WHAT ATTRACTS STUDENTS TO A SMALL, PRIVATE UNIVERSITY?

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ABSTRACT

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Few research studies have examined reasons why students choose to attend small, private universities, and even fewer have captured the selection criteria of the students in a qualitative manner (Carr, 2012; Pampaloni, 2010). This study sought to identify reasons why students chose a small, private university, particularly students who chose not to participate in intercollegiate athletes or performing arts.

Using a qualitative framework, the researcher conducted 26 semi-structured, in-person student interviews. The findings of this study contribute to the scholarly literature on the topic of enrollment management at private universities in terms of insight and strategies that can increase university enrollment. The researcher sought to explore students’ opinions about factors that were important to them in selecting their institution of choice.

Ten primary themes emerged from the interviews: (1) Aspects of affordability and scholarships were important for attending Surreal University (SU). (2) The ability to participate not only in athletics or performing arts programs but also in other activities was significant to attend SU. (3) Academic programs were cited by 20 of the 26 students as very important in their selection process. (4) Students cited the importance of internships that are built into the curriculum at SU. (5) Proximity to the university was important to students. (6) All but 2 of the 26 students interviewed began their college search via the university’s website. (7) Students indicated that the university’s offering of dual enrollment programs at local high schools was important. (8) Students cited local proximity to SU as a reason for their choice primarily because
of name recognition and familiarity. (9) Students noted that campus visits contributed to their choosing SU. (10) Finally, students were excited to be able to take part in the study-abroad opportunity or in the university’s honor programs.

Given the current outlook for private higher educational institutions in terms of projected decreases in college-age students during the next decade, understanding why students select one institution over another is a valuable tool (a) for determining how and where to invest scarce resources and (b) staying on top of current trends related to the college selection process. Specifically focused on small private institutions that have low to moderately low endowment levels and are very tuition driven in terms of how the institution meets its operational budget goals. This study will enhance previous models for enrollment leaders regarding the importance of creating an enrollment plan based on research of the current student body.

*Keywords: enrollment; small, private institutions; students’ college selection process*
This work is dedicated to my beautiful wife, Dr. Lillian B. Schumacher, for always believing in me and continuing to push me to achieve more than I believed that I could. It truly is because of you that I now stand at the precipice of this ultimate academic achievement. I am who I am because of you, and I will forever be grateful to you. Your will to succeed in everything has provided me with the confidence and desire to achieve all that I could possibly dream of and hope for. I love you more than you will ever know!

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As the world moves deeper into the 21st century, many small, private colleges and universities have struggled to meet their enrollment goals. This situation impacts the ability of institutions to live out their missions and visions and, in some cases, maintain their future viability (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Coomes & Russo, 2000). In fact, most institutions today have been faced with more intense competition than ever before as a result of the aggressive nature of the for-profit-institution market as well as the cost-effective strategies implemented by many community colleges (Shaw, 2011). Because these economic forces and intense competition have negatively influenced enrollment goals of more traditional four-year institutions, enrollment managers have been forced to implement reactive measures by developing more efficient enrollment strategies that combat and overcome this competition.

In a recent study conducted by Hoover (2006), enrollment managers across the country were asked to reveal their top recruitment challenges. Regardless of institution type, enrollment managers identified the following issues as their top concerns: (1) managing tuition discounts; (2) increasing academic profiles (e.g., students’ high school GPA, standardized test scores, etc.); and (3) meeting enrollment goals, including both recruitment and retention goals. According to Hoover, all of these concerns have arisen due to more intense competition in the higher education marketplace.

In addition to the studies mentioned above, other studies have been conducted that focus on the persistence and retention rates of students. The impetus for these additional studies largely has been founded on the early work of Summerskill (1962), Astin (1975), and Tinto (1975). Summerskill (1962) focused on student motivation and its connection to attrition rates, and he cited the need for further research to be conducted regarding the levels of student motivation and
its connection to attrition. In 1975, both Astin and Tinto examined models that focused on persistence rates, but Astin (1975) examined persistence rates in conjunction with students’ receipt of grants and loans and how these financial components influenced persistence rates. Tinto (1975) examined persistence rates from a very different perspective. Specifically, he focused on the attributes that students bring with them to college from their home life. These studies eventually resulted in more complex models designed to measure student persistence rates.

Enrollment management encompasses not only persistence rates but also the college selection process. Researchers have focused on the selection process that students use when deciding which college to attend (Coomes, 2000; Mathes & Gurney, 1985; Pampaloni, 2010). Coomes focused his studies on the use of federal student aid. He investigated the ways in which student aid influences the college selection process and provided recommendations about how policies at each institution should inform the policies that are put in place by the state budgeting process. He further noted that each institution should be accountable for keeping tuition and fees as affordable as possible. Mathes and Gurney (1985) completed a study that focused on college student athletes and their college selection process. Mathes and Gurney (1985) also explored motivational differences in the college selection process between males and females and concluded that females selected their college of choice based primarily on the beauty of the campus environment and secondarily on the athletic program; however, males selected their college of choice based primarily on their specific sport and the academic support services offered by that institution. Pampaloni (2010) completed a study that evaluated organizational image at a number of institutions and its impact on the college selection process. Pampaloni (2010) realized that organizational image was not as important as she initially believed in the
college selection process. Instead, she found that marketing inclusive information around a host of topics to be the most important factor in the college selection process (Pampaloni, 2010). However, since Pampaloni’s study, limited research has been conducted on (a) whether certain promotional methods are more effective than others in predicting college enrollment and (b) whether marketing has any significance in terms of students’ college selection process.

The focus of this study was on recruitment activities at Surreal University (SU) (pseudonym) and, in particular, on a segment of the student population that has been difficult to attract--namely, students who choose to attend small, private institutions without the incentive of an academic scholarship, a performing arts scholarship, or an athletic scholarship. In the fall of 2013, SU, a private, four-year institution with an enrollment of approximately 4,500 students, achieved a record enrollment year. The undergraduate full-time freshman class consisted of 465 students, the largest in the history of the university. A total of 131 of those full-time freshmen did not participate in any athletic programs or performing arts programs on campus. In the fall of 2012, SU enrolled 425 students, of which only 111 were non-athletes or non-performing arts students. At SU, athletes and performing arts students all receive some form of scholarship for being a member of these programs. It was for this reason, lower scholarship amounts which in turn, lower the overall institutional discount rates that this research was important for SU and many small private universities (Institutional Discount Rate – A term used to describe the amount of institutional financial aid used to recruit or retain students at an institution of higher education) (Noel-Levitz, 2011). The researcher sought to explore the reasons why these particular 131 students chose to attend Surreal University in the fall of 2013. As of 2014, the majority of these 131 students still received some type of academic scholarship from the university but at a much smaller investment than those students participating in athletics or
performing arts. Most of these 131 students received an academic scholarship, which amounts to about a 46% discount rate. Some of the student athletes are provided with scholarships equal to 100% of their tuition, not including any room and board charges, but on average as a whole, most student athletes are provided with scholarships equal to about 75% of their tuition costs. For performing arts students, the discount rate for all of these students is up to approximately 60%.

The researcher conducted a thorough qualitative analysis based on interviews with 26 SU students in an effort to better understand why they chose SU and how the institution could continue to increase enrollment among this student population while also maintaining successful retention rates among this and other student populations.

**Statement of the Problem**

As colleges and universities struggle to achieve balanced budgets, small, private institutions as well as larger public institutions have been forced to make financial cuts in terms of faculty positions, staff positions, and operational expenses in order to meet their budgetary requirements. Recent examples include faculty and staff layoffs at Ashland University (Woodhouse, 2015), (a four-year, private institution), Bowling Green State University (BGSU), (Reiter, 2013), (a public, research institution), and Terra Community College (a comprehensive community college), (Carson, 2015)--all institutions in Ohio where this downsizing has occurred during the last two years. For this reason in particular, research studies have begun pointing to the importance of understanding why students choose to attend certain universities out of a multitude of options (Coomes, 2000). In fact, enrollment has, for better or worse, become one of the most important (if not the most important) economic driver for universities in determining
whether budgets will be increased, whether merit raises will be awarded, and whether vacated positions will be filled.

Since 2008, the United States has struggled through the “Great Recession” and taken measures to recover economically (Zumeta & Kinne, 2010). Although the United States’ economy has improved since 2008, nearly all small, private universities in this country have felt the impact. According to Chabotar (2010), tuition, room and board, and fees account for roughly 80-90% of the revenue at small, private universities, and this revenue directly impacts operational budgets at these institutions. Between 2008 and 2009, many small, private institutions experienced declining enrollments, and, as a result, their discount rates increased (Chabotar, 2010). This essentially is a double jeopardy situation for institutions. Discount rates typically appear in the format of scholarships and institutional grants that are applied to students’ accounts along with any state and federal aid. These discounts are applied to reduce the amount students and their families are required to pay to universities. As an institution’s discount rate increases by just one percentage point, revenues could decrease by approximately as much as $350,000, depending on the overall discount rate at the specific institution. Institutional discount rate has been defined as the amount of institutional financial aid used to recruit or retain students subtracted from the cost of tuition at an institution of higher education (Noel-Levitz, 2011). For example, if tuition is $10,000 and the institutional discount is $4,000 provided in the form of an academic scholarship (and the student received no other aid from the institution), the discount rate would be 40%. Enrollment managers must perform these calculations with the entire student population. After breaking down the tuition costs and calculating the invested institutional aid, enrollment managers are able to determine the institutional discount rate.
The bottom line is that if institutions continue to increase their discount rates to attract more students while at the same time continue to experience increased competition in getting students to enroll, it does not take long for these tuition-driven institutions to experience dire financial turmoil and tough decisions regarding their short-term and long-term sustainability. A recent example occurred in April of 2014. Urbana University had experienced steady declines in enrollment and quickly incurred substantial debts. The institution was planning to close its doors until Franklin University, in Columbus, Ohio, purchased the institution (Binkley, 2014). Hopefully, the acquisition will prove to be successful, but it is too early to tell at this point. Many other institutions across the country have experienced the same hardship as Urbana. The institutions include not only small, private institutions but also for-profit institutions as well as large research institutions. Another recent example is Thunderbird School of Global Management. Known for decades as one of the top global MBA schools in the world, it was recently acquired by Arizona State University (ASU). Publicized as an “alliance” between the two institutions, the truth was that Thunderbird experienced financial crisis and would have been forced to cease operations had ASU not intervened (Korn, 2014).

In addition to struggling with declining enrollments and increasing discount rates, small, private institutions also have experienced a decrease in endowments. Endowments are dollars that are set aside in interest-bearing accounts. These accounts help sustain institutions in difficult economic times and ensure the long-term viability of these institutions. As the economy continued to free fall in 2008 and into 2009, many universities experienced a substantial decrease in their endowments (in some cases as much as 25-30%), causing many institutions to focus even more on enrollment driven initiatives (Chabotar, 2010). These deficits impact universities in potentially all areas of revenue generation, resulting in the need for many presidents and college
administrators to strategize and implement methods that ensure the sustainability of their respective institutions. Many college presidents have elected to reduce operating budgets and eliminate staff positions. In fact, the positions of some faculty members have been eliminated because of lower enrollments, increased discount rates, and reductions in endowments. According to Chabotar (2010), never in the history of higher education has there been an economic struggle this severe.

Furthermore, according to Beaver (2009), the competition among higher education institutions is likely to become more intense, particularly because of (a) the changing nature of the higher education industry and (b) the influx of for-profit institutions and their success during the past two decades. In addition, competition among colleges has increased as a result of continued emphasis on return on investment for university students attaining four-year degrees (Beaver, 2009). In 2009, enrollment in for-profit institutions accounted for up to 9% of the total undergraduate enrollment, more than a 6% increase since 2000 (Beaver, 2009). Revenues at for-profit institutions also have climbed from $10 billion in 2000 to more than $30 billion in 2009 (Beaver, 2009). These statistics have added yet another competitive force challenging four-year private and public institutions, and they have provided an even greater impetus for their leaders to ensure both short-term and long-term viability. Investigating the college selection process and gaining a more focused understanding of how and why students select certain institutions are two ways of combating this marketplace dynamic.

Another trend in the higher education industry is the shifting state-wide demographics as well as the shifting demographics of the country as a whole. Figure 1 indicates a predicted decline in high school graduates in the state of Ohio during next eight years. Figure 2 illustrates a decline in certain parts of the country through the year 2022. These statistics are supported by
Noel-Levitz (2013), an organization focused specifically on enrollment management and college student satisfaction. Noel-Levitz has confirmed that nationwide statistics among this same student population appear to be very similar to the state of Ohio.

*Figure 1.* Projected number of high school graduates in Ohio from 2013 to 2019.
This present research study sought to identify and explain reasons why students who do not participate in intercollegiate athletes or participate in performing arts programs chose to attend Surreal University. The researcher selected this population of students because it potentially enables a more complete understanding of why such students select Surreal University. Secondly, the researcher attempted to determine whether a connection existed between the discounted tuition of students who participated in intercollegiate athletics or performing arts programs and their decision to attend Surreal University. Third, attracting students who do not participate in intercollegiate athletics or performing arts programs should provide insight into ways in which the overall numbers of students in the incoming class can be increased. Recruitment at Surreal University in intercollegiate athletics programs and performing arts programs has met or exceeded enrollment goals during the past several years. The researcher
sought information about the reasons why student athletes, performing artists, and the general population of students chose to attend SU so that these reasons might be used to drive future recruitment efforts.

Much of the existing literature on the topic of student recruitment in higher education has been quantitative research, relying on surveying student populations. Most often, studies conducted on the college selection process by college-age students have explored how to market to student athletes (e.g., Braddock & Lv, 2006) and/or evaluated the selection processes employed by community college students (Braddock & Lv, 2006; Vander Schee et al., 2009). Very little quantitative research has been conducted on small, private institutions, and even less qualitative research has been conducted on these types of institutions. While most of the research conducted on small, private institutions has employed the use of questionnaires, this SU narrative study employed personal interviews to gain a better understanding of the college decision-making process used by SU freshman. Some researchers have explored marketing strategies and practices of institutions and suggested that it is virtually impossible to dedicate sufficient resources to this effort (Vander Schee, 2009). The marketing focus of these studies has been placed either on (1) institutions and what they can offer the families of prospective students or (2) student athletes and what they can offer institutions (Vander Schee, 2009). Much of the enrollment at SU consists of student athletes and performing arts students. Understanding populations of new students and how they are attracted to SU is of vital importance not only to the admissions office but also for many members of the campus community. Figure 3 illustrates how well the admissions officers, coaches, and performing arts recruiters at SU have been doing in recruiting high school students.
While indicators show that SU has experienced steady increases in the number of traditional undergraduate students during the past several years, this study explored the perceptions of non-athletes and non-performing arts students at SU as well as the general population of students and sought to understand why these students chose SU.

Figure 4 illustrates the number of students from the fall of 2009 through the fall of 2013 who chose to attend SU but who were not involved in intercollegiate athletics programs or performing arts programs. This figure reflects the same growth patterns as the overall enrollment numbers at SU. This makes sense in that SU has set no formal goals for recruiting non-performing arts and non-athletes at SU. To truly understand the implications of the mix of
enrollment between athletes and non-athletes and performing arts and non-performing arts students, one needs to look at the impact from a financial perspective.

![Figure 4](image.png)

Figure 4. Non-athletes and non-performing arts students at SU.

Figure 5 shows the increase in tuition at SU during the previous five years. SU has limited the increases in tuition costs to roughly 4% annually. This strategy of tuition increase has been a positive one for SU, and, combined with continued increases in the traditional undergraduate population, SU has experienced an operational budget surplus during these same periods.
Figure 5. Tuition increases per year between 2009 and 2013 at SU.

Figure 6 illustrates the influence of tuition increases on enrollment and the impact these increases have had on the operating budget at the university. Net tuition revenue is calculated by deducting any institutional scholarships from students’ tuition. The amount that is left is the net tuition revenue for the institution. From the fall of 2009 through the fall of 2013, SU’s enrollment increased by a total of 34 full-time undergraduate students, and the increase in net tuition revenue during this time increased by almost $2 million (Surreal University Registrar, 2013). This increase represents a remarkable accomplishment, especially considering that it occurred during an economic downturn. SU controlled its discounts by holding steady its institutional discount rate at 50%. Controlling its discount rate and increasing enrollment generated a budget surplus. What would happen if the enrollment mix were slightly modified?

On average, the athletic discounts at SU during the same five-year period were roughly 86%, and the performing arts discounts were 57% during the same five-year period. However, the tuition for students not involved in intercollegiate athletics programs or performing arts programs was discounted, on average, during the same five-year period at 28%. If the mix of students were just
slightly modified to reflect an increase in the non-athletic and non-performing arts students, the institution may realize a much higher net tuition revenue margin.

![Net Tuition Revenue between 2009 and 2013 at SU](image)

**Figure 6.** Net tuition revenue between 2009 and 2013 at SU.

Some early researchers identified four factors that influence the college selection process: (a) factors internal to the institution (e.g., academic reputation/prestige), (b) factors external to the institution (e.g., location and proximity to students’ homes), (c) human influences (relatives, friends, counselors), and (d) individual factors (personal and family finances) (Carrington & Sedlacek, 1975). These factors have evolved with the advent of online programming, but for those students seeking a traditional on-campus experience, these factors continue to contribute to the decision-making process (Vander Schee, 2009). According to Braddock and Lv (2006), many students also value the reputation of universities’ athletics programs as an important criterion in the college selection process. A number of researchers have shown that during the last several decades, students’ college selection process has been influenced by the amount of information that students access regarding academic programs, tuition, costs, availability of financial aid, general academic reputation, proximity to home, size, and campus social life (Braddock & Lv, 2006; Comfort, 1925; Ripperger, 1933).
Significance of the Study

By conducting a qualitative study that focuses on Surreal University, the admissions leaders at SU are enabled to further explore methods of recruiting students who fit the desired demographic profile. This study also allows for other small, private institutions struggling to attract certain populations of students to identify specific reasons students select or fail to select their institutions and to enable a shift in resources that potentially may increase the desired student population. This study also assists other small, private institutions faced with many of the same issues and allows them to focus on specific segments of their student populations that may be more attractive to recruit and retain based on tuition discounting and other pertinent factors exclusive to their own institutions. By understanding the selection process that potential students use in determining which college to attend, enrollment managers can (a) more accurately predict incoming class sizes, (b) become more effective at projecting enrollment, (c) more accurately project discounts, (d) more effectively manage operational budgets, (e) and more effectively utilize budgets to assist with marketing efforts.

The study of recruitment practices and the student college selection process has been of interest to university administrators and researchers since the early 1900s (Sevier, 1993). One study vital to the enrollment profession was completed by Lapovsky (1999). This study focused on enrollment managers and the importance of this position in higher education administration. Understanding the enrollment process and the reasons students choose to attend one university over another has become even more important given the United States’ troubled economy and the pressures of state and federal mandates (Goss, Jubenville, & Orjan, 2006). It is for this reason that the researcher conducted interviews with student participants and, as a result, gained a more
in-depth understanding of the decision-making and reasoning processes that students employ when selecting a college.

Recent research related to enrollment decisions has been primarily quantitative in nature and has not adequately captured individual perspectives that reflect the reasons students select certain institutions (Sevier, 1993). Much of the current research has focused on general student populations, such as high school-aged seniors and how they select a college (Sevier, 1993). Additional research has focused on specific segments of the populations (e.g., student athletes) to identify the decision-making and reasoning processes that prospective students use when selecting a college (Goss, Jubenville, & Orjan, 2006). The present research is distinctive since it focused on one university using a narrative study format to assess why students chose to attend this particular institution and how they worked through their college selection process.

Because universities are unique and varied, the nature of their organizations also varies, and therefore they do not all function under the same parameters (Cerit, 2006; Lewison & Hawes, 2007; Luque-Martinez & DelBarrio-Garcia, 2009). As such, the strategies and tactics institutions use to attract potential students and the impressions that are created as a result of their efforts are even more important. Smaller schools and those not as well-known are disadvantaged because image and brand awareness are even more important when consumers have had limited direct experience with an organization (Sung & Yang, 2008). Taking these factors into consideration, an explanation of possible new strategies for specific enrollment and marketing activities was the hopeful outcome of this research.

It is vital for enrollment managers not only to understand the decision-making and reasoning processes that potential students employ but also to assist staff members in attaining individual and collective recruitment goals. For example, college deans rely on enrollment
statistics to justify an increase in full-time instructors, while athletic coaches use enrollment statistics to reduce the salaries and benefits for part-time or assistant coaches (Pampaloni, 2010). University departments rely on enrollment statistics to validate the need for increased resources.

It is important for enrollment managers to understand the influence that they have on universities as well as other members of the institution. In essence, enrollment managers are primarily responsible for attracting students to four-year, private universities. This responsibility means that enrollment managers bear primary responsibility for generating a large portion of institutional operating revenues. Whether enrollment managers are aware of this, they nevertheless must see themselves as leaders. Enrollment managers are leaders in that they are responsible both for recruiting and retaining students.

Whether or not enrollment managers achieve their goal of attracting a specific number of incoming students and/or retaining a specific number of students is directly related to the sustainability of small, private institutions because most, if not all, institutions of this type are enrollment driven. In essence, enrollment managers are responsible for supporting and leading the fiscal stability of tuition-driven institutions. By definition, leadership is “the process of influencing the activities of an individual or group in efforts toward goal achievement in a given situation” (Kouzes & Posner, 2003, p. 33). The success of any leadership process is dependent upon individuals’ unique experiences, personality traits, and the degree to which individuals are persuasive (Kouzes & Posner, 2003; 2012). For enrollment managers, this “influence” is critical to the success of an institution of higher education.

Enrollment managers need to employ collaborative approaches and understand the importance of admissions activities and their influence on the retention of current students. In higher education during the past 20 years, most institutions have been considered brick-and-
mortar institutions, referring to campus settings in which professors teach in physical classrooms and students either commute to campus or live in residence halls on campus (Lucido & Schulz, 2011). The emergence of new technologies, particularly the Internet, has spawned a new breed of higher educational institutions referred to as “online schools.” Many of these institutions are for-profit institutions that benefit from federal and state allocations provided to students as a means of helping them afford a college education. The number of not-for-profit institutions entering the online arena has increased recently, and with the creation of massive open online courses (MOOCs), even more non-profit universities have entered the market (Carr, 2012). These technological advances have changed the dynamics of higher education and access to education (Carr, 2012).

Higher education is one “industry” in which the existence of some institutions may depend on the innovative approaches applied or not applied by leaders and members of faculty, staff, and students in terms of whether or not sustainability into the new century is viable. One issue that needs to be addressed is identifying the characteristics of leaders who will guide the innovative process as well as the attributes that they possess. Another issue is the manner in which these leaders will guide their respective organizations and influence change. Finding appropriate responses to these issues is critical for private higher education institutions (Carr, 2012). A failure to address this issue and identify new and innovative means of attracting students to campuses will result in the demise of small, private institutions. The days of the small but mighty enrollment-driven university that offers individual attention to students and opportunities for the development of the whole person at a high cost are long gone. Instead, offering an education that is unique and targeted to specific student demographics is the
educational delivery model currently in use by higher education institutions of all shapes and sizes and will continue to be well into the future.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the decision-making and reasoning processes students employed in choosing to attend SU. This information will be utilized by administrators at SU to attract students to attend SU and increase enrollment. The groups of students that participated included those who participated in intercollegiate athletics programs and performing arts programs as well as those who did not participate in intercollegiate athletics programs and performing arts programs. Because each student attending SU had a choice among institutions to attend, the purpose of this study was to understand the factors and the decision points that contributed to the decision-making process. The focus of this study was on non-athletes and non-performing arts students because these students are provided discounts at a lower rate than students who participate in athletics and performing arts and thus are more attractive to the university because the university realizes a larger portion of tuition revenue from these types of students. However, students from all segments of students were interviewed in order to fully understand the selection process of all of these students.

**Guiding Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. Why do students choose to attend Surreal University?
2. Why do students who do not participate in athletics or performing arts choose to attend Surreal University?
3. How can SU formulate or change its marketing materials to recruit more non-extra-curricular performers to Surreal University?
(4) Are there similarities in the students that do not participate in athletics or performing arts to those students that do participate and attend SU, so that the university might be able to recruit more of these types of students?

**Definition of Terms**

*Discount Rate* – An institutional term used to describe the amount of institutional financial aid used to recruit or retain students at an institution of higher education (Noel-Levitz, 2011).

*Enrollment Management* – An assertive approach to ensuring a steady supply of qualified students required to maintain institutional vitality (Kemerer, Baldridge, & Green, 1982).

*Extra-Curricular Activities/Co-Curricular Activities* – Activities performed by students that fall outside the realm of the normal curriculum of school or university education (Noel-Levitz, 2011). For the purposes of this study, this term applies to the activities of students not participating in athletics or performing arts.

*Financial Aid* – Funding intended to help students pay education expenses at a college or university, including tuition and fees, room and board, books and supplies, etc. (Noel-Levitz, 2011).

*Leadership* – A process whereby an individual influences another individual or a group of individuals to achieve a common goal (Kouzes & Posner, 2003; Northouse, 2007).

*Marketing* – An organizational function and a set of processes for creating, capturing, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit an organization and its stakeholders (Gundlach, 2007).

*Net-Tuition Revenue* – The amount of revenue left after all institutional gift aid has been deducted from the revenue generated from the collection of tuition and fees (Noel-Levitz, 2011).
Recruitment – The process of adding new individuals to a population or subpopulation of students (Noel-Levitz, 2011).

Retention – The act of retaining or the state of being retained (Noel-Levitz, 2011).

Delimitations and Limitations

A delimitation of this study is the fact that the research included only the freshman cohort of entering students, and only at one university. As is the case with any research, several delimitations and limitations are evident in this study. One possible limitation to this study is that all students go through a similar process when attempting to choose their institution. Many students begin their college selection process by discussing their options with parents, friends, and high school counselors (Pampaloni, 2010). The highest-achieving students may begin their college selection process a bit earlier than other students, but normally all students seek advice from parents, family members, trusted teachers, and trusted mentors at their high school (Pampaloni, 2010). Hence, much of the rationale for choosing a college could be left to the opinions of those with whom students and their families speak (Pampaloni, 2010).

An assumption of the study was the personal view of the researcher in terms of why students choose to attend SU, which may have reflected preconceptions or possible bias. A concerted effort was made on the part of the researcher to maintain objectivity in this study. The researcher was cognizant of this and focused on maintaining neutral interactions with the participants. The researcher can never remove all biases; however, being aware of how he might influence the research helped increase the validity of the research.

An additional limitation is evident due to the nature of this study, which is that it focused only on students’ entry into the university. In other words, the focus was on student when they
first arrived at SU; during the first year of enrollment. These reasons may vary and/or differ by the time the student reaches graduation.

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

The remaining chapters present a study of the factors that influence students to attend small, private institutions. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the research literature that has been conducted on factors that contribute to students’ decision to attend small, private higher education institutions. Chapter 3 describes the methods used to explore this phenomenon, including the research design, the sample, the population, the instrument, the data collection procedures and the data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 presents the findings of this study. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the results in light of the literature along with recommendation for practice and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of this study was on the recruitment process by which institutions attract high school seniors to attend their respective colleges or universities (primarily through enrollment management). This review of literature provides a consolidated summary of the research that has been conducted on enrollment management, university marketing strategies and initiatives, the college selection process, and for-profit institutions. This review also reports on the results of studies that have suggested tools for enrollment managers that may enhance (a) recruiting processes, (b) financial aid options for students, and (c) enrollment and financial benefits for institutions.

Enrollment Management

The term “enrollment management” has been in popular use since the early 1970s. It refers to the processes employed by college and university presidents to keep a watchful eye on how revenues were being used (Kurz & Scannell, 2006). However, a variety of definitions and descriptions of this term has been suggested. For example, early on, enrollment management personnel were known as “gatekeepers,” whose job was ensuring that only “qualified” students were to be admitted (Astin, 1975). Today, the expectations of enrollment managers are much greater. Maguire and Butler (2008) stated that enrollment managers today must support a college environment in which all constituents are (a) involved in the recruitment process; (b) create an atmosphere in which the efforts of faculty members, staff members, and administrators are student-focused; and (c) ensure that students feel engaged throughout their entire collegiate experience. For the purposes of this study, “enrollment management” was defined as “a confluence of departments at a university assigned to recruiting and/or retaining students” (Maguire & Butler, 2008, p. 23).
Enrollment managers have the unenviable task not only of setting aggressive enrollment goals as a means of predicting university operating budgets but also balancing the difference between advertised tuition rates and actual discount rates (once scholarships have been subtracted from the tuition achieved). The difference between these two rates is essentially the operating budget, called the “net tuition revenue.” According to Hillman (2011), enrollment directly influences institutional operating budgets—in some cases, up to 90% of operating budgets (Hillman, 2011). Further, as Lapovsky (2006) stated, “Today, enrollment is the most critical factor in determining the success of all colleges and universities, and it is from this lens that college administrators must look in order to fully compete in the changing landscape of higher education” (p. 59).

With respect to private higher education institutions, the net tuition revenue budget is of even greater significance. Because of the decreasing number of endowments and fewer opportunities for state financial support, private institutions have relied more heavily on net tuition revenue and at a much higher rate than public institutions because private institutions need this revenue to fund their operating budgets. University presidents are currently much more aware of precise enrollment figures and managed tuition discount rates than they have been in prior years. Lapovsky (2006) has suggested that enrollment management is a complex and strategic process that must be a focus for college and university presidents. This statement has never been more accurate in light of the increased reliance on tuition rates, rising costs associated with recruitment processes, retention initiatives, and the general cost of education (Hillman, 2011). Only by assessing the amount by which the actual cost of tuition has been discounted and the amount that actually is collected can an accurate financial analysis be conducted to support a college or university’s operating budget.
The concept of enrollment management has been evident in the higher education research literature for more than 40 years (Huddleston, 2000; Tinto, 1975) and continues to be a topic of great interest within various types of organizations of higher education (Kurtz & Scannell, 2006). Further, as stated above, enrollment management has evolved from its role as the “gatekeeper” of the university (i.e., admissions to the university) to its new role as the arbiter of student aid, assistant in the recruitment process, and facilitator of retention efforts among university students (Hillman, 2011). Enrollment managers have become an integral part of universities, but perhaps most importantly, they have become integral to the administration--in many cases, even more integral than fundraising and development operations (Hillman, 2011).

Enrollment managers are responsible for completing an enrollment/marketing plan, and characteristically this plan involves all key constituents from across the campus community. Grewal and Levy (2010) and Armstrong and Kotler (2013) have suggested a strategic planning and marketing process that can be applied in higher education environments. Their process includes five steps. In the first step of the process, university leaders, in conjunction with other staff members, define the mission and vision of the organization (Grewal & Levy, 2010). In the second step, university leaders evaluate the competitive environment by assessing how various constituents, both inside and outside the organization, influence the organization’s potential for success (Grewal & Levy, 2010). This traditionally has been referred to as “situational competitive analysis.” A situational competitive analysis is conducted by using a traditional SWOT analysis--i.e., analyzing strengths and weaknesses within the internal environment and analyzing opportunities and threats within the external environment (Grewal & Levy, 2010). In the third step, the implementation phase, leaders identify and evaluate different opportunities by engaging in a process involving segmentation, targeting, and positioning (STP) (Grewal &
Levy). Armstrong and Kotler (2013) defined market segmentation as “dividing a market into smaller segments of buyers with distinct needs, characteristics, or behaviors that might require separate marketing strategies or mixes” (p. 164). Armstrong and Kotler further have defined “targeting” as “the process of evaluating each market segment attractiveness in selecting one or more segments to enter” and “positioning” as “arranging for a market offering to occupy a clear, distinctive, and desirable place relative to competing products in the minds of target consumers” (p. 164). The fourth step involves marketing and, more specifically, implementing the four P’s of marketing (product, place, price, promotion). Administrative leaders must facilitate this marketing implementation process. According to Grewal and Levy (2010), implementing and leading these processes are two important functions of enrollment management:

When the firm has identified and evaluated different growth opportunities by performing an STP analysis, the real action begins. It has decided what to do, how to do it, and how many resources should be allocated to it. In the fourth step of the planning process, marketers implement the actual marketing mix—product, price, promotion, and place—for each product and service on the basis of what they believe their target markets will value. At the same time, they make important decisions about how they will allocate their scarce resources to their various products and services. (p. 45)

Finally, the fifth step is recognized as the control phase of the process and includes evaluating the performance of the marketing strategy and taking any needed corrective action (Grewal & Levey, 2010).

After following this five-step planning process, it is critical that the results of this process be developed into a written document that is a stable yet flexible plan and serves as a consistent reminder to all within the organization of the goals and the roadmap for success. The written
document normally contains nine sections, and this is noteworthy because many institutions do not develop or follow a formal strategic planning process (Grewal & Levey, 2010). These sections are (1) the executive summary, (2) overview and mission statement, (3) objectives and goals, (4) situational analysis, (5) market/product/customer analysis, (6) marketing strategy, (7) financial projections, (8) implementation plan, and (9) evaluation (Grewal & Levy, 2010). If this planning process is utilized and is intentional in its development and execution, it can serve institutions of higher education extremely well. Further, higher education institutions must find ways to differentiate what they offer in comparison to their competitors; in fact, developing and utilizing a strategic planning and marketing implementation plan can be an optimal analysis tool if taken seriously by higher educational leaders.

Keihn and Peters (1997) conducted a case study exploring a system used by the University of Wisconsin (UW) and its multi-year enrollment planning process. The planning process for Wisconsin began in 1985 and consisted of a comprehensive examination of the enrollments at all of the system universities as well as a projection of the enrollments and operational expenses through the year 2000. The statewide process called for utilization of three separate plans--the first plan covering 1987-1990, the second plan covering 1991-1994, and the last plan covering 1995-2000. The researchers examined the plans, reviewed the progress, and evaluated the outcomes, which included both expected and unexpected results.

As of 1996, there were only eight states that had formalized statewide enrollments plans that addressed the increasing costs of education and the reduction in state support. At that time, three other states were considering a statewide enrollment plan. The plans put forth by the state of Wisconsin were groundbreaking. In essence, the plans were put in place to address the issue of access and opportunity for the students in the state, and state officials ensured that proper levels
of staffing and enough faculty members were in place to handle the projected increases the state was expecting.

The purpose of the statewide plan in Wisconsin was to assess the balance between the total number of students wanting higher education in the state and the availability of the resources necessary to educate those students. Wisconsin sought to provide access without limits to those students who wished to receive a degree as well as sufficient state support to these institutions. In all the Wisconsin planning documents, officials emphasized the quality of education, access for individuals, and a partnership with the State.

Following an approval of the newest plan for implementation, Wisconsin state legislators doomed the proposal by cutting property taxes, which thereby had a negative impact of more than $1 billion dollars in commitment to the K-12 educational sector. The UW system was left with a budget reduction of more than $33 million. For the first time since projecting enrollments in 1987, the UW system experienced an enrollment decline of more than 1% below its target. This decline provided the impetus for the Board of Regents to reconvene and adjust the enrollment plan to make the most effective use of the available resources.

The University of Wisconsin’s 14-year planning process reflected not only the need for planning but also the ability to be flexible, especially in times of change. Political, economic, and demographic changes can and do influence even the most carefully forecasted plans. The UW study provides an example of how planning can positively impact an organization in times of decreased state support and enrollment projections that fall short of the desired outcomes. The planning process, however, must include a periodic review of the outcomes and an ability to react quickly to the changes in the environment. Planning also needs to be broad based and inclusive so that it generates widespread support (Keihn & Peters, 1997). UW’s leadership in
creating and executing such a plan allowed the university to maintain a competitive position within the higher education “industry.”

The attainment of human capital is another important function of enrollment managers today. Developing a staff of young professionals who possess the ability to connect with prospective students and their families has never been more crucial. Vander Schee (2010) identified this type of staffing as a key instrument in relationship marketing, whereby one admissions officer attempts to make his or her prospective students and families feel that he or she can answer every question and that there is no need to be transferred from one office to another to get questions answered. According to Vander Schee, small colleges (universities in which enrollment is under 2,000 students and enrolling 400-500 new students every fall) truly have a unique advantage over their larger counterparts. By developing and continuing to be involved with prospective students and their families even after those students have chosen to attend the university, counselors develop “unique” and “rare” relationships, and students may continue their relationship with the university long after they have graduated (Kotler & Fox, 1995). This too can be a competitive advantage for colleges and universities in varying market conditions.

Ultimately, enrollment managers are but one component of the enrollment process because in addition to employing unique and rare recruiting efforts, enrollment managers also need students to matriculate, persist through the rigors of an academic curriculum, and persist through graduation. Students’ selection process of their institution of choice is important for enrollment managers to understand in order for universities to remain sustainable. The next section of this dissertation illustrates the college selection process and the responsibility of enrollment managers in more detail.
College Selection

To understand the nuances of enrollment management and the responsibilities of enrollment leaders, one must understand the different types of students that are potentially subject to being recruited by institutions of higher education. Most institutions focus on a particular set of student demographics (Pampaloni, 2010). For example, some institutions focus on recruiting extremely high-achieving students and recruit based on top-level SAT/ACT scores and GPA (e.g., Ivy League schools) (Pampaloni, 2010). Other institutions focus on recruiting students with exceptional athletic abilities and reasonable academic achievement (e.g., NCAA Division I schools) (Pampaloni, 2010).

It is imperative that university enrollment managers ensure marketing materials and websites provide specific and tailored information that is important to each of the various student segments. The current population of college-age students is unquestionably “tech savvy,” as evidenced by the fact that 20% of college-age students began using computers between the ages of five and eight (Jones, 2002). Students within this demographic profile will more likely begin their search process using institutional websites and in some cases may make their college selection choice by this means. Recent studies have indicated that many college-bound students may begin their search the “old-fashioned way,” i.e., seeking out advice and guidance from their parents, high school teachers, counselors, and friends who have already completed college and/or their college selection (Pamploni, 2010). However, once a preliminary set of institutions has been selected, students begin to utilize the Internet and specific university websites to disengage from institutions that do not meet their selection criteria.

Aside from aggressive and current marketing efforts, other factors also are important to consider when students make their college selections. Some studies have concluded that students
apply five primary criteria when choosing an institution of higher education: (a) majors or program offerings, (b) reputation, (c) financial concerns (cost and financial aid available), (d) extracurricular activities, and (e) location/atmosphere (Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, & Palmer, 2003; Mattern & Wyatt, 2009). Interestingly, many dated studies that were conducted 15-20 years have identified the criteria that student athletes use to select a college (Adler & Adler, 1991). These studies have indicated that student athletes consider academic reputation and availability of athletic scholarships (Reynaud, 1998). Additional studies (Goss, Jubenville, & Orjan, 2006; Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, & Palmer, 2003) have reported that family members influenced some student athletes while finance-related issue influenced others. This research literature suggests that regardless of whether students are athletes or performing arts enthusiasts, whether 20 years ago or more recently, most students begin their college selection process in similar ways and base their decisions on similar selection criteria. The choice of academic programs is one of the most important criteria for students and their families when deciding on which school to attend. Enrollment managers must rely on information from their current students about the attractiveness of a specific program. They also must rely on current students to provide information about whether a program meets a specific need in terms of desired professional or career focus (Ritze, 2006). Lastly, according to Ritze (2006), four methods can be used to address enrollment management challenges: (a) create a more systematic evaluation and application policy, (b) create a gateway course, (c) limit the number of times students can enroll in the gateway course, and (d) enable advisors to intervene earlier.
Tools for Enrollment Managers

Luckily, enrollment managers do have a variety of tools at their disposal as enrollment leaders. Two of these primary tools are data mining and predictive modeling, and these can prove to be helpful in generating student matriculation.

Data Mining

Data mining is a process by which useful information is extracted from large amounts of data (Chang, 2006). Data mining is a method that reveals any natural patterns contained in large amounts of data (Chang, 2006). Data mining provides researchers with the ability to view patterns and make predictions about the number of potential applications or enrollments in the field of higher education (Chang, 2006).

Bruggink and Gambhir (1996) examined the probability of admission to a university and student enrollment choice at a selective institution. The study employed a two-stage probability model that first examined the decision to accept a student to the university and then focused on the decision by the student to enroll. The researchers conducted the study during a four-year period and utilized a logic model for the first phase of their study (Bruggink & Gambhir, 1996).

Bruggink and Gambhir (1996) cited the importance of this study due to the fact that high-achieving students are often accepted to multiple universities and their decision to enroll at one university over another is somewhat difficult to predict. The benefit of this research for enrollment managers is that it provides a better understanding of the reasons some students choose to apply to a particular university over another, but more importantly, the study also effectively demonstrated how students make decisions to enroll at their institution of choice (Bruggink & Gambhir, 1996). The data collected was from applicants from high school graduating classes between the years of 1991 and 1994 in the following categories: (1) applicants who were rejected, (2) applicants who were accepted but did not enroll, and (3) applicants who
enrolled. Approximately 165 of the 4,000 applicants were selected from each of the four years examined. During this time, approximately 50% of the students who applied to the university were accepted. The following four key characteristics of the admissions model were utilized: (1) academic, (2) personal, (3) extra-curricular, and (4) special consideration (e.g., son or daughter of alumni).

Results from the first phase of the study found that academic factors were all statistically significant when making admissions decision regarding acceptance to the university. Personal factors surrounding majors, athletic participation, relatives of alumni, and early decisions were also statistically significant. Community involvement, however, was not statistically significant. During this time period, Bruggink and Gambhir (1996) noted that it seemed to become easier to be enrolled at the university even though the applicant pool remained steady.

The second phase of the study focused on students’ decision to attend the university. With respect to the same four admission factors, the findings were somewhat similar to the applicant study in that academic factors, personal factors, and special consideration factors all were significant when predicting enrollment. In addition, the stronger the academic performance of applicants, the less likely they were to enroll because of the greater choices of schools from which to choose. Athletic participation and financial aid were extremely important in the decision to enroll. Most problematic in all of the findings were the results that indicated that minorities and students from geographically diverse areas were less likely to enroll due to financial concerns and the number of choices (Bruggink & Gambhir, 1996).

Chang (2006) conducted a study that utilized data-mining technologies in the area of enrollment management. Chang examined forecasts and estimates in an effort to identify hidden patterns in the data and to convert those patterns into actionable information that resulted in decision
support. By utilizing yet another concept borrowed from the world of business and applying it to the higher education environment with a specific focus on enrollment management, Chang (2006) asserted that data mining has a higher predictive capability than does regression logistics because data mining can focus on individual-level student predictions. Chang’s study demonstrated the possibility of using data mining and its predictive capability to enhance enrollment management strategies by increasing institutions’ understanding of the admitted applicant pool. Chang (2006) compared the prediction accuracy of the logistic regression against that of the two most common data mining techniques: neural classifications and regression trees.

The data in Chang’s research included more than 26,000 records from the fall of 2003. Prospects and inquiries were omitted from the study because of the limited amount of information collected at that stage of the enrollment funnel. Three types of predictive models were utilized, including logistic regression and the two data mining techniques referred to as (a) neural networks and (b) the classification and regression tree (C&RT).

The results indicated that the C&RT predicted with accuracy 74% of the students who enrolled, while the neural network predicted enrollment with an accuracy of 75%. Logistic regression predicted enrollment with an accuracy of 64% (Chang, 2006). This case study demonstrated that data mining techniques generated better results than traditional logistic regression in predicting admissions in a large higher education institution.

Antons and Maltz (2006) conducted a data-mining project with the assistance of the admissions staff and members of their Masters of Business Administration (MBA) program as well as members of the institutional research office at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. These researchers attempted to seek new research methods that would predict enrollment and discount rate more accurately. The research was conducted using three of the most common data mining
techniques: C&RT, neural network models, and logistic regression models. The data from the 2000-2002 admissions queries included all applicants, with a more concentrated focus on those students who enrolled. Students discussed the inaccuracy of the outside vendor’s ability to predict enrollment, which consistently fluctuated between 10% and 15% over/under initial enrollment predictions. The second issue that the researchers identified was the variance in the discount rate at the university, which ranged between 2% and 3.5% over/under the projected estimation. The results of the study demonstrated that the model created in-house was able to more accurately predict enrollment with only a 2.5% variance compared to a 10-15% variance based on the estimates of the outside vendor. As far as the discount rate, the in-house model had a variance of less than 1% (Antons & Maltz, 2006).

**Predictive Modeling**

Predictive modeling is a statistical technique used to determine the likelihood of a student performing some desired enrollment behavior. To determine this likelihood, researchers study the behavior of previous students to identify variables that influenced their enrollment behavior. After identifying relevant predictor (independent) variables, researchers then construct a statistical model to predict future behavior (DesJardins, 2002). Next, researchers apply this regression equation to the current prospective or enrolled students to determine the likelihood that they will exhibit the desired outcome (dependent variable)—e.g., to apply, enroll, persist, or graduate. Based on the likelihood of students achieving the outcome variable, institutions can modify their recruitment or retention activity in order to maximize institutional resources, human resources, or financial resources (DesJardins, 2002).

Goenner and Pauls (2006) examined data collected during the inquiry phase at a medium-size public university in North Dakota to determine whether the information would provide a basis
for a more streamlined marketing effort in recruiting first-time traditional undergraduate students. The researchers utilized past data to make future predictions about the enrollment of students within various zip codes. According to Goenner and Pauls (2006), predictive modeling as it pertains to applications in education has received little interest outside of the work completed by DesJardins (2002) and Thomas, Dawes, and Reznik (2001). As these researchers have noted, building a predictive model offers several challenges, including (a) the availability of limited data at this stage and (b) students skipping the inquiry stage and applying directly to the university without sending a request for additional information.

In Goenner and Pauls’ (2006) study, predictive modeling was used during the recruitment cycle to provide enrollment managers with a tool to craft recruitment and marketing efforts as a means of increasing enrollment. The sample in this study consisted of more than 15,800 students who inquired about North Dakota University during the fall of 2003. Of the 15,800 students who inquired, 2,067 students actually enrolled at the university. Each student’s decision was modeled as a binary choice where data was split into two groups, one to build the model and the other to test the model’s forecast. The information collected at the inquiry phase included students’ high school, physical address, and academic interest. Using students’ addresses, the researchers were able to consider the geographic and demographic variables for inclusion in the study. The geographic variables included measures of the distance from the home zip codes of the students in relation to the zip code of the university as well as the distance to the university’s closest competitor. The researchers hypothesized that the distance from the university would influence whether or not the students enrolled at the university. The researchers utilized 28 different variables collected at the point of inquiry. While controlling for a number of factors relevant to
students’ decisions, the researchers used logistic regression to estimate the probability that students would enroll.

The results of the study indicated that of the 28 models created, ten of the models produced statistically significant results (Goenner & Pauls, 2006). The variables that were statistically significant predictors included distance from the campus, income levels (based on geo-demographic information collected through outside sources), and academic major. The models accurately predicted the enrollment behavior in 89% of the inquiries when a cutoff of .5 was used (Goenner & Pauls, 2006). Using this model, the enrollment manager (a) decided to purchase a fewer number of mailing list names of students who lived a greater distance from the university and (b) emphasized the academic programs in which students were more likely to enroll. Thus, the enrollment manager was more effective in using marketing dollars and materials. The results also influenced which college fairs the admissions department participated in, which high schools they visited, and which methods they used to implement direct-mail campaigns. The authors cited the importance of updating the model with current information so that each inquiry could be properly assigned a ranking score. Further, according to Goenner and Pauls (2006), when the model is properly utilized, enrollment managers can become much more strategic in recruitment activities, which positively influences the operating budget. Every enrollment manager should employ some form of predictive modeling to ensure that enrollment goals can be met that have been established to complete university operating budgets.

**Financial Aid and Budget Implications**

At most higher education institutions today, financial aid is considered to be a part of college students’ cost estimates. Financial aid is one way in which students and their families may be able to afford the cost of higher education, and it certainly can play an important role in
the college selection process. According to Hillman (2011), tuition discounting has been the fastest-growing topics within most public and private institutions. Because most state appropriations have declined, many public institutions have begun the practice of tuition discounting. For many years, the phrase “tuition discounting” has been limited to small, private, four-year institutions and used as a way of making the college experience affordable. However, in addition to private institutions, many public institutions have embraced this practice.

Tuition discounting is the practice of awarding to students institutionally funded financial aid in the form of non-repayable grants based on academic scholarships, athletic scholarships, or performance scholarships (Hillman, 2011). Colleges provide this aid as a way of lowering the “sticker-price” students ultimately pay to attend college. Surreal University (SU), for example has a tuition rate of $20,000 per year, plus $8,000 for room and board. Based on these tuition and housing costs, a college may provide an academic scholarship of $10,000 for students who have achieved a 3.5 high school GPA and a minimum ACT or SAT score (a threshold established by each university). Based on a set of metrics, students who qualify are then offered scholarships. It is the task of enrollment managers to understand the threshold at which prospective students will select the preferred institution without over awarding or under awarding the family (Hillman, 2011). This process leads enrollment managers to a net-tuition revenue line on the operating budget. The net-tuition revenue is used to establish the overall university operating budget. By understanding how and why students select a particular institution, enrollment managers should then be better able to accurately predict the number of incoming students as well as the net tuition revenue down to one or two percentage points (Hillman, 2011).

As more institutions began to use tuition discounting, some were forced to adjust their discounting processes because the discounts began to outgrow the net tuition revenue that the
institution generated (Hillman, 2011). One example of an institution that experienced this overextension was Dickinson College during the late 1990s. Administrators at Dickinson realized that their tuition discounts were more than 50% and that the net tuition revenue for each student generated only about $0.48 cents on every dollar. Administrators at Dickinson decided to reduce the discount rate from 50% to 30%. In response, Dickinson actually experienced enrollment increases during the next several years, and the net tuition revenue also increased (Massa & Parker, 2007).

Russo and Coomes (2000) provided insight into the impact of financial aid on enrollment management at a private college. Their research also explored the response to common challenges faced by private institutions in light of statewide budgetary cuts as well as how colleges can modify strategies and organizational structures to more effectively respond to students’ needs. Their study examined the reasons why price increases are so important to private colleges and the influence on them in response to a reduction in state subsidies. Russo and Coomes (2000) further explored the aspect of “sticker price” and tuition discounting at private colleges. The “sticker price” represents the published tuition and fees that students and parents see, i.e., the retail price; however, tuition discounting is the number of dollars that students can expect the “sticker price” to be lowered in an effort to attract them to a particular institution (Russo & Coomes, 2000).

The importance of financial aid in the college selection process cannot be understated. Many families have not saved for college and do not have the necessary means to help their children pay for the college experience (Shaw, 2011). This is one reason why so many institutions have begun to closely monitor tuition discounting as well as net tuition revenue. Many college administrators have sought ways to reduce the amount of time students spend at an
institution by awarding a bachelor’s degree (normally four years of work) within a three-year time period. They have explored a variety of options, such as providing classes throughout the summer and adding additional coursework in fall and spring semesters (Shaw, 2011). The cost to educate students will continue to increase because of (a) increases in faculty and staff salaries and (b) the medical and retirement benefits institutions are required to pay to full-time employees. Many institutions have been looking abroad, finding international students who either have the capacity to pay the full price of tuition (thus offsetting the discounts provided to traditional U.S. students in the classroom) or, again, finding international students who are supported through their home country’s government-sponsored programs (Shaw, 2011). By seeking these relationships, enrollment managers may experience new opportunities to reduce tuition discounts, thus increasing the net tuition revenues to their respective institutions. This optimal solution, however, is much easier said than done.

For-Profit Higher Education

The impact of for-profit higher education is perhaps the most significant and the most controversial development that has occurred during the past 20 years of American higher education (Beaver, 2009). The advent of the Internet brought with it the ease with which students are able to seek alternative opportunities for their higher education degrees. Some students have deliberately sought a non-traditional way to achieve their degrees, primarily because of the convenience of being able to enroll in classes without having to drive great distances to do so and because they can complete coursework at nontraditional times through nontraditional delivery systems. This is where for-profit higher education institutions fit into the mix. Approximately 10% of post-secondary students now attend a for-profit institution, which translates into a $48 billion dollar industry (Blumenstyk, 2005). This has been a major concern
for many small, private universities across the country as students have sought a more affordable and, in some cases, a more convenient way to achieve their educational goals.

For-profit institutions date back to the 1600s, around the time when institutions such as Harvard were founded (Beaver, 2009). Most of these institutions provided education to individuals that focused on practical and narrowly specialized training, filling a market need that was not being met by other public or private institutions (Honick, 1992). As it is today, many of the for-profit institutions fill the needs of working adults in that most students attending for-profit institutions are adults seeking additional education or training to advance in their chosen careers (Beaver, 2009). According to the Department of Education, about 40% of students attending for-profit institutions are over 30 years of age; this is especially important considering the fact that more than 52.5% of U.S. adults have attended college but have not achieved a degree. Without a degree, the opportunities for career advancement remain somewhat limited, which is why so many of these students have sought a more convenient way to earn a degree (Beaver, 2009). The other segment of the population that for-profit institutions have continued to attract is low-income students seeking to obtain advanced training or those trying to increase their income levels. The benefit to these students is that for-profit institutions offer an affordable and convenient way to attend a college or university; unfortunately, achieving a degree does not always mean advancement in social mobility (Beaver, 2009).

Although for-profit institutions have in some cases provided a lower cost and perhaps more convenient educational option, these institutions have not been without their challenges. As many of the for-profits have experienced when working with lower-income students in particular, some of these students have sought ways to take advantage of the system. Many for-profit institutions in particular have experienced a significant increase in student loan default
rates, which can have an adverse effect on an institution’s rating by the Department of Education. As some institutions have found, some students are merely “check-chasers.” A check-chaser is a so-called “student” who enrolls at more than one institution, and once the financial aid has been applied to his or her account, the student withdraws from the institution with the federal funds (Beaver, 2009). This drives up the institution’s default rates, which could impact its ability to provide federal aid in the future.

Many of the federal regulations that have emerged in recent years are a direct result of the actions of some of the for-profit institutions and their influence on student default rates. One of the most significant regulations is the 90/10 rule, which states that an institution cannot have federal student aid higher than 10% of the school’s total revenue (Beaver, 2009).

**Summary of the Literature Review**

The studies described in this review of the literature indicate that focusing on enrollment could have lasting effects on institutions, not just from a budgetary perspective but also in terms of the achievements of students, faculty members, and the university as a whole. Research has clearly demonstrated how an improved and more efficient enrollment process can positively influence an institution’s overall success and sustainability in a variety of areas, most specifically within the enrollment management division, which directly impacts the operating budget of a university.

The need for continuous and up-to-date data is one of the most crucial elements in managing enrollment. Planning is also an integral part of any operation, whether it is planning in the form of strategic initiatives or planning for emergency type situations. Enrollment leaders should constantly seek the means to improve their practices, whether these practices include executing a strategy or successfully achieving a recruiting goal. Enrollment managers also need
to be aware of other critical events taking place on their campuses, in the larger community, in the state where they are located, and even throughout the entire higher education landscape. These environmental factors can positively or negatively influence the overall outcome of a university’s recruitment and retention efforts.

For-profit institutions are here to stay, and enrollment managers at traditional institutions need to monitor not only the competition in terms of private and public institutions but also for-profit institutions because they will continue to encroach on the traditional populations of students, especially those who are looking for convenience and lower cost as they select their institution of choice.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction and Overview

Not only do colleges and universities struggle to achieve a balanced budget, the rising costs of health insurance and the cost to recruit students continue to increase as well; in response, it has become imperative for enrollment managers to figure out ways to continuously increase enrollment at their institutions but not increase the discount rates.

The purpose of this study was to better understand why students choose to attend Surreal University and identify whether there were any areas where university officials, specifically the enrollment manager, could make positive change occur. Perhaps by either modifying the website and/or other marketing materials, or some other aspect that is gleaned from the research, the university could realize an increase not only in net tuition revenue but also retention and graduation rates. The significance of this study was, first, for Surreal University to ensure its strength and prosperity into the future. A second reason this study was significant is that other small, private universities could find this information important enough, and perhaps applicable enough, to conduct their own study.

This chapter describes the research design and methods used to collect and analyze the data in an effort to answer the following research questions:

(1) Why do students choose to attend Surreal University?
(2) Why do students who do not participate in athletics or performing arts choose to attend Surreal University?
(3) How can SU formulate or change its marketing materials to recruit more non-extra-curricular performers to Surreal University?
(4) Are there similarities in the students who do not participate in athletics or performing arts that do attend SU, so that the university might be able to recruit more of these types of students?

By investigating the reasons why students choose to attend SU and by specifically focusing on those students who do not participate in athletics or performing arts, Surreal University will be able to increase the number of students who do not participate in athletics or performing arts (i.e., those who are less likely to be awarded a scholarship or tuition reduction), which would also influence the net-tuition revenue experienced by the university.

Research Design

A qualitative research process was used for this dissertation. Specifically, this research represents a life story study. Qualitative research is grounded in a fundamentally constructivist philosophical position (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). This type of research characteristically is concerned with how the complexities of the sociocultural world are experienced, understood, and interpreted at a particular time and within a particular context (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). The objective of qualitative research is to examine a social situation or interaction by allowing the researcher to enter the world of others and attempt to achieve a holistic rather than a reductionist understanding (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). Creswell (2009) defined qualitative research as follows:

[Qualitative research provides] a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participants’ setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the
researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. The final written report has a flexible structure. Those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation. (p. 4)

Qualitative methodology places an emphasis on discovery and description (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). The objectives are generally focused on interpreting and extracting the meaning of experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). Within the framework of qualitative research, this study was most suited for a life story approach (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As a form of research methodology, phenomenological research is essentially the study of experience (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Titchen and Hobson (2005) described phenomenology as the study of lived, human phenomena within the everyday social contexts in which the phenomena occur to better understand the perspective of those who experience them. Titchen and Hobson (2005) noted that the value of examining the phenomena of professional practice has been increasingly emphasized. Phenomenology is not only a philosophy; it is also a research method for capturing the lived experiences of individuals (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). For phenomenologists, there is not just one reality. Experiences are perceived along a variety of dimensions, including time, space, relationships with others, and bodily experiences (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Phenomenologists use methods such as observations and in-depth interviewing to collect data (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Overall, phenomenology is a methodological viewpoint aimed at generating knowledge about how people experience their environment (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).
Background of SU

Surreal University (SU) is a small, private university that was established in 1888. SU is a co-educational private institution in the state of Ohio. The university had its beginnings as a part of another institution, Noble University (pseudonym), in the same local community and was founded in 1888, when Noble University created it as a commercial business college (Grandillo, 2010). When the dean of the commercial business college and the then president of Noble University could not agree upon the direction of the unit, the dean created what he referred to as “the campus in the clouds,” which was Surreal Business University, so named because the school was located on the second floor of a warehouse in the downtown community (Grandillo, 2010). In the early 1950s, the university moved to its current location.

The university has increased its footprint on the local community by expanding the campus offerings in terms of academic programs, athletic programs, and performing arts programs. The university experienced its greatest period of growth in the 1990s under the leadership of its fourth president, who invested a great deal of time, effort, and resources into a campus expansion and beautification program (Grandillo, 2010). The campus grew from just 1 building to more than 20 buildings under the president’s leadership. Programs such as criminal justice and liberal arts were added to an already vibrant business program. Master’s-level programs in the School of Business were added during this period, and the university also created online courses and satellite campuses for the adult learner population (Grandillo, 2010). SU’s fourth president retired in 2002, and he was credited with providing phenomenal vision and growth to a small private university. Under his tenure, enrollment grew from just over 500 students to more than 1,500 students who were enrolled in classes on campus, online, and in satellite locations (Grandillo, 2010).
Surreal University’s fifth president arrived in the summer of 2002 and sustained the trend of growth that his predecessor had accomplished. He continued to increase the enrollment at the university, and in the fall of 2007, enrollment had risen to more than 2,300 students (Grandillo, 2010). By 2009, enrollment had reached more than 3,400 students. New residence halls were completed along with new construction projects for a move in athletics to Division II status (Grandillo, 2010).

SU began as a business school and has always been a small university, having never enrolled more than 6,500 students at one time. The university focuses on traditional-age college students who are seeking traditional on-campus experiences. While SU has focused on traditional student populations, the university began to offer online courses for students as early as 1998. The growth of SU in the future will be within the online arena because online programs help offset budgetary concerns regarding the traditional-age populations and their projected declines during the next decade (personal communication, Dr. Raul Mason, 2013, 2014, and 2015).

In the fall of 2013, SU repeated a record enrollment year. The undergraduate, full-time freshman class was comprised of 416 students, the largest in the 125-year history of the university. A total of 131 of those students did not participate in any athletics or performing arts programs on campus. In the fall of 2012, SU enrolled 406 students, of which only 111 were non-athletes or non-performing arts students. In the fall of 2011, SU had enrolled 411 first-time, full-time freshmen, and only 110 students of the 2011 incoming class did not participate in athletics or performing arts.

The basic rationale of SU is reflected in its vision statement:
The basic rationale manifested by the existence of Surreal University is that of the American dream. Surreal is a place where the work ethic of the American heartland is evident and where there is truly value added for students, many of whom are among the first generation in their families to attend college. Surreal provides access and opportunity for individuals and facilitates their preparation for successful careers and for productive and satisfying lives. Surreal University represents a new kind of institution, the professional university, where the career objectives of traditional college-age students and adult students are optimized through professionally focused undergraduate and graduate programs that have a broad general education foundation. This fundamental institutional strategy appropriately positions Surreal for the 21st century. (Surreal University, Academic Bulletin, 2014, p. 2)

The mission of Surreal University is to…

● …offer quality, professionally focused, learning-centered undergraduate and graduate degree programs and lifelong learning opportunities to prepare traditional college-age students and adult students for successful careers and for productive and satisfying lives of excellence, leadership, and service.

● …work with employers and specific professions to anticipate, design, and deliver effective academic programs that reflect evolving professional needs and intellectual requirements of the future. (Surreal University, Academic Bulletin, 2014, p. 1)

Participants

The participants for this study included members of the freshmen class during the fall of 2013. I choose this student group intentionally because they had completed one year at SU and therefore already had decided to return to SU the subsequent fall semester. Students volunteered
to participate in the study; this includes students who participated in athletics and the performing arts areas as well as those students who did not. I used a purposive, criterion-based sampling strategy to identify students who had been retained at SU. Twenty-six students volunteered to participate in this study and engaged in semi-structured interviews. No participant names were revealed as a result of the interviews; however, the students were given a code so that I was able to more easily analyze the data.

I used information collected through the admissions office as well as the financial aid office at SU to identify and separate those students who participated in athletics and performing arts activities and those who were not involved in those activities. I invited all students to volunteer to participate in this study during the 2013-2014 academic year. The goal was to generate a 10% participation rate from first-time freshmen class during the fall of 2013.

**Instrumentation**

In-depth qualitative interviewing was selected as the primary data collection method in this research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005). The interview method was used in this study because it has the potential to elicit in-depth descriptions from participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In-depth qualitative interviewing has several important characteristics. I was looking for rich, detailed information that included examples, experiences, narratives, and stories. I asked open-ended questions (see Appendix A), and the questions were not fixed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Further, in-depth qualitative interviewing gave me an opportunity to probe for additional information relating to marketing, enrollment management, and leadership. In addition, I utilized enrollment reports that identified the incoming 2013 freshman class. I also used enrollment marketing materials that were sent to the families of the incoming class.
Data Collection

As a part of the data collection process, I consulted enrollment reports that included the number of the students who enrolled at SU during the fall of 2013. These enrollment reports also reflected the number of students who participated in athletics and performing arts programs. The enrollment reports indicated the institutional discount rate for the incoming freshman class as well as the discount rates for the entire undergraduate student population as a whole. I also collected marketing materials that had been used by the admissions office to recruit students for the 2013 fall class.

I began by e-mailing all students in an attempt to attract 10-20 students (see Appendix B). I asked students about their willingness to participate in the study and let them know that their participation was completely voluntary (see Appendix C). Once the student volunteers had reached the critical number, I then began to schedule interviews.

I provided each participant with information and a written demographic questionnaire. The participants read and completed the demographic items. The Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) guidelines were also included in the information that each participant received (see Appendix B). The HSRB guidelines informed participants that participation was voluntary, and their willingness to be interviewed and audio recorded was indicated by signing the letter (see Appendix B).

I interviewed 26 individual students. The interview method was selected for this study because it had the potential to elicit rich, detailed information about the experiences that students encountered regarding their college selection process. Creswell (2013) and Maxwell (2005) agreed that an important feature of the interview method is that researchers can capture experiences from each participant’s viewpoint. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009),
interviewing is a key tool in qualitative research. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) further indicated that qualitative research interviews are an “attempt to understand the world from the subject’s point of view, to unfold the meaning of the subject’s experiences, to uncover their lived world” (p. 1). I asked each participant a series of semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix A). This guided research technique allowed me and the participants to form a relationship and provided the feeling of a conversation as opposed to a structured academic procedure. This informal setting allowed participants to be more at ease and therefore more likely to divulge valuable personal information (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). According to Creswell (1998), semi-structured interviews have the advantage of ensuring that the interviewer will not stray from the research plan and that all of the questions will be asked. Coupled with the strategies that I used to minimize anxiety for participants, this technique maximized the likelihood of productive interviews (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). I used the study’s research questions as the basis for developing the interview questions as well as enrollment reports, enrollment marketing materials, and the university’s website. As noted by Creswell (1998), qualitative research interview questions can take the form of grand tour questions (i.e., representing broad or central questions), such as “Why did you choose SU,” that lead to more specific probing questions. These probing questions can consist of (a) issue questions, which address the major concerns and complexities to be resolved (e.g., “What do you think it means to be a ‘quality’ college or university?”) and (b) topical questions, which arise from a need for information for the description of the case (e.g., “What guides and sustains you in your quest towards a degree?”). The interview questions and probing questions were open-ended questions designed to elicit a more open interaction with me.
I sent emails to potential participants, requested a meeting at a convenient time, and suggested a location to conduct the interviews. I sent confirming emails to the 26 participants. The interviews occurred between March and May of 2014. Prior to each interview, participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form (see Appendix C). All interviews were conducted in person and audio recorded with permission from each participant. At the end of each session, the interviews were transcribed verbatim.

**Data Analysis**

Oftentimes in qualitative research, issues of validity and reliability come into question. Lincoln and Guba (1984) have suggested several alternative terms that could be used in place of “validation” when conducting qualitative research in a narrative study, including “credibility,” “authenticity,” and “dependability” (p. 300). I chose to perform the coding in two cycles as recommended by Saldaña (2013). First-cycle and second-cycle coding methods were used. During first-cycle coding, both descriptive coding and in vivo coding methods were used (Saldaña, 2013).

I employed multiple methods in order to ensure validity and reliability, including peer review (i.e., having my research advisor serve as the “devil’s advocate” to keep me honest), member checking, and rich descriptions (Creswell, 2007, p. 209). For this study, I employed a private contractor to transcribe each interview from an audio recording to a Microsoft Word document. The contractor signed a confidentiality form, agreed to erase the audio recordings after the transcriptions had been completed, and deleted the transcripts from his/her computer after they were delivered to me. I then sent each participant via email an electronic copy of his/her transcripts for approval with a note asking each participant to review the transcripts and contact me if any discrepancies were found. No discrepancies were found.
Descriptive coding “assigns labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase--most often a noun--the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 74). Descriptive coding helps researchers identify topics and build a categorized inventory of the data’s contents and is essential to second-cycle coding (Saldaña, 2013). Descriptive coding is one form of creating labels and categories that describe the way the participants create, work with, feel, handle, and experience on a daily basis (Saldaña, 2013). It provides a method to categorize data and gain an organizational grasp on the study (Saldaña, 2013).

The second coding method that was used during the first cycle was in vivo coding. According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), in vivo coding “uses the words or short phrases from the participant’s own language in the data record as codes” (p. 74). The root meaning of “in vivo” is “in that which is alive” and refers to words from the participants’ actual language in the interview transcripts (Saldaña, 2013).

After the first cycle of coding was completed using descriptive and in vivo coding methods, I employed a second-cycle coding method referred to as “pattern coding” (Saldaña, 2013). The primary goal, during the second cycle of coding was to develop a deeper sense of the categories, patterns, and themes that emerged from the first cycle of coding. As described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014, pattern coding is a second-cycle method that “is a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes, or constructs” (p. 86). Pattern codes are typically explanatory codes that identify emergent themes from the first cycle of coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), pattern codes typically consist of four interrelated summaries. They include (a)
categories or themes, (b) causes or explanations, (c) relationships among people, and (d) theoretical constructs (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p.87).

According to Maxwell (2005), using a variety of sources and methods to collect information is called “triangulation” (Maxwell, 2005). This strategy reduces the risk of systemic biases as well as limitations of a specific source. It also helps provide a broader understanding of the issues that are being investigated. The use of triangulation is critical in obtaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Maxwell, 2005). According to Creswell (2013), these data collection strategies add breadth, depth, and rigor to qualitative studies and provide corroborative evidence of the data obtained. In response, I employed numerous data collection methods, including interviews, enrollment reports, and marketing information. I also clarified any research bias that may have been involved in this study by being forthcoming not only about my position within the university but also about the existing assumptions I held that might have influenced the findings of this study (Merriam, 1988).

**Ethical Issues**

Given that the nature of qualitative research involves observation and interaction with individuals and groups, anticipating ethical issues and managing ethical dilemmas are essential to ensure the integrity of the data collection and data analysis processes. Miles and Huberman (1994) identified several issues that researchers should consider when engaging in qualitative research:

- Informed consent (Do participants have full knowledge of what is involved?)
- Harm and risk (Can the study hurt participants?)
- Honesty and trust (Is I being truthful in presenting data?)
• Privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity (Will the data be handled and reported in such way as to protect each individual’s identity?)

• Intervention and advocacy (What should researchers do if participants report harmful or illegal behavior?)

During the planning for this study, I considered each of these issues. All participants were asked to sign an informed consent form that describes the purpose and procedures of the study. In addition, as part of the member-checking process, I provided participants with an opportunity to view their transcribed responses to ensure accuracy in the presentation of the findings.

I assigned each participant a code so that the identities of all participants remained confidential. All personally identifiable information about the participants was removed from the transcripts. In advance of the data collection process, I decided that if any harmful or illegal behavior were reported, I would address the issue immediately. This may have included omitting one or more of the participants from the study or, in a worst-case scenario, halting the study. In any case, this did not occur.

The Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) process at Bowling Green State University and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process at SU provided oversight regarding informed consent, potential harm and risk associated with the study, and privacy concerns.

**Role of the Researcher**

I am an administrator at SU. I have more than 20 years of experience in the enrollment services profession. I have served in the capacity of director of undergraduate admissions and after seven years was promoted to vice president for enrollment management. I had served in this role for eight years prior to arriving at SU. I currently serve as vice president for development at SU but was formerly responsible for enrollment management services, including oversight of the
graduate, adult and transfer, international, and undergraduate admission department; financial aid; the registrar’s office; and several other related areas. The departmental areas highlighted above within enrollment management account for 96% of the revenue generated at SU, which is extremely vital to sustaining operations. The significance of SU’s tuition-driven budget was the main motivation for this dissertation research and its specific focus on the undergraduate population, which accounts for almost 60% of the overall revenue that is generated for the university. It is imperative for this reason in particular that administration fully understands the reasons a particular student who is not involved in an extracurricular activity chooses to attend SU.

I was aware of staying focused on the research and not handling this work as a part of his regular duties and responsibilities as a university administrator. In fact, it helped that I switched roles into advancement during my doctoral studies as this move removed me from the day-to-day operations in enrollment management, and my role as researcher became even clearer. I often struggled with my role as a researcher and my role as a former enrollment leader, however my chair was instrumental in reminding the me of the separation of work and research. Throughout the entire process, the chair continued to work with me to maintain the proper distance between the role of employee and the role of researcher. As I continued the research, it was constantly top of mind to continue to stay true to the work as a researcher in order not to have any administrator biases or opinions influence the study.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Introduction

As colleges and universities struggle to achieve balanced budgets, both small, private institutions as well as larger public institutions have been forced to make financial cuts to faculty and staff positions as well as other operational expenses in order to meet their budgetary requirements. This continuous pressure is likely to intensify as the higher education “industry” becomes more competitive and insists on validating students’ return on investment. Recent events have provided evidence of this heightened competition, and even if higher education institutions do all that they can to ensure their sustainability, an increasing number will fail and be forced to close their doors (Carr, 2012). For this reason, research studies have begun pointing to the importance of understanding why students choose to attend certain universities (Hillman, 2011). The purpose of the present study was to gain an understanding of the decision-making and reasoning processes students employed as they made the decision to attend Surreal University (SU). The following four research questions guided this study:

(1) Why do students choose to attend Surreal University?

(2) Why do students who do not participate in athletics or performing arts choose to attend Surreal University?

(3) How can SU formulate or change its marketing materials to recruit more non-extra-curricular performers to Surreal University?

(4) Are there similarities in the students who do not participate in athletics or performing arts that do attend SU, so that the university might be able to recruit more of these types of students?
The students attending SU are generally first-generation college students; 90% of the students are eligible for financial aid and 60% are Pell eligible, which indicates that they are from modest backgrounds and rely on grants from the federal government to assist their educational needs (Melanie Pafer, personal communication, March 26, 2015). Fifty-five percent of the students attending SU participate on one of the 22 sports teams at the university (Remy Martin, personal communication, March 24, 2015). Twenty percent of the students attending participate in one of the performing arts (music) areas at SU; the music programs at the university have grown from 16 students in 1995 to 175 in the fall of 2015; the music program has more than 20 different performing groups, and most of the groups travel to different locations to perform. Both groups of students are eligible for partial scholarships by participating in either athletics or music, and both are also eligible for academic scholarships in addition to their scholarships for their performance. Roughly 75% of on-campus students participate in financial aid programs and receive some sort of financial assistance from the university (Melanie Pafer, personal communication, March 26, 2015). In the most recent numbers released by the university, only 131 students in the fall 2013 freshman cohort at SU did not participate in either athletics or performing arts. This is an area of concern for the university’s leadership because students in athletics or performing arts are discounted at a much higher rate and therefore offer the institution less in net tuition revenue, which means much less in dollars to offer for raises and any additional resources the university needs to maintain its long-term sustainability (Remy Martin, personal communication, March 24, 2015). After reading the reports distributed by Vice-President for Enrollment Management, Remy Martin, and Director of Financial Aid, Melanie Pafer, and discussing these reports with these administrators, I was able to more fully understand the issues these administrators face on a daily basis as members of the enrollment team. For
example, Melanie commented that “students do not have enough financial aid to cover their costs associated with attending a private higher education institution; therefore, the scholarships are significant to the students and their families and make a difference in terms of whether they stay or go.” Another challenge is that many of these students choose to attend based on scholarships, which may mean that students have not really chosen the university based on their selection criteria but rather on which institution has offered the most money, and for most institutions, including SU, this can have a severely negative impact. In the long run, this may mean the loss of that student if he/she leaves the university prior to graduating; this has a negative impact not only on retention rates but also the graduation rates at the university.

**Summary of the Methods**

For this study, I employed a qualitative life story research design. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 26 students at SU. The students represented a cross-section of the 2013 traditional freshman cohort and of SU overall. Eight of the students were involved in athletics, eight were involved in performing arts, and the other 10 students were not involved in either. The interviews were conducted on the SU campus in an auxiliary conference room. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed into Microsoft Word documents. The documents were coded using initial coding (first-cycle coding) and pattern coding (second-cycle coding) (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Figure 7 reflects the hand coding that I utilized to examine the interview transcripts and to capture the rich information that was provided by the participants. Following the hand coding, will be a presentation of the themes that were captured.
### Figure 7. Hand-Coded Data.

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*Note: Yellow highlight indicates dual enrollment offered.*

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*Note: Yellow highlight indicates dual enrollment offered.*
Emergent Themes

Theme 1: Scholarships/Affordability

Since SU has maintained its position as one of the lowest-priced private universities in the state, scholarships are the way that many students and their families access affordable education. SU is as affordable in most cases as many of the larger public universities after all financial aid and institutional scholarships have been applied to a student’s financial aid package. Twenty-five out of the 26 participants reported that they receive some sort of scholarship from the university, whether in the form of an academic scholarship or some athletic or performing arts scholarship or a combination of both. The fact that college affordability and scholarships go hand in hand at SU is no surprise. SU has made it a priority to keep college affordable and has done so by keeping tuition as low as possible. SU has prominently expressed affordability in many of the marketing materials utilized for recruiting. SU has done this by maintaining the discount rate (i.e., the cost of attendance minus all institutional aid) that is in line with most other private universities of just under 48% (Remy Martin, personal communication, May 27, 2015). By keeping costs lower, the tuition that a family needs to pay is also lower; that is, a family does not need to borrow large amounts of outside dollars to cover the costs of the tuition. By keeping tuition as low as possible, SU is competing with most of the larger public institutions across the state (Remy Martin, personal communication, May 27, 2015). This is important because of SU’s large population of first-generation students who may require smaller class sizes and one-on-one face time with faculty members and tutors (Remy Martin, personal communication, May 27, 2015).

Seven students indicated that their reason for selecting SU was based on their financial concerns while attending SU but also the amount of loan assistance that would be needed to
complete their degree. Many of the students were concerned with having large amounts of debt after they completed their degree. Participant 1 stated, “The only way in which I could afford to go to a private school was to receive scholarships that would allow me to be able to afford my education, while staying focused on keeping my loans at a minimum.” A commuter student spoke of the benefits of commuting and how those benefits informed his decision to attend SU: “I selected SU because I am able to commute and save a bunch of money by not living on campus, but I’m still able to participate in normal college activities.” Another student stated: “I had older siblings that attended similar colleges, and they came away with a lot of debt, and as I began my search, this was a critical aspect for me and my family; I did not want the same thing to happen to me.” Another student stated that “because of the support given at a small, private university, I felt this was the best fit for me as I began my college career.” On the institution’s website, SU boasts of being one of the most affordable private institutions in the state of Ohio and that more than 90% of the students receive some financial aid. Obviously, the university leaders have listened to students and included this not only on the website but in a large number of its marketing publications. SU includes numerous outside scholarships that students can apply for on the website. The university uses the word “affordable” in the headlines of several of the financial aid web pages. According to the director of financial aid at SU, “This helps our students and families with understanding how to pay for the gap between the financial aid and scholarships that they receive and the outside forms of financial aid available.” (Melanie Pafer, personal communication, March 26, 2015).

Theme 2: Participation

Because SU is a small, private university and many of the students are first-generation college students, they are looking for ways to get involved (Melanie Pafer, personal
communication, March 26, 2015). At SU, this is somewhat more simplified than at a larger public university. Students can participate in athletics or performing arts, and many of the participants in this study were recruited by either an athletic coach or one of the performing arts directors. Fourteen of the 26 participants in this study were engaged in either athletics or the performing arts, and many of the students reported that either the coaches or the recruiters from performing arts as a key reason for their attendance at SU. One student spoke of the coaches as being a “rather large influence on the student and his family” so much so that it was a major reason for him attending SU. Another described the performing arts director as “being cool” and said that “he really made me feel special” and that this performing arts director was the reason she selected SU. Another student indicated the importance of being involved and said, “This is really important to me, and it is a lot easier to do this at a smaller school like SU than a big school… this was one of the main reasons I choose SU for my college education.” With 14 of the 26 students participating in either athletics or performing arts, the participation in those groups was an important factor in the selection criteria, although of the remaining 12 students, participation in other activities was also an important component in their selection criteria. One student not involved in athletics or performing arts stated: “I selected SU based on the number of activities the university provided and all of the choices, like Greek programming and other opportunities.”

**Theme 3: Academic Programs**

SU offers a variety of professionally focused degrees, and 20 of the participants in this study stated that they selected SU for this reason: an academic program of their choice. The university started as a business school with a focus on secretarial programs and accounting programs. In early 1950, SU expanded its offerings in the business school to offer such programs
as marketing and management. In 1980, SU introduced programs in the criminal justice field and related areas, as well as entrepreneurial programs within the School of Business. Then, in early 2002, following the attack on the World Trade Center, SU created programs in homeland security, cyber security, forensic science and forensic psychology. These programs have become the backbone of the university during the last decade. SU has continued to add programs that match the skills that employers are looking for in recent graduates in terms of job-readiness. This emphasis on preparation and connection with the marketplace is the hallmark of SU. Many of the new programs added in the last several years have been added because of market needs and the needs of employers (Remy Martin, personal communication, May 2, 2015). A drawback may be that when students decide that a particular major that attracted them to SU in the first place is not for them, there are somewhat limited options as these students seek an alternative major. This could be a reason for some of the retention challenges that Surreal University experiences, although this was not the focus of this study.

As stated earlier, twenty of the 26 students indicated that they selected SU based on the academic program of choice; 17 of these students were seeking a degree in business. Specifically, 8 of the 17 students selected accounting as their chosen field within the school of business. One student specifically stated that “this was the reason for my selection of SU.” Another student who took part in the dual enrollment program stated, “My level of comfortability with the faculty member and her discussions surrounding the accounting program really assisted me and my decision to attend SU.”

Nine of the 26 students interviewed reported that they wanted to enter the criminal justice field, and for all 9 of these students, their selection of SU came about because of the reputation of the criminal justice program and the research they conducted when it came to their selection
process. As one participant stated, “I searched for schools that had programs in homeland security, and SU came up as one of the best in the state.” Some students attributed their selection of SU to the words and advice of others who were familiar with the programs at SU and also the faculty within the programs. One student said, “My guidance counselor is the one who introduced me after I told her what I wanted to study; she had mentioned the programs, and as we searched online, I really liked the faculty and the former positions they had held.”

**Theme 4: Internships**

All participants reported that they considered the internships that are part of the curriculum of most programs as a key component in their selection of SU. Of the 26 participants, 20 indicated that this was a very important part of their search criteria, while 6 students reported that it was important. Not one of the participants cited internships as less than important. This is critical when considering which school to attend because many students who seek an internship do so to discover whether their career of choice is what they thought it would be. As one participant mentioned, “This is why I came to school here; I wanted to gain an internship to find out if I wanted to do this for the rest of my life.” Another student said, “The whole reason why you go to school is to get a job, and an internship really helps figure that out!” Another student mentioned that “for all of the schools I chose to visit, this was one piece of criteria [internships] that was included because it is extremely important to me to know that I will enjoy the work I am planning on doing for the rest of my life.”

**Theme 5: Proximity**

Proximity to SU is a theme that emerged particularly for the non-athlete and non-performing arts students. Eight of the 26 students interviewed were from distances greater than four hours away, but only one of these was a non-athlete or non-performing arts student. This
suggests that most of the students from farther distances need the additional recruiter as well as the additional monetary aid to support their educational endeavors. This lone non-athletic and non-performing arts student lived four hours away and chose SU because of a specific academic program SU offered as well as a visit from the admissions counselor. In his own words, he shared what happened when he was attending a college fair where SU was presented:

I felt sorry for the admissions counselor because no one was visiting with her, so I did, and when I left, she made me fall in love with SU, and of course, it did not hurt they had the academic program I was interested in.

This student is from a county in the far southeast corner of the state and is one of only a handful of students SU has been able to recruit from that region of the state. Many of the non-athletes and non-performing arts students are from distances 4 hours away or closer; 11 of the 12 participants who did not participate are from distances of 2 hours away or closer. This may indicate that students closer in proximity to SU were familiar with the university and had heard about its academic programs. At least three participants mentioned that part of the initial search criteria was a school that was within two hours away, and as one student stated, “I wanted to commute so that I could still experience all aspects of university without the cost of room and board.” Eleven of the 12 students from less than two hours away did indicate that they selected SU based on the academic programs that they wanted to study.

**Theme 6: Website**

Most of the students referred to the university website. For example, 24 of the 26 students indicated that their search started or included a visit or two to the website. Seven of the 24 students indicated that they had received and briefly looked at the materials that were sent to their homes, but mostly they reported that their parents or guardians did most of the research
based on the materials sent through regular mail to their home address. As one student stated, “The marketing materials that were sent home really were good for my parents, so after they read something, I did more research on the website.” The same student indicated that “this was not only the case for SU but also for other universities that I was researching.” Modifications to the website emerged as another theme, as this was the starting point for 92% of the students who completed the interview. Many of the students indicated that they started their search via the website; however, they also reported that it was not easy to navigate the website or find the topics or subjects that they were searching for. Most of the participants were actually pretty critical of the website and its features. One student claimed, “The website is a joke; I could not find any information related to my desired program.” Another student stated, “Getting to the information I was looking for was too hard; I almost gave up.” Still other students were a bit more politically correct in their response but nevertheless critical of the website materials. As stated by another student, “Just dress it up a bit more and have a more user friendly system, one that you are able to utilize on your phone or iPad.”

Participants indicated that they liked the photos of the campus and did not feel when they visited campus that it was much different than what was portrayed on the website. On the other hand, 24 students indicated they felt like the website could be restructured so that they and their parents/guardians could navigate more efficiently and that this ease of navigation would have simplified the start of their search process. Many participants reported problems finding the actual costs to attend SU, which could be detrimental to the university, especially since so many students and families have major concerns about price and affordability. Fortunately, at least these participants still chose to attend SU. This information should concern the administrators at the university regarding how many students did not even select SU as an option because they
may have gotten frustrated with navigating the website. SU must find ways to make sure that as one of the lowest priced private universities in the state, this information is easily identified on the website so that students and their families can clearly conduct a cost-benefit analysis without too much navigation before even finding this information.

It is important to note that a report was discovered during this research process that supports students’ comments regarding the website. Specifically, in a report regarding the institution’s website, submitted in March of 2014 by Ellucian (the institution’s third-party provider of technological services), many deficiencies were identified. Included in the report is a general assessment of the website, including such factors as ease of navigation, mobile readiness, features and applications, and social media connections. The report identified that the website was in need of critical modifications, especially considering that students and parents searching for information may not always know where to look for the information in question. The report also indicated an overall score on the key areas that Ellucian utilizes as assessment criteria. These key areas included the following: (a) site navigation, (b) site content, (c) information architecture, (d) site design, (e) search engine optimization, (f) load time/performance, (g) site analytics, (h) mobile optimization, (i) features/applications, (j) browser compatibility, (k) social media, and (l) content management system.

Ellucian graded the website based on metrics surrounding these 12 criteria, with each having a value of up to 10 points, for a total of 120 points. The SU website received a score of 75 out of a possible 120. Nine of the 12 criteria in the report required changes or improvements, including navigation issues, features within the website, and the overall content management system.
Theme 7: Dual Enrollment Programs

Of the 12 students who did not participate in either athletics or performing arts at SU, five were enrolled in SU classes at their high school as a part of the dual enrollment program offered by the university in partnership with many regionally situated high schools. The SU dual enrollment program is a unique program that the university began offering in 2012, when it started partnering with local and regional high schools to offer classes at these high school facility. It started because many superintendents at these high schools were concerned about loss of funds and spoke to university administrators about finding a solution for the loss of state-supported dollars every time a student left their building to enroll in post-secondary courses at a college campus (Remy Martin, personal communication, May 2, 2015). As a result, high school administrators and university administrators worked together to establish dual enrollment courses that would be offered on the campuses of local high schools. This way, the university could continue to showcase courses and faculty members while introducing high school students to the university curriculum and acclimating them to college courses—all without leaving the high school. The university utilized either its own faculty members or approved faculty members who were qualified to teach (Beau Derek, personal communication, May 5, 2015). This made the high school superintendents happy because they would no longer be losing state supported dollars when the high school students left the school grounds, and safety and security of the high school students were still intact as well (Remy Martin, personal communication May 2, 2015). This arrangement was a win-win situation as long as the high schools worked closely with SU’s academic affairs division.

This theme could be one of the most important findings for the university, although the numbers are relatively small because six participants—all of whom were from less than an hour
away from the institution--chose SU, and five of these six were enrolled at high schools where SU partnered to offer dual enrollment courses. These participants selected SU because of their level of comfort with the faculty members and staff members that they had become familiar with as they enrolled in their classes as juniors in high schools. As one of the students mentioned in her comments,

The dual enrollment program provided me an indication of college work and what it is like, and I liked the professor and how she taught us; I am not sure I would have taken a college class if I had to leave my high school.”

Another participant also reported the following:

My level of anxiety was removed because of the courses being taught at my high school. I am really glad I was able to be part of the dual enrollment program… it did have a lot to do with why I ended up at SU as a student as well, because I got to know about the university because of the faculty that taught our classes.

**Theme 8: Local Proximity**

Local proximity emerged as a theme related to the reasons some participants chose to attend SU and it is different than just proximity in that many of the students in the local area had an opportunity through the dual enrollment programs or other avenues to get to know SU earlier than just their college search process. Of the 26 participants interviewed, 12 were not participants in either athletics or performance arts, and of these 12 non-participants, 6 were from the local surrounding counties. The local area is considered less than an hour away from SU. As one participant stated, “I knew the university from when I was little, so I always knew that is where I was going to go.” Because many of the local students knew about SU and were familiar with the school and its campus, many of these students did not consider attending any other university;
they wanted to stay close to home and commute to campus. In fact, of these six participants, all were commuter students.

Another factor for these local participants was affordability. Participants indicated their selection criteria included schools only from the local area as a way of keeping some of the costs lower. Participants specifically stated that room and board costs were factors in their selection criteria. As one participant stated, “Living at home and commuting to SU was an attractive option once all scholarships were calculated and I saw the difference in costs from living at home to living on campus.” Another participant mentioned that “commuting was the only option as I did not receive any scholarships, and thus the only way I was even able to go to SU was by commuting from home.”

**Theme 9: Campus Visit**

Visiting the SU campus was another significant reason participants chose to attend SU. Of the 26 participants interviewed, 20 had been on campus for a campus visit before deciding to attend SU. Out of the 12 non-athletic and non-performing arts participants, 7 had been on campus for a campus visit before deciding to attend SU. The campus visit for these participants had an impact possibly because of the personal attention they received when they visited. As one participant stated, “On my visit, I felt like the staff really made me and my family feel wanted and welcomed; everyone was so nice.” Another participant said, “I left campus and knew this is where I wanted to attend; I felt like any issue I had I could discuss with a staff or faculty member and they would help me through it.” Another participant stated, “There are a lot of really nice staff and faculty at SU; everyone made me feel like I was really special and that they really wanted me to come here.”
An interesting note here is that 5 of the 26 participants also had another set of criteria that they utilized during the campus visit. As one participants stated, “Once I reached campus, my criteria adjusted from the original set to a set that only I could gather once I visited.” One participant reported that “things like the beauty of campus and how friendly people were on the campus visit and the size and selection in the cafeteria” all became criteria once they had visited the SU campus. Another participant stated, “Once I came to campus I looked at things like did I like the dorms, and the library, could I envision myself walking on this campus for the next four years.”

**Theme 10: Study Abroad and Honors Programs**

Participants reported that study abroad and honors programs influenced their decision to attend SU, especially those students not participating in either athletics or performing arts. Seven of the 12 students not participating in athletics or performing arts indicated that the study abroad option was an important factor in their final decision to attend SU. Of those seven students, six were females. As one participant stated, “The study abroad program provides a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to travel and really get an idea of how my degree will work for me well into the future.” Another participant claimed that she really wanted to study somewhere in Europe and was excited to see that SU provided this opportunity as an option. This particular student had never left the United States at the time of the interview but had found out about the study abroad program from another student who was part of it. As a result of him sharing his experience with her, she became interested. Another student said, “I want to study abroad now because I do not know if I will have the opportunity to go anywhere in the future.”

SU does a nice job of identifying the classroom experience as a global community and has cited the importance of education being more than just textbooks and lectures. The real value
lies in the fact that students can experience a global perspective by living in a community outside of their comfort zone. The purpose of traveling abroad is to create for students an independence from their habits, taking them outside of their comfort zone and providing a real-world experience (SU website).

Another theme was the interest in the Honors Program. Nine of the 12 students who did not participate in athletics or performing arts indicated that this was a deciding factor in their selection of SU. All five of the participants in the dual enrollment programs indicated that the Honors Program as a very important piece in their selection of a university. As one participant stated regarding the Honors Program, “I believe this will only help me when I enter the workforce; I need to be able to stand out, and I like how an Honors Program would push me to do even better.” Another participant mentioned that “since I was an Honor student throughout high school, I just wanted to continue to push myself to see if I could do it.”

Of the nine students who indicated that an Honors Program was a key factor in their decision to attend SU, seven were females. This suggests that the selection criteria of female participants focused more on the programs within the institution that would further their studies not only in the classroom but also outside of the classroom and in other parts of the world. Alternatively, the male students focused more on the university campus and, more specifically, on the activities they wanted to participate in, especially in terms of athletics.

The website provides examples of the Honors Program at SU and the holistic approach to education through this program. The students are challenged to critically think over such topics as philosophy, literature, science and other topics (SU website). Most of the students felt the website was not as up to par with the marketing materials, as one student stated “the website is
awful”. Another student stated that “I could not find any information without clicking the search bar for help”. Still another student simply stated “it is not user friendly”.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the decision-making processes, selection criteria, and reasoning processes students have employed in choosing to attend Surreal University. Four research questions were explored:

**Why do students choose to attend Surreal University?** Many students chose to attend Surreal University because of their level of comfort with the university. Many of the students stated that because they live within close proximity to the university, they knew people from the university or had taken classes at their high school and were certain that they could be successful in achieving their goals. Many of the students who lived nearby were also not involved in athletics or performing arts programs, so they relied less on the extra scholarship dollars as did the other students within the study. All of the students surveyed indicated that their selection of the university was primarily due to the impact of the academic scholarships offered and the internships that were a part of the curriculum at the university.

**Why do students who do not participate in athletics or performing arts choose to attend Surreal University?** As I have indicated, the students from the area have a unique understanding of the university and a level of comfort, which made their selection of the university much easier. Six of the students were enrolled in the dual-enrollment program that the university offered at local high schools, which made the selection of SU much more simplified. The students who do not participate in athletics or performing arts programs are often higher achieving students who are local to the university and are very interested in a certain academic offering the institution is noted for. Many of the students not participating in athletics or performing arts stressed the
importance of the relationship with the admissions recruiter as being most important in their
decision.

How can SU formulate or change its marketing materials to recruit more non-extra-
curricular performers to Surreal University? Nearly all of the students (25 of the 26 interviewed)
cited that they began their search on the website and that the website was not the most user
friendly website that they had encountered. The students stated that the website was not as good
as it should be and that the materials that were sent to the students home was a much better
reflection of the university and should be utilized as the template for how to improve the website.
Many of the students stated the information they were seeking was not immediately attainable
and only when they utilized the search function could they find the information that they were
searching for.

Are there similarities in the students that do not participate in athletics or performing arts
to those students that do participate and attend SU, so that the university might be able to recruit
more of these types of students? There are many similarities between the two populations of
students as they started their search process. Many of the students began their search on the
website and had a specific major in mind when they began their search. All of the students stated
that they had a keen interest in their ability to gain internships as they continued their studies at
the university. One area that the students were not similar was that of the students participating
in the dual enrollment programs as all of the students participating in these programs were not
involved in athletics of performing arts programs.

Several themes emerged as a result of analyzing the data from the 26 participants
interviewed. Internships were important for all of the participants, and they cited this as one of
the main reasons for their selection of SU. Participants cited internships as critical since it was
how they could differentiate between schools, and this was especially important since SU has an internship as a part of its curriculum. The participants also cited the importance of the internship as preparation for their chosen careers. The participants felt that the opportunity to complete an internship would provide them with information about whether or not they would enjoy the work they would be doing once they graduated from the university. Some participants recognized that an internship was also an opportunity to determine whether they wanted to continue or potentially change majors if they felt that they would not enjoy their chosen field.

The importance of scholarships and affordability was critical to 25 of the 26 participants. Participants indicated their concern about affordability when attending college and keeping loans and other forms of repayment at a minimum as much as possible. These participants were savvy in terms of understanding and managing the costs and affordability aspects of selecting a university. Many participants selected SU based on this specific criterion, indicating it was the most important aspect of their college search process.

The website was the starting point for research among 24 of the 26 participants; as a result, the website must be kept current and relevant to students and parents since many potential students today begin their college search by pursuing college and university websites. Of the participants who selected the website as an important aspect in their search process, many indicated the website was not easy to navigate and that they could not find the information that was pertinent to their search. The participants also mentioned that they did not find the website to be very welcoming and that many of the photos seemed dated. Many felt the website could be more fully utilized if the materials that were sent via mail could be used as a template for the look of the website.
Academic majors contributed to the decision process of 20 of the 26 participants. Because SU offers a select number of majors, many students, specifically those from Ohio, who are familiar with the institution’s background as a business school and more recently being a leader in criminal justice, chose SU because of these majors and programs. Participants indicated the academic majors offered were a critical aspect of the college search process. In addition to the academic majors, the ability to study abroad and participate in an honors program was an important part of participants’ decision to attend SU.

Proximity to SU was important in that most participants in the study resided in the local area or from less than four hours away, particularly those who were not involved in athletics programs or the performing arts. For the most part, students from more than four hours away participated in either athletics or performing arts programs. Proximity was also included with scholarships and affordability as a part of the selection criteria for students.

Familiarity with the campus, either because of a previous campus visit or participation in the dual enrollment program (or both), was important to participants in choosing to attend SU. The dual enrollment programs attracted students that otherwise would not attend the university based on the level of familiarity with the university, the faculty members, and the staff members. The campus visit was important to 20 of the participants. Once they had visited, the criteria for selection changed, and additional criteria were added to the selection criteria for students.

Finally, the opportunity to participate in intercollegiate athletics, performing arts programs, student government, intramural activities, Greek life and other activities focusing on student involvement were critical. This involvement is important not only in terms of student recruitment but also in terms of student retention.
In Chapter 5, these results are discussed in more detail, and a model is presented to help enrollment management practitioners. Limitations of this study are also provided as well as implications for future research in the field of enrollment management and the student college selection process.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the decision-making processes, selection criteria, and reasoning processes students employed in choosing to attend Surreal University (SU). This information can be utilized by administrators at SU to attract new students to attend the university and increase enrollment. This information can assist other similar institutions that are tuition driven and have moderate to low endowment levels.

The individuals who participated in the study consisted of 26 students. Marketing materials, enrollment reports, information provided on the university website, and other information were instrumental in this study. Eight of the 26 students participated in athletics, eight participated in the performing arts, and 10 did not participate in athletics or performing arts, which reflected a cross-section of the entire entering freshmen class during the fall semester of 2013. Because each student attending SU had a choice among institutions to attend, the purpose of this study was to understand factors and the decision points that contributed to their decision-making process. Of particular interest were the non-athletes and non-performing arts students because these students are provided discounts at a lower rate than students who participate in athletics and performing arts and thus are more attractive to the university because the university realizes a larger portion of tuition revenue from this category of students.

The following research questions guided this study:

(1) Why do students choose to attend Surreal University?

(2) Why do students who do not participate in athletics or performing arts choose to attend Surreal University?
(3) How can SU formulate or change its marketing materials to recruit more non-extra-curricular performers to Surreal University?

(4) Are there similarities in the students who do not participate in athletics or performing arts that do attend SU, so that the university might be able to recruit more of these types of students?

**Discussion**

Recently, higher education institutions have faced difficult challenges and issues, including increasing competition, specifically from for-profit entities, and a shrinking population of traditional-age students (Christensen & Eyring 2011; Coomes & Russo, 2000; Shaw, 2011). Today’s enrollment managers are critical to the success of those institutions. In fact, “Today, enrollment is the most critical factor in determining the success of all colleges and universities, and it is from this lens that college administrators must look in order to fully compete in the changing landscape of higher education” (Lapovsky, 2006, p. 3). Further, enrollment managers are responsible for completing an enrollment/marketing plan, and characteristically this plan involves all key constituents from across the campus community. Grewal and Levy (2010) and Armstrong and Kotler (2013) have suggested a strategic planning and marketing process that can be applied in higher education environments. Given the results of this present study, including the importance of scholarships, distance from the university, internships, academic programs and dual enrollment programs, such a plan might be a great first step for SU because currently, such a plan has not been put into place (Remy Martin, personal communication, May 27, 2015). The process offered by Grewal and Levy include five steps:

1. University leaders, in conjunction with other staff members, define the mission and vision of the organization (Grewal & Levy, 2010).
2. University leaders evaluate the competitive environment by assessing how various constituents, both inside and outside the organization, influence the organization's potential for success (Grewal & Levy, 2010).

3. During this implementation phase, leaders identify and evaluate different opportunities by engaging in a process known as segmentation, targeting, and positioning (STP) (Grewal & Levy, Armstrong, & Kotler, 2013).

4. University leaders implement marketing efforts and, more specifically, implement the four P’s of marketing (product, place, price, promotion). Administrative leaders must facilitate this marketing implementation process. According to Grewal and Levy (2010), implementing and leading these processes are two critical functions of enrollment management.

5. The control phase of the process includes evaluating the performance of the marketing strategy and taking any needed corrective action (Grewal & Levey, 2010).

An important goal of every higher institution is developing an enrollment/marketing plan (Carr, 2012; Grewal & Levey, 2010). This is the first step in truly being able to understand why students choose to attend a particular university (Grewal & Levey, 2010). Through this marketing plan, an institution’s enrollment is comprehensively developed and is based on a strategic, integrative plan that includes the identification, attraction, selection, encouragement, registration, retention, and graduation of targeted student segments (Huddleston, 2000). By understanding that different students may have different selection criteria, enrollment leaders can ensure that a focus is placed on those specific populations, and this then will help ensure that the right mix of students attend the university. With this in mind, the next step must be the training...
of university constituents. This piece is vital before a college or university can begin its recruiting process.

In fact, developing a staff of young professionals who possess the ability to connect with prospective students and their families has never been more crucial. Vander Schee (2010) identified this type of staffing as a key instrument in relationship marketing, whereby one admissions officer attempts to make prospective students and families feel that he or she can answer every question and that there is no need to be transferred from one office to another to get questions answered. Statements from students in the present study, such as “the connection with the admissions counselor that visited my high school,” or the “performing arts recruiter that continued to follow up with me and my family,” indicate the importance of maintaining connections with perspective students and their families. These statements are examples of how vital it is for enrollment leaders to stay abreast of specific criteria that students are influenced by and what their concerns or anxieties are when selecting a college. Enrollment managers need to have a staff of professionals who are in tune with the students of today, and training is the best way to stay ahead of the curve with this (Vander Schee, 2010). The present study reflects the elements that have been identified by previous research, including the need to constantly survey or research the current students in order to stay out in front of the new trends in the college selection process. Many of the participants in the present study indicated the need to feel connected to an admissions recruiter, a coach, or performing arts recruiter.

The findings of the present study, including the importance of the admissions counselor’s and coaches and other recruiters suggest that, while students’ selection criteria may differ slightly, there are several initiatives that enrollment managers can institute to achieve their desired goals and at the same time recruit an optimal number of students. The first initiative is
cost. Many participants were very aware of the costs associated with attending SU and how affordable it was to attend this institution. Students were well aware of the burden of loans after their college careers, and many cited this as a major reason for their selection of SU. This question of cost and affordability in terms of selecting an institution has become an important issue recently, as many state legislators and governors have made it one of the highest priorities (Beaver, 2009). Even the President of the United States has made college affordability one of his main focus areas. To fully understand the concerns of parents and students, it is important to understand the impact of changes to the federal and state policies during the last several years and the impact on the amount of debt students carry into the workforce (Chen & Wiederspan, 2014). Student debt burden is measured by the ratio of monthly student loan payments to gross monthly income. Much of the aid that was previously provided through grants (free financial aid) has been converted into loans; thus, the student debt burden has become increasingly important to understand for students and parents (Chen & Wiederspan, 2014). During the past decade, tuition rates have outpaced inflation rates, and with the current reform in health care, these tuition costs will likely continue to increase (Chen & Wiederspan, 2014). Thus, it is of great importance to university administrators to be aware of tuition costs and the aspect of affordability for students and their families. With costs rising, students and parents will continue to look at affordability as a key metric when assessing a university during the college search process (Chen & Wiederspan, 2014).

A second initiative for institutions of higher education to focus on is student demographics. Most institutions focus on a specific set of student demographics (Pampaloni, 2010). For example, some institutions focus on recruiting high-achieving students and recruit based on top-level SAT/ACT scores and GPA (e.g., Ivy League schools) (Pampaloni, 2010).
Other institutions focus on recruiting students with exceptional athletic abilities and reasonable academic achievement (e.g., NCAA Division 1 Schools) (Pampaloni, 2010). Not only is it extremely important for enrollment managers to know the students who are attending their institution, but it is equally as important to follow up and conduct research with those students in terms of why they selected that particular college. At SU, it is important to understand the demographic profile of the student body and why they chose to attend the university. SU has had a long history of relying on student athletes and performing arts as a way to boost enrollment (Remy Martin, personal communication, May 27, 2015). The advantage for SU of conducting this study is a more in-depth understanding of why students select SU because this study provides information that contributes to a long-term solution, achieving a balance between student athletes, performing arts participants, and non-athletes and non-performing arts students. This study identified the student demographics of those currently attending SU and the potential strategies for purposefully moving away from the reliance on student athletes and performing arts students.

A third initiative is allocation of scholarships and assistance to attend higher education. SU has maintained its position as one of the lowest-priced private universities in the state, and scholarships at SU are the way for many students and their families to afford an education. SU is as affordable, in most cases, as many of the larger public universities after all financial aid and institutional scholarships have been applied to students’ financial aid package. As mentioned in previous chapters, twenty-five out of the 26 students interviewed received some sort of scholarship from the university, whether it was an academic scholarship, athletic or performing arts scholarship, or a combination of both. The fact that college affordability and scholarships go hand in hand at SU is no surprise. SU has made it a priority to keep college affordable and has
done so by keeping tuition as low as possible. SU has prominently emphasized affordability in many of the marketing materials utilized for recruiting. SU has done this by maintaining a discount rate that is in line with most other private universities, which is just under 48% (Remy Martin, personal communication, May 27, 2015). As indicated by a majority of the participants in this study, college affordability was very important when deciding which college they should attend. Several studies cited the importance of financial issues--specifically costs and the availability of financial aid--as one of the top five factors in selecting a college (Letawsky, Schneider, Pederson, & Palmer, 2003; Mattern & Wyatt, 2009). The importance of cost factors has never been a greater influencer of college selection at any other time in the history of higher education (Goss, Jubenville, & Orejean, 2006)--thus the importance of university recruiters understanding the market and how different variables may influence the college selection process (Sevier, 2000).

Maintaining a feasible discount rate is the fourth initiative. By keeping costs lower, the gap between the tuition a family needs to pay is also lower; that is, a family does not need to borrow large amounts of outside dollars to cover the costs of the tuition. Keeping tuition costs as low as possible means that SU is competing with most of the larger public institutions across the state, and some of the other small private colleges and universities in the region, which is a benefit to the population of families that SU serves (Remy Martin, personal communication, May 27, 2015). Because of the large population of first generation students that SU serves, some of the students need the smaller class sizes to have more one-on-one face time with faculty members and tutors (Remy Martin, personal communication, May 27, 2015).

Seven participants indicated that their reason for selecting SU was based on their financial concerns while attending SU and the amount of loan assistance that would be needed to
complete their degree. SU has purposefully kept tuition costs as low as possible to continue to compete with all institutions across the state, including larger public universities. This strategy has continued to keep SU in competition for many students as well as benefitting SU by consistently achieving enrollment goals during the past 10 years. This finding seems to be in line with the model presented by Astin (1975), which examined the impact of the receipt of grants and loans on their college selection and persistence. Many students in Tinto’s (1975) study based their selection on the amount of aid received from the institution of choice and were retained at the institution at a higher rate if they paid for a portion of their college bill out of their own pocket (1975).

Keeping costs relatively low and thus keeping college affordable for many students is one strategy that continues to be successful. Students have been departing college with a lower amount of debt, which is important as students enter the workforce because they are not bogged down with large amounts of debt and a very small paycheck (Remy Martin, personal communication, May 27, 2015). The university applies all federal aid first to a student’s financial aid package. The university then applies any state grants that a student may be eligible for, and finally any institutional aid is applied (Remy Martin, personal communication, May 27, 2015). This purposeful way of utilizing federal, state and institutional dollars, along with a strategy that continues to keep costs affordable, is but one piece of the continual struggle to enroll a high-achieving and robust student body while maintaining a balanced budget and a positive and ever-increasing net tuition revenue for the institution (Remy Martin, personal communication, May 27, 2015).

One participant stated that “the only way… I could afford to go to a private school was to receive scholarships that would allow me to be able to afford my education, while staying
focused on keeping my loans at a minimum.” Another student stated, “I had older siblings that attended similar colleges, and they came away with a lot of debt, and as I began my search, this was a critical aspect for me and my family; I did not want the same thing to happen to me.” Another participant stated that “because of the support in terms of scholarships, and the faculty and staff support given at a small, private university, I felt this was the best fit for me as I began my college career.”

Overall, students have become more insightful in their search process, particularly regarding cost and affordability. This in actuality matches existing reports regarding student debt. For example, according to a report by Shierholz, Sabadish, and Wething (2012), the wages for young college graduates are lower today than they were in 2000. Between 2000 and 2011, real wages (adjusted for inflation) declined by 5.4%. Additionally, young graduates are taking on part-time jobs so that they can afford their student loan payments and other debt they have accumulated (Chen & Wiederspan, 2014). Today’s college students are indeed much more aware of the cost and benefits associated with a college education (Chen & Widerspan, 2014).

A particularly striking finding in this study was the fact that every participant considered the internships that are part of the curriculum in most programs at SU as a critical component of their selection of SU as their institutional choice. Therefore, this is a fifth initiative—that is, ensuring that experiential learning, such as an internship experience, is part of the university’s curriculum and, even more importantly, a part of the recruiting process for university admissions counselors. Of the 26 participants, 20 indicated that this was a very important part of their search criteria, while 6 students said it was important. Not one participant cited this as less than important. This is critical when considering which school to attend because many students who seek an internship do so to determine whether their career of choice is what they thought it
would be. As one of participant reported, “This is why I came to school here; I wanted to gain an internship to find out if I wanted to do this for the rest of my life.” Another student said, “The whole reason why you go to school is to get a job, and an internship really helps figure that out!”

Research literature has suggested that regardless of whether students are athletes or performing arts enthusiasts, most students begin their college selection process in similar ways and based on similar selection criteria (Pampaloni, 2010). Smith (2012) noted that internships are important to students, academic departments within universities, and employers. Students can gain entry and “test drive a career before committing” (Smith, 2012). Internships provide students with real-world experience that employers are looking for, and it can give job applicants an advantage (Tucciarone, 2014). The issue is how college administrators utilize this information to assist the admissions recruiters.

Internships require students to apply the concepts and principles they learned in the classroom to practical application in the workforce (Tucciarone, 2014). The offering of academic programs at an institution and how to best promote these to prospective students is the sixth initiative that enrollment managers can institute. This concept is supported by research conducted by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), which indicated that part of the selection criteria, although not always obvious to students and families initially, is based on the career opportunities within that college or academic program. In this study, academic programs combined with the internships attached to the curriculum were key reasons participants chose to attend SU. Another important aspect of the internship finding is that in students’ initial college selection criteria, internships appeared for all of the students.

Many studies have indicated that student athletes consider academic reputation and availability of athletic scholarships (Reynaud, 1998). Additional studies (Goss, Jubenville &
Orejan, 2006; Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, & Palmer, 2003) have reported that family members influenced some student athletes while finance-related issue influenced others. In most of these quantitative studies, the question of internships has not been noted in any of the research. This finding is critical for SU as it will assist with further marketing materials and adjustments to SU’s website. Most of the past quantitative studies have cited the issue of cost, academic programs, reputation, and location as most critical (Letawsky, Schneider, & Pedersen) to the aspect of internships within the curriculum. Internships have never been cited as a factor within the initial college search criteria, it has shown up in the final selection criteria however. It is important to understand the value of the qualitative research and the impact that it can have on the area of college selection, as this study is one of only a few qualitative studies that has been completed, specifically on a small, private institution. Also this study captures the student voice and what items are important to the student in the student voice.

While many of the central themes seem very different it would seem that they are all connected by the variable of economics. All of the students indicated their need for an internship as a way to select their institution of choice and of course this is another economic issue as the students all indicated their primary goal stemming from the internship was a job within their chosen career field. The themes of scholarships, debt, and affordability are all very clearly key indicators of economic drivers in the selection process.

Even though recruiting is a top priority for enrollment managers, they must balance the achievement of enrollment goals with the aspect of retention and how students and the university are achieving the desired results in terms of retention and graduation rates. This is where strategic planning and enrollment plans that lay out the future of the incoming class and how students persist through graduation become important (Armstrong & Kotler, 2013). In order to
accomplish this, leaders must share annual enrollment plans with their organizations (Kurtz & Scannell, 2006). After everyone in the organization is aware of existing challenges and opportunities, they will be able to fully embrace and support any future vision and planning in a more informed way (Kurtz & Scannell, 2006). In higher education, this means that enrollment must be a top priority for everyone in the organization. The following section highlights several discussion points regarding the study and then suggests a six-step model for enrollment leaders.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings from the present study can serve as effective tools for enhanced enrollment management practice, through researching the student body and utilizing that information to inform the university’s enrollment plan can only benefit the institution in achieving their long term enrollment and retention goals. Further the findings provide evidence that intentional enrollment management strategy can enhance the overall health of an institution by maintaining a mix of students that is desired by the institution and the appropriate discount rates for the institution.

**Factor 1: Scholarships**

While scholarships may be the biggest influencer of students attending SU, this should not be the way SU attracts students in the future. The university should not “buy” students as some for-profit, private and public universities seem to be doing today. Many universities have adopted a growing discount rate while attracting the same numbers of students, which impacts not only the revenue at the university but also the positive effects of the student affairs offices because students’ selection criteria were not fully utilized; rather, the decision of which college to attend was made because of the dollars students received from the university. As more and more institutions have continued to use tuition discounting, some will be forced to adjust their
discounting processes because the discounts will eventually outgrow the net tuition revenue that
the institution generated (Hillman, 2011). One example of an institution that experienced this
over extension was Dickinson College in the late 1990s. Administrators at Dickinson realized
that their tuition discounts were more than 50% and that the net tuition revenue for each student
generated only about $0.48 cents on every dollar. Administrators at Dickinson decided to reduce
the discount rate from 50% to 30%, while also reducing the tuition rates. In response, Dickinson
actually experienced enrollment increases during the next several years, and the net tuition
revenue also increased (Massa & Parker, 2007). Because SU administrators and board members
have continued to focus on tuition at the university and utilize the assistance of a consultant
(Noel-Levitz) when looking at potential tuition increases, the university has been able to invest
in students, locating the so-called “sweet spot” in terms of their willingness to pay and their
ability to pay. This is a key ingredient when establishing strategic enrollment plans and
proposing the proper mix of students.

**Factor 2: Building a Team of Recruiters**

The assistance to the admissions department from additional campus recruiters has a
profound impact on the university and its ability to attract students to SU, in conjunction with
scholarships and affordability. Having coaches and performing arts instructors assist in the
recruiting process helps with the university's ability to continually attract students who want to
participate in athletics or performing arts as well as study within their chosen major. By having
these recruiters assist the admissions office, it becomes a seamless focus for all college
employees to aid the students and the families in this major decision about which is the best
college choice for their son or daughter. This creates one voice and one concerted effort for each
student, and this “centralized” focus could potentially become an even more distinguished competitive advantage.

Having high school guidance counselors assist in this manner is also of extreme importance. As the findings indicated, having a knowledgeable staff is imperative but also having high school counselors who are able to discuss the opportunities that a particular institution can provide is vital as well. As reflected in one study by Kim (2012), “Promoting student access to postsecondary opportunities has become an important organizational goal of most high schools” (p. 513). By having, in essence, another set of recruiters in high school guidance counselors, the institution can become stronger in recruiting new students, but enrollment managers need to make sure the right fit and mix of students in the end of that recruitment class are in line with the institution’s strategic focus. This factor may be a reason that the numbers of students from the dual enrollment programs were so strikingly high in the yield numbers from those programs.

Guidance counselors create relationships not only with high school students but also professors and the institution as whole. These relationships are key, especially as students come closer to making their decision to attend a particular college or university. At the start of the college search process, parents have the biggest influence on students (Bergerson, 2009; Cabrera & LaNasa, 2000; Helwig, 2004; Hossler, 2009). This is especially important when deciding which information to send or even how to communicate with students and their families. But as the search continues, somewhere during the second half of students’ senior year, teachers and guidance counselors have a larger influence on students as they finalize their decisions (Helwig 2004; Hossler, 1999).
By having the ability to participate in a variety of activities, the students that select SU are often happier with their college selection because they now have more connection to the college. They have more access to admissions and financial aid staff, coaches, and performing arts instructors, who can help them, adjust to going away to school. Participating in college activities is a key factor in the selection of institutions and may well be one of the biggest reasons students may elect to stay at the institution or transfer. In many cases during the interviews, participants discussed their selection of SU and said that it was a direct result of having not only admissions personnel contacting them but also the other coaches, performing arts staff, and, in certain cases, the high school guidance counselors sending the same consistent message regarding SU.

At a small, private university, students have many opportunities for involvement in areas outside of athletics and performing arts programming, including intramural athletics or one of the many clubs associated with the degree programs. Students also may become involved in other groups, such as student ambassador programs, which are offered by a variety of departments on campus, including admissions, alumni and development, student affairs, and academic tutoring, just to name a few. Getting students involved in a variety of activities may well be the key ingredient in whether or not a student chooses to stay at SU or decides to transfer. Because of the small size of SU, opportunities are available to all students to get involved and become an integral member of campus. The opportunities help students to feel that they are a part of the campus community much sooner. This leads not only to the matriculation of students but also the retention and graduation of those students.

One of the factors that influence students’ college selection is students’ intuition about how well they fit in at a particular university (Pampaloni, 2010). This aspect of fit and
participation go hand in hand. Much of this fit has to do with how the relationship is formed between the perspective student and the university constituents. At SU, for instance, an admissions counselor may contact a particular student, but then, as the coach/performing arts individual or even a high school teacher or counselor talks with the student even more about the institution, the student feels more connected with the institution. This also can have a positive impact on the retention and eventual graduation of that student from the university.

The State of Ohio recently created the College Credit Plus program for high school students, which enables them to earn college credits and high school credits at the same time by enrolling in college courses from community colleges or universities (Ohio Department of Education, 2015). The purpose of this program is to promote rigorous academic pursuits and to provide a wide variety of options to college-ready students. Enrolling in a college course from a public college or university through College Credit Plus is free. This means no cost for tuition, books, or fees. If students choose to attend a private college or university, they may have limited costs. The program is open to students in seventh through twelfth grades who meet the eligibility requirements as set forth by the state. This program, much like the dual enrollment program, could have a substantial impact on institutions that students have an interest in because with this program, students can enroll in classes through that institution free of charge for large public institutions, or at a minimal charge for the private colleges, and essentially try on that particular college or university.

Factor 3: Know Your Audience

The college selection process that many students employ as they begin their college selection process starts with their parents and friends (Pampaloni, 2010). This extends into social media. Social media could help recruitment of nonathletic and non-performing arts students. The
current population of college-age students is unquestionably “tech savvy,” as evidenced by the fact that 20% of college-age students began using computers between the ages of five and eight (Jones, 2002). Students within this demographic profile will more likely begin their search process using institutional websites and in some cases may make their college selection choice by this means. Recent studies have indicated that many college-bound students begin their search the “old-fashioned way,” i.e., seeking out advice and guidance from their parents, high school teachers, counselors, and friends who have already completed college and/or their college selection (Pampaloni, 2010). However, once a preliminary set of institutions has been selected, students begin to utilize the Internet and specific university websites to disengage from institutions that do not meet their selection criteria (Coomes & Russo, 2000).

The importance of the marketing materials as well as the information provided on the university website is of even greater importance considering the fact that 24 of the 26 students interviewed utilized the website to either begin or at the very least inform them during the selection process. It is therefore vital for enrollment managers to be knowledgeable about the information that is presented not only in the marketing materials and the messages sent to students but also in terms of whether the information on the website communicates a consistent message to the parents and the students. In the future, social media may have an even greater impact on the selection of institutions by students through their circle of family and friends via social media sites. Consider that LinkedIn already has begun to collect information on its more than 277 million members (Maney, 2014). As one of LinkedIn’s executives stated, there is a void of information for college students as they begin the college search process, so LinkedIn wanted to fill the void by mapping colleges to outcomes and outcomes to colleges (Maney, 2014).
LinkedIn begins by analyzing information that students like, which could include the students’ strengths and weaknesses, talents, the subjects they enjoy, and the tasks students like. By the time students reach high school, LinkedIn feels that they have a set of institutions that match these students based on the information collected while students were still in high school (Maney, 2014). This, however, is not just limited to LinkedIn. This idea could be duplicated by sites like Facebook, Google, and others that collect information on member demographics (Maney, 2014). Traditional methods of college data gathering by today’s students are coming to an end. As Maney (2014) stated, “The current (traditional) method is fundamentally flawed and the data will make it better and the outcome will be a much better fit for the student and the university” (p. 22). This piece of information could prove an invaluable asset to enrollment leaders and must be watched closely as to how these sites will match high school students to different institutions that match their profiles. Institutions will then need to figure out how to increase their profiles. Colleges and universities need to be represented in every faction of social media. They need to have a presence on Facebook, LinkedIn, and any other social media site that is presently being utilized by high school students.

**Factor 4: Proximity**

The proximity of the university, especially in the local markets, is an important piece in the student college selection process. Twenty of the 26 participants were from distances less than four hours from campus. Of the six students from distances greater than four hours, all were active in either athletics or performing arts at SU. As stated by Pampaloni (2010) “One of the key factors in the selection of an institution is that of distance from the campus” (p. 87). This is key as enrollment counselors continue to work with students and their families to ensure that high school visits into the local and secondary markets are made and whenever possible the
connections are made stronger by educating guidance counselors and teachers about the advantages of attending SU. In addition, developing the College Credit Plus program and establishing the university as an institution of choice of the schools that are in the local and secondary markets are key factors in capitalizing on proximity issues.

**Recommendations for Practice: The RECIPE**

As Charles Darwin stated, “It is not the strongest species that will survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one that is most responsive to change.” In enrollment management, the same premise is true; those enrollment leaders who can shift with the times and stay on top of the expectations and priorities of incoming students and their families will be able to survive, and the rest will flounder, along with their institutions, until they are forced to make those critical decisions. As Collins (2009) claimed, today’s organizations cannot rest on their success; they must always find ways to stay on top and never become complacent. This is extremely critical for colleges and universities of all types today, regardless of size, whether public or private, or whether blessed with strong endowments or lean endowments. Regardless, even the strongest and mightiest of institutions can quickly fall and fail.

Figure 8 illustrates a recommended plan for enrollment managers to follow in order to remain proactive in understanding the college selection process of today’s students. This model can easily be modified regardless of university type and/or student demographic. The following model is based on a previous model developed by Grewal and Levy (2012). The subtle differences include that of completing research based on the current student population as well as the research from the students that did not select the institution. This model was enhanced through the present research completed at SU. The most important aspect of this research was that of being in the student voice and having this lead the construction of the new model. Many
of the modifications were completed as a direct result of the research. Modifications to the Grewal and Levy model included the construction of the team, which came directly from 20 of the participants who indicated their reliance on the admissions counselor or other recruiter from the university. The present research has influenced the model in general, as there seems to have been a lack of understanding of why students attend a particular university – a must for enrollment leaders at any size institution. Finally, many of the participating students stated that it is not only the admissions recruiters but all of the staff that students met with who were on the same page with the information that was being presented regarding the university.

Figure 8. Model for today’s enrollment manager.

This model incorporates a six-step process that can be utilized to ensure the success of every institution of higher education. As the current study progressed, the model became clear as a path for future leaders in the enrollment field.
Step 1: Research

Data drives change (Maney, 2014), and enrollment leaders need to continuously look at data and research in the field that will enable them to make appropriate decisions for their institutions. For example, an enrollment manager should always be tuned into the “trade” journals on enrollment management and attend conferences on the enrollment management process so that they are attaining continuous education about practices that are most relevant in today’s university environment. This may sound simple, but few enrollment managers make this a priority (Pampaloni, 2010). In addition, enrollment managers should always be able to articulate the most critical factors that influence a significant university decision, and this is done by constantly attaining data and doing research.

Step 2: Evaluate the Data

Enrollment managers need to properly evaluate data. For example, if data show that 85% of today’s direct, out-of-high-school students focus on marketing material received from an institution or website information illustrated by the institution, they should evaluate what this could mean at their institution. What changes need to be made to the marketing materials sent to prospective students? Is what is sent out attractive and eye-catching to today’s prospective college student? If not, what could the institution do instead? What changes are needed on the website? What have students reported as positive or not about information gathered from the university website?

Step 3: Construct the Team and Plan

Enrollment managers and their teams should then construct a plan to proactively recruit, in this example, with marketing materials that have been branded to fit the organizational look (based on what the evaluation process revealed) and provide a consistent messaging across all
communication vehicles, including the website and any outlets in the social media world. In addition, the plan should include how the proactive recruitment process will occur, such as how many mailers. How will hits on the website be responded to? Can the institution create an automatic response for every visit to the university’s website? How will the university track how many students matriculate to the institution because of the newly created marketing materials?

**Step 4: Inform the People**

Enrollment managers and the members of the enrollment team must lead the effort to train everyone across campus; all university constituents, including counselors in the high schools, must be trained and informed about the university brand. Examples of this may include holding informational sessions for the high school guidance counselors so that they are able to more fully understand the competitive advantage held by a particular university (i.e., the best academic programs, etc.). Most high school counselors have not been on a campus unless there is a reason to be there. Enrollment leaders need to give them a reason to be there and a reason to promote their university over other institutions.

**Step 5: Permeate the Organization**

From the time that a plan is announced, enrollment leaders need to communicate the message and the plan. This data-driven plan must fully inform the campus and local communities, including the primary and secondary markets. It needs to be the manual for all who promote the institution in any way, shape or form.

**Step 6: Evaluate the Outcomes**

In everything that is done, whenever changes are made, enrollment leaders should be able to evaluate the results of the change that has been implemented. This is especially true when dealing with small, private institutions of higher education that have limited resources in terms of
endowments. In short, analyzing the results must be part of this process. This last step closes the loop and takes the enrollment manager back to Step 1 again.

This model is the R-E-C-I-P-E for success for enrollment managers at small, private universities. Enrollment leaders who implement this model can continuously improve their university and succeed in recruiting students.

**Recommendations for Future Study**

Further investigation is needed to study the longitudinal aspects of an incoming class not just at one university but potentially several institutions. This research should explore not only the reasons students attended one university over another but also reasons they remain at their chosen institutions.

The second recommendation for future research is to understand the relationship between tuition and enrollments. Quantifying supply, demand, and price elasticity is critical to success in the enrollment and marketing aspects of private schools. While identifying whether there is a relationship between tuition and enrollment, it should be noted that different methodologies should be used for the study of enrollment management. The field of enrollment management would benefit from both qualitative and quantitative studies.

The last recommendation for future research is to undertake a study that examines the implications of an institution that has continued to reduce budgets based on failure to meet enrollment objectives and the reduction of faculty members and staff members.

**Limitations**

This study focused on one private institution of higher education and the students who chose to attend the institution. One limitation is the fact that although I tried to remain objective,
my background includes being a higher educational administrator, and this may have influenced this study.

Another limitation is that the scope of this study was limited due to numerous reasons, including a lack of response from students. If I had more available resources perhaps a larger sample size could have been attained. Although the study included a cross section of SU’s student body, the study could have been enhanced if it would have included individuals who attended different institutions, including a more selective institution, a public institution, and perhaps even a for-profit institution. Perhaps research in this area could expand and be broadened by studying university type and varying degrees of student demographics, including the adult student and the online student.

Conclusion

Private, higher education institutions in the United States have strong historical foundations, specifically dating back to the early 1600s, when Harvard University first opened its doors in 1636. The role of enrollment managers has shifted; the role is no longer that of a gatekeeper, whose job it was to ensure that only “qualified” students were admitted (Astin, 1975). Today, the expectations of enrollment managers is much greater and much more complex. Maguire and Butler (2008) stated that enrollment managers of today must support a college environment in which all constituents are involved in the recruitment process and create an atmosphere in which the efforts of faculty members, staff members, and administrators are student-focused and the students feel engaged throughout their entire collegiate experience. This is much easier said than done because this is extremely difficult. Regardless, for the purpose of this study, enrollment management was defined as “a confluence of departments at a university assigned to recruiting and/or retaining students” (Maguire & Butler, 2008, p. 23).
Institutions need to realize that students attending the institution can provide a roadmap for how to continue to increase the desired populations and the mix of students at a given university. The findings of the study revealed that students attend a university for a myriad of reasons, but the best way to answer the question of why a particular institution is selected is to ask the students themselves. Getting the student voice and viewpoint is a must for any enrollment leader to understand how and why students are selecting and persisting at any institution.
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APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following questions, constructed as open-ended with ample room for the key informants to discuss the topic and the issue, were used in the interviews with key informants:

1. How old are you?

2. Where are you from?

3. How did you find Surreal University (SU.)? Website, commercial, guidance counselor etc…

4. Why did you choose to attend SU? Academic program, athletics, friend attends etc…

5. Are you receiving any type of scholarship at SU? If so, describe?

6. Did you visit SU before deciding to attend? If so, how many times did you visit and what did you observe?

7. If you found SU on the website, how did your search arrive at SU? Google, yahoo or another search engine? What was your opinion of our website? Did it impact your decision at all?

8. Did you visit/search any other schools? If so, which ones?

9. What was more important to you, the marketing material or the campus visit?

10. How do you think we did with marketing SU?
11. In comparison to other schools, were our marketing pieces good, better or best? Why?

12. How important are the following to you:
   a. Study Abroad
   b. Greek Life
   c. Residential Life programs
   d. Honors Programs
   e. Campus Security
   f. Campus Health Center

13. Are you involved in academic clubs or professional society service groups? If so, please explain.

14. How was your experience with the university as you enrolled?

15. Please explain your opinion on SU’s academic majors, courses and other academic experiences.
Sample e-mail

Introduction and Purpose of Interview

I am a doctoral candidate in the Doctorate in Education program at Bowling Green State University. I am in the process of writing my doctoral dissertation and am collecting data for that purpose. For my doctoral dissertation, I am very interested in exploring and understanding the reasons why students selected to attend SU. In addition, I am interested in further understanding of the college selection process that you experienced during your search process.

The purpose of this e-mail is to ask for your assistance as administrator here at SU and a doctoral student at BGSU, by agreeing to be a participant in this study you will not only be of assistance to SU but also enable me to achieve my goal.

Please ask any questions that you have about participating in this project at any time. I want you to have the information you need to make a decision that is best for you.

Thank you for your time, I look forward to hearing from you,

Sincerely,

Ronald M. Schumacher

Doctor of Education Candidate
APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT

WHAT ATTRACTS STUDENTS TO A SMALL PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study
The goal of this research study is to gain an understanding of why students select SU as the institution of choice.

This study is being conducted by Ron Schumacher, an administrator at SU and a student at BGSU seeking his Doctor of Education degree.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you agree to participate in this study, you would be interviewed for about an hour in three separate sessions. The interview includes questions about your college selection process and how you found out about SU and other influencers in your decision making process.

Participating in this study may not benefit you directly, but it will help us learn how and why students select SU.

The information you will share with us if you participate in this study will be kept completely confidential to the full extent of the law. Your information will be assigned a code number that is unique to this study. The list connecting your name to this number will be kept in a locked file [specify where] and only the Study Director and other researchers will be able to see the list or the interview you participated in. No one at SU will be able to see your interview or even know whether you participated in this study. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the list linking participant’s names to study numbers will be destroyed. Study findings will be presented only in summary form and your name would not be used in any report.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Ron Schumacher at 419-448-3584 or Dr. Pat Pauken at BGSU at 419-111-2222.

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS FORM WHETHER OR NOT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE.
APPENDIX D. THANK-YOU EMAIL

Bowling Green State University

Sample e-mail Thank You

Thank you for agreeing to participate

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my study.

In the next week, I will be reaching out to you to set up times for us to get acquainted so that we can begin the interview process as quickly as possible. We may have a couple of sessions before I have captured enough rich content.

I look forward to meeting with you.

Thank you for your time, I look forward to hearing from you,

Sincerely,

Ronald M. Schumacher

Doctor of Education Candidate

Bowling Green State University
APPENDIX E. WEB ASSESSMENT

Web Assessment
2014

INTRODUCTION
A remote assessment of the **Surreal University website** was conducted in March of 2014. The assessment focused on a number of areas including site content, site navigation, information architecture, site design, content management system, social media, mobile optimization, search engine optimization, and site features and applications. This document provides the high level results of the assessment including best practices, issues identified and brief recommendations within the **Surreal University** web presence.

FINDINGS

GENERAL ASSESSMENT
The following tables provide a high level evaluation of the areas assessed:

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ASSESSMENT CRITERIA
The following definitions provide sample questions and criteria to explain the rating process used above:

1. **Site Navigation** – Is the navigation structure organized in a logical hierarchical manner? Are there common global elements present across all pages? Does the site contain major search elements (alphabetical site map, hierarchy site map, “bread crumbs”)? Are navigational menus present to local areas of the site? Are standard locations used for navigational elements? Are they consistent? Are different groups of individuals (e.g., current students, perspective students, alumni, faculty, and parents) accurately represented in the organization of the content?

2. **Site Content** – Does the home page/content pages contain detailed text and explanations as opposed to only lists of links to other pages? Does the text appear complete and well written? Are illustrations and images clear and professional? Is there a sufficient amount of content “coverage” throughout the different areas of the Website?

3. **Information Architecture** – Is information easy to find from one section of the Website to the next? Will users often get lost, or not know where information is being kept on the Website? Does information seem to be ordered logically in sections of the Website, relevant to the other surrounding content/links?

4. **Site Design** – Are major sections of the Website consistent in the use of institutional branding, logos, and colors? Do template designs and structures throughout the website use modern web design trends and techniques to display content in the most professional, clean, and easy to use manner? Are website templates coded properly with HTML, CSS, and JavaScript?
5. **Search Engine Optimization** – Are HTML META tags present? Are they populated with unique information? Is there sufficient/appropriate information for search engines to utilize? Do pages contain heading tags? Are proper 301 redirects in place? Is the site using canonical URLs?

6. **Load Time/Performance** – Were the load times acceptable on the home page/randomly selected pages? Are images optimized for use on the Internet? Are images sized (physical and file size) appropriately? Are images over-used (used in place of formatted text, used for spacing)?

7. **Site Analytics** – Is the Website currently using a site analytics tool to measure user and page statistics? Is the analytics tool tracking all pages throughout the Website presence?

8. **Mobile Optimization** – Is there a mobile version of the current Website? Is it responsive?

9. **Features/Applications** – Was there a sufficient number of features present for the end user? Were they static (HTML/PDF) or dynamic (database-driven)?

10. **Browser Compatibility** – Does the existing site and tested pages support the features of major Web browsers? Are there non-standard coding elements/practices in use? Are the sites notably different between different browsers and platforms?

11. **Social Media** – Does the Website provide social media outlets such as YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, and Twitter? Are Twitter and YouTube pages customized to remain consistent with the institution’s branding? Is the web site utilizing social media features throughout the public website?

12. **Content Management System** – Is the institution using a content management system (CMS) for website updates? Does the CMS meet the needs of the College and support the website in an effective way?

## CONTENT ASSESSMENT

### SITE NAVIGATION

The following criteria were used in evaluating the navigational structure within the **SU** Web presence:

**Criteria Finding**

- Site Map (Hierarchical) and/or A to Z index Present
- Bread Crumb Navigation Elements Present
- Global Navigation Present
- Local Navigation Present
- Friendly Error Page (404) for Broken Links Present
- Navigation Design Can Use Improvement

**SU** website contains a great deal of quality content. The quality and usefulness of this content is critical to the end user’s experience. However, it is equally critical for the end user to be able to find the information they are seeking. In order to ensure the best possible experience for end users, websites need to present an intuitive and comprehensive navigation structure.

Incorporating global navigation elements on a higher education Website is very important because it will allow end users to access many highly trafficked and highly sought links from almost any page of the website. Many subject-based and audience-based navigation links are often placed near the header of the website. If incorporated correctly into a template structure, the global navigation menus can display toplevel links consistently across every page of the website and provide quick access points to various pages that website visitors are wanting to find. Such links as About Us, Admissions, Athletics, Alumni, and Student Services are all examples of commonly used global navigation links on a higher education website.

Other links that can "guide" users are more audience-based, such as Current Students, Prospective Students, etc. **SU** does display several global navigation elements with effective placements and information architecture structures, however some of the design and layouts of these navigation structures can be improved.

Many institutions will also place global navigation elements within the footer of their Website. **Surreal University** does display a consistent footer throughout the website; however, some design enhancements can be added to the footer, resulting in a more positive navigation and content experience for end users.
The local navigation on the interior pages of a website is often found on the left or right hand side of interior pages and is typically more topic or section specific than the global navigation. **Surreal University** does display local navigation elements throughout all of the interior pages that were reviewed during the time of this assessment.

A 404 error page is displayed when an end user navigates through to a broken link on the website or when an end user enters a bad URL. Often, websites will include a friendly 404 error page configured to allow their website visitors to see the 404 error message within the global template structure so that important website navigation elements and search features are readily available. **Surreal University** is doing an excellent job of utilizing a friendly 404 error page within their website. “Bread crumb” links (usually located at the top of the page, illustrating the path from the home page to the current document) are present on the **Surreal University** Website. An example of “bread crumbs” can be seen below:

**Example 1:** “Bread Crumbs” located at the top of a web page.

Bread crumbs are an important aspect of a website’s navigation structure because it will allow the end user to always see the path of where they started on the website (home page) to the current page they are visiting. **Surreal University** does include breadcrumb navigation throughout any areas reviewed during this assessment.

**SITE CONTENT**

The following criteria were used in evaluating the content within the **Surreal University** Web presence:

**Criteria Finding**

- Sufficient Content Coverage Yes
- Sufficient Image and Photography Content Yes
- Content is Written for the Web Mostly

Content is one of the most important aspects of a website. Website content is made up of more than just the text. Content is comprised of the images and banners, headlines, or all the fine details that make up a course catalog. Every piece of content is important and contributes an important role in the success of the website.

In the case of **Surreal University**, most content has been written for the web and contains sufficient content copy throughout many sections reviewed during this assessment.

Some areas reviewed can use additional dynamic content components through interactive features, applications, and widgets. Discovery and strategy sessions are recommended to gain an understanding of which content areas should be revised, built upon, and to provide advisement on the content creation process. This will ensure that **Surreal University** is using best web practices and are reaching target audiences effectively through their messages on the web.

**INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE**

A University’s website can contain thousands of pages, with information targeted towards multiple different audiences. Revising how that information is organized and presented by implementing an information architecture solution will enable users to find the information they are looking for in a quicker amount of time.

Information on a website should be presented and layered in a manner that will allow end users to intuitively navigate the website. Users often need to know the answer to two questions when they are visiting a website: “Where am I right now on the website?” and “How do I get to where I want to go next?” In the case of the **Surreal University** website, users are mostly presented with clear navigation paths and clear calls to action.

A common mistake on higher education websites is having no information architecture governance in place and allowing content managers to place content wherever they would like. This action can often result in duplicated content, outdated information, and an excessive amount of pages with uncategorized information. These factors can make it increasingly confusing for end users to navigate to the appropriate information they are looking for.
Discovery and strategy sessions are recommended to fully review and revise various areas of the **Surreal University** website’s information architecture structures, ensuring that all website visitors will have a positive experience while navigating through the website.

**DESIGN IMPROVEMENTS**
The following criteria were used in evaluating the design templates within the **Surreal University** website presence.

**Criteria Finding**
Alignment Good
Typography Good
Precedence (Guiding the Eye) Good
Spacing Good
Navigation Design Can Use Improvement
Color Choices Good
Design Consistency Good
Global Footer Design Can Use Improvement
Global Header Design Can Use Improvement
Calls to Action Can Use Improvement
Design Brand and Identity Good
Mobile & Tablet Design Can Use Improvement
Use of Professional Photography Good

Although design can be very subjective, several design principles can always be used to create templates that are very marketable, professional, and easy to use for all target audiences. Proper spacing such as line spacing, padding, and white space needs to be in place to achieve a design effect that will allow end users to easily read key content elements on a web page. Other design elements such as navigation, typography (color, spacing, font choices, font sizes, and line length), alignment, website colors, and contrast all contribute an important role in a website's template design. If used effectively, these visual design elements can dramatically increase end user experiences throughout the website.

In the case of the **Surreal University** website, many design choices have been made that support a strong online presence and identity for **Surreal University**. However there are some areas that were reviewed that have a need for more modern design approaches that will increase focus on key calls to action and University marketing messages, increase navigation experiences, utilizing a framework with effective placement of rich interactive features and applications, following modern design approaches and trends that are being used throughout the web today.

Various modern higher education website designs today are also incorporating unique landing page designs for departments such as Admissions, Academics, Alumni, and other departments. Some departments or service offering within a University have their own particular business needs and messages that they need to convey to their unique audiences on the web. Interior template layouts and designs can be constructed that support those messages in an effective way. **Surreal University** should consider providing various landing page layouts that support their department’s key business needs and messages through a site redesign.

**Surreal University** can greatly benefit from a full website redesign. Template design and layouts should be constructed that allow for a modern and professional impact of the University to end-users. A design should be made that supports the business needs, marketing messages, and vision of the University, as well as, expressing the strong culture and unique identity of the **Surreal University**.

**SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION**
The following criteria were used in evaluating the metadata / search engine optimization (SEO) structure within the **Surreal University** website presence, and a portion of these results were provided by WebsiteGrader.com:

**Criteria Finding**
Unique Meta Description Used on Home Page No
Unique Meta Descriptions Used on Interior Pages No
Proper Use of Page Headings Mostly
Proper Use of ALT Tags Some
Proper Use of Canonical URLs or 301 Redirects No
Pages Titles Optimized for Search Engines Yes
META descriptions are very important because they will provide a unique description of each page when an end user is searching for key words related to your website on search engines, such as Google. **Surreal University** does not include any unique META descriptions throughout all of the pages reviewed during this assessment.

Headings and sub-headings are used to help users identify content specific areas. Websites use tags in their HTML code to achieve this. These tags not only help users read the content, they also help search engines better understand the content on a page. It is a good idea to use heading tags to help search engines identify webpage content. Nearly every page of the website should include heading tags. **Surreal University** is doing a good job of utilizing heading tags in most of the areas reviewed.

Providing appropriate ALT tags throughout the College’s website not only assists end users with disabilities that are viewing the website, but can assist search engines in better understanding what kind of content the website contains. ALT tags are not being used properly and consistently throughout the **Surreal University** website.

Content is also a very important aspect of a website’s search engine optimization process. Writing meaningful, well-formatted content copy with important keywords cannot only make an end user’s experience more enjoyable, but it will also increase search engine experiences and rankings. Review of content areas throughout the website presence reveal that content keyword population and placement can use some improvements.

Some of the areas reviewed throughout the **Surreal University** website are not using proper search engine optimization techniques. It is recommended that **Surreal University** review, strategize, and compose a new search engine optimization solution and set SEO guidelines for the website, resulting in more meaningful and clear search results with improved rankings.

**LOAD TIME/PERFORMANCE**
Many factors can affect a Website's load time, including: server performance / location, page caching, image optimization, number of HTTP requests, and use of best practices for HTML, CSS, and JavaScript coding. Through initial testing, load times throughout the **Surreal University** website appear to be normal, however a review of the current server and hosting specifications is recommended to ensure best practices are maintained throughout the web presence and to recommend any improved practices that may increase load times.

**SITE ANALYTICS**
During this assessment it appears that **Surreal University** is tracking website statistics using Google Analytics Tools. Setting up proper analytics tracking on a website can allow primary website stakeholders (i.e. Marketing Department) to review visitor statistics on their institution’s website and make key decisions based on the analytics reports regarding website content, placement, and producing effective web marketing solutions. **Surreal University** is doing an excellent job by tracking visitor statistics on the website through the use of modern analytics tools.

**MOBILE OPTIMIZATION**
The following criteria were used in evaluating the **Surreal University** mobile Website presence:

**Criteria Finding**
Mobile/Tablet Version of Website Mobile - Yes
Tablet - No
A review of the **Surreal University** website indicates that the website has a mobile specific layout for devices that are 640 pixels wide or less. This allows the website to display optimally on mobile devices.
devices, however does not include a tablet specific style coverage for tablet devices with wider resolutions such as the iPad.

Today mobile and tablet layouts are becoming more important than ever. Students, faculty members, and other audience groups are regularly looking at the Surreal University website from their handheld devices. This is why Surreal University should consider a redesign to include a powerful responsive design solution for mobile and tablet devices.

FEATURES AND APPLICATIONS
End users are expecting much more from websites than they have in the past. Users want to be able to interact with a website by utilizing interactive calendars, course guides, news listings, and more. End users expect to find areas where they can easily connect with staff and can get their questions answered.

Implementing interactive features and applications can increase an end user’s experiences throughout the website. A review of the features and applications on the Surreal University website revealed that Surreal University is providing their audiences with various features and applications, but feature coverage should be expanded and existing features and applications can be improved.

The table below provides an overview of some primary features and applications that were reviewed during this assessment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature / Application Finding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Events Calendar Needs Improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Needs Improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Page Rotating Gallery Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directory Needs Improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site Map or A to Z Index Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Forms Needs Improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student/Faculty/Staff/Alumni Profiles Can Use Improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Application Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search Feature &amp; Search Results Present</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most areas of the Surreal University website can use extensive improvements to provide rich interactive features and applications that users expect to see today. Most of the content reviewed is being delivered in a static capacity (i.e. forms are in PDF and DOC formats). Surreal University should consider delivering dynamic content throughout powerful, clean, and interactive features throughout the website.

Discovery and strategy sessions are recommended to assess what kind of content will best suit Surreal University’s business needs and goals. Features and applications that support those business needs and goals can be designed, built, and configured to seamlessly integrate within the Surreal University website, providing rich content features and applications that are useful and impactful to all of Surreal University’s audiences.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Criteria Finding
Facebook Account Found Yes
YouTube Account Found Yes
Twitter Account Found Yes
Social Media Icons Present in Global Navigation Yes
Social Media Feed/Widgets/Sharing Present on the Website Some

Today’s social media usage is dramatically increasing, including their use on higher education websites. The correct use of social media outlets on a higher education website can increase an institution’s marketing reach to prospective students and they can give students, alumni, parents, and other targeted audiences a way to connect with each other. Surreal University is doing an excellent
job of utilizing several social media tools, but can expand on how social media is being used throughout the main website.

Social media links are often incorporated in the global navigation structure, often placed near the header or footer of a website. **Surreal University** is doing a great job of incorporating their social media accounts into the overall template structure, allowing them to be visible from nearly any page of the website.

**Surreal University** Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts were found during the time of this assessment. The website should be configured and planned to allow seamless integration of these social media tools throughout the website. Discovery and strategy sessions are recommended in order to assess how these social media tools can deliver effective messages to target audiences throughout the website presence.

**CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

**Surreal University** may not be using a content management system (CMS) on their website. A CMS can be implemented that allows for content managers to update their portions of the website with minimal training and effort, allows for display of consistent design elements and theme customization, friendly URLs, improved SEO, and much more.

Ellucian Web Developers are skilled in configuring a CMS that makes content edits easy for anyone. Based on technical requirements, Ellucian Web Developers will configure options and features that will allow content managers to make quick and effective updates, all with very minimal training. Some of the applications and features that can be integrated within a CMS include online calendars, rotating galleries, online forms, news, directory, spotlights, and much more. **Surreal University** should consider maintaining nearly all of their applications and features through the use of a CMS.

Through a redesign, a CMS can be implemented that will allow for consistent design elements, designated content areas, and rich features and applications that web users are looking for today. The correct CMS will also provide intranet capabilities, allowing for a secure, private website to be maintained with the same software that is used to maintain the public website. Through further discovery of **Surreal University’s** marketing goals and strategy, a CMS can be customized that supports the University’s business needs and vision.

**NEXT STEPS**

This assessment reviews high level website components compared to industry best practices. It is recommended that next steps involve an in-depth discovery session with **Surreal University** key stakeholders in the creation of a new web presence. An effective university strategic plan and marketing goals will drive an engaging user experience on a future **Surreal University** website.