midst of everything they get.” Just as with physical mail, the sheer number of emails became unmanageable and, as Paola, a Hispanic female engineering major from Texas, summed up, “annoying.” Jessica, a white female from Idaho, accuses colleges of becoming spammers:

It ends up just being spam because we get so many emails from so many different schools when you do the PSAT thing and it’s kinda like ok, I have like 20 emails today and I’m not gonna look in detail at every single one of them.

Stealth applicants who meet university parameters for search receive these mailings and emails, but do not visibly respond to them, illustrating a challenge unique to stealth applicants. Despite large operating budgets, schools cannot afford to invest significant recruiting dollars in 250,000 potential candidates. They must narrow their focus to those students most likely to apply and may stop communicating with a potential student who did not reply to a search mailing because the university cannot know if the student is considering the institution.

What Motivates College Search

While universities are motivated to recruit students to meet enrollment targets, the need for a post-high school plan motivates high school students to begin the college search. The expectations of family, friends, and the community impact and promote the search process as
students, like consumers, seek options. The expectation of going to college could take on a menacing tone for some students. “If I hadn’t gone to college it would have been very bad,” reported Alastair, a white male economics major from Utah.

The college search process represents a high involvement search. High involvement searches impact self image, involve pressure from external forces, have long term consequences, carry high economic and personal costs, and are decisions that cannot be made with certainty even after extensive search. College searches and high involvement searches results in high risk decisions for students whose outcomes are only measurable long after the initial decision. For most high school students, the college search represents the most significant, complex, and long-term choice they have faced. Arcilla, a female Hispanic student from Texas, reflected on the importance of making the right college choice, “This is the next four years of your life, potentially the rest of your life, so you really want to go and know what you’re doing, to know what you’re getting yourself into.” A poor decision carries high economic and personal costs. The students interviewed demonstrated awareness of these costs but expressed confidence that the economic and personal cost of education would provide future benefits. As Heidi explained:

I went into auditioning and applying to colleges with the thought that I was gonna be taking out $60,000 of loans a year. I mean that’s what my mindset was. I said I was fine with it because I need this training. I need the training in order to make money in the future. So that was my thought.

The college search for these students contained elements of outcome analysis and questions about the benefits of specific colleges for future professional and financial success. “It seems like all this pressure to get into college is all about getting a job and getting good pay and living a good life,” says Alexander, an Asian male trombone major from California, with some trepidation. Jonathan, a white male studio art major from Texas, selected SMU specifically because “there would be opportunities to network and get noticed early,” while Winona selected
the university and her major because, “I’ve been broke my whole life. It would be nice if I could have a comfort zone of money, that was the issue for me.” Alexander connected his college choice with future professional and financial success in his industry:

The music industry I guess is really hostile, so all that matters is getting a job after you graduate, otherwise you’re going to be doing something else [laughs uncomfortably]. I mean, of course there’s like the personal factor if you work hard enough you could get somewhere, but teachers do have a really large influence. And I believe SMU does too. So that was kind of attractive knowing that these teachers produce successful students.

The difficulty involved in making a college decision reflects the complexity of the college search. When asked how prepared he felt he was to distinguish between universities and the different possible outcomes from attending a specific school, Lewis spoke of the challenge and importance of research in understanding the differences:

Making that distinction accurately is very difficult. You always have preconceived notions about what these schools are, and I think those are most potent in your sophomore and junior year when you’re first looking at them because it’s kind of like your inhibitions about schools… that reflex that helps you narrow down this huge range of schools that you’re looking at. So I think it can be difficult, but I think that if you do the research and if you’re dedicated enough to finding the school that you want to go to it is not a difficult process. It is a long process and a hard process.

While Lewis was a stealth applicant at SMU, the process he describes does not reflect an absence of active college search. He engaged in an active and in-depth search, just one not visible to SMU.

High reference group pressure also frames the college choice decision. Others judge the consumer, or in this case the student, based on his or her decision. Alexander described the external pressures of college choice on teens, a group already buffeted by peer pressure:

It’s not a matter of if you get a letter but more of a matter of like where you get in. Like it’s pretty much a given that you’ll get in, and if you don’t you’re like shamed or something. It’s terrifying. … People pretty much compare what schools they get into and they label themselves based off of that school, and they relate that to pride. And if you’re not going to a good school then you’re not as competent as the others. So that’s the attitude. {emphasis added}
Parents, friends, the high school environment, and general community expectations exert pressure on students as they search for colleges. Alexander speculated, “My parents would disown me if I didn’t go [to college].” The student’s high school and local community may also hold educational aspirations for students. For Alexander, “I guess it’s just the mindset of the area. I mean, it was just like you’re going to college, period. No matter what.”

High involvement search responds to these external pressures by utilizing both internal and external search activities. Drawn from personal memory, the internal search is subject to the limitations and biases of memory. Where memory biases the internal search, the tendency to seek evidence to support previously held beliefs influences the external search. In addition to providing a framework for gathering and evaluating information, internal and external search both attempt to match user skill levels with the choices under consideration. In college search, this matching addresses questions related to the possibility of admission. Matching in a consumer search model differs from the issues of “fit” often discussed in enrollment management and college search and retention literature. Fit evaluates the probability of social and personal comfort at the institution, answering the student’s question of “do I belong here?” Match attempts to answers the questions “will I get in?” For example, issues of matching led Alexander to report, “sometimes you get to a point where you assume you can’t get in… [so] you just don’t apply.”

The Stealth Applicant Search

The search processes described by SMU’s stealth applicants did not move neatly and sequentially through the stages of consumer behavior based internal and external search. Rather, the college search of these students swirled among categories as illustrated by Alastair when asked the best ways to identify possible colleges:
Friends are very useful, family is very useful, older wiser family who have been to college and who know it. All the books at Barnes and Nobel, *Princeton Review*; College Confidential was really great. The school web sites, if you actually go and visit the school web sites I feel like you get a very good idea. You know, kind of explore them and see what they’re about. I got mail. Like I sent them that I’m interested…and they sent me a packet out that told them what they were about and that was helping in making my pro and con list. Talking to my guidance counselor was extremely helpful.

Alastair used internal and external search including retail, media, and interpersonal methods. He contacted some schools to request materials, while for others he used the web and external search to gather information. As young consumers who have had limited contact with colleges, students have little data to draw from in the internal search process. Albert, an African-American male from Florida, acknowledged his lack of experience in how to “do” the college search:

> I didn’t know, like I didn’t know how to research schools and I mean, I could go on the websites and all I saw was pictures, and it didn’t really do much for me. And so it was just like I would sort of from word of mouth, you know, what people said were good schools, what my teachers recommended, is how I sort of went about choosing what I should audition for or apply for.

While students have limited direct experience with the college search process, at most experiencing college search as a witness to an older sibling’s process, many described using tools and methods that followed similar patterns, including media and interpersonal recommendations, using web based resources throughout the search, and including experiential and retailer visits late in the search. All of the stealth applicants interviewed articulated some type of organizational structure for their search. However, their processes were more a swirl of search activities and inputs than the linear process typically described in consumer behavior research. Tyler, a white male engineering student from Indiana, started with his girlfriend and a map:

> The very first thing that I did was while I was dating my girlfriend we were talking about what colleges we wanted to go to and she was a cheerleader and I’m a football player. She is pre-engineering and I was pre-med and we wrote all those down, made subcategories on a paper…And we sat down and I had a map of where all the colleges
were … and we just we decided amongst each other, ok, what’s the farthest we’ll go, first. And we said within five hours of home. … So we basically marked out a five hour radius around our city on the map, and then looked at all the colleges within that and looked them up online and found out which ones were football, premed, engineering, cheerleading oriented. And that’s how we came up with a list. We came up with a list of 13 colleges that had all of that. And that was basically my starting point of lists …And from then on it really just came off of like mail, emails, and word of mouth.

Tyler also used internal and external search, focusing on attributes as a starting point and then moving to media and interpersonal sources to research the 13 colleges on his list. Again, this stealth applicant was actively engaged in his college search process, but his interest at this early stage was not visible to SMU.

*Internal Search*

According to consumer behavior models, consumers resolve problems in four stages, beginning with problem identification, followed by active search, selection, and the analysis of outcomes. Search begins internally with an assessment of what the consumer, in this case the high school student, already knows about the options available to resolve their need. For students, search often begins in recalling brands, or colleges, with which they are already familiar through reputation, media, or personal experience. After recalling brands, other factors in internal search are the evaluation of attributes, personal preferences, and prior experiences.

*Locating Brands*

Brand recall is limited to a small subset of available colleges, with anywhere from two to eight brands normally considered. In college search, these top-of-mind brands may represent high prestige schools or schools with highly visible athletic programs. Aram knew “from a very young age…Stanford is always one of my dreams,” but he also said that at his high school:

It’s really crazy how many people base their college, the university they want to go to, simply because of like basketball or football teams which is ridiculous to think about. But I have so many friends who are going to the University of Oklahoma just because they love the OU football team. And I’m like, “have you guys even considered anything else
about the school?” And they’re like, “we don’t care, we just want to go to the games” which is maybe not the best idea but whatever works for them.

The limitations of memory constrict brand recall. Most students interviewed could not remember the schools they initially considered, and a surprising number could not name the specific universities where they applied or visited. When reviewing where she applied, Arcilla recounted applying to “Let’s see… it was Our Lady of the Lake, SMU, Texas Tech… and what other school was it? [Pauses] Oh, Baylor.” A few minutes later, when asked if she had considered any out of state schools, she replied, “Oh, I actually did apply to UCLA.” For some students, brand recall during internal search was the primary method of identifying the schools they considered and where they ultimately applied. Kofi, a male African-American student from New York, explained how he identified possible universities:

Most of the colleges I applied to were on the list that I’d already known. So I didn’t really want to research schools because I already had enough schools to think about that I could consider being, staying, in for the four years.

Kofi participated in a college program that identified and worked with high potential African American students starting in the 7th grade. The program included college visits and intensive college counseling and guidance from 7th through 12th grade; Kofi spent summers visiting colleges:

We’d go to the same colleges every year, so I could rattle them off. There was Georgetown, Haverford, Swarthmore, Bryn Mawr, Villanova, and, um, UMBC, Pomona, what were the other ones? William and Mary, and there was one more, I believe.

Even after five years of visiting the same nine schools, Kofi struggled to recall the names of these schools.

As Kofi explained how students identify an initial set of schools to research, he mentioned that most students like him are “naturally biased” toward “the schools that I heard enough about . . . well, I mean, everyone does Harvard. So you look at Harvard, it’s in every
movie with smart people in it.” Often high profile institutions, the name brand colleges recalled during internal search are often swiftly discarded as a mismatch during the search and evaluation process. Students interviewed recognized brand awareness carries value in the college selection process and that the importance of the college brand in their post graduation plans. Heidi detailed, “It’s the name. It’s always the name. It’s your connection that you make. So that’s a major thing that really played a part in my search.”

**Identifying Attributes**

The students interviewed had specific attributes they sought during the college search process, including geographic location, size, specific academic majors, gender ratio, and cost. For some students, attribute preferences limited the number of universities considered during the internal search. Some attributes were non-negotiable while others were simply preferences, yet students regularly reported applying to schools that clearly contradicted their preferred attributes. Elizabeth, a white female from Illinois, was looking for “southern, private, warm, kind of big but kind of small.” She applied to Vanderbilt, Emory, SMU, Boston College, Boston University, and Loyola of Chicago. After she received her admission letters, she said, “I’d gotten into a lot of the cold ones. Not interested. I figured, hey, got in, let’s go to the warm ones.” Steven, a white male student from Georgia who attended a boarding school in the Northeast, disregarded all institutions outside of his preferred geographic area:

> I knew that I wanted to come back to the Texas area because … it’s been my favorite place that I’ve ever lived. So my main two schools I was looking at were SMU and Rice, and Baylor, because in my opinion those are the three best in Texas. Those were really the only three that I really thought about.

Steven also considered the majors offered in relationship to school prestige, clarifying his interest in a “really good,” but not necessarily prestigious school:
It was mainly did they have the major that I wanted and was it a really good school. My parents wanted me to go to some prestigious school but that’s not really my thing. I feel like education is what you make of it, you can go anywhere and do well but I, I wanted to go somewhere that I knew would challenge me and push me to get outside my comfort zone and level in terms of academics that was my main thing.

Like Steven, most students easily identified a preliminary list of their preferred attributes. While identified during the internal search, the consideration of which schools will fulfill these attributes primarily occurred during external search. Alastair began his search with a lengthy list of attributes as a way to narrow down the available choices, “I think when I started to move away was when I had a list of about 10 things that I wanted. We had 10 things – smaller, liberal arts, in a good city, with connections, and those were the major factors.” Many students cited the availability of certain academic majors as one of the first considerations in their search. Arcilla explained her process:

I kind of just started with ok, what schools? First of all what am I gonna go study, and since I want to do something in medicine and in science so that was my first step. What do I want to do, what school offers this? That’s a little type of I guess filter system that I made for myself so that I wouldn’t be applying to 32 schools.

Students like Arcilla recognize the importance of identifying personally preferred attributes as an organizing framework for their college search. Paola, whose college choices were geographically limited by family preferences, focused instead on the attributes of majors and university size:

Well, I have to say the major, what they offer. I mean, if you want to do architecture, like you shouldn’t come to SMU because SMU doesn’t offer it. I guess just knowing the majors that are offered, which ones they’re strong in so they can correlate with whatever you’re wanting to do. Also I think maybe size, size is a factor just because if you want like a huge school, there’s no point in going to a small one and being disappointed and also vice versa.
Paola used her search to explore personal preferences and attributes that would impact her fit at a university, such as size, after disregarding options that did not meet her non-negotiable attribute: location.

Geographic preferences often existed in relation to professional goals, family relationships, and the desire to be close to – or farther from – home. The allure of a new place guided Cristina, a white female guitar major from Nevada:

    At that time I had no idea where I wanted to be or what I wanted to do. Actually, at that time I wanted to go to Boston University, just because it was in Boston and it sounded cool. … so junior year I was like, “I’m not going to major in music, and I want to go somewhere on the east coast, like Boston or something like that. New York, I don’t care, just somewhere completely different from Las Vegas.” So that’s where I was at junior year; I didn’t know I was going to be anything like I am now.

Similarly, Emma, a white female engineering major from Colorado, sought distance from her parents and her hometown, but with the security of having some family in the region:

    I knew that I didn’t want to go to school in state just because I wanted to get away from my parents and just be independent on my own, explore new things. I started looking at a better alternative and my sister lives in Texas so I [thought] Texas would be a good option.

Other students sought options close to home, but the definition of “close to home” varied.

Melissa, a white female student from Louisiana, “applied to SMU and TCU, because I went to camp in Texas and I lived in Houston after Hurricane Katrina, and Texas isn’t too far away from Louisiana.” Paola, from Grand Prairie, Texas, knew:

    My parents didn’t want me to go far. We’re really close, so there’s one thing, but also I knew I didn’t want to live at home just because it’s hard for me to focus and then also my parents are really strict so I felt like I didn’t have liberty to do things on my own.

Paola limited her applications to schools within 30 minutes of her home. “Close to home” for Melissa was 530 miles while Paola defined the radius as 30 miles.
Institution size represented another non-negotiable attribute for some students. Emma knew “I wanted a school that wasn’t super small, but I didn’t want to go to a giant school where I’d just be a number on a list somewhere.” Some students had clear expectations of the impact of size on the college experience, despite their lack of personal experience with large institutions. Aram applied to both large and small schools, but identified smaller colleges as more personal and more appealing, and “even though I applied to a few of the larger schools like UT, I really never considered going to them . . . it feels like if you go to one of those schools you’re lost in the crowd.” Arcilla echoed these perceptions about larger schools, and larger classes:

I didn’t want to go to a school that was 30,000, 50,000, 60,000 students. Because I knew that the classes were already gonna be really big and I really definitely liked, I mean even if it wasn’t one-on-one, but something smaller to where you could go into office hours and you knew the professor by at least one meeting instead of having TAs.

Beyond attributes such as geography, personal preferences based on past experiences impact the search process. For example, Cristina laughed while explaining a key factor in her college search:

This sounds really lame, but my number one thing I would look at before anything else – I mean, it had to be a university, I had to get a good education, and scholarships were extremely important - . . . but something that was really important to me was the ratio of males to females. In my high school, um, there were no guys. . . . I mean that sounds stupid but it was totally important to me as well as financial aid and the accreditation of the university.

The internal search for stealth applicants began with big brands, later balanced by personal analysis of attributes, likes, and dislikes. Information gathered through the narrow lenses of known brands and personal preferences does not provide adequate data on which the problem of college search can be resolved. Search must then be expanded to include external sources of information.
**External Search**

Even as students expanded to external search, brand awareness and attribute preferences continued to impact their evaluations of colleges. In the college search process, the external search answers questions about the availability of desired attributes at a college and provides information on college match and fit. In gathering information, students manage and respond to information from many external sources, some more reliable or trustworthy than others. They also manage the natural bias in external search toward information that reinforces previously held beliefs. The length of time spent engaged in external search varies. Kofi’s Physician Scientist Training Program resulted in five years of engagement in the college search process. Other students, such as Albert, delay external search until late in their senior year.

Winona, who performed extensive external search for college information, reported that her awareness of name recognition had a stronger impact during internal search than information she collected during external research:

I did go to the library … and there was this one thing called college search, and I had to sign up and do all that good stuff and [the program] basically put your name to colleges that it thinks you would match to. So I said my degree, my GPA, grades and then it would match you up with colleges that it thought would be good and you would like. But I really didn’t use those because, well I remember one was in Hawaii. It sounded great and all, but it was a smaller college, no one knows about it, never heard of it, and I wanted a college that had name behind it, that people actually knew.

Even when College Board identified schools that were a strong match for Winona’s attributes and preferences, she rejected schools that “no one knows about” and “I never heard of” because of her desire to attend a “college that has a name behind it.”

The tools used in external search include technology, interpersonal relationships, and experiential experiences. External search tools may be university generated, such as university publications, web pages, and interaction at college fairs. The stealth applicants interviewed
focused their external search on information that could be gathered without direct interaction with the colleges, postponing direct contact until after they had applied. Several students commented this was due to the easy availability of all the information they needed online, eliminating the need to call for a brochure.

Technology

In the college search process, the use of search engines followed by visits to institutional web sites frequently described student’s search. According to Cristina and other students, using the web to gather information is “obvious.” While most students used independent web pages such as Google for general search, they were quick to navigate to the university’s web page when they wanted specific information. Students reported that most web pages were consistent with the look and information of the print publications received later in the search process. Cristina explained, “The majority of the time the things that I had on paper were pretty much equivalent to what’s on the web site.” Cristina was one of very few students who expressed a preference for publications, contending:

Usually though, I actually preferred getting pamphlets to searching on the web site, at least for getting introduced to the university. A lot of times you don’t know where to go on a web site about the university. It doesn’t have [mimics clicking a mouse] “this is the place that Cristina wants to look.” But a brochure is easy to search for the things that you want.

With the exception of Cristina, the other interviews echoed Winona’s recommendation of the web as a primary tool for college search. Even though she had limited computer access growing up, if she were to advise a student on how to research colleges, Winona would tell them:

The internet has everything you could ever want. Just because, type in a word, sends you straight to the site, so that’s what I would do, I guess. If I were to tell my friends about SMU I would say just type in SMU in Google, that’s everything we are right there.
The impact of technology on the search process eclipsed all other search tools for students. For some students, like Cristina, whose audition schedule often conflicted with official campus tours, the university web page served as a substitute.

I missed a lot of tours. We were lucky to find guide yourself tours online… it was really important for us to see what the buildings look like that I’d be living in, what the campus looked like, and everything.

While the web greatly expands access to information and the amount of information available, this increase does not always benefit searchers. Too much information can cause overload, and make the decision even more complex. Cristina explains further:

Sometimes I just looked on the web site and it’s really overwhelming how much is going on and even when you go to apply and you’re doing the whole application process and you’re like where do I log in, what’s going on. Web sites can be a little too much going on, a little overwhelming.

Universities offer extensive information online targeting prospective students. Students can easily use online forms to sign up to receive more information, however only two of the students interviewed reported requesting a brochure from a university by using a form on that university’s web page. Instead, the students used university web sites to browse campus photos and seek answers to specific questions about admission requirements, academic programs, scholarships, and the university in general.

Experiences

Some prospective students have prior personal experiences with colleges. While the stealth applicants interviewed had not officially visited SMU prior to applying, some had been on campus for non-admissions programs, and others had visited other universities. These visits, recalled within the limitations of mood and memory, impact student’s interest in a college. Melissa’s earliest memories of colleges are connected to a special trip she took with her
grandmother to New York, and by later independent visits to “hang out” on local college campuses:

I did that a lot with my grandmother in the 8th grade at [two national design schools]. We just kinda walked around to get the vibe of the campus. To get the vibe of the students, and buildings, and went to the bookstore and looked at textbooks and stuff like that. And then Loyola and Tulane, just since I’m from there, I would go on campus and they have a pizza place that’s really good so I’d kind of hang out around there anyway.

Melissa’s memories of these colleges are connected to family, travel, “vibes,” and “hanging out.” Several students visited local campuses for events such as performing arts programs and summer camps; these students’ initial impressions of college life were rooted in these experiences.

Paola’s visits to SMU and the University of Texas at Arlington during high school created a negative impression of the campus environment at UTA:

Well, SMU, I had been here in 9th grade. It was a long time ago…. I went to UTA just because they have a lot of ballets and performances and so I would go to watch them, but I didn’t really like the way the campus was, they have like a lot of buildings spread out and it’s really big.

Several students participated in academic and athletic camps at colleges. Experiences in these programs directly and often positively impacted their early interest in applying to the university. Melissa attended summer arts programs at two national design schools, and later applied for admission to both of those colleges:

Where I thought I would be going was Parsons School of Design in New York. I took summer classes there for two years, and I wanted to go there since sixth grade. I was one of those people who signed up for the list really early on, and then I was just intimidated jumping into an arts school that wouldn’t have anything else because I was only able to study art, and I wouldn’t be able to take English classes or things like that that are important for undergraduate.

Melissa was not a stealth applicant at these schools, where she had been on mailing lists for several years, however she was a stealth applicant at SMU. This blend of stealth behavior and traditional applicant behavior was evident in the actions of many of the students interviewed.
Athletic summer programs had a similarly strong impact. Tyler recently secured a walk-on position on the SMU football team. While in high school, he attended athletic football camps at Vanderbilt for three years:

I went to football camp and just loved it there. And I got real close with the running back coach and I went to that football camp the summer before my sophomore year, after my sophomore year, and then after my junior year. I mean, to fully understand how I was totally into the school, I wanted everything to do with this school. With clothing-wise and everything. I was so ready to go there, and like I had a good in. I felt like I was going to Vanderbilt.

Tyler believed his three summers at Vanderbilt would lead to a football scholarship. However, this evaporated with a coaching change during the fall of his senior year. Tyler was a late entry into the college search process after he learned that he would not be offered a spot at Vanderbilt.

Campus visits. Some students began their external research as they followed an older sibling, forming experiences and opinions that would later impact their search process. Thomas typified this scenario:

When my older brother went to do college visits and my parents brought me along and were like “we’re gonna save a trip and take you with and see if you like it.” And I think the first school we ever visited was in Oklahoma, it was OU. I don’t even remember why we were there, and the campus was so big, and I was like I’m not sure if I really like big schools.

Campus visits have long been a central element in college search. Many high schools now offer college trips for students to expose them to college campuses, both as a motivation and as a way to begin identifying preferred attributes. Heidi took two college trips, “Junior and senior year we take a fall trip up to colleges . . . and that really gives us a lot to think about.” Visiting campuses helps students visualize their future at that college. Visits are an influential experience for students and a powerful recruiting tool for schools. Arcilla’s public school “has a paid college trip….it was all to Texas public schools. We went to UTSA, we went to UT Austin, we went to
Texas Tech, and we went to A&M.” Even students who did not participate in these tours mentioned them as a benefit offered at their school. Albert said his former high school:

Had something like a college tour and you could go and they would bus you up to all the colleges all throughout from Florida to Georgia and it was a one week thing, you would just go and visit them. I never got to go on it, but I know that was available.

The power of the visit has a long history in college choice research, attaining near mythical status. Students are often told that they’ll “just know” when they arrive on the right campus, as Tyler recounted with skepticism:

Everybody who’d gone to college that I knew said you will know when you step on that campus, and you just feel it, and I was always like “how do you feel it? That doesn’t make any sense.” I’m probably like one of those analytical people … and I’m like “there is just no way that you’re gonna step on campus and just oh, feel it, ahhhhhh.” [Laughs]. . . And then I come here and there it is, this is where I’m supposed to be.

The students interviewed delayed the college visit to SMU until after they applied or were admitted. A number did not visit campus at all prior to enrolling. Lewis found visits highly useful, visiting twice after he was admitted to SMU. His sequence illustrates the inverted search process of stealth applicants, who apply, then act as visible prospects in communicating with the institution and visiting campus after admission but before making a final enrollment decision:

What made the biggest difference for me was coming here to campus and then getting that experience. …coming here, going to classes, seeing professors, talking with the people, talking with the people in the President’s Scholars program was really what made me consider it far more strongly than I had ever given it credit for initially. Which I found the case at most schools, which is why I made it such a priority to visit.

Experiences that mimic product use, such as class visits or staying overnight in a residence hall, are part of an experiential search. This differs from a campus tour, as experiential search focuses on resolving questions of fit, with students looking for, as Alastair explained, the “feeling of what it’s like to be on campus,” and trying to “picture yourself here”
Students quickly differentiate between official and unofficial visit experiences. Alastair clarified this distinction, at the same time highlighting the oft-mentioned undercurrent of mistrust toward the official visit:

If you’re coming here and you’re going to be involved in a student-run or a school-run event like Mustang Days, or if you’re coming to stay with friend and really get the true taste of it. I kind of had both, because I have a friend who goes here, he’s a junior. And so I stayed with him for a couple days after Mustang Days. And I got a very different sense because here you know, they’re all happy and they want you to come and you’re like wow, they’re so excited, and then you kind of see really what it’s like.

Melissa said that “staying overnight with a student” was the best way to experience a college, while Lewis recommended meeting with students who you already know to “get their perspective. Meeting with real people and going to the campus as much as possible was in my opinion the most valuable information.”

A student’s perception of admissibility, cost of travel, and scheduling conflicts impact their decisions to visit colleges. Some students are unable to visit college campuses, or choose not to do so. Often these students sought technical substitutes for these experiences. Winona, who was limited by cost in her college visits, suggested, “if you haven’t been there it’s not the same. But it [the web] works. It serves as a good replacement. It’ll work if you cannot afford to go there, if it’s the best you’ve got.”

Like Winona, several students waited until they had been admitted to colleges and only visited the schools they were most likely to attend during the spring of their senior year. “I would have had to miss class and some basketball tournament,” explained Alastair when asked why he visited SMU and not his other top choice school, “it really came down to weird things, kind of the timing worked out with coming here to Dallas and not with Emory.” Similarly, Jessica limited her visits based on cost and on admissibility:
Living in Boise those are long trips, and it can be really expensive to go visit those other schools when I’m not sure if I want to go there … they’re [also] reach schools and I wasn’t sure if I could get in.

The students all agreed in the importance of campus visits in the college search process, especially in the final assessment of “fit.” Their deferral of college visits until the spring semester was based on scheduling, cost, and searching efficiently. By deferring visits until the spring, they do not waste resources - time and money - visiting schools where they may not apply or having that “ahhhh” moment at a school where they may not be admitted.

*High school visits.* Contacts with colleges, or “retail contacts” in the consumer behavior models, encompass more than campus visits. They also include other interactions between representatives of the campus and prospective students, often through programs such as college nights at high schools. For some, these programs inspire thoughts of exciting possibilities, as Cristina notes:

They have this huge college fair in Las Vegas every year and I started going when I was a sophomore because I was so excited about college, and there I was “oh, maybe I’ll be an astronaut, train in Colorado. Maybe I’ll be this, maybe I’ll be that.

Some of these fairs are crowded and make difficult individual conversations. Emma explains that college fairs were not the best place to find a school because open houses “were so crowded and nobody remembered you, anyways.” Thomas said that his school “would have college representatives from different colleges come on campus during the lunch period. They would give out information if you went to the session and they would announce it on the announcements in the morning,” but when asked if he attended any of these sessions, he replied “no.” Thomas’ focus on geography in his search was so firm that he did not bother attending programs that did not feature the three schools he was considering. Aram also said his school “had a lot of colleges visit us and visit the school and …they’d talk about their school and try to
get recruits or whatever. And I didn’t go to any of those.” Aram was considering a national network of schools, but preferred smaller programs where he could have one-on-one conversations.

Other students found the college information sessions at their high school very helpful in the search process. Arcilla found interacting with college representatives at her high school provided additional insights into the complex college search and admissions process. While she did not recall an SMU visit at her school, she reported, “we did have a lot of college representatives… there was quite a few, and it got us to get a better feel of what they were looking for definitely, and more information about that school.” Some students, saw the opportunity to meet college representatives at their school or during a college fair as a starting point for making a connection with the school or, at times, as an escape from class. Elizabeth benefitted from both:

> Our school would have reps from colleges come by a lot, so you could like get out of gym and go talk to people … a lot of it started with those and I’d go to as many of those as appealed to me you know like south, warm, whatever, and I’d go listen to them and if I liked it more they’d give you the contact information for the faculty person there.

*Faculty interactions.* Some colleges send faculty to high schools to guest lecture, as judges for competitions, or for other programs. While these programs are not official recruiting events, some faculty are oriented toward recruiting and use these visits to connect with prospective students. This faculty interaction can have a strong impact on the prospective student. Aram was particularly struck by the accessibility of the faculty member who came to his school:

> We actually had an SMU representative come and talk to us and they were there and [said] “if you’re interested come and we can have a one and one time” and that was really helpful … when you get that one on one time you feel like they care about you and they want you there. This wasn’t even to apply, they weren’t trying to get us to apply.
The professor who visited Aram’s school profoundly impacted his impression of the institution.

I was blown away by this man. He’s a genius and he’s taking 15 minutes out of his day to have a conversation about me and ask me about what I’m thinking and what I want to do and that was so awesome and him just giving me his business card and telling me whenever if I come here to give him a call and so that was like that was definitely incredible.

The impact of a personal connection with a faculty member was repeated by other students, especially those who planned to major in music, where the college search process is dictated by auditions and individual relationships between students and instructors. Rebecca, a female Asian violin major from Texas, explains:

As a music major, it really depends on not actually the college but more on who you want to study with. So it really depends on your violin professors that you’ll be studying with for the next four years of college.

One of her classmates, Alexander, a trombonist, agreed:

For music you’re looking more for faculty than for school reputation. And so I didn’t, really at that point, it didn’t really matter the atmosphere or where it was, it just mattered about that professor. And I didn’t really consider anything else at that time.

Because of the audition process, other arts majors develop connections to faculty, but not in the same depth as music majors. Theatre majors, for example, mentioned ongoing contact with the faculty who they met during auditions. Heidi heard regularly from her faculty contact.

There was a point in time when he called me twice a week for like three weeks. He was on the ball [snaps her fingers]… He was great, if there was ever a question, even if it was something stupid, he was always there to answer it. So that really helped.

The same professor’s presence on Facebook had a positive impact on Albert’s decision to attend SMU:

It was a good audition and after that he kept in touch with me, like and he was on Facebook and it was very easy to keep in contact with, you know, with this professor you know. So I had basically everything at my fingertips. I could ask him whatever questions I needed to ask him…. So it was refreshing to have someone there to talk to…. without
Charlie I wouldn’t have done like this CSS profile thing or whatever that had to be completed and I didn’t know about it and because Charlie was there, that got done, and you know the money came through and I was able to come here.

These stealth applicants had extensive contact with a faculty member in their department after their auditions, but before they submitted the SMU application for admission. Despite these repeated contacts, they remained coded as “no interest.” At SMU, no standardized mechanism exists for recording these impactful interactions between faculty and students.

The connections between faculty and students in the performing arts programs were related to the audition process, but some non-performing arts majors also developed relationships with faculty after applying to SMU. Alastair emailed several faculty members:

I’d say “hey, I’m interested in taking your class when I enroll here in the fall, I’m not quite sure if I’m going to go here yet, so give me an idea as to what this class, how this works, how you teach, how if this is normal for SMU.” Actually [the professor] who was the first one to get back to me was really just funny and I liked him a lot . . . It was nice to know that people cared . . . you’re going to be interacting with your professors while you’re here so why not start that interaction and get a feel for you know who they are and who you’re going be taking classes from? That way it’s not as different when you get here, you kind of have a sense of what it’s going be like.

Alastair’s external search expanded from admissibility/match to fit, asking about the college classroom experience at each school. His focus was not on if he would get in – with high grades and test scores, a senior class of 18, a family expectation of attending college, and skilled college counseling, his probability of admission was high - the question became which school would be the right fit for him.

*Interpersonal search*

Interpersonal search is based on word of mouth, opinions, and reputation, and has the greatest impact early and late in the search process. Elements of the interpersonal search include all external human inputs to the search process, including the advice and opinions of family, friends, high school teachers, and college counselors.
Counselors. High school guidance counselors, college counselors, and career counselors act as a bridge and resource for students in the transition from high school to college. While no standard professional training program exists for college counselors, most have counseling or teaching backgrounds. Some have worked in admissions at the university level, and many are members of the National Association of College Admissions Counseling (NACAC), a professional organization with over 11,000 members.

Universities like SMU host events for counselors on campus and in regional areas to promote the university’s programs. Some high schools also provide travel budgets for their counseling staff to visit universities. The level of engagement in the college search process by high school staff varies; counselors may do as little as provide registration information for standardized tests and mail transcripts, and as much as lead groups on college tours and lobby university admissions offices on behalf of their students’ applications (Stevens, 2009). Private high schools place a premium on college counseling, using their college placement list as a marketing tool in recruiting new students to their secondary schools. Private schools normally have lower student to counselor ratios, and provide a broader range of services.

Just as students invest widely varying amounts of time in search, they also structure their search process differently based in part on their access to external and interpersonal resources. Some students worked independently of their counselors, while others relied on interpersonal support systems. Those who had highly engaged college counseling offices often reported that they were led through an exploratory process including self-analysis of interests and preferred attributes, and utilized search tools to identify schools that may fit these interests. Alastair described the process at his small, private, college preparatory school in Utah:

[The counselor] went through a plan with us and we took different tests that told us what kind of person we were and she went down this checklist of, did we want small, did we
want large, you know. What kind of weather do we like…. What we’re interested in, what we might want to study, liberal arts or not, so it was really an extensive pro/con you know it was very scientific the way that she went about this.

Other students from private schools reported similar experiences and recognized that their experiences may have been different than students at less resourced schools. Alastair commented on his college search versus his perception of other students’ experiences outside of his school:

I don’t feel like I had a normal experience. Kids I’ve talked to in public school, they say they like never met with their guidance counselor and if they did it was like 10 minutes. But we sit down with our guidance counselor at least twice a week. We would meet with our counselor twice a week for 30 minutes to an hour because there were 18 kids in our class and she could meet with everyone.

Steven attended a prestigious northeastern boarding school, where he was impressed by the extent of the college counseling services:

They had one of the best college counseling centers that I’ve ever seen. . . . it was a lot of one-on-one interaction and they were always there to help you, they always had time . . . I met [my counselor] and he was, he was great. He pretty much told me exactly what I needed to do to get into college; you know obviously keep my grades up but you know get in, get more involved in clubs, just make the initiative to get them to remember who you are.

David, a white male student from California, who attended an elite prep school, described the very high-touch college counseling offered at his school, where each senior met with a college counselor for at least thirty minutes each week:

You have an advisor who pretty much walks you through the whole thing, makes sure you’re on top of your, making your applications and stuff and they actually do a pretty good job of making sure you get all your applications in on time, when you need to take your tests signing up for SAT and all that stuff so they’re pretty efficient with it. The first meeting is basically what you want in a college and then from what you like, write down, they take that and search for all the colleges that kind of match what you’re looking for but before that you’re supposed to, they gave you a book, like a pamphlet of like different colleges or how different colleges could be like state schools and stuff and descriptions to give you a general idea of what you want or what you’d be looking for.

At this school, the student provides the attributes, and the counselor performs the college search.

Students are given assignments, such as reviewing a book of college attributes. Time and
resources allocated to college search support services for the seniors at this school are substantial, especially when compared with Paola’s experience at her large, public high school, “Well, we did have a college counselor who was supposed to help us and guide us through all of that but she wasn’t available much.” Similarly, Tyler found the counseling support lacking at his large public high school:

> We had our counselors and… that was about it. I mean, we didn’t have much, our counselors tried to help us but my senior year I saw my counselors … two I think maybe throughout the whole year. And so, through scholarships and applications, like we always had to go through our counselor. So, I dealt with her a lot through that. But searching for colleges it was basically all on your own unless you asked them for help. And then they would try and help you but they were very busy too.

Not all public school students had a negative experience with college counseling. Students in special programs, such as arts magnet programs or International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, received additional counseling services. Aram was in the IB Program at his school:

> We had kind of our own counselor since we’re in the IB program, so we had one counselor that just kind of dealt with us and she’s such an amazing woman and basically we could go talk to her anytime. We could meet with her outside of school and anything we needed, and she was really awesome. We also had like the normal school counselors and they would give us letters and we’d go in there every once in a while and they’d ask us questions but mainly the IB counselor was the most significant one.

Despite the well-known challenges of college counseling in public schools, a few public school graduates reported positive experiences with college guidance in helping them develop a plan to structure their search. Elizabeth attended a large public high school in the Chicago suburbs that had a four-year focus on the college search process.

> In the beginning of the year, actually staring your freshman year they had this five piece program that was puzzle pieces. They tried to make it entertaining. It was place, people, price, it was all these things so they had you starting to think about [college]; not really the important stuff like where exactly, but what you were more comfortable with. They started you out with that and then junior year they’re telling you how to visit places where you can go to look and senior year there are tons. You’re meeting with a counselor to figure out where you should look in the first place and they’ll have a meeting with you and say “based on your numbers, your grade point average, your tests, you should look at
these schools, these are [raises her hand to waist level] you’ll definitely get in, [raises hand to shoulder level] you might get in, [raises her hand over her head] you will be lucky if you get in” type of spectrum based on the location and stuff like that. So based on where you go. And I said “I’d like to be somewhere warm, somewhere this and that” they said “ok, based on that you could probably go here, here, here.” And they’d go over essays with you, or they’d help you build your resume, which teachers to talk to for recommendations. Like they did a ton of stuff. No one didn’t know what to do.

Likewise, not all private school students found value in their college counseling center.

Melissa attended a private day school in Louisiana.

We had a college counselor and she would have meetings with us once a week junior year, but she wasn’t very helpful at all. She actually, she gave me a list of 10 schools I should look at and I didn’t look at a single one.

While the process for Melissa included interest and attribute surveys, she did not trust her counselor and thought she “pulled [colleges] out of nowhere.” Melissa lost faith in her college counselor when she learned that the counselor had discouraged one of her friends from applying to a competitive public university, and was instead encouraging him to apply to less well known colleges.

Students also had different levels of engagement with counselors during the search process. Some students accepted recommendations, such as Jessica, who “hadn’t heard of SMU until my career counselor mentioned it to me.” Others mentioned that counselors helped them understand what they could to do be more competitive college applicants. Alexander struggled with a gap between his college knowledge and his counselor’s expectations, explaining that counselors “kind of walk you through the college application process but … it seems like they assume that people already know.” Some students were more inclined to use their counselors, while others were not. Lewis, who was one of the academically strongest student interviewed in this study, managed his college search with little guidance:

We have guidance counselors who can sit down and counsel with you as to where you might be thinking about going. I personally didn’t engage myself too much in the college
search that was there at the school. For me really the college search is something that I took and I did on my own.

Lewis’ independence in search reflected his overall belief that personal experience produces the only true measure of which college is the right fit. Jessica was also a strong student, and actively and regularly engaged with her counselor. She recalled their interaction:

My counselor… God, my counselor was such a lot of help…we would meet up mainly, towards the end of my junior year and he would tell me start looking into it ….So I began to go and look up stuff and whenever I did find something I would go into his office and tell him and he would look a little bit more into it.

While Jessica attended a very large high school, with a senior class of over 1,500, Jessica used her involvement in student leadership positions to develop personal relationships with the school’s administrative staff, including her college counselor.

Family. In general, students reported that their family members were highly supportive of their searches, within the limits of their experiences and abilities. Students whose parents had limited experience with the American higher education system found that they lacked the level of parental guidance that they perceived their classmates received from college-educated parents. Parents also bring their own preferred attributes for cost, academic programs, and geographic region to the college search. Steven’s parents were happy he wanted to go to college in Texas because the state “was their favorite place to live, too, and they wanted any excuse they could to come back out here so me going to school here was great for them.” Emma’s parents “weren’t extremely helpful, but they were supporting of me looking. They wanted, I mean of course they wanted me to stay in the same town so that they could see me, but they kind of knew that was not what I was wanting.” Several students related that their parents, while outwardly supportive, had reservations about their college decisions.
Some parents expressed strong opinions about the student’s academic major. Alexander’s parents had hoped he would pursue a more traditional academic major, and discouraged his applications to conservatory programs for music. “I mean they can’t really do anything, but they did provide like the money to fly out and send the applications, so. And they really did try to hold me back from doing music.” Thomas had a similar struggle in defending his career plans to work in the video game industry:

I guess when you’re going off to college you’re starting to do what you want to do with your life and form your own life. And if your parents are trying to help you out and try to make you go toward a certain path it’s like that’s not what I want to do. I want to do computer science and go into video games. My mom is not so big on the video games, she’s still “why don’t you go to some school that has a biomedical computer science thing and SMU does;” she basically was trying to push me away from video games and I’m like “no, I’m good.”

Other parents deferred the process to the student, with caveats about cost and the importance of the college decision. Moises, a male Hispanic student from Florida, said that his parents “supported whatever decision I took, but they just wanted, made me caution that the school I went was going to have a great effect of my future.” Parental influence often intersected with financial issues, either as parents served as financial advisors or as they limited the consideration of schools based on cost. Lewis’ family knew he would receive merit scholarship money, but were also clear in explaining what they could afford to contribute to his education:

There was also the family influence just of my parents saying, look, this is financially what we can do. And my dad especially was big on “it would be great if you could go to a school where there’s a full ride.” So I took that as well with a grain of salt and saying “OK from their finance perspective and their perspective of having all of these years of finance experience they’re coming at me with this advice; it’s something to consider.”

Money was a tool for some parents in attempting to sway the student’s college decision. Arcilla’s father “was actually wanting me to stay in El Paso, to go to UTEP, no matter what. So he didn’t even give me a chance. He said ‘just so you know, I’m not paying for anything.’”
First generation students often do not have parents with the cultural capital necessary to aid them in their college search. Paola “just kinda did it on my own,” saying:

Since I always did it on my own pretty much it was up to me but financially, that was a big factor …I was filling out the FAFSA I was worried that I was writing something wrong and I had to constantly translate and ask my parents what things meant and I think that’s a big thing, just having parents who have gone through it.

When asked, most parents provided direct guidance and recommended schools to consider.

Elizabeth’s father graduated from SMU, but did not recommend the school until she approached him for advice:

I was really stressed out and I was like dad, I need a safe school that’s really warm. And he was like SMU, and I was like ok… I feel like he was secretly he wanted me to at least check it out so he could go back and see it and stuff and it ended up working out pretty well.

Some students worked very closely with their parents in the search process, often deferring decision making to their parents. Tyler explains that:

When it came to my senior year and we started having to apply to schools, to look at schools, my dad was just told me just apply there and he basically recommended schools to me to apply to.

Tyler gave his list of 13 schools to his father so his father could research the schools. SMU was not on the list, but his father added SMU after the university was recommended by another parent. Jessica’s mother played an equally active role in her search, with Jessica’s encouragement:

My mom played a huge role. She’s a very, one of those very involved mothers, which I loved. She’s very helpful. She did a lot of helping me work through which colleges I should look at and “oh, hey, what about this one you haven’t look at this one yet.” So it was kind of fun to go through and look at and “oh, that’s a fun school maybe we should look at and apply there.”

Several students, including Tyler and Jessica, repeatedly used “we” in describing their college search and application activities. Phrases such as “we applied to;” “we thought;” and “we
wanted a school” occur frequently, illustrating the search partnership and co-purchasing behavior between parent and child. Other students were far more independent in their college search. Heidi described her father’s limited role in her college search process:

He’s just “you know you’re gonna apply to all these schools and you’d better get scholarships to them.” That was the only words that were ever uttered from his mouth. He never knew when my deadlines were. If there was something I needed help with I would ask him, but he would never offer his help or anything. That’s just how our relationship is. He wants me to be independent.

Other family members also impacted the college search. Several students applied to schools that their older siblings had applied to, or they did not apply to a school because of a sibling’s experience there. Emma, who did not visit campus prior to enrolling at SMU, explained that she was fairly certain she would like the campus because “My sister had wanted to come here really badly but she didn’t get in… and I thought if she really wanted to go here that would probably be somewhere I’d want to go, too.” For Lewis, the only piece of unsolicited search mail that led to an application was from Davidson College. When it arrived:

My grandma actually picked up the piece of mail and “oh, Davidson, this is a great school,” and I had never heard of it and never looked at it, and I started looking into it and found that it was a school that was probably going to fit me very well, and actually right down to the wire, the last two schools that I was considering was here and Davidson.

Friends. Friends impact the college search by recommending schools for consideration and giving emotional support and encouragement during the application and decision process. Older friends who have already attended college provide an insider’s perspective on the application process and on the school that they attend. Friends who have already graduated may also recommend specific colleges. Alexander explained “if it weren’t for my other trombone friend, he’s in his 20s so he has experience - if it weren’t for him I wouldn’t have known about SMU.”
Initially, friends share information from their searches and suggest schools for consideration. Paola and her friends “would just talk about what they were majoring in and what they were interested in, and pretty much I got the information from them on what they found.” Arcilla and her friends started a college search club at their high school. Eventually the club was given space in the building where they could store college materials and meet with other students for peer advising. Through this information sharing, some students helped others find a college that is a good fit. Melissa introduced SMU to her friend:

My friends played a small role and I know I played a role … actually my friend who goes here did not know about SMU. He was not going to apply, and then I told him about it, and that’s when he like looked at it and got accepted and came to Mustang Days and now he’s here!

At some high schools, students have overlapping lists of colleges. Heidi reported that she and her classmates in the theater program at an arts magnet school:

All applied to the same schools pretty much, so it was ‘where are you applying, what are you doing’ and ‘you’re applying here for acting and I’m going for lighting.’ It was a bunch of comparing and contrasting but it was all the same lists of schools.

Older friends provide a secondary source for confirming attributes. Steven, who wanted to be sure he attended a school that would be academically rigorous but also a place where he would have a good time, contacted a former student from his high school:

I had a friend who is now here, and I played on the hockey team with him when we were in high school, and I had talked to him about it and he said it was really challenging, it was really worthwhile he was a better student because of it. That was one thing that helped me get an idea of what kind of school SMU is like.

This network between high school seniors and college freshman was mentioned in several interviews. There appears to be an extensive use of this interpersonal tool in gathering information about colleges during experiential and interpersonal search. Several students set up their own overnight visits and stayed in an on campus residence hall with an older graduate of
their high school to have the “student experience.” These visits occurred most often during weekends, with a student experience focused on social life. David’s school choice very nearly hinged on his relationships with students in the class preceding him.

Seniors and juniors in high school from everyone I know they all hang out with each other. So you definitely make some friends that are older…I was almost going to go to Arizona because most of my friends from the senior year before they’d gone to Arizona and they were just like “oh my god it’s so much fun, blah blah blah.” So definitely friends from school influence where you’re looking.

The contact he had with older friends at the colleges he was considering proved an influential factor for David:

I think it’s more from speaking with your friends you know who have gone to college already and you’re talking to them and they’re like “oh I love SMU and this is the bee’s knees, it’s awesome down here.”

In the end, David and a family member compared colleges, and decided SMU better matched his preferred attributes and financial limitations, but having been told by his friends that SMU was “the bee’s knees” had an equally significant impact on his decision to attend.

In general, friends provide additional support during the high pressure and high stakes college search process. Emma valued the cheerleader role played by a friend:

I had one friend in particular who was very ambitious and she applied to all of the Ivy Leagues and tons of different schools, and she really encouraged me to just go after whatever I could. And I think that was really important in my college search.

While they are also competitors for admission, the students interviewed never expressed their relationships with friends as adversarial or competitive. Instead, students shared stories of support and encouragement.

Teachers. Teachers’ opinions provided a trusted and valued source, especially for those in the performing arts. Sophia, a female African-American student from Georgia, participated in a multi-school audition for theater programs and received 13 call-backs, one from SMU:
I had never even heard of SMU but the thing that stood out for SMU was that SMU only called four people back and I was one of them. And the teacher was like “this is amazing, you have to go, I know great things about that school.”

Her teacher’s enthusiasm for SMU and the competitive nature of the audition were important in developing her understanding of SMU. The same teacher also brought university representatives to visit their classes throughout the year. All of the performing arts majors interviewed indicated that their teachers served as a primary source of information on colleges or on specific faculty at colleges. As soon as she decided she wanted to major in music, Cristina turned to her high school guitar teacher:

The first thing I did was ask my guitar teacher at school who the best guitar teachers were for me to study with, and then narrowed the list down, I would look at the guitar teacher and then the university.

Some teachers took on the role of college counselor, holding college information and planning meetings for students and their parents. Heidi’s theatre teacher was highly involved in the college search process for students in the theatre program.

Our director was like a mother to all of us. Honestly. She controlled when we slept, when we ate, when we went home at night, and like she dictated every part of our lives … about junior year she calls all of the people that are in the class and their parents in to have a meeting, and we start talking about college, and how the college search goes.

As they provided recommendations for schools and information on university programs and reputations, teachers became mentors in the college search. Aram, who was a first generation student, explained that his junior year English teacher “was kind of like a mentor for my everything. I would give her colleges and she’d be like ‘you wouldn’t fit in here because of [fill in the] blank, or possibly this but you’d have to change.’” A personal relationship with a teacher or counselor eased the college search experience for several students.
Other Relationships. Winona had a particularly close relationship with the local librarian, as the library was her only source of internet access or research materials. Kofi was enrolled in the Physician Scientist Training Program, and was greatly influenced by the program director:

My program [director] had tried to sell SMU to us, because he went here for graduate school so he had personal experience … he told us about all the possibilities you can have here, all the capabilities of the school. Sure, we never heard of it but I was willing to give it a chance.

For Kofi, who admitted a natural bias toward schools he had “already heard about,” the impact of interpersonal search outweighed brand name. Interpersonal search also impacted secondary participants in the college search. Paola’s father began to accept her desire to attend SMU after a coworker praised the school:

He still wasn’t very convinced; just because of the price, that’s what he was scared about. But at his job, I guess his coworkers were really impressed that his daughter was going to SMU, so I guess they started talking to him about it. He didn’t know much about the college but then he realized that it was, not better than UTA, but that a degree from here could get me more connections.

Independent Search

Independent search refers to information gathered through sources of information outside of the control of the institution, such as non-university web pages, ranking guides, books, and other media. These independent sources often provide extensive information to supplement information gathered through university web pages. Students continue to constrain the schools considered by focusing on match and preferred attributes during the independent search, and continued to mix their search tools during independent search. Emma had already decided to attend school in Texas – an attribute identified in internal search – and then “looked through a lot of the Texas schools in [books] and I didn’t use that as my main thing, but I’d find schools in that book and then look them up online.” Books, Google and the College Board were most often
reported as students’ first external search tool, and as the preferred tools for gathering information about schools.

*The Princeton Review, 365 Best Colleges,* and various ranking publications served as core resources for many students as part of their independent search. While members of a generation perceived as technology-based, a surprising number of these students included books in their research. Winona explains that when she “started out, I read books. I was a library freak when I was a kid, I went to the library. So I read books” to look for colleges. Moises echoed this sentiment saying, “I read a lot. I read a lot of books, like all the college books.” Several students, like Steven, inherited books from an older sibling and bought updated editions of those books: “My brother had a book, a college book, and we decided to buy another one.” Lewis combined printed reference books, ranking guides, and online materials to identify schools offering specific scholarships or programs:

I took a list of schools that gave substantial money to National Merit Finalists, and I took a list of the schools and I went through a ranking book of colleges and looked at the schools in the top couple hundred and picked out ones, researched them, picked out ones that I thought would apply to what I wanted to do, ones that I knew I wanted to do, wanted to apply to that is, and just put those into a list.

Some books provided comprehensive overviews of universities for students, with information on match as well as on fit by combining statistical data and student summaries. Jessica relied on these publications:

We had one book that was absolutely fabulous. It has every, it was the top 500 schools or something like that. And then it had one page that had all the statistics and all of the things the school would present to you to say “here, come to my school.” And then it had a side that was student’s perspective of that school. So they talked about the campus environment, the people that went there, that sort of thing. The numbers of male to female ratio, how many dorms, what they were like, that kind of thing. Was there a lot of smoking on campus or was there not, which I thought that was really helpful because when you look at a university on paper they say they have all these academic programs but what are the people actually like?
Students had mixed feelings about ranking publications. While several mentioned their search for “well known” schools with “good reputations,” and “name recognition,” skepticism existed about the validity of rankings. When asked what types of publications he used in his college search, Lewis said:

Lists, sources of rankings, college rankings, are good in my opinion for a general idea of how colleges are but there is only so much those can do. I mean when you start nitpicking between some that are, five or ten spaces apart, that doesn’t necessarily mean anything at all. Colleges can buy those rankings or can do all sorts of things to get those rankings but they will give you an idea of where those are at academically.

Lewis used the rankings, but questioned their validity, recognizing there may be little difference in schools that are clustered together. Lewis does not trust the rankings to provide a clear delineation between schools, and he suspects the schools are gaming the ranking systems, suggesting that colleges “buy” their rankings or do “all sorts of things” to move up in the rankings. Lewis’ attitude highlights the undercurrent of mistrust of universities that appeared in the interviews. Yet students are drawn to the rankings. In his search for the right school, David “would go to the top ranked business school and top ranked stuff.” When asked how he would define top ranked, he clarified “As defined by the web site I was on.”

Non-university web pages, such as the online rankings of BusinessWeek and U.S. News and World Report, significantly factored in students’ searches for college information. Commercial web pages such as CollegeBoard.com, PrincetonReview.com and social networking sites including CollegeConfidential.com and Facebook served as sources during independent search. Some students found non-university web pages more trustworthy than the university’s page, and questioned their peers’ faith in university information. Jessica questioned the information gathering techniques of her peers, “Do they just go onto the school’s website and
look at all the information they have to offer, which can easily be biased, or go to a non-biased website that they’ve heard of and look at it through there?”

Albert used the College Board’s web page to find demographic information easily accessible on university web pages, explaining that “it’s good to listen to the school but I would say whatever outside information you can get is the best information.” The College Board web page was the most cited non-university web pages used by the students interviewed, like Albert:

Honestly the best place to start was College Board. I always used College Board because you can search for anything you want my major and by financial aid, by anything. So College Board was my number one tool and as soon as I found colleges there, I went to their web sites to get information.

High school counselors bolster the College Board’s credibility by recommending the site. When Sophia asked her counselor about schools, “the guidance counselor would just tell us to go [to College Board] and type in different things we were interested in and they gave us different schools.” The ability to search by combinations of preferred attributes, and the trust generated by a school-approved tool also affiliated with the SAT, make the College Board web site an important tool for search. For Thomas, a College Board search did generate an application to a college he had not otherwise considered:

I’m 99% sure I used College Board’s search thing that they have on there. And that’s how I got, I think that’s how we got Carnegie Mellon. Because I looked up and saw it had stuff I liked after I put in my information, my likes and dislikes, where my mom was like “oh, one of your old teachers used to be from Pittsburgh.” She’s like “it’s a really good academic area you should go there” and I was like “ok, might as well send in an application.”

Other students reported using web pages for the *Princeton Review*, *BusinessWeek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and even Wikipedia. “I know no one uses Wikipedia, but I personally used Wikipedia,” explained Jessica in an embarrassed tone. Other students used Facebook during their
college search to connect with current students and faculty at the institution. Cristina looked at photos on Facebook to “see what kinds of people are going there.”

Social networking sites, such as online forums and chat rooms, expanded the avenues for prospective college students to gather information about universities. In these environments, students ask questions and engage in real time online conversations with one or many anonymous sources. Several students reporting using College Confidential forums to ask questions or find information about schools during their college search and decision process. Most of the students focused on the social side of college, but others, like Alastair, asked about college reputation and about data points such as retention and graduation rates:

I would look on College Confidential about SMU for the social, there was a lot of stuff about social scene and a lot of crap they gave us about fraternities and that sort of thing but on there I would look at like drop rate, how many people had transferred, how many people had dropped after the first year, what people go on to do afterwards.

Retention and graduation rates are reported on every university web page as part of the Common Data Set, and appear in many college resource guides. When asked why students would trust social networking sites for this type of information, Albert explained:

With this generation, generation X, it is all about the internet and all about Facebook and stuff like that. We do a lot of texting; we do a lot of phone calls, that’s the way to get to us. You know? I mean you can have your web site but not everybody goes to the web site. I would say go to the social networking.

Contributing Factors in the Stealth Search Process

In identifying the processes and tools used by stealth applicants in their college search, several common threads emerged related to these tools and also to the psychological stress of the search and decision process. The impact of technology on the search and application process expands the volume of information available, the sources of that information, and the timeline for search. Prospective students use technology to search for colleges at any hour of the day or
night, from their laptop, desktop, or smartphone, using multiple sources to gather information. Universities are no longer the only source for information; technology allows anyone with an opinion to contribute to public awareness of a college brand. High schools embrace new programs that allow them to track prior graduates’ grades and test scores in relation to their college applications. Current high school students can then compare their grades and scores to try to predict their admissibility to a given institution. With this influx of information comes growing stress, as students process more and more information from many different sources. An undercurrent of mistrust, stress, and fear underlies the college search process, as students try to determine which sources of information are trustworthy. Parents play a pivotal role in helping students identify which schools they should apply to, and which they ultimately attend.

*Expansion of Technology*

Technology is a rapidly evolving tool for college search. The availability of information online and on-demand both aids and detracts from search. Technology makes visible even more choices, making more difficult a single “right” choice in college search. This leads to second-guessing the college decision that continues into the freshman year. In retrospect, Heidi wished she had done more research to identify the many options available to her:

I would just say don’t leave your options closed. I think that was definitely a problem with me because I just applied to schools that my friends were applying to. I was one of those kids, you know. But there were so many other schools that I look back on now and I really wish I had applied. … Just look, I mean Google colleges, you know, you’ll get millions and millions of results.

While technology has altered the search and application process over the last two decades, this generation of applicants is unaware of this change; to them, the use of technology in consumer search is ubiquitous to their everyday lives. Albert demonstrates how far technology reaches into purchasing decisions:
Mainly my thing when buying something is always user reviews. Regardless of what I’m buying, if I’ve never heard of it before I look it up. If I’m buying scissors, I look it up. [Laugh] Yeah, I mean even scissors. [Laughs] Anything.

Technology expands the college search geographically to include all universities and aids in the college search process by providing multiple resources to resolve questions about college attributes. Technology also eases the application process, making possible more application to more institutions. Increasingly, college search is an online process. “As horrible, horrible, horrible as it might sound, it’s all technology based,” Heidi explained with a wry smile. Prospective students are able to find information on colleges without ever contacting the institution. Even Winona, who did not have a computer in her home, used a computer in the local library for college research. Like many stealth applicants, Sophia describes her college search as:

Mostly internet. Internet for everything. And even if it wasn’t, if it was just Facebook, like one of my friends in one of my school, he graduated from my high school, he went to NYU. So I knew that he went there so I would Facebook him about information so he would message me all the things that I should know before I had my audition and stuff like that. Which was good, because you know having a personal you know conversation with someone even though I wasn’t there was better than just reading it off the internet. So he really was real with me. Um. But as far as like research I did all of my research pretty much online.

Online research is “easy,” but also limits the development of the personal relationships that students purport to value in the search process. Aram worries that online research and technology in general is making the process less human:

At some point we take it too far and we lose touch with each other. We can always text and stuff. You kind of lose the whole human connection. It’s still so important. Over an email or text or phone call you can’t get the same kind of emotional connection that you can from a face to face conversation.

In addition, technology changes the application process. The advent of online applications, the Common Application, and state based applications like Apply Texas make duplicating essays from one application to another a simple process. When asked how they
applied to college, most students immediately replied “Common App.” David explained how this works:

[The Common App] was the easiest way to do it. I only had to do one application, and I could apply to all the schools. It makes it easier to apply to more schools if you weren’t looking at a bunch of schools. But also it costs money to apply to a bunch of schools.

Thomas, who described himself as “lazy and late” in the college application process, said that he did not like doing “all the essays and stuff so … if I could send all the information I already had from another one to that school it would make it a lot easier. I was for the common application.” There was even one instance when a student reported applying spontaneously to a school simply because it is on the Common Application. “I wasn’t really interested in [Northeastern Private Liberal Arts College] to begin with, I was just applying to apply,” Kofi said, “and it was on the Common App so I kind of just put a send.” These technological innovations have enabled invisible prospecting. Students no longer have to call a school to ask if the school has an attribute they seek, or to request an application for admission.

Stress and Fear

High investment searches create an environment of stress and pressure, which for some students created fear of the college search. The students reflected mixed attitudes toward engaging in the search process. The gravity of the decision facing students can lead to coping mechanisms or denial, as described by Heidi:

I think that a lot of us just don’t want to come to terms with having to [look for colleges] because it’s a huge process. It dictates the next four years of your life if you decide to go to college. Or more, you know. But it’s so overwhelming.

Some were reluctant, others stressed, and others in denial about the upcoming transition from high school to college. These students displayed difficulty moving from stage one of the consumer behavior decision models, problem identification, to stage two, search. Steven
explained, “it was kind of overwhelming, because at the time I didn’t really want to have to start
doing all the applications and everything. I was trying to go as long as possible without doing
that.” Aram explained why some high school students might not begin their college search until
late in their senior year. He suggested procrastination and denial are counterbalanced by parents
and personal motivation in determining when students begin to search for colleges:

We don’t want to think about growing up. We don’t want to think about having to go to
college and having to apply somewhere, and so I would just say that the people that really
start early they probably have a lot of pressure from their parents or more encouragement
from their parents to do it. And then I think once you get to high school, then the people
who start then, earlier on that others, I would say it’s just like they’re more dedicated. If
you want to say they’re more, they’re kinda more, ready, and they’re… they just, they
understand life better. Or they understand that, you know, like high school isn’t going to
last forever and that eventually we need to start taking things more serious and looking
into our future and to what we actually want to start doing with the rest of our lives.

Students expressed a clear awareness of the senior year as a time that they were approaching
transition. Paola echoed this theme as she discussed the sense of coming to an end, and how that
impacted college search for her and her peers:

I wanted to get my high school experience, you know, hang out with all of my friends,
and get high grades. I was too caught up with experiencing high school and letting that
finish, because I knew that was coming to an end, than to really worry about college since
it was just starting. Maybe I would think like those who aren’t really engaged in
searching for college, they’re too caught up with high school and doing those things at
the time.

Students report that the senior year, with the importance of the college search process and
impending transition, leads to a high level of stress and intimidation. When Heidi was asked if
she applied to schools during the November early action or January regular action admissions
cycles, she replied that the application time frame “just intimidates me. November comes around
and they’re talking about early entry and you’re just like “No!” I still need to narrow my list
down to less than 20 schools, you know, so it’s just really confusing.” Personal motivation
impacts search as students acknowledged different experiences for seniors within a high school,
with one group researching colleges and another less engaged in search. Emma classified the behavior of two groups in her high school: the AP students, and the rest of the student population. “The people who took it more seriously, we definitely were the ones to take more advantage of the resources and the other people would be like, ‘oh yes, senior year, party, who cares what happens next.’”

Students often discussed the pressures of where they were in the process, their admissibility to college, and the challenge of balancing senior year commitments and college search. Albert did not take the SAT until his senior year. He feared that his late entry into the college search process would result in long-term negative consequences:

Everybody had this plan and I felt like I was really behind everybody because people had already taken their SAT if not the second time, the third time, you know? And I hadn’t even taken it once. It was really scary because I felt like, you know, I wasn’t going to go school, I wasn’t going to go to college and I was gonna be a dropout and I was gonna be like this horrible person [laughs self-consciously]. I just got so scared and I didn’t know what to do. ,You know… if my grades weren’t good enough for the schools I wanted to go to, then there wasn’t really time for me to build that back up, and then I was scared that I wasn’t gonna get accepted anywhere.

His awareness and comparisons to others in the college search process heightened the tension of the senior year. Students watched others’ progress as a measure of their own experience, and compared their probability of admission with past and current students at their high school. In describing her experiences, Arcilla recognized the broader competition between all applicants for admission to college:

It’s a lot of pressure when you’re writing the essays, making sure everything is good. I think it is a lot of pressure because you realize that in high school you have the people who you’re competing with within your high school to get into that school. Your friends are also doing that school, let’s see which one of you gets in. And then you realize oh, wow, I’m not only competing with them, I’m also competing with tens of thousands of other people. So it really makes you wonder what’s gonna make me distinct out of all these.
How do I stand out? Will I be admitted? Is what I’ve done good enough? These are the questions that occupied the minds of these students during the college search.

As they enter their senior year, many students struggle to balance the leadership positions they have ascended to during high school with the time and emotional and intellectual investment necessary for college search. Sophia recalled advice from her brother, a student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who told her “it’s stressful, but you can do it….work hard….stay on top of school and get involved, keep getting involved with other activities outside of school.” She followed his advice, but still found the year to be highly stressful:

I think last year was the most I’ve ever cried. … I was extremely stressed out. And I think it was because it was my senior year, and I was having auditions, and I was having to travel for whatever, and on top of that I still had my regular high school, so I was doing shows for there, and I was involved in my school, and I was in student counsel executive. All of that on top of being stressed out on scholarships and schools and different essays for that. It was just overwhelming, it really was! And then when the FAFSA came I was like “oh my gosh!” That was extremely stressful. … I think people probably are scared of that because they know, they know that’s coming and how stressful it can be because I know I wasn’t the only one stressed; my friends were too who were applying to different schools and I think they just don’t want to be overwhelmed.

While many students suggested that procrastination was a coping mechanism used during the senior year, Melissa quickly pointed out that while some students procrastinate, colleges cannot make the assumption that students are not participating in college search even if their search methods are not visible to the college. Melissa explained:

I mean, at least a lot of my friends, they procrastinate. Senior year, junior and senior year, they’re so busy anyway. And just because like you might not see our name on a mailing list it doesn’t mean we’re not looking at your web site every day or we’re not, we didn’t pick up a magazine from the school.

The perception of procrastination is at odds with the ongoing and extensive search processes described by stealth applicants.
An undercurrent of intimidation also ran through discussions of why students did not directly contact the schools or avoided getting on mailing lists, as Steven explained:

It can be kind of stressful talking to these college admission people when you don’t even know if you’re going to that school, or if you’re in, or if you’re not, so I feel like it can be kind of stressful.

Fear or intimidation dictated some student’s actions and impacted how they searched for information. Emma used the web to avoid having to call and ask questions: “I know I was always scared talking to strangers on the phone so I tried to find everything I could find online or ask people I already knew. [Laughs] It’s just intimidating.” After she applied for admission, Melissa was aware that she needed to demonstrate interest by contacting colleges, but she feared her emails would be “annoying,” explaining “I don’t want to email them every day, [but] I knew it was good to get my name out there, but I think some people don’t even think to do that.”

The interest in long term career outcomes in combination with the nation’s current economic climate also helps explain the undercurrent of fear expressed when discussing the college search experience. The sheer volume of information available in search does not make the college search easier, and may also add to a growing sense of unease among searchers. The language used to describe the college search and its impact on their senior year included words and phrases such as: terrified, overwhelmed, too scared, a big crazy deal, scary, horrible, stressed, and stupid. The difficulty in knowing the outcomes of college, and the uncertainty involved in making the right choice in college search heighten the sense of risk or fear for students.

The sheer volume of information available to prospective college students is overwhelming. Most colleges provide information cards for students to compete at college fairs
and visits, and use that information to track prospective student interest. Not all students, however, take the time to compete an information card. Steven said his school:

Had the college fair, and they had I think it was 40 or 50 colleges come in; most of them were from the northeast … And I went and talked to multiple different ones, SMU included, and that’s really the only interaction I had [with SMU] beforehand.

When asked why he did not fill out SMU’s information card at the fair, he said “I felt like if I really wanted information about a college I could just look at it myself and not have to be put on a mailing list for it.” This hesitation to sign up for a mailing list reoccurs during the search process for stealth applicants.

Many students had already identified preferred attributes via internal search, and when the college mailings arrived from a wide variety of institutions, they quickly discarded materials from schools that did not fit their preferred attributes or that they felt they would not be qualified to attend. Paola, who had already decided to stay close to home, typified this:

I got tons of mail. I just I had a box full, there were so many. Most of them, if they’re out of state I would automatically not really look at them, so the ones instate if they were big colleges I would also kind of put to the side, I was just focused on size and location, those were my things. And then I went into what majors they offered.

David did not understand why he was receiving so much mail, particularly since he had not overtly signed up for any mailing lists. He seemed unaware of the impact of signing the release making his contact information available to colleges when he took the PSAT. “I don’t even know what I signed up for but I was getting mail from all kinds of schools. Schools that I couldn’t get into for sure and schools that I would never ever go to.” Steven found the ongoing influx of mail “annoying,” saying:

Before I applied to SMU I got a lot of mail from schools that I had never heard of, mainly just saying “come here, we’re a great school.” It just kind of overflowed my mailbox a little bit and it got kind of annoying. A lot of them were from, they were just weird places I’ve never heard of in far off states I had no interest in going to.
The volume of mail that students receive was reported to become a significant annoyance over time. Initially, Elizabeth was pleased with the brochures she received:

Oh my gosh. It was kinda nice because I like getting mail but after a while it was, ok, I’m not going to Montana. But I got tons, which was nice, you know, but I don’t think I looked at any of those schools.

Elizabeth and most of her peers did not apply to any universities simply because of these mailings. Jonathan, a white male studio art major from Texas, derided the flood of mail as a “bunch of crap,” saying:

We get it not just from SMU but from all schools and we just tune it out. Like it becomes bull crap to us, and so instead of filling out the response cards and stuff it’s more us looking at it ourselves [online]. That was my experience. I would see one that looked interesting but I wouldn’t necessarily return it. I would just keep it, and be like that school looks interesting, and I’d look at it [online].

Many students agreed with Jessica, who “Didn’t find any of the schools I ended up applying to through the information I got from them.” Search program mail and email represents another traditional university outreach that is unsolicited and moves in one direction, from the school to the student. The students reported that the volume of mail and email was “spam,” and that they disliked mail from unknown schools, yet search programs through the College Board and ACT remain the primary search tool used by admissions offices to identify prospective students. This illustrates a disconnect between how universities develop prospects, and how prospective students interact with universities.

Mistrust of Marketing

Personalization juxtaposed with an awareness of being one of many potential applicants creates a tension in the college search process, demonstrated by a growing mistrust that universities may say they want to know prospective students as individuals, but actually view them as a revenue generating number. The students interviewed alternated between naïveté –
such as Aram’s belief that the professor visiting his high school wasn’t there to recruit, or Jessica’s belief in non-biased web sites – and open skepticism. Many students characterized the university’s outreach to them in purely marketing terms. Kofi described university publications as “where they try to sell it with all the fancy pictures with models that aren’t actually students.” Admissions counselors have an agenda, he suggests, “they’re trying to sell it to me. I mean there are strings attached when you ask a college. They’re trying their hardest to make their school look good.” This mistrust of information from colleges was echoed throughout the interviews. Students viewed universities not as altruistic providers of knowledge or honest representatives of their own strengths and weaknesses, but as marketers whose focus is selling. Steven explains this:

Every college is going to say that they’re the best, and they have the best teachers, and stuff like that … you know that all they’re going to do is talk up their school and they’re going to downplay anything that’s negative.

Colleges are engaged in selling; this makes their printed materials and web pages suspect, even when these materials include student voices. Jonathan echoed this suspicion when reviewing college materials from schools:

I got a bunch of brochures where it was like student feedback, it was like quotes from students saying “oh my school is awesome” and I felt that those are rather contrived and didn’t really provide me with information that I could actually use to figure out where I wanted to go.

While students are comfortable using non-university web sites, not all of them trust the information on these web pages either. Students are aware that different types of people participate in forums and chat rooms, and that their opinions may be biased. Arcilla laughed as she said she was careful not to let what she read on forums cloud her judgment too much, “Because I think forums are one of the things that are a little like “rate my professor,” you know what I mean?” Lewis used the forums and chat rooms, but did so with great care:
I went onto a number of sites that had students reviewing their college. And you have to go into that understanding that the kind of students that review their own college are usually the type that are raving about how wonderful their college is, or raving about how much they dislike the college. That can be one of the least trustworthy sources of information if you take it as these are the people going to this school, but if you take it as these kinds of students that are going to be leaving responses, there is valuable information that can be found...And sources like online opinions can be less trustworthy unless you can take it ... with the mature understanding of what it is.

The awareness that not all information proves trustworthy adds to the tension of the high stakes college search. As students use expanded resources to search for information, they question the truthfulness and bias of that information. Frequently, students trusted interpersonal contacts and word of mouth if they knew the person providing the advice. Alexander relied on word of mouth explaining, “of course, every school wants to say this program is the best, but I think what I did was I just relied on word of mouth. If friends said a school was reliable or known for this subject, then go with that.” Steven and others also trusted friends who went to the school. While the students considered the source of information in forums and chat rooms, Albert acknowledged that negative comments on forums are “just hard to hear” and do have a slight impact on the institution under consideration.

Personal experiences often provided authentic and unscripted trustworthy information. “The most trustworthy source is found in firsthand experience going to visit colleges and talking to people who had been at the college,” Lewis explains. Students do not fully trust the schools or anonymous posters and bloggers, and they question the authenticity of official university events; their trusted search tools are books, non-university web sites, and interpersonal relationships.

*Parental Engagement*

Parents continue to play a role in the college search for stealth applicants, beginning with setting the expectation that a student will attend college. Jonathan’s “whole family expected me to [attend college] because they noticed from an early age that I was kind of gifted, so they
wanted me to do something with my life.” Going to college was described as “always something I planned on” by Lewis and others, or for Elizabeth:

I wouldn’t say expectation more as like assumed. It’s not like my parents said you have to go to college, but I knew early on that my parents could afford to send me to college and it was always and it was always “cool, where will you go to college?”

In describing their college search process, several students used “we” instead of “I,” for example as Jessica describes her college search: “In the beginning I wasn’t exactly sure what we wanted to do. We did a lot of the Texas schools. We also did a lot of books. We had one book that was absolutely fabulous.” Others had parents who attended college events for them, including Jonathan, whose father “went to a college fair to look at colleges for me.” Tyler described his father’s role in the search process: “We started having to apply to schools, to look at schools…. and more and more as we went through it he started feeling the same thing that I was feeling.” This symbiotic and connected language illustrates the role of parents as partners in the college search process.

Parents were also often cast as the deadline managers in the college search process. Their involvement could have positive or negative results, as illustrated by the responses of students to questions about their parents’ involvement. Cristina initially chaffed at but ultimately appreciated her mother’s support:

I was an angry teenager and wanted to go to Eastman. I was like, I don’t care if it was completely obvious that SMU is the better choice. And my mom was like, “hey, if SMU gives you more money you’re going to SMU.” … I was still being a little bit stubborn about it. Eastman was my dream for a whole year, and I don’t know, my mom played a really important role in helping me decide that SMU was really a good choice. My mom was on my butt, not a lot more than I was on my own, but she was constantly asking me questions, and she was very involved and very supportive of my decision to be in college, and she offered her opinions a lot and she really helped me out a lot.

Alastair also went through a period where he resisted his father’s involvement in the college search process, and briefly considered not going to college at all:
So a conversation with my dad was “are you thinking about college?” And I was like “yeah, I’ve thought about it.” And he’s “I want you to have a plan, I want you to know exactly what you’re going to do and to start thinking about it now.” And then him pushing me pushed me away from it; by the time I was a junior and things were not so great and I was thinking maybe I should take a year off.

Aram, on the other hand, accepted his parent’s recommendations, even when they conflicted with his longstanding dreams:

My plan was to go to Duke, however my mother was fairly worried that I would be alone and she really, like it was her dream for me and my sister to stay together and have each other while we’re here and, well mother raised me for 18 years so she had a big say.

While their parents were still part of the “we” in the college search and decision process, other students made decisions based solely on their own preferences. “I mean, my parents were sort of against me because one it’s far away and two I don’t know anybody in Texas and none of my family had ever been to Texas before so it’s like it was just this completely new thing,” explained Albert. Winona used her mother to help bring her father in agreement with her decision:

Mom was wanting me to stick around because obviously I helped raise my younger siblings, so she wanted me to stick around and help with that. Well, she realized I was not going to be doing that. I’m just not like all the other people there. …I’m like “Mom, I want to go to SMU,” she’s been like “ok, let’s do it,” so she and I have been working; she helped me the whole way. Mom helped me the whole way.

Cost impacted the role that many parents played in the college search process, even when parents tried to insulate the college search process from financial issues. Jonathan said his parents were:

Very supportive and they, before the recession hit they were like “pick anywhere you want and we’ll help you pay for it all the way,” and then after it was, like it was, it felt kind of jaded because I knew that wasn’t possible and yet they still continued to claim that I could probably choose wherever I want but I knew that wasn’t the case just because of financial circumstances.
As savvy consumers, some parents helped negotiate scholarship packages. Jonathan explained “Me and my mom worked together to like, milk the financial aid as much as possible.” Parents had concerns as co-purchasers about cost, majors, student life, and outcomes, and these concerns influenced several students’ decisions. As David explained, “pretty much the rest of it was whether my parents could afford it. And kind of what they wanted me to do … because if they didn’t approve then that wasn’t going to work.” Parental influence framed the college search, impacting where students applied and where they ultimately enrolled. The boundaries defining “we” and “me” in the college search were fluid. Students used “we” more often in describing their initial search process and final decision, and “me” or “I” when discussing preferred attributes. Students most often sought guidance from their parents on issues related to educational cost and anticipated outcomes.

Successfully Reaching Stealth Applicants

SMU’s stealth applicants had strong opinions about the experiences they had with schools once they began to engage with those schools. The responsiveness of faculty and others to email and calls significantly influenced their post application search. Receiving poor information discourages students from contacting schools. The quantity of information now available online also enables college search without “signing up” with a school, as Steven discovered. Several students spoke of unreturned phone calls and unanswered questions. For some, like Alastair, SMU’s quick response time to questions was noted.

I liked how all the professors here were, they got back to me very quickly through emails, and if I wanted to talk to admissions they would get right back to me. The other colleges would take 3 weeks to get back, to respond to an email or a question that I had. So I got a good response from SMU so that made me feel better about it.

The lack of responsiveness to student outreach also influenced Sophia’s enrollment decision:
I was going to Howard for broadcasting. And they weren’t consistent in getting in contact with me. I would call them, they would never answer, or their voicemail would be full. So I was like ok, and then I would call later, not that same day but maybe later on in the week and it was always the same thing.

This issue occurred at large and small institutions, and at public as well as private schools. In general, students expected a quick and consistent response that when they contacted a university.

During her application process, Emma had trouble getting consistent answers:

> When I was working with [Large A&M], whenever I tried to call them about any questions I’d just get some random person on the phone who didn’t know what they were doing and I’d call different times and get different answers from different people and like it sounds like they really don’t know what they are doing in their department.

One resolution to the fear of contacting a school occurred when students felt that the institution wanted them. Several students were highly responsive to interactions that made them feel valued. Alastair received an email from the president of SMU’s Model United Nations program, encouraging his participation in the fledgling club at SMU. “I kind of pictured myself as doing exactly what I was doing in high school except now I would be at the collegiate level starting something the exact way I did it in high school. So that was sort of exciting.” Direct contact with a specific admissions counselor or faculty member who “knew who I was,” personalized mailings, such as brochures that mention the specific mileage from the student’s hometown to campus, were cited by students as making them feel more welcomed and wanted.

Sophia recalled a university brochure that featured her name written in the sand, and another with her name written in autumn leaves. “Stuff like that,” she said “was whoa!” When asked what universities could do, in general, to build relationships with high school students, Emma recommended:

> Making it more, I don’t know, geared toward the individual rather than like you’re kind of the 1000th person we’ve asked to come to our school, come to our school kind of thing. Because you need to feel valued as a student and you want to go to a place where you’re going to be valued.
Conclusion

As the findings reflect, the college search process is extensive, complex, and highly nuanced for stealth applicants, just as for applicants whose college search is more visible to institutions. While stealth applicants perform extensive searches for information, their intentional or inadvertent avoidance of direct contact with universities prior to applying deprives them of an information resource that could expand their understanding of the colleges they are considering. These students are not lacking in the quantity of information gathered during college search, however, and their invisibility to universities does not reflect an absence of involvement in the college search process.

The changes wrought by technology, by the transformation of universities to follow business marketing models, and by the admissions arms race contribute to the high levels of stress and fear expressed by students. The commercialization of the university marketplace has created a generation of applicants who view colleges with the jaded eye of a consumer, who questions if the university’s claims of greatness are simply too good to be true. Prospective students are unsure who they can trust to provide accurate and unbiased information. Parents, counselors, friends, teachers, and strangers all give them advice and direction on college; mail and email arrive daily, new web pages and search engines offer new options. These prospective students are surrounded by information, but their needs for information are unmet.
CHAPTER 5
IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The label stealth applicant often proves misleading; “invisible prospects” or “unanticipated applicants” might better identify the students described by consultants, the media, and enrollment managers as stealth applicants. By any label, these applicants represent a growing proportion of the applicant pool at colleges and universities, where they create challenges in enrollment planning for tuition sensitive and prestige seeking institutions. The ability to understand and predict applicant behaviors impacts admission rates, yield rates, and planning for first year student enrollments. Prior research to map applicants’ college search processes and practices created predictive enrollment models (Bassin et al., 1997; DesJardins, 2008; Goenner & Pauls, 2006; Nurnberg, Schapiro, & Zimmerman, 2010), but this research does not address the rising tide of stealth applicants who become visible late in the admissions process (Cifarelli & Cullen, 2004), and who use technology to search in non-traditional sequences (Earlham College, 2008; Hoover, 2008b).

Consumer behavior and enrollment management literature demonstrate that search occurs when consumers face high involvement decisions, even if the search process occurs outside of traditionally observable action such as direct contact with the institution or retailer. This literature describes the methods by which high school students gather and utilize some portion of the vast quantity of information available in college search. Some populations within this group will search more extensively than others. Consumer behavior research demonstrates that socio-economic status impacts both the “sequence of search and level of search” (Capton & Davis,
1984), and underrepresented populations participate in an expanded external information search (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007). Stealth applicants at Southern Methodist University disproportionately represent minority and first generation subgroups within the institution’s first year class.

Consumers also participate in more expansive pre-decision research when considering a service, or when evaluating information that leads to the purchase of a credence good (Litton et al., 1983; Murray, 1991). Higher education has the characteristics of a credence good as a product that cannot be fully evaluated until after purchase and consumption. Extensive search also occurs in decisions involving high risk and brand uncertainty (Jacoby, Chestnut, & Fisher, 1978). The risks involved in college search include financial, performance, social, psychological, and time/convenience risks - five of the six risk factors identified by Murray (1991) - and may also include safety, the sixth factor. Finally, Brucks (1985) asserts that more extensive search correlates to high and low self assessments of product knowledge. In other words, the less faith the consumer has in their existing knowledge, the more extensive the consumer search process, and the more extensive the consumer’s knowledge, the more the consumer will search. This creates a classic bathtub curve relationship between perceived knowledge and search (Brucks, 1985). The stealth applicants interviewed were on both sides of this curve, ranging from first generation, lower income, minority students who reported searching extensively because they had “no idea” how the college search “worked,” to the high achieving grandson of a University of Pennsylvania professor whose extensive search for a school that met all of his preferred attributes was aided by a strong pre-search knowledge base.

This evidence from the consumer behavior and search literature demonstrates that both traditional and stealth applicants gather information through various search methods during the
college selection process. Universities track the search activities of applicants who sign up and become visible as prospective students prior to applying for admission. Enrollment managers look at these engaged, visible prospects and speculate if stealth applicants, whose search behaviors are unseen, participate in college search at all. Enrollment managers may question these applicants’ interest in the institution, while also wondering if the institution is effectively reaching the 30% of applicants at private universities who search anonymously, or if there are other prospective students who are lost during the invisible prospect stage. Understanding how these invisible prospective students search for colleges will assist universities in communicating and marketing to stealth applicants and to others who influence their college decision process.

**Answering the Research Questions**

*How do stealth applicants search for college?*

Stealth applicants use familiar tools and techniques in their search for colleges. Each student articulated a search process that included internal analysis of preferred attributes and external search for schools perceived to match those attributes. In this way, stealth applicants search for colleges in a consumer behavior based framework, in much the same ways that visible prospects or more traditional applicants search. The stealth applicant’s lack of direct contact with the university prior to applying, or more specifically the lack of student-initiated contact with the university, remains the most striking difference in the stealth search process. Stealth applicants may receive information from institutions through the PLAN or PSAT search programs, but they do not return the reply cards in these mailings or go online to complete requests for additional information. Stealth applicants reported attending college fairs at their high schools to pick up university brochures, but did not complete the information cards at those fairs. Some stealth applicants intentionally decided not to sign up for mailing lists; others stated that they simply did
not see the advantage to getting on “all those lists” when the answers to their questions about colleges were readily available online or through direct emails to faculty or current students. Stealth applicants may visit colleges, but often do so through unofficial or untracked visits, expressing a preference for authentic experiences when visiting schools, seeking out friends as sources of the “real” experience of college and delaying more official admissions visits until the spring, after admission to the university.

While stealth applicants become visible at a different point in the admissions funnel than traditional applicants, they still performed search. The difference between stealth and traditional applicants search is the visibility of their actions to universities. Stealth applicants remain invisible prospects who delay the traditional pre-applicant interaction with institutions to a period that follows, instead of precedes, application. This deferral reduces the timeframe during which universities and prospective students interact and build relationships, accelerating the information flow between applicant and institution to a near manic pace. SMU sends emails and letters to admitted students at least four days each week during the spring. The average SMU student receives offers of admission from six institutions; at this rate they have over 20 university contacts each week. A high score on the PSAT may lead to several hundred search mailings and even more emails. These numbers certainly explain why some students report that they are overwhelmed by information and want to avoid receiving more mailings from colleges.

In addition to entering the application stage without previous documented interaction with the institution, stealth applicants do not move sequentially from internal to external search as they progress through the consumer behavior search models. The minimal available internal information about colleges limits their internal search, leading stealth applicants and traditional applicants to spend most of their time in external search. While the students interviewed did not
follow identical patterns of information gathering, many re-sequenced the traditional consumer behavior model in similar ways during external search, and some commonalities emerged when examining the traditional search versus the experience of stealth applicants.

- Traditional applicants use interpersonal, media, external, and retailer search to gather information prior to applying, while stealth applicants postpone retailer and visible media search until after they have applied and, in some instances, received an offer of admission. Stealth applicants may interview after applying, and they will likely visit after admission, not before. Instead of progressing in a sequential manner, they swirl the categories of prospective student/information seeker and applicant.

- Traditional models of consumer behavior demonstrate that consumers utilize media and marketing early in the search process, and reserve interpersonal search for the end of the process (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007). Stealth applicants invert this sequence by deferring university controlled media search, and using interpersonal search throughout the external search process.

- Consistent with prior research in enrollment management (Abrahamson & Farrell, 2009; Lipman Hearne 2009) and adolescent consumer behavior (Martin & Bush, 2000), interpersonal influences such as advice from parents have the greatest impact early and late in the process, at the point of building the list of schools to consider and at the final decision. Parents play a significant role in student’s decisions, thus “it is extremely vital that marketing managers consider building awareness and gaining support of these important individuals” (Martin & Bush, 2000, p. 445).

- Unique to stealth applicants, retailer contact and experiential search occur late in the search process, often after application and admission to a university.
Stealth applicants apply the tools of consumer search, but with increased emphasis on search tools that are not tracked by admissions offices, relying on research methods that do not require responses or direct interaction. Despite research indicating that millennial students seek personal connections in college search (Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2009), the stealth search focuses on information gathering and seeking answers to specific questions, not on gathering more general information or building relationships through a bi-directional conversation between prospective students and institutions.

The interviews in this study demonstrate that stealth applicants engage in a pre-application search process. The stealth applicants who participated in this study can be divided into two groups. The first group was made up of true stealth applicants who did not contact the institution prior to applying. These applicants re-sequence the search process to search anonymously. The second group of applicants was involved in a bi-directional conversation with the institution, but not with the admissions office. This group contacted SMU prior to applying, but in ways that are currently untracked.

The external search of the stealth applicants primarily flowed in one direction – student seeking information – using tools not tracked in most admission processes (Table 5). Admissions offices track campus tours and experiential visits, for example, but this tracking system only works when students register for visits with the admissions office. Many of the students interviewed set up their visits independent of the admissions office through older friends. The majority of the search tools and methods described in stealth applicant interviews were activities not visible to the admissions office.
Table 5

Traceability of the external search categories used by stealth applicants in commercial and college search. Adapted from Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External Search Category</th>
<th>Commercial Search Behavior</th>
<th>College Search Behavior</th>
<th>Tracked by University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retailer Search</td>
<td>Visit or calls to stores</td>
<td>Campus visits</td>
<td>Only if arranged through the admissions office.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Calls to university</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Search</td>
<td>Advertising, web, and other marketing materials</td>
<td>University web page</td>
<td>Only if student completes online registration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>University view book</td>
<td>Only if student returns reply card</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other university publications (such as PSAT search mailings)</td>
<td>Only if student returns reply card</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Search</td>
<td>Advice from friends, relatives, neighbors, coworkers, and/ or other consumers</td>
<td>Advice from friends, relatives, teachers, counselors, and current students</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Search</td>
<td>Contact with independent sources of information</td>
<td>Guidebooks, ranking publications, web sites, social networking, etc.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiential Search</td>
<td>Product samples, service trials</td>
<td>Class visits, overnight visits in residence halls</td>
<td>Only if arranged through the admissions office</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Why are a growing number of applicants entering the application funnel at the point of application, and not participating in the traditional college search process that makes them visible as prospective students to the colleges in their choice set?

Several factors influenced when these students entered the visible stage of the college search. While technology facilitates anonymous search, financial and psychological factors
impact students’ search behaviors. Many students discussed the stress of their senior year with heavy course loads, extensive social and extracurricular commitments, and the perception that college represents a consequence laden decision. Students expressed a fear of failure in the form of making a bad college choice, and how that choice would follow them into their professional lives. While not unique to stealth applicants, some reported that they, or their friends, used procrastination as a coping mechanism in reaction to the stress and fear of leaving high school. The search activities and experiences stealth applicants described did not suggest that procrastination meant they were not actively engaged in a college search process. While some students perceived that they started later than others - most notably a student who did not take his SAT until his senior year - the majority of stealth applicants began to work through the search process by their junior year in high school.

Technology’s entwinement in these students’ everyday lives positioned the Internet to serve as their overarching tool. Online applications embody the de facto choice for applying to college; online research, even using maligned sites such as Wikipedia, epitomize the accepted, immediate, and normal way to research. No recent innovation compares to the impact of the changes caused by technology. An expected part of nearly any process today, the ubiquitous nature of technology proves central to understanding the “why” and “how” of how students search for and apply to colleges.

The psychological factors that support stealth applicant behavior are more complex than the impact of technology. Research defines the type of decision represented in the college search process as high risk (Kiecker, 2004; Murray, 1991). As a result, these decisions lead to intensive searches for information to aid in the decision making process. The choice to search anonymously, however, illustrates the growing distrust of college marketing mentioned in many
student interviews. This distrust leads many stealth applications to seek information outside of university sources. Students perceived official sources as biased, overly positive, unrealistic, and sales-oriented. This generation of savvy consumers understands and questions marketing messages and seeks third party external validation for the marketing messages relentlessly pumped out by colleges and universities. As they receive, but do not respond to, mailings from colleges they seek the truth behind the glossy brochures. Web pages and search mailings quoting students who “love it here!” are crosschecked by contacting current students to discuss their lived experiences. Rankings and interpersonal search are used to validate messages claiming, “you’ll be a success!” Naviance and College Board data help students determine if application solicitations that begin with “picture yourself here” represent a viable option for admission. Claims of “great scholarships” are measured in forum discussions on CollegeConfidential.com. This study does not examine the question of whether the growing focus on prioritizing information from outside of the institution is unique to the stealth applicant. However, the stealth applicant’s absence from direct university engagement could represent an intentional decision to screen out potentially untrustworthy messages while still performing the search necessary for high risk decisions.

Most stealth applicants interviewed did not classify SMU as their first choice institution when they applied for admission. This notable finding suggests a connection between stealth behavior and the applicant’s top choice institution. Several students applied to and were admitted to their first choice institution, only to later decide through continuing search activities that their first choice no longer matched their preferred attributes. Over the course of the senior year, academic interests change, students become more aware of the impact of specific university attributes, and family and financial inputs redefine the college search. One student suggested that
students who do not visibly prospect prior to applying are probably high achieving students who have designated the un-prospected school as a back up or safety school. Other students on the lower end of the academic spectrum behave as stealth applicants at their reach institutions, postponing engagement until they have secured an unexpected offer of admission. Regardless of if these students considered Southern Methodist University as a safety or reach school, their delayed search restricts the time available for direct interaction, resulting in a compressed timeframe for evaluating fit in making the final enrollment decision. Institutions that are able to adequately meet the information needs of stealth applicants may become the stealth applicant’s top choice for enrollment. Prior to applying, stealth applicants were responsive to personal communication from institutions that reflected attention to the student’s specific interests, while impersonality and inconsistency had a negative impact on their perception of an institution. After applying, the university’s responsiveness and consistency to inquiries had a strong impact. Unlike stealth applicants, traditional applicants complete information cards, which provide personal information such as preferred academic major and extracurricular activities prior to applying, allowing the personalization of pre-application outreach. Stealth prospecting limits the university’s ability to determine a prospective student’s preferred attributes and to address those specific interests.

Analysis of Results

The stealth applicants interviewed for this study rarely applied to institutions on pure impulse or without researching the institution. While acknowledging the Common Application makes easier applications to multiple schools, only one stealth applicant spontaneously added a school to his Common Application list simply because the opportunity existed. Although some of the students interviewed did not have extensive information about SMU when they first
learned about the school, all of them researched the university before applying to determine if the institution matched their preferred attributes. In some instances the stealth applicants interviewed applied to schools that did not match their preferences – a school in a cooler climate, for example, when warm weather was a preferred attribute – but students made their application decisions with an awareness that the school was not a fit for their preferences and often applied to schools of this type for reasons related to prestige or safety. In these situations, the school was often a reach school or a safety school; a school they might attend if they were somehow admitted, or a school that they would only attend if they had no other options. Their decision to apply to SMU, as well as to other institutions, was based on traditional behavior found in consumer research, including internal and external search tools (Hoyer & MacInnis, 2007), the reliance on subjective resources (Jacoby, Chestnut, & Fisher, 1978), and a preference for personal information (Murray, 1991).

Stealth applicants often identified SMU and other institutions where they were stealth applicants through interpersonal search and the recommendations of teachers, parents, counselors, and friends. This interpersonal search was followed by independent search, as the students who had access to computers universally reported that they researched universities online before deciding to apply. After reaching an initial assessment of their match with the institution based on this search, their first recorded contact with SMU was the application. This application triggers media search as the stealth applicants are integrated into the university’s advertising and marketing schema. In considering if they would apply to SMU, these stealth applicants followed traditional consumer behavior models (for example, Kotler & Fox, 1995), using both internal and external search techniques to build their college choice set prior to applying.
Figure 3. Admissions funnel with stealth activity. Each progressive step reflects increasing contact between the university and the prospective student.

The timing and sequence of stealth applicants’ search, however, did not exactly follow consumer behavior patterns or the prospect-to-applicant funnel (Litten et al., 1983) on which universities have relied for enrollment planning. Enrollment models track pre-applicant interaction, including how test scores are sent, participation in on campus events, and methods of requesting information (Goenner & Pauls, 2006) to determine applicant’s interest in an institution. These models cannot be applied to applicants who do not follow these traditional methods of search. The admissions funnel, as a sequence of activities, differs for stealth applicants. Considered in stages, traditional college applicants move from suspects, to prospects, to applicants as shown in Figure 3. Stealth applicants move directly from suspects to applicants, bypassing a period of recorded interaction with the institution.

Activities in the prospect stage normally combine interactions which are visible and invisible, such as attending college fairs, receiving and replying to mailings, visiting campus, and
interacting with various college representatives. Each progressive step in the traditional admissions process reflects increasing contact between the student and institution, often offering benefits to students who are more visibly engaged. High school seniors, or admissions suspects, sign up for mailing lists, respond to mailings from the institution, and visit campus. By taking these steps, they become prospective applicants.

**Figure 4:** Traditional and stealth movement from invisible prospect through admission.

Stealth applicants pick and choose among these search activities, and in the ways they search they exclude those actions that would make them visible to the university. In considering the activities associated with these stages, this study suggests that the admissions funnel is oversimplified. A revised roadmap divides the prospect stage into visible and invisible actions (Figure 4). Visible prospects receive more in-depth information from the school, often including invitations to sign up for events such as admissions interviews which may have an impact on
admission decisions (Hoover & Supiana, 2010). These prospects may also receive incentives, such as application fee waivers, to encourage them to move to the next stage, application. Stealth applicants do not receive application incentives offered to known prospects, as they become visible prospects after submitting applications. Increasingly, applicants’ expression of interest in a university impacts admission decisions (de Vise, 2010). The National Association for College Admission Counseling began tracking “demonstrated interest” as a factor in the admissions process in 2003. From 2003 to 2008 the percentage of universities classifying demonstrated interest as a factor of “considerable importance” in admissions decisions increased from 7% to 23% (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2009). The growing focus on demonstrated interest benefits students who have the financial resources to visit campuses before applying and the information resources to understand the importance of initiating contact with universities (Bound et al., 2009). While the enrollment management models used for thirty years illustrate a sequence of interactions that anticipate student responses to increasingly detailed mailings, stealth applicants do not respond to mailings, fill out information cards, or register online. When the students interviewed received a mailing or email that generated their interest, the student did not use the enclosed, postage paid reply card to request more information. Instead, he or she utilized Google, the college’s web page, or other college-related sites to learn more about the institution. Technology facilitates the new ways that students search for schools, allowing prospective students to “just look it up” when they want to learn more about an institution. The availability and breadth of information available online directly reduces a student’s reliance on the institution for information. Technology also allows for ongoing research throughout the college search. This generation of college applicants has been described as “technology omnivores who use gadgets and services to participate voraciously in cyberspace” (Finnegan et al., 2007, p. 20). As
prospects, applicants, and admitted students their first impulse when seeking information was to go online and “look it up.” High school students use technology to play dual roles in the college search process, as both seekers and providers of information. These students utilize technology to gather information in their college search, and they also provide information to other searchers through online conversations, social networking sites, and blog posts. While consumers move sequentially from internal search to external search through the traditional consumer behavior model, the students interviewed for this study swirled through the search process, alternating and overlapping internal and external search and the roles of college search novice and guide.

Four general themes emerged from interviews with stealth applicants related to technology, trust, stress, and the role of parents. First, information gathering for these students occurred primarily online through university and third party web pages and search engines. The college search begins with Google and the College Board; university web pages substitute for brochures and campus visits; online communities provide third party verification of university marketing messages; and online applications simplify the process of applying to multiple institutions. Nearly limitless information is available with a click. All of this information, however, comes at the cost of creating an environment of confusion and mistrust. The students interviewed were highly skeptical and resistant to the mailings they received from institutions, and utilized but questioned the validity of online opinions and ranking systems. Inconsistencies in information and opinions compiled from multiple sources increased students’ stress during the search process. The search process was highly stressful, bordering on fearful, for many students. Finally, while parents often operate as partners in the decision making process, students had mixed responses to parental involvement. Some parents were ill equipped to assist in the search process, and others expressed preferences for attributes that did not match the student’s preferred
attributes. These four themes – technology, trust, stress, and parents - may not be exclusive to stealth applicants, but were consistent among the group of stealth applicants interviewed for this study.

Implications of Technology

Technology greatly expands access to institutions, increasing the pool of possible colleges beyond national brand universities and institutions in the student’s home geographic region to a national pool of over 3,000 colleges and universities (Hoxby, 1997). While geographic location continues have significant impact on student identified attributes (Nurnberg et al., 2010), the ability to research institutions online regardless of their location expands students’ awareness of the broader set of choices. The availability of more choices and more information, however, does not lead to better decisions (Lurie, 2004). Information overload and stress are symptoms of the inability of consumers to fully examine all available choices before making a final decision. Technology also facilitates invisible search by providing access to information without the requirement of registration (Noel-Levitz, 2009c) and by creating avenues through which prospective students can directly contact people who they believe have “real” information: the faculty and current students. The expanding network of third party opinions available through forums, blogs, ranking systems, and social networking allow students to authenticate university claims. Online applications and shared application networks such as the Common Application ease the process of applying to more schools (de Vise, 2010); every four year public university and 95% of private four year universities offer an online application (Finnegan et al., 2007). Finally, college matching tools such as those found on the Princeton Review and College Board web sites allow students to enter a number of variables to discover
which universities match their preferred attributes and academic profile. Every student interviewed used most, if not all, of these technical tools during their college search process.

*Information Overload and Mistrust: Reactions to Media Search*

The students interviewed were notably uninterested in media search through university generated marketing materials and mailing lists. Several students described receiving and quickly culling through their college mail, throwing away correspondence from unfamiliar schools. “Boring” and impersonal brochures, letters and unsolicited materials from schools that did not meet the student’s desired attributes for size, location, or major were also rapidly discarded. Student reactions to these mailings suggest that prospective students seemed, perhaps unrealistically, to expect schools to know if the student was interested in that institution. Receiving mail from “some school I’ve never heard of” or a school “somewhere I’d never go” generated a consistently negative reaction. Over the course of their college search, the influx of mail from schools that these students were not interested in became annoying “bull crap” and a waste of the institution’s money and of the student’s time. Few students were motivated to consider a school because they received a mailing. Students frequently considered college mail as junk, in the same category as a flyer for the local pizza delivery company. Likewise, college email blasts were treated as spam. University managed media was not only an annoyance, messages from universities were not considered trustworthy sources of “the truth” about the university. The mail that stood out to the stealth applicants interviewed was from schools they had already heard of, or that was highly personalized. While traditional consumer search literature reports that media and marketing materials have a strong impact on consumers early in the consumer search process (Berning & Jacoby, 1974), the stealth applicants interviewed were not responsive to media and marketing. Consumer behavior research also indicates that
interpersonal search and recommendations from friends, family, and colleagues have a strong impact late in the decision process (Kohn Berning, & Jacoby, 1974). For stealth applicants, the impact of interpersonal search persisted throughout the search and decision process, with different interpersonal contacts impacting search at different stages. Parents had a strong impact early and late in the search process; counselors and teachers influenced early search decisions on where to apply, and friends effected where to apply and, to a lesser extent, where to attend.

**Stress, Fear, and Search**

With greater choice comes greater pressure to make the “right” selection from a much larger pool of possibilities, increasing the risk of making a “bad” choice in the college search process. The availability of more information “means that they are less likely to process all of the information and therefore less likely to choose the best alternative” (Lurie, 2004, p. 482). The stress caused by information overload may not be unique to stealth applicants, however stress, fear, and the sense of being overwhelmed were regular features as the stealth applicants interviewed retold their college search stories. The cost of a poor decision carries long term consequences. Having more choices does not always equal better decisions; more choices lead to information overload, consumer confusion, a reduced ability to recall specific relevant attribute, lower quality decisions, and dissatisfaction with the final choice (Jacoby, Chestnut, & Silberman, 1977; Lurie, 2004). The students interviewed frequently described feeling “terrified,” “scared,” “stressed,” and “overwhelmed;” for them the college search was a “big crazy deal,” “horrible,” “ridiculous,” and “stupid.”

**The Role of Parents**

The role of parents in the college search process has long been understood as an important influence in college search. Among stealth applicants, the level of parental
involvement, the impact of that involvement, and the timing of parental intervention varied.

“We” and “me” were used interchangeably by some students in describing their college search process. A number of stealth applicants were first generation college students. While these applicants reported having general parental support in the college application process, additional stresses related to the unfamiliarity of current college practices in the United States and to issues related to costs surfaced in most interviews with first generation students. These students received less specific in-home guidance on how to search for universities; yet consistent with consumer behavior research they relied more heavily on interpersonal relationships to help them navigate the college search process (Brucks, 1985). The change in the college admission process from a regional to a national market over the past two decades (Kodrzycki, 1999) resulted in a decreasing ability for parents who attended college to utilize their experiences to help guide their children’s college search process. Even students whose parents attended college in the United States reported that their parents were often at a loss to understand how the complex higher education system operates.

Recommendations

Technology and the nationalization of the higher education marketplace change the ways that students search for college and also how colleges interact with prospective students. This study sought to expand the research in the behavior of stealth applicants, which has been primarily provided by private consulting groups, and to provide a more complete understanding of the stealth applicant search process with the objective of providing relevant guidance for colleges facing a rising number of these applicants each year.

The models developed to assist enrollment managers in predicting enrollment behaviors include using pre-applicant behavior as an indicator of the probability that a specific applicant
will enroll, if admitted. In a competitive higher education marketplace, with rankings driven by admission and yield rates and university budgets dependant on enrollment, universities have a significant motivation to decrease the rate of admission, increase yield rates, and produce a specific size entering class. These goals are challenged by the increasing number of applications submitted by each college applicant and by the hidden search processes of the growing pool of stealth applicants. “Making the class” in this complex environment requires that enrollment managers continuously scan their environment, explore new methods of delivery, and seek understanding of the diversity of the college-going population. Stealth applicants are a large and growing subset of this population, and within the subset of stealth applicants exist other subgroups of students from a variety of backgrounds. The college search behavior of high school seniors may be impacted by many influences, including income, environment, expectations, personality, prior educational experiences, fear, stress, confidence, cultural capital, brand awareness, and desired outcomes from education (Galotti & Mark, 1994; Goenner & Pauls, 2006; Hanson & Litton, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Kotler & Fox, 1995). Stealth application behaviors are related to all of these factors; their search process reflects the complexity of college choice in America.

Complicating the understanding of college search are the new populations of students entering the college search process (Clinedinst & Hawkins, 2009). Many of these students are first-generation citizens, first generation college seekers, or first generation English-language speakers. Changing demographics in the college-aged population will lead to an increase in the number of first generation students considering universities. Non-white high school graduates are projected to become the majority by 2022 (Marks & Diaz, 2009). Universities such as SMU who seek expanded enrollment from these populations must overcome additional barriers in reaching
students and parents in these new populations, which are often more geographically limited in their search, and may not consider private institutions without direct and specific outreach (Nurnberg, Schapiro, & Zimmerman, 2010). These students may also face barriers of language and culture. Significant financial hurdles impact an increasing number of students who hope to pursue higher education (Marks & Diaz, 2009), and socio-economic status continues to have a direct impact on college enrollment (Plank & Jordan, 2001).

While many opportunities for additional research remain, a number of practical recommendations emerge from the data applicable to the site institution as well as to the admissions profession as a whole (Table 6). Given differences in budget, culture, and goals, not all recommendations are appropriate for all institutions. Several recommendations are applicable to both stealth and traditional applicants, notably the need for more personal and personalized information, and the need to refine and present a unique and authentic institutional identity.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The practice of enrollment management has been compared to an art and a science, combining mental modeling and quantitative data to predict enrollment behavior. The unpredictability of the behavior of teenage consumers lends a high level of uncertainty to enrollment management; successful enrollment managers counter uncertainty with creativity by using research to develop new ways to reach prospective students. Differences in institutional goals and institutional types dictate different approaches; while enrollment managers must think beyond their current perspective, they must also consider all recommendations for practice through the framework of their individual institution.
Table 6

Summary of recommendations for practice.

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<th>Major Finding</th>
<th>Summary of Recommendations</th>
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| Applicant interest cannot be measured by the number or timing of recorded, student-initiated contacts with an institution. | Schools should not consider interaction as a significant measure of interest in an institution.  
Schools should expand ways to track pre-applicant interactions online and with faculty.  
Expand and revise spring programming to reflect a diversity of experience levels among participants. |
| The expansion of the college search process creates additional cost and stress, which impacts search processes. | Universities need clear communication about costs, including direct messages about the availability of resources to offset the cost of college search, such as application fee waivers and refunds of CSS:Profile filing fees.  
Offer methods for students who opt-in to university communication to manage the volume and delivery method of university materials. Do not assume that more information is a universal good.  
Funding should be available to pay for students with financial need to visit schools. |
| Technology is the preferred search tool. | Use web traffic counts to evaluate the impact of mailings, not information card reply rates.  
Expand presence on student’s preferred sites, including social networking sites such as Facebook, CollegeConfidential, etc.  
Expand virtual options online, including virtual tours via GoogleEarth, streaming classes, and online ambassadors. |
| Interpersonal search is a strong influencer of schools in the choice set and the final college choice. | Develop outreach programs targeting parents.  
Develop outreach programs targeting high school teachers.  
Develop outreaching programs targeting college counselors. |
| Prospective students are skeptical consumers, and do not trust “official” messaging. | Use current students as ambassadors.  
Develop web pages and materials that have an authentic voice – don’t claim to be all things to all people.  
Develop communication methods that are personal and responsive to individual student needs and interests. |
The overarching lesson for universities remains that the evaluation of an applicant’s interest should not be based on the number of recorded contacts the applicant has with the institution. The data suggest that universities should be discouraged from considering expression of interest as a factor in admission decisions for stealth applicants. Stealth applicants’ pre-application interaction with the school did not accurately reflect the student’s pre-application investment in researching the university. Universities are also cautioned to be cognizant of the social and political influences which impact the traditional interactions associated with expression of interest. The expense of visiting colleges limits some student’s pre-application interactions. Other students are unfamiliar with the competitive admission marketplace and do not know that visiting can strengthen a borderline application. Some applicants are shy; others are fearful or afraid of being perceived as a “pest” by the admissions office. Many factors impact the ifs, whens, and hows of prospective students’ pre-application interactions with the university.

If funding is available, universities might consider providing travel grants for targeted populations, such as first generation students or students who qualify for fee waivers. Parent-to-parent calls and expanded outreach from financial aid would benefit all admitted students, not just stealth applicants. Additionally, universities should recognize that many students postpone search activities until after they have been admitted, and increase opportunities for engagement after admission decisions by offering more programs for admitted students in February, March, and April, including programming on weekends to accommodate senior year schedules. Adapting and expanding spring programs to meet the needs of an audience whose knowledge of the school varies will create additional avenues for stealth applicants to research institutions. For example, offering multiple versions of the campus tours during spring programs allows students to self-select tours that match their institutional knowledge and interests. Students who have not
previously visited campus would attend a general campus tour, with more specific tours offered relating to specific interest areas. While these tours would be for students who have already participated in the general tour, stealth applicants and other first time visitors who participated in an online version of a campus tour might prefer these more personalized and specialized programs. A wellness tour, for example, would feature recreational facilities, the health center, behind-the-scenes in a “green” dining hall, and a tour through the wellness residence hall, while a student life tour would focus on the student activity center, clubs and organizations, and community service options. A library tour would highlight the nine libraries on campus, while a student services tour includes interaction in the tutoring center and advising offices. Depending on the area surrounding campus, the university might also offer an off-campus tour highlighting the neighborhoods, shops, and restaurants around campus.

Stealth applicants learn about institutions in a variety of ways, some of which are similar to traditional applicants. Institutions providing alternate ways to introduce prospective students to the university as a prospective match will increase the probability of attracting invisible prospects. Stronger relationships between the admissions office, alumni office, and current parent groups expand the ways that alumni, current students, and current parents influence the interpersonal search process. Working closely together, admissions and alumni offices are able to identify prospective students whose parents or siblings attend the institution and develop outreach programs to these target legacies and siblings. This serves admissions while also solidifying relationships with alumni. Several stealth applicants interviewed initially applied to a school because of a sibling or parent’s relationship with that school; strengthening these connections is possible using existing data and at minimal cost. Likewise, high school teachers and counselors make excellent brand ambassadors for their alma mater. Again working with
alumni offices to identify alumni who are current high school teachers, admissions outreach to these alumni would include lesson support, guest speakers, or even university-specific classroom decorations. Many high schools have “college shirt day;” every alumni teacher should receive a university logoed polo to wear on those days.

Stealth applicants may be at an information disadvantage when they apply, having had exposure only to the information they found online and through interpersonal relationships. While the university may perceive that stealth applicants simply need to be “caught up” in the institution’s predefined mailing sequence, the stealth applicants interviewed were unresponsive to static messages and highly responsive to more personal outreach. Universities should develop a mechanism to encourage rapid and personal response to stealth applications as they arrive, for example, instead of blindly mailing brochures to these applicants, a call from an admissions counselor to determine what type of information they would like to receive highlights a personal outreach effort. Allowing applicants to specify the information most important to them, and allowing them to prioritize how they want to receive information – via mail, email, text messages, phone calls, or a combination of methods – responds to prospective students’ desire for personalization and control. Giving control of the communication process to prospective students represents a significant departure from the historical ways that institutions interact with prospects (LeFauve, 2001). However, control of the volume, type, and delivery method of information received from colleges represents a central concern for stealth applicants. Universities willing to adopt delivery methods preferred by these students may be rewarded. Continued growth in the stealth applicant population may also lead to delays in final enrollment decisions, increasing the number of late-April deposits and requests for deposit deferrals, all of which will require increased attention and management from admissions officers.
Stealth applicants prioritize online search tools and third party publications above other search mechanisms. Universities cannot do enough or spend enough on technology to support the modern search process through participation in third party chat room discussions and regular monitoring of online discussions about the university. While the university cannot censor online conversations on third party sites, university brand ambassadors can participate in these conversations. Enlisting students, current parents, and alumni as online brand ambassadors requires a willingness to relinquish total control over the university’s message. University fears about releasing this control demonstrate that issues related to trust are relevant to universities as well as to prospective students.

Many third party pages, such as Princeton Review and College Board solicit information from schools, but other sites do not. Regular monitoring of these sites to validate information about the university ensures that as stealth applicants search for colleges they have access to current and correct information. Refreshing the university’s online presence each day will ensure accurate information and will also help elevate the university’s web presence in most search engines. New photos, blog posts, videos, and Twitter need to be incorporated into the university’s outreach strategy. Investments in technology should not simply replicate existing print publications in an electronic form. Too many universities fall into the easy snare of creating an e-card to match the postcard also sent via traditional mail. Many students reported being overwhelmed and annoyed by the volume of email they received, and specifically asked why schools do everything twice (once via email and once via traditional media), when students are already overloaded with information. Investing in new technology goes beyond creating an online version of print publications. Where funding exists, schools benefit from adopting some of the technological innovations used on commercial sites. American Airlines, for example, has a
very small pop-up with a photo of a representative and a “click here to talk” button that appears after users spend a certain amount of time on the web page. An equivalent innovation for an admissions web page would feature a student photo with a statement encouraging web page visitors to click if they would like to chat with this current student via instant messenger or text messaging.

Through an expanded web page, a university may provide more interactive campus maps and tours, more video content including classroom videos, and interactive features such as a “design your dorm room” page that allows students to experiment with virtually “lofting” beds and rearranging furniture. Facebook advertising targeting specific high schools and geographic regions provides universities with entry into a student-centered social networking space. Creating an admissions counselor position that initiates, tracks, and comments on chat rooms and forums and who works to stay abreast of new developments in student search and technology, continuously monitoring technological developments and recent innovations, assists the university’s efforts to remain current.

Finally, search mailings have little to no impact on stealth applicants. As the proportion of stealth applicants in the admissions pool continues to increase, the value of search mailings decreases. The cost of search and low average response rates suggest that many universities may be better served by reducing their search mailing budget to instead create different ways to reach out to prospective students identified through PLAN and PSAT search services, or to invest in more personalized search mailings that include student-specific details. Students were more responsive to mailings that incorporated their name or hometown; similarly, personalized search mailings featuring mascots associated with the students’ high school would encourage the student to trade in their “Plano Wildcats” jersey for the “SMU Mustangs.” Instead of judging the
success of these outreaches based on information card response rates, universities should monitor
metrics for web traffic as an indication of mailing effectiveness. While these metrics will not
provide information on individual students, spikes in web traffic may be traced to specific
outreach programs. Web metrics also track where visitors enter a web site and where they go
after they leave, providing valuable information on how stealth applicants find the institution,
and the other institutions they are considering.

Several of these recommendations are time intensive and require human and financial
resources. As universities examine the effectiveness of expensive mass marketing programs they
may discover that a reallocation of resources from mass mailing programs to fund more
personalization offsets the cost of these personal outreaches. Many universities continued to
increase their budget for print publications over the past twenty years, despite the emergence of
the web. The prevalence of the web in search reduces the need for print publications; a reduction
in print and mailing costs would also reallocate funds to develop more personalized and
responsive outreach programs.

Recommendations for SMU

SMU, like many private tuition driven institutions, has a vested interest in improving the
progression of potential students through the prospect and admissions stages to become enrolled
students. The university has invested in technology, search, consulting, and marketing materials
to expand the pool of prospective students and applicants, growing the size of the applicant pool
from 6,000 to over 9,000 applicants in the past decade. As the number of high school seniors
begins to decline (Apodeca, 2009; Marks & Diaz, 2009; WISCHE, 2009), institutions like SMU
will need to refine their strategic enrollment plan to maintain the gains achieved in admission
rates and student quality.
To prepare for the next decade of success, SMU should conduct an internal audit of all recruiting outreach, including the outreach of its colleges, to better understand the scope and investment in traditional publications and new media, including search mailings, brochures, online video, interactive chats, downloadable campus tours, and web page development and design. This audit should engage admissions stakeholders across campus. While the school-based recruiting system meets the needs of prospective students interested in more specific academic information and contact with the academic disciplines, the information flow between the schools and central admissions should be enriched to avoid the duplication of efforts. This audit and the resulting interactions between these stakeholders would benefit the recruiting and admission of all applicants, not just stealth applicants.

Focus groups with current students would help SMU determine if the primary marketing publications – the view book, for example, which has not had a significant redesign in a decade – are still effective. Purposefully designed focus groups featuring students based on their search method would review marketing materials and the SMU web presence using tools such as Zaltman’s Metaphor Elicitation Technique (Zaltman & Coulter, 1997) to understand the “mental models that drive consumer thinking and behavior” (p. 47). Findings from these groups provide guidance for mass marketing, technology, and general outreach to prospective students.

SMU utilizes student ambassadors for tours and outreach programs, including calling admitted students to congratulate them and to encourage them to deposit. SMU should develop a core of online ambassadors who contribute to online discussions on third party web pages, and who reach out to prospective students via Facebook. Inexpensive advertising on Facebook targeting students in specific geographic regions with advertisements featuring a current SMU
An urgent need for SMU to invest time and resources in new media exists. Many institutions face this, need as “the ease with which information is made available [online] is moving faster than changes in the way decisions are made” (LeFauve, 2001, p. 3). SMU and many peer institutions have web pages that lack some features that might engage stealth applicants, such as iPhone tours, increased video content, and free downloadable accessory content such as SMU ringtones and screensavers. Downloadable iPhone tours are especially important given the stealth applicant’s propensity to visit campus without registering for an official university tour. Prospective students would be asked to register to receive these downloads, but registration would not be mandatory, or would have an “opt-out” option for stealth applicants who do not want to receive emails.

The recruitment of performing arts majors represents an area where SMU has been successful that could be better managed and replicated in other academic divisions. The unique nature of performance programs for conservatory-level student artists presents challenges and opportunities for the centralization of recruiting and marketing. At SMU the faculty in the performing arts areas significantly impact application and enrollment decisions. Performing arts majors, especially in music, search for colleges based on the individual faculty member in their chosen instrument. SMU would benefit from better tracking and coordination of faculty involvement in the admissions process. Each music major interviewed revealed extensive interaction with the faculty member in their instrument prior to applying to SMU, yet these students were not coded as prospective students in the university’s data management system. They appear as stealth applicants in the data, but are not true stealth applicants.
The Meadows School at SMU sets a high bar for pre-application interaction between faculty and students. While music majors are primarily focused on faculty in their initial college search, several also mentioned that the overall university environment becomes a factor later in the decision process. The interactions between musical performance faculty and prospective students are tracked in the Meadows School; these interactions and student contact information should also be recorded in the central admissions office to ensure that prospective music majors also receive general university information and invitations to events. Likewise, the university should consider expanding faculty involvement beyond the performing arts, and by developing methods for faculty to submit contact information for prospective students for admissions office follow up. The creation of an online referral form allows members of the SMU community to submit information on prospective students, with an SMU Ambassador personally calling each of these prospective students and highlighting their SMU connection in the initial contact.

Recommendations for Future Research

As stealth applicants represent a growing subset of the national pool of prospective students, understanding stealth behavior becomes increasingly important for enrollment management. Stealth applicants represent the leading edge of change in how students search for colleges, employing new technology and eschewing direct contact with institutions until they have formed their college choice set. Universities seeking inclusion in these choice sets benefit from a better understanding of the stealth applicant process, including examining outcomes for this group of applicants that extend beyond the enrollment decision.

The retention and academic performance of former stealth applicants requires additional study. Student commitment and conscientiousness often predict academic success (Strauss and Volkwein, 2004; Weiss, 1999); while the stealth applicants interviewed did not appear to have
behaved impulsively in the admission process, whimsical or impulsive applicant behavior may reflect lower levels of commitment and conscientiousness which in turn can predict lower academic performance and retention. Research on academic performance shows that late registrants may be more prone to attrition and more likely to fail. Late entrants into the admissions process may also be more prone to attrition, especially if a function of the admissions cycle is increasing students’ understanding of a school. Research in corporate culture suggests that finding a “person-culture” fit improves “commitment, satisfaction, and performance” (O’Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991, p. 493). Stealth applicants may be at a higher risk of making a bad match by omitting the exploratory stages where fit can be analyzed and understood. Research demonstrates a direct relationship between the date of registration and the grades earned in specific courses (Ford, Stahl, Walker, and Ford, 2008). Repurposing this study to compare application dates and overall academic performance and retention provides insight into the longer term outcomes experienced by stealth applicants. Existing studies of student behavior link early action with success in the classroom (Ford et al., 2008). If stealths’ behavior as students mirrors their behavior as applicants, they may be at greater academic risk and more prone to attrition. Several stealth applicants expressed reservations about their decision to attend SMU. While these expressions may be a normal stage in the student development process, stealth applicant’s abbreviated interactions with the institution prior to enrolling reduced the timeframe for their assessment of institutional culture and person-culture fit. Entering the admissions process earlier indicates conscientious engagement in the admission and selection process, reflecting “the degree to which a student develops ties . . . [which] also impacts attrition” (Stratton et al., 2007). The academic performance of stealth applications could be related to fit
issues, or tied to personal characteristics (procrastination, for example) which also predict attrition and poor performance.

Future researchers should employ a multi-location study to compare the experiences of students at other schools, including those who may have considered but not attended SMU. Focusing on the period between admission and enrollment allows a more complete understanding of the stealth enrollment decision process. Future research and interviews with stealth applicants who did not enroll at the study institution would position the data in a broader frame, encompassing the larger college search process. Were stealth applicants who did not enroll at SMU engaged in visible prospect activities, such as campus visits and programs, before making their enrollment decision? Did these students apply as stealth applicants at the universities where they matriculated? Were these non-matriculated stealth applicants academically and demographically representative of the larger applicant pool? Understanding the stealth applicants who did not matriculate at SMU provides a complete overview of this cohort of students. As stealth applicants become an increasingly large percentage of the applicant pool, enrollment managers need to seek measures that can predict the yield of stealth applicants. In successful enrollment management, the enrollment decisions of thirty percent of the applicant pool cannot be left to chance.

Research into parental attitudes and processes is also warranted as students’ information needs and preferences may not be the same as parents’ preferences. Parental preferences for the types of information and the method of information delivery may differ from student preferences, illustrating the need for dual information tracks targeting these two interrelated audiences. Parents may be more responsive to traditional media and mailings, for example. Several stealth applicants applied to SMU in response to parental recommendations, and several
attended SMU because of their parents. As past research (Abrahamson & Farrell, 2009) has shown and this study confirmed, parents play a strong role in building students’ lists of possible colleges and in making the final enrollment decision. As actors and influencers at these two key points in search, additional research related to parents’ internal search and the impact they have on application and enrollment decisions would be valuable.

The undercurrent of mistrust in the search process warrants specific research. Prior research in adolescent’s reaction to commercial advertising demonstrated that skepticism toward advertising was a behavior learned from parents and peers (Mangleburg & Birstol, 1998). Recent research from The Nielsen Company reports “personal recommendations and consumer opinions online are the most trusted forms of advertising” (2010, p. 1). Psychology based studies on trust and social media demonstrate that creating trust in online communication requires timely responsiveness (Mashable, 2010). Research specific to understanding parent and student attitudes toward advertising and marketing from universities might demonstrate if stealth activity represented an intentional search strategy designed to screen out untrustworthy messages.

Quantitative research to develop a demographic profile of stealth applicants would also prove useful to enrollment management. The demographic information compiled in chapter three of this study compares the study participants and the first year class. While this sample of stealth applicants was a purposeful, not representative sample, the data provided demonstrate that stealth applicants at SMU, including the subset of students interviewed, are more likely to be African-American out-of-state applicants who attended a public high school and have financial need. These factors may have direct impact on the applicant’s search process. Expanded quantitative research, including a review of the demographic, economic, and social background of stealth applicants helps identify patterns of success in converting stealth applicants to enrolled students.
Goenner and Pauls’ research (2006), which models enrollment behavior starting with visible prospects to identify factors that can predict enrollment and, more successfully, predict non-enrollment, could be turned to review stealth decisions retrospectively. Several factors examined by Goenner and Pauls, such as how and when test scores are sent and the impact of post-admission visits, may be transferable to research about stealth applicants. Finally, a quantitative review of admission and yield rates, test scores, grade point averages, retention, and graduation rates would provide valuable insights into the profile of stealth applicants. For example, the data provided in chapter three demonstrate that stealth applicants at SMU yield at a lower rate than traditional applicant. Quantitative research considers yield rates as an outcome of stealth applicant behavior, or in relation to other behaviors – such as applying in regular action as opposed to early action – and background features such as academic profile, financial need, geographic origin, or ethnicity.

Conclusion

The students interviewed in this study did not know that they were stealth applicants, or that their search methods might have been perceived as unusual by the colleges to which they applied. They were equally unaware that the way they moved through the college search process might have any impact on the admissions process itself. While measures of applicant interest are more strongly associated with admission at competitive institutions, any college or university attempting to manage admission metrics engages in modeling to try to predict applicant behavior. In the past these predictive models have included demographics and behavior. Stealth applicants challenge the effectiveness of behavioral modeling.

Stealth applicants are not inattentive to the admission process, and are not normally applying spontaneously simply because the evolution of programs such as the Common
Application that expand the ease of applying to multiple universities. These applicants perform extensive college search, but do so in ways that are not visible to colleges. Technology plays a significant role in their search process, enabling anonymous search while simultaneously complicating search with the inclusion of many internal and external sources of information.

This study examined the experiences of stealth applicants as they developed their college choice set, applied to colleges, gathered information through interpersonal and experiential search, behaving as consumers in the higher education market. Even nine months after making their college decisions, these students recalled the emotional stress of the college search and decision process, and spoke with fear and awe of the importance of the college decision on future success. The power of the college decision creates the need for an extensive search process. Stealth applicants are motivated to perform extensive college search by the perception of the high risks associated with making the “wrong” college choice. The structure of their search, especially where their processes differed from that of traditional applicants, often reflected the impact of resources and technology. The arms race in admission and the high stress college admissions marketplace does not only impact enrollment managers and universities; college applicants also operate in a high stress admissions marketplace, where they participate in an arms race to secure the best opportunities for their future success and happiness. Colleges and students face a tumultuous college search process, with outcomes that are closely related to prestige and fiscal success. Colleges and a growing number of students engage consultants to help them navigate the increasingly complex process of meeting their admission goals. In this high stakes world, the broader purpose of higher education becomes hidden behind the consumer behaviors of colleges and prospective students.
REFERENCES


Southern Methodist University. (2000). Minutes of the faculty senate meeting (November 1, 2000). Retrieved online September 6, 2009 from smu.edu/facultysenate/_site_archive/minutes/faculty_senate_minutes_2000-2001/minutes_senate_mtg_1_November_2000.htm


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# APPENDIX A

## Research Participants

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<th>Name</th>
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*Codes taken from institutional database as reported on the SMU application for admission; AMIND = Native American.
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APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introductory Remarks

Thank you so much for coming in to talk with me today. I am enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Alabama, and am conducting interviews as a part of my dissertation, which studies how students look for colleges, make decisions about where they will apply, and where they will attend.

Icebreakers

Where are you from? What high school did you attend? Is that a private school, or a public school? Did most students from your high school go to a four-year university after graduating? Did you take the SAT, the ACT, or both exams? Are you the oldest/youngest/middle/only child? Are you the first child in your family to enter college?

The College Search

1. Think back to your junior or senior year in high school. Can you recreate a “typical” conversation you might have had with your parents (friends, teachers) about college?

2. Describe the ways that you think the typical prospective student gathers information on colleges.

3. When you started thinking about where you should go to college, what types of things were you looking for in a college? How did you identify schools that had the things you were looking for?

4. How did you become aware of the schools that were on your initial list for consideration?
   a. What made you think these schools might be right for you?
5. What did you do to learn more about the colleges on your list BEFORE you applied for admission?

6. What are the best sources for information about colleges?

7. What kinds of contacts did you have with the university before applying?
   a. What was your first contact with XYZ University? Did you contact them, or did they contact you?
   b. Did you visit any of the schools you mentioned before applying? (which ones?)
   c. What types of visits/programs did you attend?
   d. Where these ‘official’ university programs scheduled for groups of prospective students?
   e. How did you schedule your visit?
   f. Why did you visit the school?
   g. What impacted your decision to visit or not visit a campus?

8. Tell me more about the online resources you used when you were looking for a college.

9. Describe the kinds of information you received BEFORE you applied to schools.
   a. How did this information impact your decision to consider the school? To apply?
   b. How did this information compare with / enhance what you’d found on the web?
   c. What kinds of things would you have liked to know more about before applying to schools?

10. What activities did you undertake to learn more about schools AFTER you applied for admission?
    a. What kinds of information were you seeking?
b. How did this differ from the information you wanted prior to applying?

11. What did you do to learn more about schools after you were admitted?
   a. What information did you need to make a decision on where to attend?
   b. How did this differ from the information you wanted after you had applied?

12. Many prospective students contact schools before they apply to get more information. Why might students decide not to visit campus, register online for information, etc., before applying?

13. Describe for me how you would make a decision if you had to buy a very expensive item, like a car. Walk me through your process from the point that you realize that you need a car.

Questions added after initial interviews:

14. What type of information did you find most trustworthy when you were trying to learn more about universities?
   a. Where did you find this information?
   b. What are the most trustworthy sources of information?
   c. What makes these people/places trustworthy?

15. Who can you trust to guide you through the college search and decision process?
   a. How was this person helpful to you?
   b. Was there anyone who could not be trusted to help you? Why?