A Thesis

Entitled

Factors Determining Student Choice of Christian Liberal Arts Colleges

By

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An Abstract of
Factors Determining Student Choice of Christian Liberal Arts Colleges

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The research question this thesis answers is why do students choose to attend selected Midwestern Christian liberal arts institutions for their education. The literature indicates that there are many different factors influencing college choice, and there are three different phases of college choice: the decision to go to college, of where to apply, and of where to enroll. This study will address all three stages, but focus on the third. To answer the research question, 20 first-year college students were interviewed using an interview guide for 30 minutes each, 10 at a Midwestern Christian liberal arts college and 10 at a Midwestern Christian liberal arts university. The interviews were transcribed and data was lifted from the transcriptions through a typological content analysis, which allowed the researcher to compare the themes of college choice found in the research to those in the literature. The final chapter examines how the influences indicated by the study participants have implications for the endurance of Christian liberal arts colleges in our current time and also has recommendations for further study.
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I. Introduction - An Issue of Choice

Introduction

The majority of college bound high school students today spend the last two to three years of high school sifting through piles of brochures, advertisements, and obvious marketing strategies from a broad range of colleges and universities. There are 4483 colleges and universities for students to choose from, one for every caliber of student with interests in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009) The choice is between schools with two-year programs and those with four-year programs. Students who want a private four-year education have 1838 schools to choose from (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). There are marked differences between public and private universities. Students engaged in the process of college choice have to consider their educational interests and goals, and thus consider the major choices one college might offer and another might not. In high schools where the next step as college is assumed, sophomores are asked to start thinking about what career they want to choose and they are slowly convinced by their guidance counselor, and perhaps those piles of mail, that they need to make that decision as soon as possible.

It is true that in our current educational and economic climate most high schools, especially those that are considered “college preparatory,” have it as a goal to order their students’ thinking and learning towards college. High schools offer Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and dual enrollment courses, so that their students can have a leg up in college. They prepare their students specifically for aptitude and placement
tests, such as the SAT and ACT. Students are given the chance to be involved in extracurricular activities—including community service—to round out their college applications. Strong writing skills and math skills are stressed, and sometimes simultaneous enrollment at local community colleges will give high school students college level credit for their high school classes. Students generally go through all the steps, including meeting with a high school counselor, attending college fairs, listening to their peers already in college, and, more frequently in the current generation, their parents. They go on visits, take tours, and listen to admissions counselors.

Admissions counselors work to convince perspective students that their respective institution can be a great fit for them. In many cases there is more than one great fit, but after visiting a school, the students will probably be aware of the benefits one would encounter going to that particular school. Different colleges are preferable for different reasons, and no one school is the only perfect destination for a newly graduated high school senior. However, from a retrospective stance, one can see that his or her college choice was not based on one particular thing. It was a combination of the right environment, the right distance from home, the right financial package, and, for some, the right collection of beliefs on which the college was built and is run.

For students entering college, the mission of the university and the faith tradition behind the university has a tremendous impact on whether or not they would even consider applying or enrolling there (Benne, 2001). Spiritually-focused students are likely interested in spiritually-focused institutions. In some cases, spiritually-focused students pursue Christian education without considering the cost, the location, or the actual quality of education. In other cases, there is a great deal of deliberation between a favorite
Christian school and a top-ranked public university, which would provide student with an equally good chance of receiving a life-changing education. The aim of this study is to explored the thought students attending a Christian liberal arts college, spiritually-focused or not, put into their college choice.

Background on College Choice

The aggressive strategies of college admission departments and the vast array of choices available to the typical high school senior were not always present. Prior to the 1970’s, colleges could generally rely on a certain number of students to apply and attend, while they passively waited for the applications to just appear in the mailbag (Paulsen, 1990). In 1974, because of a small economic downturn, for the first time in the history of American higher education, colleges could no longer rely on students to apply and enroll without a proactive admissions strategy in place (Paulsen, 1990). The gentle economic downturn starting in 1974 caused high school graduates to seriously consider forgoing four years of relatively profitless learning for the chance of four more years of money-making (Hoxby, 2004). Colleges learned through this transition that it was easier to increase enrollment with an aggressive enrollment management plan. Enrollment management plans did not go away when the recession did, and this movement gradually evolved into the admissions programs seen today.

Admissions programs were only the start, however. Much of the information currently available on college student choice pays close attention to marketing and economic trends, as well as the correlation between financial aid packages and college choice (Hoxby, 2004; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983, Manski & Wise, 1983). Robert Birnbaum
makes this connection as well, noting that institutions of higher education are usually five to ten years behind the corporate world, in terms of management fads and techniques for tracking student data (Birnbaum, 2001). From the last decade of the twentieth century on, there has been a trend of considering students as customers and implementation of “good customer service” strategies (Hill, 1995). In light of the fact that marketing and economics sometimes has an effect on student college choice, it is important to keep the economic and monetary aspects of college choice in mind, even though we are focusing on the spiritual aspect of college choice.

Intersect of Choice and Faith

The phrase “Christian liberal arts college,” used liberally throughout this study, is defined in the following way. Simply, they are colleges where academic subjects are taught through a Christian worldview. “Academic subjects” are disciplines which do not directly relate to technical trades, and a “Christian worldview” is a comprehensive understanding of the world from a specifically Christian standpoint and can be broken down further to reflect the ideologies of certain Christian denominations. Thus a Methodist liberal arts college, a Roman Catholic liberal arts college, and a Christian Reformed liberal arts college would all be grouped under the category of “Christian liberal arts college.” The institutions participating in this study, a Christian liberal arts college and a Christian liberal arts university, both in the Midwest, belong to the Christian Reformed and United Brethren denominations respectively. The teachings of the Christian Reformed church are based on the work of the French Reformer John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper. The Reformed Church is distinctive from other Christian
denominations in that it stresses the following tenets of Christianity: the sovereignty of God, the authority of Scripture, the need for discipline in daily life and that Christianity is a religion of the Kingdom of God (DeMoor, 2001). The Church of the United Brethren in Christ has a different approach to Christianity. The church was founded by Martin Boehm and William Otterbein in 1767, back when the nation was still colonies. These two men composed a Confession of Faith that had guided the church body ever since. The central tenets of the Confession are: the Triune God, Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the Holy Spirit as comforter and guide, the Holy Bible and the salvation message within, and the Christian ordinances, such as baptism and communions, known to other denominations as sacraments (United Brethren, n.d.)

Even though there is a Christian liberal arts college to correlate with almost any branch of the Christian church in America, the reason a student chooses a Christian liberal arts college may very well have nothing to do with their personal faith (Johnson, Kristeller & Sheets, 2004). The school may be reputable, close to home, their parent’s alma mater, or the right choice for any number of reasons. However, in many cases it is assumed that the existence of a college supported and endorsed by the student’s Christian denomination may be cause enough for the student to seriously consider that college for their education, provided the student is seriously devoted to his or her Christian denomination. Christian church bodies, especially those noted as being fundamentalist, have a strong internal teaching that their young should be brought up in the “true” faith (Kazanjian & Lawrence, 2000).

The faith background of a college does not correlate directly with its level of academic rigor. A portion of Christian liberal arts colleges have surpassed the
expectations of their non-Christian and non-private college counterparts, in terms of academic excellence (Budde & Wright, 2004). While alumni of these colleges might take pride in the successes of their alma maters, they may also worry about how the college has changed since they were students, and this may affect their desire to donate to the school. On the other hand, high school graduates looking for a new educational home tend to meet colleges where they are in terms of commitment to a certain faith tradition. They might not care that a school used to be traditional or rooted in faith; they may only be concerned that the school has what they need and will serve them well for their college years.

One initiative that ties most Christian liberal arts colleges together is an intense commitment to the philosophy of *in loco parentis* (Budde & Wright, 2004; Benne, 2001). Christian liberal arts colleges are known for conservative living restrictions, such as single-sex residence halls, limited visitation hours in the opposite-sex residence halls, strict prohibition of alcohol and smoking, and guidelines for what kinds of music and films students can enjoy. These restrictions may cause a student to choose a liberal school for their undergraduate experience or particularly pious students may see those restrictions as necessary (Johnson, Kristeller & Sheets, 2004). The variety of Christian liberal arts colleges does make it difficult to assume that these restrictions would be deciding factors across the board. Students can also circumvent many of these restrictions by choosing to live off campus for most of their college years. However, it is important to keep in mind when thinking about Christian liberal arts colleges that these restrictions exist at these colleges almost exclusively. A public university with severe restrictions
such as those listed above would have difficulty defending the regulations in our negative freedom focused society.

Statement of the Problem

The research question this thesis answers is why do students choose to attend selected Midwestern Christian liberal arts institutions for their education. This question comes out of the problem that higher educational professionals at Christian liberal arts colleges do not have literature available to them. There are no preexisting proven connections between spirituality and college choice, the literature indicates that students are consistently choosing these colleges and causing them to grow. The purpose of this study is to fill the gap between the literature and the reality of student choice of Christian liberal arts institutions. Richard R. Spies defines the student’s college choice as a two part decision: first they decide where to apply; second they decide where to enroll (Spies, 1973). His research focuses on the first decision, but this study will focus on the second part of that decision—why students, who applied to a Christian liberal arts college as part of their college search, decided to enroll there for their first year.

There are numerous reasons for why a student might choose a particular college, and in many cases, those may be unique personal circumstances—like having parents who will only pay for college if the student attends their alma mater—which would not easily fit into a graph, description or report. However, most of the research on college choice is concerned with the effects of test scores on college choice or the effects of the financial aid on college choice, both of which are very real factors affecting the students’ choices (Hoxby, 2004). Considering the impact of test scores and financial aid is
important, but seeing as this study deals with Christian liberal arts colleges and the effect of their dedication to spirituality on enrollment, and this study is designed to discover to what extent students’ faith effects their higher education choice.

Assumptions

The assumptions of this study are as follows. It is assumed that students take into account the religious affiliation of their school when making a college choice. It is assumed that students will have more than one reason for their college choice. It is assumed that the students involved considered more than one college during the course of their college. It is assumed that high school students are involved enough in their church and their faith life to have spiritual mentors or pastors who could have an influence on their college choice. It is assumed that the students interviewed have involved, nurturing parents who would care about their child’s educational choices. It is assumed that the students interviewed were in a position, when they were choosing a college, to choose any school they were qualified to attend. Finally, it is assumed that students do, in fact, take matters of faith into account when choosing a college.

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of this study are as follows. To have a full picture of college choice, it would be necessary to interview every first-year college student, and this study has a sample size of 20. Instead of being able to interview students at every Christian liberal arts college, this study is only being conducted at two Midwestern Christian liberal arts institutions. Students were invited to participate in the study randomly, and since a
random sample is not necessarily an evenly distributed or diverse sample, there was no way to assure diversity of experience from the participants. There were time limitations—the study was conducted over a matter of weeks and the interviews were limited to 30 minutes—which had an effect on the depth of information and analysis. Finally the process of interviewing, recording the interviews, transcribing the interviews, and analyzing the data was open to bias on part of the researcher.

The delimitations of the project are as follows. The researcher is personally supportive of Christian liberal arts institutions, being a graduate of one of the participating institutions, and was interested in studying them. The study was limited to two Midwestern Christian liberal arts institutions because of the preexistent contacts the researcher had at both institutions. These institutions are unique and students attending these institutions have had different experiences collectively than students from other Christian liberal arts institutions.

Outline

The remainder of this study follows the standard format of a thesis. The literature review will focus first on college choice, examining the trends in college choice and how they have changed with the times, from the 1950’s to present, and explore the implications those changes have on this research topic. Second, the review of literature will cover the inclusion of faith in the academy, the effects of integrating faith and learning, and the distinctive cultural marks of a Christian liberal arts campus. The conclusion of the second chapter will tie these two topics together in such a way that it prepares the reader for the findings of the research. The third chapter deals with the
methods used to conduct the research, including a disclosure of the instrument, procedures used in the interviews, and the means used to collect and analyze the data. The fourth chapter will present the data collected in the interview process and summarize the findings. The fifth and final chapter will look at the implications of the findings and see how they measure up to the literature available on the topic. Likewise, this chapter will delve further into the results and extrapolate from there to decide what these results mean for Christian liberal arts colleges on the whole, and will conclude with recommendations for further research.
II. Literature Review

*Introduction*

The college choice trends for Christian liberal arts colleges and universities have implications for higher education in the United States. When a student chooses to attend a Christian liberal arts college, he or she may be making a decision based on their personal beliefs, their financial situation, their educational goals, or a desire to stay close or leave home. Regardless of their individual reasons for attending a certain college, college students are consistently seeking the same thing: a bachelor’s degree. With the exception of students who drop out of college, people generally leave college with a degree, and a degree is basically a guarantee that the person holding it has “achieved a certain level of educational eminence” (Lyon & Lyon, 1967). As long as a college is accredited, it is generally accepted that bachelor’s degrees with have a similar weight (Lyon & Lyon, 1967). In reality, however, where a student goes to college can change much more than his or her status of educational eminence.

There has been a long-standing trend in higher education for undergraduate study to focus on theories, empirically discerned facts, and the ways and means of arriving at those theories and facts (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006). This empirical approach leaves a lot to be desired in the less concrete fields—such as philosophy, literature, and theology—but it is possible to study those subjects through a strictly empirical lens, although you might lose meaning therein. Focus on the empirical stimulates the thinking
part of the growing and maturing student’s mind, but it is thinking, feeling and sensing working together that make a complete human being (Miller, Karsten, Denton, Orr & Kates, 2005). Without ever focusing on the realms of feeling and sensing in the educational process, the college would produce, so to speak, incomplete adults—incomplete human beings (Miller et al., 2005). Even though students may not be choosing a school because they intentionally want to develop their whole selves, a college or university with a holistic mission statement will attempt to follow-through on their promise to educate the students in their academic care.

At institutions with proactive faculty, the move towards holistic personal development in students is taken on by the faculty, but at institutions where faculty stay in the classroom, the student affairs departments are responsible for the development of the whole student. There are many ways to go about this, of course, but as Margaret B. Jablonski (2001) puts it:

Student affairs professionals must understand the role that such values as faith, hope, and love play in the structure and persistence of communities, in the constructions of knowledge, in the understanding of truth, and in the developmental processes of students. (Jablonski, 2001, p 1)

Student affairs seems to be fairly cognizant of this need as a profession, but at public universities, often the hands of student affairs professionals are tied, either by the campus climate or by worries over separation of church and state (Budde & Wright, 2004). These restrictions on public education open up a convenient corner for Christian liberal arts colleges. Students, who care about their spirituality, may envision public universities as spiritually dead places where spirituality never comes up or places where their spirituality
will be challenged to the point of breaking. This is definitely one of the considerations that pushes students away from public universities and brings them to Christian liberal arts colleges.

In light of this framework, a close study of college choice in general and a comparison of information provided by the Christian liberal arts college community on what brings students to their campus is needed. The remainder of this chapter will work through these two topics in depth and attempt to lay out an understanding of college choice and the impact of spirituality on that choice. There is a definition of what makes a Christian liberal arts education a preferred choice for students and a look at trends found specifically in that sector of higher education. Finally, the demographics and faith traditions of the colleges from which the students in this study will be interviewed will be discussed. It is important to understand what makes these colleges distinctive and define specific factors in advance which might make them a preferred choice—the right choice—for high school graduates.

**College Choice**

This section will go in depth into the literature on college choice. First, the phases of college choice will be examined in detail. Next, the effect of college choice on student development will be explained in general and then in relationship to spirituality and the development of the whole person. The researcher then shifts to a discussion of the factors affecting college choice presenting by the literature. The section concludes with an exhaustive overview of how current trends and changes in college choice.
There are many ways in which individual students approach their college search and there is no real way to normalize or streamline that process or set out steps that each high school student must follow. Educators have tried to make it simple for students, but what works for one student or even one group of students does not work for others. This process is personal and it is important to recognize the problems inherent in trying to categorize reasons for a personal choice from the outset. The literature provides a set of phases in the college choice that must be followed in order for students to enroll, and it is through examining these phases that we can break down the college choice decision.

The traditional first phase is that of predisposition—the time where the student decides whether college is for them (Pope & Fermin, 2003). This phase is important for some students because they may not come from a background where going to college is the given choice after high school. Other students—coming from highly educated families—will likely make the decision to go to college and move through this phase without much thought. Caroline Hoxby notes that this phase of college choice is no longer where the action takes place (Hoxby, 2004). Her stance is that the decision of whether or not to attend college is no longer at the forefront of the mind of the majority; that action is now found in deciding where to attend (Hoxby, 2004).

The second phase of the college choice is deciding where to apply. By the third year of high school, most students have established a reliable cumulative high school GPA and have taken standardized tests like the SAT and ACT. Having both of these factors, grades and test scores, at the ready will give students an idea of the kinds of colleges and universities that they would have a good chance of getting into (Zemsky & Oedel, 1983). Those are limiting factors, but if the student has above average grades and
decent test scores, then they can start deciding what kind of school will best suit their academic goals. A student who is automatically thinking of going into a field which will require post-graduate study, such as medicine or certain fine arts, will be looking for a college able to prepare him or her to achieve those goals (Zemsky & Oedel, 1983).

Once a student has applied to and been accepted by a number of schools, then they enter the third phase of college choice, which is selection or enrollment (Pope & Fermin, 2003). This is the most difficult phase to study on a large scale, simply because this decision is so personal. Richard L. Spies, in his monograph on college choice, chooses to focus on the second stage, because according to him students generally choose similar types of schools to apply to (Spies, 1973). This is a valid point, and it is definitely a concern for a large scale study like the one Spies was conducting. There is a valid case for not paying much attention to the third stage because it can be an assumed case of choosing between equals. However, the work by Spies is a little outdated, and in this current climate, students have a much wider swath of options open to them (Paulsen, 1990). Michael Paulsen (1990) supports the study of the third stage of college choice by saying, “The study of college choice behavior of individual students indicates the ways in which environmental, institutional, and students’ characteristics affect a student’s choice…” (Paulsen, 1990, p. iii). This emphasizes the importance of the individual in college choice, and is certainly a valuable part of working towards and understanding of all the aspects that go into a student’s college choice. Given that there is a lot to lose if the choice of individual students is over looked and the choice of the individual is most exemplified in the final stage of selection, examining the final of college choice is crucial.
In focusing on the choice of the individual student, it is possible to lose sight of the influence of parents on students, which is especially strong in the case of the generation currently populating the nation’s colleges and universities (Howe & Strauss, 2007). There are many studies covering the impact of the Millennial student generation on higher education, but there is not room to go into that here in any depth. However, it is definitely worth mentioning the impact that parents have on these students. Where there are three stages of college choice for the student, there are also three concurrent stages for the parents of those students (Pope & Fermin, 2003). The stages follow this pattern: general information from parent to student, college visits and applications, and encouragement in the decision-making process (Pope & Fermin, 2003). These fit with the phases of college choice outlined above. Unfortunately they are biased towards students coming from families where the parents are educated and are supportive of their children’s aspirations. First generation students and low income students are less likely to receive the same quality of these three phases of support in one of their first major independent life decisions.

The decision to attend college and where to attend is generally regarded as one large first-step toward adulthood for many adolescents. To put it in terms of Erik Erikson’s stages of development, the move from adolescence to adulthood is realized through experiencing a crisis and making commitments on the other side of that crisis (Tillery & Kildegaard, 1973). The decision of where to attend college is certainly a crisis, and making a commitment of which school to attend achieves a strengthening of the ego. Students must learn at this point in their lives to make realistic choices and move purposefully toward goals. Making college decisions prematurely because of pressure
from educators, parents and peers has the potential to stunt development in this area (Tillery & Kildegaard, 1973). Simply put, if attending college directly after graduating from high school might not best suit a student, the adults in his or her life have a responsibility to make that option clear to them; the current mentality that everyone should go to college is to blame for high attrition rates in certain demographics (Tillery & Kildegaard, 1973). Victor Kazanjian and Peter Lawrence go as far as to say that negotiating important developmental tasks in relationships, career choices, and identity simultaneously causes students to feel overwhelmed and disoriented (Kazanjian & Lawrence, 2000). This disorientation leads to feelings of fragmentation and cause unwise decisions to be made.

Much like Kazanjian and Lawrence, others argue that the many pressures put on students in higher education lead to developmental and mental health problems. This is the basis of their argument for the inclusion of spirituality in higher education. Kazanjian and Lawrence assert that, “spiritual quest is rooted in a normal developmental process in which a person negotiates questions and concerns regarding personal destiny, happiness, God, and the ethical implications of one’s behavior, suffering and death” (Kazanjian & Lawrence, 2000, p. 45). This assertion that spirituality affects student behavior and has an effect on major decisions such as college choice is echoed in the work of Margaret Jablonski. She links spirituality to the development or acknowledgement of personal destiny, and makes the claim that college students are consciously in the developmental stages of their personal narrative and their personal goals and vocation in life (Jablonski, 2001).
There are harsher terms used to describe what life is like for a student whose spiritual needs are not met, for instance they may be inflicted with “diseases of the understanding,” which can only be overcome through a time of holistic learning and development (Miller et al., 2005). There is hope amongst higher education professionals that having an education would not only prepare students for a career in whatever field they choose, but also that their education would prepare them to be fully developed individuals and decent citizens (McGrath, 1966). The root of this hope is in the concept that a college education should develop in students loyalty to certain commonly held moral and ethical ideals that are used for the common good (Miller et al., 2005). This hope should be reflected in the student affairs professional’s way of putting developmental theory to practice when working with students (McGrath, 1966). This is all to say that student development begins before students even apply to college. The way they are treated in their contact with admissions counselors should reflect a general understanding of their place on the path to personal development, and acknowledge that the individual student’s choice of a college should enhance rather than impede their personal development (Miller et al., 2005).

Having looked at the steps to college choice and the way in which personal development influences and influenced by it, it is now time to turn to the issues and trends affecting student choice. There is no way to properly canvas all the factors that influence every student’s decision to attend a certain school, but there are definitely some factors which are seen over and over again. Zemsky and Oedel define their most common factors determining college choice as educational aspirations, scholastic aptitude, and family income (Zemsky & Oedel, 1983). Then they go on to say that we learn the most
about college choice when we examine how these determining factors interact. Pope and Fermin break it down into parental, social and economic reasons (Pope & Fermin, 2003). They follow up this information with the statement that students primarily want to attend college to achieve personal and career goals, which makes the factors they espouse almost identical to those put forth by Zemsky and Oedel (1983) (Pope & Fermin, 2003; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983). Richard Spies also notes socioeconomic status as a major determining factor in the type of college students will choose to attend (Spies, 1973). When he did his research in 1971, students tended to apply to colleges all with $1000 of total fees and tuition costs (Spies, 1973). There have been no follow-up research studies on the scale of Spies college choice study in the 1970’s, but Spies’ results still have relevance today, given that educational expenses are clearly a defining factor influencing which schools students apply to. However, in this age of college loans where large costs and debts are almost a given, this argument may be much less valid than it was in Spies’ time.

Educational researchers interested in college choice also identify upbringing, academic and social factors as having an effect on college choice. Michael Paulsen draws a line between a sociological approach and an economical approach, “sociologists view college from the perspective of status attainment process, while economists view it as a form of investment decision-making behavior” (Paulsen, 1990, p.12). Tillery and Kildegaard agree with Paulsen and Zemsky and Oedel in the opinion that educational aspirations, no matter who or what inspired them, will affect college choice (Tillery & Kildegaard, 1983; Paulsen, 1990; Zemsky & Oedel, 2003). Paulsen makes a simple statement that explains college choice outright: a “student’s preferred college could be
predicted at where the attributes of a school intersect with a student’s ideal college” (Paulsen, 1990, p.66).

Thus, the decisions of college choice are made at the points of intersection between the ideal college and the actual college. This straightforward understanding of college choice fails to include the academic quality of the student. Students with an ideal college with the attributes of an Ivy League school will not get to attend their ideal college unless they have a nearly spotless high school academic record and do very well on standardized tests. While admissions offices’ recruitment efforts to bring the college attributes to the attention of the student, the quality of the student will determine the freedom students have in the first stages of college choice (Manski & Wise, 1983). It might even influence the final choice, because good grades are necessary for acquiring many scholarships. Test scores often constrain individual choice, and this is frustrating for students who are not good testers. However, this is a necessary evil, because colleges are intentionally selective to maintain the academic integrity of their student body (Paulsen, 1990). Some students are left behind because certain gaps in their education, the quality of their high school, and the fitness of standardized tests for their cultural background may work against them (Manski & Wise, 1983). As higher education becomes more cognizant of multiple intelligences and the broad range of student abilities, professionals are attempting to close the gap these factors might create.

Issues of parent education and background and economic accessibility are at the forefront of issues affecting college choice, but once a student has chosen several schools to apply to, there are secondary factors that kick in. Manski and Wise note that race still has a demonstrable affect on where a student chooses to enroll (Manski & Wise, 1983).
Many students apply schools based on demographic and admissions information alone and wait to make visits once they have been accepted. Also, peers’ opinions about certain schools have a profound effect, as well as, the influences of church and religious leaders and mentors (Pope & Fermin, 2003). These influences are particularly applicable to the scope and intent of this paper. Religious organizations and churches will sometimes provide students with scholarships to go to schools associated with their Christian denomination. Thus, aside from peers and parents, a student may be getting advice on the college search from his or her youth pastor or other mentors in his or her church when making the decision to attend college (Pope & Fermin, 2003). This is a key component of discovering the type of student that would choose to apply to and eventually attend a Christian liberal arts college, although it is important to remember that not all students at Christian liberal arts colleges are there because of the Christian environment. It is nonetheless worth noting that literature on college choice not specifically related to the study of spirituality on college campuses would cite religious background as a determining factor (Pope & Fermin, 2003; Paulsen, 1990).

Finally, in this discussion of college choice, it is important to examine some trends and commonly held beliefs currently affecting the landscape of college choice and having a profound effect on students and Christian liberal arts colleges alike. First of all, there is a concern that the rising prices of private liberal arts education will drive students away (Hall, 1995; Spies, 1973). This is possibly a valid concern, but when considering that the quality liberal arts schools are seeing increased enrollments simply because they are good schools, this supposed trend loses its credibility (Riley, 2005). Also, there is the assertion that students with liberal arts degrees from highly ranked private colleges will
automatically earn more than their peers at less reputable institutions in their respective careers (Hill, 1995). This is not necessarily true; it depends very much on the discipline the student is studying; a computer programmer is more likely to earn more than a teacher, regardless of where they were educated.

Colleges and universities often find themselves working hard to distinguish themselves from other colleges and universities in the eyes of high-achieving high school students, and aspire to a unique mission, vision and atmosphere to attract those students. This is so much of a pressure that the concerns about enrollment have moved up the chain of command in the university; what was once only a concern of the admission office may now be a priority for vice presidents (Paulsen, 1990). Also because of the competitive atmosphere for admissions, high school students are being targeted in aggressive ways earlier in their high school years than ever before (Kinzie, Palmer, Hayek, Jacob & Cummings, 2004).

The research shows that high school students consider the greatest number of colleges during their junior year. Thus, admissions departments try to race each other to the forefront of a student’s college considerations. The rise of early admissions has moved up the time of the college decision dramatically for a lot of students, and this definitely has an effect on their motivation in high school (Kinzie et al., 2004). Imagine a student being guaranteed a full-ride sports scholarship as early as their sophomore year of high school; it would be hard to turn down and hard to maintain academic motivation if success on the basketball court was all that was needed to determine the best college choice. This scenario, of course, is rarely seen in reality, but it has implications for all of higher education as scholarships are offered for many different talents and abilities other
than sports ability and has the ability to change the playing field of college choice (Kinzie et al., 2004).

There have been other changes on the college choice landscape. Admissions officers have become more like political canvassers than sales people. They want to represent their candidate as the best choice for the job of educating the student (Zemsky & Oedel, 1983). This has minimal implications for how a student views their educational choice, and considering that most students are admitted to the first choice school, it is probably the best way of bringing the positive aspects of the college to the front of prospective students’ minds (Manski & Wise, 1983). As students are willing to be persuaded in a political fashion, admissions offices are expanding their scope of recruitment from just high school forums to include churches and other religious groups, as well as community and civic organizations (Pope & Fermin, 2003).

This move clearly has implications for the scope of this paper. Students are influenced by the political and spiritual foundations their parents and mentors lay for them. To have a pastor endorse a particular college can have a profound effect on an individual student’s college choice (Paulsen, 1990). Unlike public high school counselors, religious organizations have no obligation to maintain objectivity in their counseling of students. They will communicate their sincere beliefs about the difference between public and private universities and may work hard to influence students to attend their alma mater or at least a college affiliated with their denomination. Admissions departments are courting religious organizations and churches for this reason (Pope & Fermin, 2003).
Christian Liberal Arts Colleges

This section gives the reader background on Christian liberal art colleges. It starts with a description of what “liberal arts” are and how Christian liberal arts are distinctive within this subset, including what Christian liberal arts do for the student. This is followed by an exploration into the current trends in Christian liberal arts. Finally, the section concludes with a discussion of trends in college choice as it relates specifically to Christian liberal arts.

It is possible to talk about Christian liberal arts colleges and largely ignore the aspects that make them special and important in our society as a group. They stand in stark opposition to institutions of higher education where students are seen not as individuals but as receptacles for learning (McGrath, 1966). Some Christian leaders even go so far as to say that students entering public universities are indoctrinated into dualism, scientism, and consumerism. Students are not pushed to liberate themselves from self interest (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006). Margaret Jablonski agrees in her statements about how students not exposed to healthy spiritual leaders and education can and are plagued by superstition and the fear of the supernatural, simply because they do not know how to deal with their spiritual selves (Jablonski, 2001). Students are willing to explore their beliefs, feelings, and convictions when they are given a space to do so. This is not purely “feel-goodism” or a move towards religious fundamentalism, rather it is genuine spiritual searching—moving towards adult maturity and transformation of the whole person (Jablonski, 2001; Gleason, 1995). This understanding of spiritual maturity includes significant encounters with otherness that makes students more complete people. Professionals working at Christian liberal arts colleges may have more of handle on the
connection between spirituality and culturally relevant education and may be best suited
to facilitate the aforementioned encounters (Tisdell, 2003). Scholars from Christian
liberal arts colleges are primed to be the leaders in their fields when it comes to reforming
the academy and assisting students in using spirituality to construct meaning.

There is a growth of religious diversity in our society, and with that growth there
is an ever expanding need for greater meaning, wholeness, and relatedness in people’s
lives (Kazanjian & Lawrence, 2000). The relatively new religious diversity creates a need
for students who are experiencing it every day to have a forum and space within which to
discuss their feelings and observations about religious pluralism. The typical Christian
liberal arts college is called to create these forums, simply because of their place in
society as flag bearers of the enduring importance of spirituality in human life (Kazanjian
& Lawrence, 2000). In addition to bringing spiritual matters into the academy, Christian
liberal arts colleges are charged with building the moral character of their students
(Budde & Wright, 2004; Walter, 1958). Students educated in Christian liberal arts
colleges are sometimes considered to be chaplains to the world (Walter, 1958). This is a
heavy weight to bear simply because a student decides to attend one school over another,
but the idea is that by shaping the moral character of their students the Christian liberal
arts college contributes to the end of the liberal society at large (Buddy & Wright, 2004).
From outside and inside their walls, Christian liberal arts colleges are assumed to be
cultivating hardy social responsibility in their students through their holistic college
experience (McGrath, 1966).

There are also factors that make liberal arts distinctively liberal arts. Students at
liberal arts schools learn how to empathize with those different from them, they learn to
think independently, the learn how to approach social situations with mature social and emotional judgment, they develop liberal, egalitarian values, and learn to deeply value cultural experiences (Mannoia, 2000). Students at liberal arts colleges learn how to learn. Elmer John Thiessen (2001) describes the four central figures of the liberal tradition by saying:

   It is individualist, in that it asserts the moral primacy of the person against any collectivity, egalitarian, in that it confers on all human beings the same basic moral status, universalist, affirming the moral unity of the species, and meliorist, in that it asserts the open-ended improvability, by use of critical reason, of human life. (Thiessen, 2001, p. 202)

These four central figures are demonstrated repeatedly in the work of all liberal arts colleges. The popularity of liberal arts in this country speaks to a desire to move past liberalism and postmodernism to a place where communitarianism and universalism are the norm (Thiessen, 2001). This move would ensure that students would be trained to be humane individuals in a world growing more connected every day.

The liberal arts have a dual value: “they do things for you”—instrumental value—and “they do things to you”—intrinsic value (Mannoia, 2000, p. 23). It is learning for its own sake and learning for the sake of society. Whether or not students attending Christian liberal arts colleges are interested in the intrinsic value of their education or consciously engaging in their transformation into people who are bright moral lights in society does not seem to matter to the colleges they attend; the mission to take care of students who are becoming is something these schools take very seriously (Mannoia, 2001). Students graduating from Christian liberal arts college have an understanding of
these two mandates, which graduates from non-liberal arts colleges may lack: a calling to maintain awareness of the global dimension to each one’s personal life goals and the imperative to cultivate an empathetic response with respect to life’s harsh realities (Kazanjian and Lawrence, 2000). This is why it is easy to find Christian liberal arts college graduates committed to social justice initiatives both in and outside of their daily work; the mandates listed above tend to permeate their lives (Butler, 1989).

All of this heavy-handed language about how Christian liberal arts colleges are out to produce the best people in society is not meant to sugar coat the work of Christian liberal arts colleges or make it seem like large research universities are ignoring the social, emotional and spiritual sides of their students. Public universities can also be liberal arts schools; this is not an exclusive distinction for Christian schools. However, in terms of teaching and engendering spiritual growth in their students, aggressive interpretation of laws separating church and state often work to keep spiritual life at a minimum in public universities (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Jablonski, 2001). The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that public education must be neutral in matters of religion (Jablonski, 2001). This means that no religion can be favored over another, however at some universities, this seems to stop any mention of spirituality whatsoever, out of fear of law suits from unrepresented spiritual parties.

The fear is not only found on the side of administrators in public universities. There is also fear—and sometimes facts to back up that fear—about fundamentalism being taught at some Christian liberal arts colleges (Thiessen, 2001; Marsden, 1994). Amongst the charges is the idea that religious schools may promote divisiveness, foster intolerance, and violate the academic freedom of students and faculty members both
(Marsden, 1994). Also, some choose to call out Christian liberal arts colleges with high tuition, saying that only the financially well off can afford to attend, which stands in direct opposition to the egalitarianism that the colleges claim to espouse (Thiessen, 2001; Gleason, 1995). These charges, along with the charge of indoctrination, may be founded in reality, but for some of these colleges academic freedom and intolerance are relative to the conservative beliefs they happen to hold. When a student decides to enroll at a particular college and has to sign a community contract or an honor code, they are making a choice to submit to the rules of community (Thiessen, 2001).

Regardless of the competition, the charges against Christian liberal arts, or the types of students enrolled, a Christian liberal arts college is defined by three characteristics: its vision, its ethos, and the Christian people who put the vision and ethos to practice (Benne, 2001). The essential questions of life—meaning, purpose, and conduct—are addressed in a Christian liberal arts education. This focus is one of the reasons that students end up at Christian liberal arts colleges, but the prevalence of colleges that adhere to a Christian worldview does not mean that the Christian community is content with their level of commitment (Benne, 2001).

These colleges face criticism from their constituents, simply because they are trying to provide their students with liberal educations that prepare students to mesh with and be leaders in society. In fact, phrases such as “darkening of the light” and “darkening trends” in Christian higher education have been used to describe schools that have gradually become more secularized (Benne, 2001; Marsden, 1994). Christian colleges are currently re-examining the role of religious practice and a Christian worldview in higher education. These institutions struggle to keep the Christian tradition “publically relevant”
in the life of their college (Benne, 2001). This does not mean that students are indoctrinated into the religion or turned away if they are not Christian, it simply means that the Christian mission and ethos of the school is proclaimed upfront; the college cannot and should not be mistaken for a secularized school (Riley, 2005).

This upfront approach has worked. According to data from the Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities, enrollment in its member institutions increased over 60% from 1990 to 2002 (Riley, 2005). These schools are still growing at an impressive rate. Students who recognize the cognitive dissonance of separating your life into different parts—the objective, soulless classroom, and the faith-filled Christian student organization—are attracted to schools where this division is not necessary (Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, 2006). Even though students are clearly choosing these schools because they adhere to a particular Christian tradition, it does not mean that they do not face criticism for that very adherence (Tisdell, 2003). Some Christian liberal arts colleges do demand that their students sign a statement of belief upon enrolling, but in the spirit of liberal arts as described in this paper, that does not necessarily give them room for the exploration that must take place on the way to adulthood (Tisdell, 2003). At schools where premarital sex and consumption of alcohol are considered taboo, when these things happen anyway, students may not know how to do it safely (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006). This situation is also construed in some instances to make it appear as though Christian liberal arts colleges are set against society at large; implying that maintaining traditional beliefs leave Christian liberal arts colleges behind in the progressive evolution of society (Budde & Wright, 2004).
The statistics released by the Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities—with a current institutional membership of 111—and other organizations show that students have chosen Christian liberal arts colleges more in this generation than in previous ones (Riley, 2005). There are underlying reasons for this. The emerging trend that this generation of students is more concerned with their developing spiritual wellbeing is certainly one of them (Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, 2006). However, there are other less noble reasons, such as the desire to get married at an early age. Our society puts a lot of pressure on young people to find their mate early on, especially in the conservative Christian circles (Riley, 2005). Some institutions, like Brigham Young University, in Provo, Utah and Trinity International College, in Dearborn, Illinois, use the percentage of their students graduating with a fiancé, husband or wife as a selling point in their admissions strategy (Riley, 2005). It is hard to accept that an institution of higher education would employ the marketing strategy of providing an abundant pool of potential mates in a serious manner, but some colleges do, and certainly students choose those colleges because of the increased chance of finding a spouse who believes that what they believe (Tillery & Kiltegaard, 1973).

While the possibility of an equally-yoked mate is definitely a pull, it still takes a back seat to the Christian liberal arts college’s mission. Students will choose a school based on the feel of the community and beliefs the school is based on; it is a similar pull for Christian liberal arts schools as for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Kinzie et al., 2004). Students who transfer to a Christian liberal arts college after spending one semester or more at a public university often have stories to tell of having their principles derided as contrary to tolerance and diversity (Riley, 2005). A mere eight
percent of surveyed students at public colleges and universities reported that their professors provided opportunities in the classroom for the discussion of religious or spiritual matters (Riley, 2004). High school students who take their faith development seriously may hear these negative stories from people they know and decide to attend a college that will build them up rather than break them down (Benne, 2001). Whether this decision would mean these students will ultimately receive an inferior education is hard to say. There are over seven hundred Christian colleges and universities, thus it would be unwise to generalize that all of these are comparable to their secular counterparts (Riley, 2005). They are, for the most part, accredited by the same organizations that accredit public colleges, so, at least from that standpoint, they meet educational standards.

Students may choose a Christian college because they are determined to be leaders in their churches and communities. Christianity has been blamed in the past for causing crimes ranging from terrorism to genocide; Christian young people may want to equip themselves to turn back this negative perception (Kazanjian & Lawrence, 2000). Students also choose to attend a Christian liberal arts college because of their socio-cultural context. Christians are found all over the face of the earth, so remaining immersed in the Christian tradition is a way of connecting with people from all around the world (Butler, 1989). It is comfortable to be surrounded by people who believe what you believe. College can be a difficult and stressful time for students, so the rational for attending a Christian liberal arts college may be for the support provided there (Kazanjian & Lawrence, 2000). Attending a college where you know your beliefs will be challenged in a non-devastating way might be a draw, especially considering the typical stage of identity development a college freshman (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006). Students
may also enjoy the protection and “hand-holding” that Christian liberal arts colleges traditionally provide. The philosophy of *in loco parentis* is something that has all but disappeared in public institutions, but Christian colleges and universities often still take it seriously (Benne, 2001). On the other hand, students may not want visiting hours, curfew, and dating or dancing rules handed down to them from the administration, which might be a reason students might decide against attending an especially strict Christian institution (Thiessen, 2001).

It seems as though, for many students, the choice of a Christian liberal arts college fits with their understanding of how life works. There is no other choice really. They feel as though a decision to choose a school other than a “good” Christian college would be disrespectful towards their parents, pastors and peers (Riley, 2005). Ultimately, for Christian liberal arts colleges, their religious affiliation is part of their product, whether or not they choose to describe it that way (Budde & Wright, 2004). Choosing to mask or downplay the religious tradition from whence they came would probably repel students who are looking for a genuine Christian living and learning community. The two institutions chosen to participate in this study demonstrate how integration of faith and learning can work successfully in a liberal arts setting. The contexts of each of the participating institutions will be explained further in the methodology.

**Conclusion**

Christian liberal arts colleges are a valid and somewhat popular choice for college students in recent years. Although college choice is affected by many factors, the factors leading to the choice of Christian liberal arts college are generally based in the faith
tradition of the family, the education of the parents, the reputation of the institution, or the academic rigor of the institution. Christian colleges, more than secular or public universities, are charged with curing the diseases of understanding prevalent in our society, through their teaching directly and through sending out morally and academically grounded graduates (Miller et al., 2005).

Whether students share the religious tradition of the university or not, the most important service that Christian liberal arts colleges are providing—which other institutions may not—are strong student communities that embrace spiritual and religious diversity and exploration (Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, 2006). Christian liberal arts colleges are open to the development of the whole person and generally teach their students to understand that the faith narrative that runs throughout their lives is an important part of their whole selves (Kazanjian & Lawrence, 2000). Students looking for a school which will not neglect their spiritual selves will ultimately be drawn to a Christian liberal arts college. Colleges and universities wanting to teach and develop complete and mature students within their walls will do well to learn from the example Christian liberal arts colleges set. The spiritual cannot be ignored without consequence, and the young people of this country want to bring their whole selves into the classroom, instead of leaving their souls at the door.

Summary

The literature provides a basis from which to understand holistic student development, the phases of college, and the place of Christian liberal arts college in the spectrum of higher education in the United States. The literature also gives the reader
insight into current trends in college choice and Christian higher education. However, the existing literature provides no answer to the research question of this study: why do students choose Christian liberal arts colleges, specifically those Midwestern institutions participating in this study. The literature does not link the spirituality of the institution to college choice, nor does it connect the spirituality of the student to college choice. This gap in the literature is problem that this study is addressing.
III. Methodology

Introduction

This chapter describes the methods used in collecting data on this topic. The research model, research design and instrument, characteristics of participating institutions, methods for selecting subjects, procedures for data collection, and methods of analysis will be discussed. The assumptions and limitations of the above listed components of methodology will be examined throughout.

Research Method

The method employed for this study is a micro-level qualitative interview research approach. According to G. E. Gorman and Peter Clayton (2005), qualitative research is the “process of inquiry that draws data from the context in which events occur” (p. 20). Furthermore, the data collected is used to determine the processes which lead to the events observed and the perspectives of those interviewed. From this, the researcher has derived possible explanations for the implications of the data collected (Gorman & Clayton, 2005). Qualitative researchers consider the words and actions of those involved in certain social situations as the best way to understand the factors going into those situations (DeLaine, 2000). Qualitative research is best suited for social and educational research, because social and educational environments are often complex and constantly evolving (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Gorman and Clayton (2005) refer to this
understanding of those environments as fitting within the “interpretivist paradigm,” because precise measurement and numerical data would be relatively ineffective at communicating the complexity of social environments (Gorman & Clayon, 2005).

Gorman and Clayton are not alone in their understanding of the applicability of qualitative research to answer complex social questions; Matthew Miles and Michael Huberman indicate that qualitative research is best for going in depth in topics, where quantitative data provides breadth (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This is the basis for the use of micro-level qualitative research, and considering the personal nature of the research question, this is the approach that makes sense. With this type of research question, quantitative research or large scale qualitative research would not make sense (Marshall & Russman, 2006).

The methods used in this particular study are intent upon studying a small group of students in depth, rather than getting cursory information from a much larger number of students (DeLaine, 2000). The goal of this study was to uncover themes from a complicated and multi-faceted life decision. No two students go through the same process when deciding on which college to attend. This is why the qualitative interview approach has been chosen for this study. The interview process allows for much greater depth where it lacks in breadth (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Thus, when deciding on a sample size the researcher determined that interviewing ten students from each institution would provide sufficient data.

Within qualitative research there are many different ways of collecting data. Some of the ways, as described by Peter Woods, are observation, sampling, questionnaires, and interviewing. This study was conducted through semi-structured
interviews, conducted at two separate Christian liberal arts institutions. A formal interview method would follow printed questions exclusively, but this seems to obstruct the development of empathy by the researcher with the participant, which is one thing Woods notes as necessary for the researcher to do in order for the participants to feel comfortable sharing their experiences (Woods, 1999). Given this need for empathy, the interviews were conducted using an interview guide, with prepared questions under general headings, and followed the general pattern that the guide dictated for the interviews, but were limited to those particular questions. Establishing empathy was necessary to achieve the depth of data for which the qualitative interview method provides. To follow only the set questions would have limited the ability of the interviewer and the participant to get to the bottom of the reasons for their college choice.

In addition to developing empathy, Woods notes that it is essential to be as unobtrusive as possible. Being unobtrusive as the researcher is important, because it would violate the one of the central tenants of qualitative research, which is to focus on natural settings (Woods, 1999). Gorman and Clayton also support the interview method, citing the advantages of immediacy, mutual exploration, investigation of causation, personal contact and speed as those which make interviewing a viable choice (Gorman and Clayton, 2005). Especially in a study such as this one, where there were limits on the amount of time the interviewer was be able to be at each college, immediacy and personal contact were especially important. The interviewer strove to immediately build rapport and a feeling of relative trust with the participant. A disadvantage of interviewing is that it can be construed as uncritical and especially open to bias. However, the likelihood of bias is a disadvantage of all qualitative research, because numerical data is not applied to
it. No matter how one might feel about the validity of data from a qualitative study, there is still that ability to explore each student’s experience with college choice in greater depth, and that outweighs the disadvantages.

As part of this methodology, the researcher obtained informed consent from each interviewed student to have the conversation recorded. From the recording, the interviewer collected additional data that may not have picked up during the actual time of the interview. Another advantage of having the interviews recorded was that the researcher was able to focus on having a genuine, empathetic conversation with the participant, rather than being distracted by note-taking. Maintaining a seamless conversation fits with Woods’ vision of maintaining a natural environment, where the participant knows he or she is being interviewed, but may lose track of that fact because of the natural cadence of the conversation with the interviewer (Woods, 1999). This perspective also supports the use of an interview guide instead of a certain number of set questions.

This study is what Michael Paulsen calls a micro-level investigation because it focuses on what affects the college choice behavior of individual students (Paulsen, 1990). Micro-level studies are cross-sectional in nature. The opposite, a macro-level study, would be used for looking at the aggregate trends in higher education and college-going activity. A micro-level study cannot be used to determine trends, but it focuses on the relationships between the enrollment behavior of individual students and how that behavior intersects with environmental, institutional, and other student characteristics (Paulsen, 1990). This study also focuses on students who are currently going to Christian liberal arts colleges rather than students who are in the process of choosing a college,
which is the kind of participant that Richard Spies investigated in his 1973 study of student choice (Spies, 1973). Even though this study has a fairly narrow focus, the narrow focus proves its worth by doing the work larger studies cannot do—the cross-sectional in-depth work. Also, with some level of certainty, the results of micro-level studies can be extrapolated to make assertions about the population at large.

Research Question and Design

The research question this thesis answers is why do students choose to attend selected Midwestern Christian liberal arts institutions for their education. Thus, the questions on the interview guide were designed to encourage students to talk about their college search, their final decision, their spirituality, and how their spirituality affected their college choice. The major sections of the interview guide follow that pattern as well. The guide itself, enclosed in the Appendix A, list questions in the following categories; demographic, the importance of spirituality in the subject’s life, the number and names of colleges applied to and why, the steps the subject took to narrow down their choice to two, and the influence parents, counselors, and peers had on college choice. There are also questions about how the religious affiliation of the college and its effect on college choice and then a follow up question or two allowing the students to reflect on their choice now that they are almost a year into their education at their respective choice. These questions were developed by the researcher by taking recurring factors affection college choice as indicated by the literature and forming them into to questions to test whether those factors are indeed viable for this group of students. There was no way to determine in advance how long each participant would talk about each question or
whether they would have any response, which is another reason why have a semi-
structured interview guide was necessary for this study.

Demographic data was collected and will contribute to the depth of the analysis of
the results. It was important to gather a few bits of demographic data, because students
with slightly different ages and different majors might have had different reasons for
choosing the college. Also, demographic differences between students, especially
differences in their religious affiliation, have implications for how the students might
answer questions later in the interview. As an example, a strong connection to the
religious tradition of the college might make it easier for the student to decide to go there,
whereas, a student who does not share the religious tradition of the college would choose
the college for other reasons, and those reasons are what the interview is meant to
uncover.

_Institutional Characteristics_

The two Christian liberal arts institutions were chosen for several reasons. The
researcher knew that the time available for travel and interviewing would be limited, so it
was decided that the institutions involved should be within a two to three hour drive of
the home institution. These particular institutions—a four-year Midwestern Christian
liberal arts college in the Reformed Christian tradition and a four-year Midwestern
Christian liberal arts university in the United Brethren Christian tradition—were chosen
as a convenience sample, in part because the researcher had established contacts at both
institutions who agreed to participate in the study and because of their locations.
Furthermore, these institutions were chosen because they are leaders in Christian liberal arts. They are both known for their commitment to academic integrity in higher education and the Christian liberal arts tradition. These institutions were also chosen because they are both members of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). Choosing schools committed to Christian education was important and to be members of the CCCU, these schools had to demonstrate their commitment.

The college urges its students to find the evidence of God in all things, and stresses the integration of faith and learning in its curriculum and co-curricular activities. The university is committed to the development of the whole person and roots its academics in the belief that all truth is God’s truth. The college has just over 4000 undergraduates and the university has just over 1000. Both schools are praised for maintaining the integrity of their Christian faith traditions while being regional and national leaders in education. Throughout the analysis, the Midwestern Christian liberal arts college in the Reformed tradition will be referred to as “the participating college” or “the college” and the Midwestern Christian liberal arts university in the United Brethren tradition will be referred to as “the participating university” or “the university.”

**Subjects**

The rational for interviewing 10 students at each school—20 total—is based in the theory of micro-level qualitative studies and supported by Gorman and Clayton (2005) and Paulsen (1990). The 20 students who chose to participate in this study were invited to participate randomly from the first-year students at each institution. Both participating institutions generated lists of 10 random first-year students and then used an email
invitation the researcher provided to invite those students to participate. Both schools used a sign-up sheet to make sure no two students were coming at the same time. When the first batch of 10 random students did not all sign up for the project, another list of random students was generated and emailed until the 10 interview spots were filled; 40 students were invited at each institution. The goal of inviting random students was to give the researcher access to students who might not naturally gravitate to such an invitation were it issued through a mass email or institutional announcement. Asking the contacts at each institution to select first-year students that they knew would limit the possibility of a diverse group of students.

The study participants were intentionally first-year students because of the nature of the project. Asking college seniors about their college choice would prove inconclusive, because they are so far removed from the time when they would make that decision. Besides the inclusion of only first-year students, there was no intention put into the sample’s demographics. There was no reason to make sure that both men and women were equally represented, because it would be difficult to uncover how a student’s gender might affect his or her college choice. This would be a concern at a single-sex institution, but interviews were not completed at such an institution.

As mentioned in chapter one, there are several limitations to having a small random sample for this study. One limitation of having a random sample is that there will still be only certain students willing to take thirty minutes out of their day and submit to an interview. Another limitation is that random does not necessarily mean well-distributed. A random sample might bring up only female math education majors who chose the school for its math education program. So, there are limitations inherent in
random selection of participants. In the use of randomly selected students, there is an assumption that they will be partially representative of the whole.

Instrumentation, Field Procedures and Data Collection

As explained above, a method of qualitative interviewing was used. As part of this method, an interview guide provides a baseline for topics to be covered in the interviews. Interviews took thirty minutes at the most, and the majority of interviews were between twenty and twenty-five minutes. When the participant entered the interview space, which was a conference at both institutions, the researcher immediately started building rapport with light conversation. The researcher presented subjects with the informed consent form before the beginning of the interview and explained the purpose of the study and consent form. Once informed consent was granted, the interviewer started the digital voice recorder. The voice recorder allowed the researcher to take minimal notes and focus on the conversation; however, the researcher took minimal notes to keep large themes in mind and to correlate the digital recordings with the researcher’s actual thoughts during the interview. The subjects were instructed to relax and not worry about having to speak directly into the voice recorder. The interviewer gave them a chance to ask any questions they might have. The interview followed the interview guide as was seen fit, and concluding with a space for final comments and questions from the subject.
Data Analysis

There are dozens of methods of analyzing qualitative data, and many of them overlap. However, given the type of information collected in this study, the field of applicable methods narrows considerably. Anselm Strauss puts forth the constant comparison or grounded theory approach, which takes portions of field notes from each part of the research and constantly lines them up to see if there are any correlations (Strauss, 1987). This approach would not work because the analysis was not done concurrently with the study, but rather after the study was completed. Miles and Huberman support the logical analysis/matrix analysis, in which the researcher is responsible for creating logic model of the data, often accompanied by a visualization of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Other methods of analysis exist, such as domain analysis—building semantic relationships—hermeneutical analysis—exploring the different layers of meaning in the subject’s discourse—or semiotics—which in this case would interpret body language (Van Manen, 1990; Manning, 1983; Spradley, 1980). However, for the purpose of this study, the data was analyzed using a typology based on content analysis (Loftland & Loftland, 1995; Weber, 1990). A typology is a classification system made up of mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories (Loftland & Loftland, 1995). The content analysis method looks for latent emphases in the discourse—themes communicated that the subjects did not say out right and is driven by the theory present in the literature (Weber, 1990).

This method of data analysis—a typological content analysis—is a slightly more nuanced form of the “cut-and-paste” model (Loftland & Loftland, 1995). The interview
recordings were transcribed by the researcher into separate documents manually and from there the researcher pulled out individual statements from those transcriptions to form overall results. This provided the basis for the typology. The content analysis was not a separate process, but the themes lifted from the conversations between the researcher and the subjects provided the basis for some of the commentary in the analysis and discussion. From this point, the frequency of thematic elements—in a form of quasi-statistics—were entered into a spreadsheet to give the researcher a clear view of the results. Once this spreadsheet was generated, the researcher used the information therein to form the categories of the typology. The goal of using this method of data analysis is to correlate participants’ responses with major themes present in the literature and create room for any new themes that might emerge (Loftland & Loftland, 1995). This approach assumes that the results will have some correlation to the literature and make a contribution to the existing understanding of how spirituality affects college choice.
IV. Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of the study and answer the research question. The research question was why do students choose to enroll at Christian liberal arts colleges. In a nation with separation of church and state and which is largely secularized in all sectors, the researcher aimed to discover the reasons behind the student’s desire to be in Christian environments. In the analysis, the researcher took the influences and reasons for individual students’ college choice and marked the frequency and diversity of responses; categories of responses were defined and particular examples examined within each category. The responses came in the form of interpersonal—resulting from contact with others—and intrapersonal—discovered within oneself—reasons, although some reasons could fall within both of those large categories; thus, instead of trying to group them into interpersonal and intrapersonal groups first before breaking down them down into smaller categories, the researcher decided to focus only on the smaller categories.

As explained in chapter three, this method of data analysis is referred to as a typology with content analysis. The categories of responses were defined by the researcher through looking at all the reasons given by participants in the interview transcripts and grouping them into intuitive groups. The categories defined based on the results are as follows: Christian/spiritual, academic quality, institutional demography,
family, peer/mentor, and other. The number of responses in each category is represented in Table 1. All responses related to the spirituality of the school or the Christ-centered environment fall under the “Christian/spiritual” category. All responses related to the academic quality, or reputation of the institution, are grouped under the “academic quality” category. All responses related to the size, location, or atmosphere of the institution itself are included under the “institutional demography” category. All responses related to the influence of family on the college choice are grouped under the “family” category. All responses related to the influence of mentors or peers on college choice fall under the “peer/mentor” category.

Finally, all responses that did not fit under any of these other categories were grouped under the “other” category. The “other” category became necessary for this analysis because several students provided reasons that were vastly different from those of other students. An example of this would be the two students who listed the willingness of the college to help them with their physical disabilities as a major factor determining their college choice. Not all students have physical disabilities to consider in their college choice, so these statements were valuable, but did not fit within the other categories.
Before going through and examining the responses included in each category and the reasoning behind the way they were placed in further detail, it is important for the reader to have an understanding of the group of students that was interviewed. Also, since part of college choice is deciding when schools to apply to, there will be a short section analyzing that second step of the college choice process. The information about the participants and their college search will inform the analysis of the factors influencing college choice, as provided by the participants. Finally, the last section of this chapter ties the analysis together in a summary before the reader moves on to the discussion in chapter five.

Profile of the participant group

The participant group was composed of 20 first-year students chosen at random to participate in this study. Ten of those students were from a Midwestern Christian liberal arts college of over 4000 undergraduates and the other ten were from a Midwestern Christian liberal arts university of over 1000 undergraduates. The majority of students interviewed were from Midwestern states—such as Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, and Ohio—and content to stay in the Midwest for college. There were two from the Northeast—upstate New York and New Hampshire—and one student from Colorado. One student was the son of missionaries to Brazil and considered Brazil home, even though his family was from Michigan originally.

All of the students interviewed were easily able to place themselves on the wide spectrum of Christianity in the United States. At the college, the most popular denominational affiliation was Christian Reformed and was very much in line with the
overall demographic of the institution with 50% of all students claiming to be Christian Reformed. The university had a majority of non-denominational community church goers in the participant group. Three students did not want to ally with a certain denomination at first, because they do not like denominations in general, but when urged they could associate with some group, even if it was non-denominational.

All but one of the 20 students in the participant group indicated that spirituality was important for them. Even though 19 of the students indicated a personal investment in spirituality, only 16 grew up in Christian homes. Of the four students who did not grow up in Christian homes, three of them had regularly attended a church or youth group apart from their families. There was no consistent connection between the parent denominations of the students and the churches they were attending at school. Six students expressed feelings of being more spiritually mature or focused than their parents, even if their parents were involved in the church. All but two of the participants were involved in spiritual activities on campus as well. The university requires students attend thirty chapels a semester, which insures that their students are attending some worship services. Spiritual activity is optional at the college, but 7 of the 10 students indicated that attending chapel or other campus worship times were enjoyable or important to them.

In terms of students’ majors and career goals, the possible majors and careers presented by the group were diverse. There were a couple of interesting trends, however. All but one of the students with intended minors were taking those minors in a language, usually Spanish. Six of the students at the university who had decided on a major were planning to use it in an intentionally Christian way, whether through missions or youth ministry or by bringing a Christian voice to film or journalism. These responses were
completely different from those of the college’s participants, none of which indicated that they would be using their education for expressly Christian occupations. The college has a strong commitment to integrating faith and learning, so the students at the college talked about how spirituality was brought into every classroom as well as every co-curricular activity, but they did not have expressly Christian vocational priorities. Of all twenty students, there were only two undecided students, and only one of those had no particular leanings in any direction. While some of the students had already changed majors, those who had a declared major seemed fairly confident in their choice.

The College Choice Journey

With the research question of why students choose to attend Christian liberal arts colleges, it was important to ask students about all parts of their choice. The interview guide used in this study had questions about all three phases of college choice. The first stage, composed of the decision to go to college, was assumed by all buy two students, both of whom briefly considered going into the armed services instead of college directly after high school graduation. The second stage, composed of the decision of where to apply, was where all students participating in the study had to make a clear and concerted choice. There were three students who only applied to their current institution, which made their decision in the third and final phase of college choice assumed. Everyone else had at least one other place they had applied to and been accepted to from which to choose. All but five of the students applied to three or fewer schools. One student had applied to total of eight institutions.
Students decided the type of school they were interested in before applying to schools at all. The participants were able to make statements about wanting “a small, Christian school,” “a good film school,” “a school within four hours of home,” or “a school that could make accommodations for my disability.” They could explain why they applied to the schools they finally applied to based on those baseline criteria. Sometimes, even though they knew what they wanted, they would apply to a safe school—safe because of money, distance, or lower selectivity than their other choices. Eight of the students applied to a mix of public and private institutions, leaving nine students who applied to multiple Christian liberal arts colleges and three who only applied to their current institution. Even though, as mentioned in the literature review, the two participating institutions are dissimilar as far as Christian liberal arts schools go—in terms of size, location, and denominational background—two students from the participating university had applied to the participating college and one student from the college had applied to the university.

Findings on College Choice

Of the students interviewed, 15 went into their college search with a certain type of college in mind and the other five were interested in looking at a broad range of options before settling on a certain type. The 15 students looking only at Christian institutions took for granted that they wanted to go to Christian school and conducted their search from that assumption. When subjects were asked about their top three reasons for their college choice, the top ranked factor—as seen in Table 2—in terms of frequency, was the “Christian liberal arts” nature of the college.
Table 2.

*Most frequently occurring college choice factors*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Christian liberal arts</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Degree programs</th>
<th>Campus atmosphere</th>
<th>Financial</th>
<th>Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of occurrences</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Created using original data from this study only*

Not every student who indicated this factor as important to them came out and said that they wanted to attend a Christian liberal arts college out right, but their voiced desire for an education where faith is integrated in the classroom was similar to the definition of Christian liberal arts and the response was tallied as such.

The second most common factor mentioned was the location of the college. Each student indicated different desires in terms of how close or far he or she wanted to be from home. One student wanted to be about exactly four hours away from home, and so location was very important in his search. One student was the child of missionaries from Brazil, so any college in the United States was far from home for him. The third most popular response was the existence and quality of the degree program offered by the college. One student was interested in majoring in Chinese language, and so she immediately ruled out all Christian schools that did not have Chinese as a major, this left her with a pretty slim list of options to choose from. She liked other aspects of the college she chose, but the existence of a Chinese major made her decision for her.

The researcher asked every student if they could rank their top three reasons for choosing their current college. When analyzing the transcript data, these answers were extracted and entered into a spreadsheet by the rankings provided by the participants. The
most commonly occurring top reasons were, in order of rank from first to last: Christian liberal arts, degree program, campus atmosphere, location, cost of education, quality of school, and school size. Where location overall was second to most important, in terms of the number one reason for choosing a school, it was indicated as less important and the degree program and campus atmosphere factors were more important. On the other hand, all of the factors listed as first reasons were also listed as third reasons and as additional reasons separate from the answer to the “top three” question.

Campus atmosphere, Christ-centered community and the influence of parents were not in the group of top reasons for attending a school, but were all mentioned by 10, 8 and 7 of the participants respectively. For the sake of clarity, it is important to make a distinction between campus atmosphere and Christ-centered community. The campus atmosphere includes the general feel of the campus, the level of friendliness and welcoming feelings, and even the beauty of the architecture and the landscaping. Six students spoke at length about the campus atmosphere and its effect on their college choice without mentioning the Christian focus of the campus. Certainly the effects of a Christ-centered community may shape the campus atmosphere, but when thinking about Christ-centered community specifically, we are dealing with the vibrancy of Christian devotion and discipleship visible on the campus. Students expressing an interest in the Christ-centered community were concerned with the quality of chapel and other worship services, the frequency of prayer within the classroom and the residence halls, and the existence of Bible studies, spiritual religious groups, and spiritual leadership opportunities.
Typological Categories

The first category of influences is Christian/spiritual influences and includes Christian liberal arts and Christ-centered community. The factor of Christian liberal arts was the strongest factor demonstrated by this sample. For 15 students, the college search began the Christian backdrop in mind. The students who did not first consider Christian liberal arts colleges were either not committed Christians or concerned more with the cost of education rather than how it would affect their faith. Students who were interested in Christian liberal arts but applied to public schools in addition to their Christian choices did so to have a “safety school” where they knew they would be able to get in and afford the education. These safety schools were state schools within the state where they grew up.

Students for whom money was not an issue applied to Christian liberal arts colleges exclusively, with the exception of one who was interested in a state school for its reputable media production program. Overall, the Christian background and life of these institutions had a profound effect on the college choice of their students. There is a overlap of this category with family and mentor influences—given the 16 subjects who had grown up in Christian homes—but that factor does not affect the results. Overall, this category included the most “top three reasons” responses and 19 of the 20 participants expressed concern that their college choice involved a close connection to their spirituality and would provide an outlet in which to grow as Christians.

The second category is academic quality, which refers to factors such as the reputation of the school, quality of the education, the quality of teaching faculty and the availability of certain programs of study. One student only applied to schools with
excellent film programs, and his final choice of the participating college was cemented by how much better their on-campus studio facilities were than the facilities at the other schools he had applied to. One student, who was not interested in the Christian background of the school, had compared the data for nursing schools across the state of Michigan; she was concerned with retention rates, the percentage of graduates with jobs within six months and other quantitative data about Calvin’s nursing program. She chose the Christian college because of its strong nursing program. One student at the participating university chose the school partly because of the number of Advanced Placement credits they accepted. He would have had to take more college classes at other institutions and since he was undecided, having more room in his schedule to explore different disciplines was important to him.

The third category of responses is the institutional demography. This refers to the influences of size, location, student population, and campus atmosphere. Size was important to seven of the participants. One participant noted that she thought a smaller school would be better for her because she was more relational. She did not want to be just a number to faculty members and school administrators, and chose the university because it was on the smaller end of higher education institutions. Three of the other students who cited size as a factor did not want to be overwhelmed in their transition from high school to college. They had attended small high schools or were from small home communities and were apprehensive about going to an institution as small as the university, since even at 1000 students, it was several times the size of their high school. The remaining three students from those citing size as a factor were looking for a smaller school because they had felt underappreciated in large public high schools. They were
seeking a more personal approach to education. Location was very important to the students as well, with 13 indicating it as a factor and two citing it as the top factor determining their choice. One participant wanted to stay in Michigan and only looked at schools in that state. Another participant knew she needed to get out of Colorado, and so she only looked at Christian schools in Indiana, with the exception of Colorado State as her safety school. As a final example, a participant had been living as part of a missionary family in Brazil and was ready to go anywhere in the states to find the right environment.

Campus atmosphere was a major deciding factor for exactly half of the students interviewed. Campus atmosphere was envisioned differently for each participant, and thus was difficult to analyze on any level above individual. However, the feel of a college was enough to bring students to one college over another. One student chose the college in spite of a negative experience in her overnight visit experience. She was placed with a current student who had very different interests and priorities from her. She had to be reminded by her family and friends that she had liked everyone else at the college, including the admissions folks, professors, RAs, and other student life staff, to recover from her bad experience. Even though she ended up going to the college and loves being there, that one bad experience could have changed her whole perception of the place. A participant at the university also had a campus atmosphere story to tell. She was staying overnight and hated the campus and was skeptical of the community the first day, and then when she woke up in the morning, she felt totally at home. That feeling led her to enroll at the university.

The fourth category of influences is that of family influences. This category includes the influences of parents, as well as siblings and extended family members.
When students cited their parents’ influence, they at the same time mentioned the financial aspect of their search. Students who listed parental involvement, with one exception, indicated that their parents wanted to know that their son or daughter would be able to get scholarships and the right amount of federal aid so that they could live comfortably after college. Participants noted that their parents, when their parents were Christian, were also concerned that their children would continue following the faith tradition in which they had been raised. Four students said that their parents were more willing to help them financially if they chose a Christian school, so that influence affected their choice of schools to apply to, as well as their final choice. Three of the student indicated that their parents’ interest in their college choice was colored by the fact that they were alumni of one school or another. None of those three were convinced to choose their school because their parents were alumni, but they were happy to please their mother or father by carrying on a family tradition.

Three of the students, all at the participating college, spoke at length about the influence their siblings had on their college choice. With the exception of one, those siblings were still in the college with the student and they would frequently have lunch together or go to Sunday dinner at a nearby relative’s house. The sibling had talked up the college while at home on breaks and was having a very positive experience at the school to pass on to the student. Thus, when the student visited the campus, they had a tour guide whose opinion they trusted and valued. The other student for whom a sibling was an influence was from Grand Rapids and had a brother who was sick and dying from cancer. She was mostly concerned in her college choice with being able to stay in the area so that she would be able to visit her brother on a weekly or daily basis if need be.
Even though her brother’s illness kept her in the area, this was not her top reason for choosing the college.

The fifth category of the typology is that of peer/mentor influences. Two students in particular at the participating university were deeply influenced by their youth pastors in their choice of the university. Both of the youth pastors in question had attended the university, and dad personal experience and investment in the institution. The pastors involved were interested in sending their students to a place where they could continue to grow in their faith. In terms of peer influence, one student at the university had spent a year abroad doing missions between his high school graduation and his first year of college. The peers that he worked with on his year abroad convinced him to check out the university and he ended up going there based on their recommendation. One other student mentioned peers as having an influence on her search. She had been looking at Bible colleges in the south, when one of her friends convinced her to try visiting the university. That visit caused her, and her friend, to decide to attend there. She credited that friend with connecting her with the perfect college for her needs and desires.

The final category of influences—the “other” category—is a catch-all for responses which did not fit in the other categories and were not predicted by the literature. One factor that came up at the university was that three of the participants were athletes—tennis players all—and they mentioned that the attitude of the tennis coach at the university made them feel more appreciated than coaches at other schools had. None of the randomly selected students at the college were at all concerned with sports.
Two of the students at the college mentioned that its willingness to accommodate their physical disabilities was a major reason to enroll there. One of the disabled students conducted her college search based on how committed an institution was to accessibility and how easy it would be for her to get around on campus. She was thrilled to find a school that met that requirement and her desire for a Christian liberal arts college as well. The final factor fitting into the other category was that of the college’s admissions department’s persistence. Two of the students at the college mentioned that having a meaningful relationship with their admissions counselor really made them feel like the college wanted them there. Even though they considered other schools along the way, they felt like that consistent presence of the college’s voice in their head made it all the simpler for them to decide to attend the college.

Summary

The 20 interviews produced a large amount of information and this chapter has shown the process the researched went through to analyze it and the results of that analysis. Since this was a qualitative study looking at the factors determining college choice, a typological content analysis was used to identify themes amongst the factors. The categories chosen by the researcher from the analysis and the influence of the literature were “Christian/spiritual,” “academic quality,” “institutional demography,” “family,” “peer/mentor,” and “other.” This method of analysis is explained further and detailed in chapter three.

The 20 students interviewed, with the exception of one, took their spiritual lives and development seriously. Those students chose a Christian college because they
wanted to grow spiritually and others because they wanted to live and interact with other Christians. The Christian liberal arts nature of the college or the university was the most frequently occurring response to the “top three reasons” question, but students indicated that the demographics of the institution or its academic quality were also among their top reasons for choosing to attend a Christian liberal arts college. Students found it important to get a good education in a place that made them feel comfortable.

The rest of the influences cited by the study participants—e.g. cost of education, family influence, peer influence, test scores, sports, and disability accommodation—were varied based on the students individual background, financial stability, abilities, and family or social involvement. These reasons for attendance were important to each student but did not evolve into any sort of pattern as the interview transcripts were analyzed. The discussion that follows looks further at the themes drawn from the data and compares the results of the interviews to the information presented in the theories and literature presented in the second chapter.
V. Discussion

Introduction

In this the final chapter of this thesis, there is a discussion of the findings of the study in relation to the literature. This discussion is followed by a summary of the study as a whole, reviewing the contents of the preceding four chapters of the thesis. The researcher will draw some conclusions relating college choice to spirituality. This will include an honest assessment of the study and its ability to actually answer the research question satisfyingly. Finally, suggestions will be put forth by the researcher for the application of the thesis for recruitment officials or those interested in college choice, as well as, suggestions for further study.

Discussion of Findings – Student Spirituality

The survival of Christian liberal arts colleges depend on the peopling of their campuses and the survival of their Christian heritage depends on the peopling of their campuses with spiritually aware students. So, part of examining the college choice of students at Christian liberal arts colleges is to understand their spiritual backgrounds. One portion of chapter four gave the spiritual demographics of the group of students interviewed. Judging by the information provided by these students, there is a desire in them for holistic development, which correlates with the literature focused on the value of holistic development (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Miller et al, 2005;
Jablonski, 2001). The interviewed students’ statements concurred with those of the authors that development of their whole selves was important to them. Most students interviewed seemed to be in tune with their spiritual selves or they expressed a desire to pursue that development, which supports the work by Jablonski and Gleason, who both stress the importance of spiritual development (Jablonski, 2001; Gleason, 2005).

Budde and Wright, in their work on the importance of Christian liberal arts, note that students at Christian liberal arts colleges are to act as “chaplains to the world” (Budde & Wright, 2004). Several interviewed students seemed to resonate with this vision of the Christian liberal arts student. This vision of the Christian liberal arts student was reflected not only in their words but also in their chosen vocations. They talked at length about bringing Christ or a Christian perspective to fields such as film, journalism, business and nursing. Likewise, several of the students were interested in outright ministry or missions. This is a literal understanding of Budde and Wright’s notion; however all of the students, even those who did not explicitly say so, were going to be impacted by an education integrated with faith. Budde and Wright are more interested with the subconscious and ingrained version of being “chaplains to the world,” however the former approach is a legitimate actualization of their theory (Budde & Wright, 2004).

Jablonski’s work and Thiessen’s work were interested in two sides of the same coin. Jablonski brought up the issue of the separation of church and state and how that affects what can be taught and discussed by professors and administrators at Christian liberal arts colleges (Jablonski, 2001). Students were conscious of the freedom their professors and school administrators had in terms of spirituality, although when asked about why they did not apply to public schools, they did not mention the separation of
church and state outright. The study participants who had gone to public schools before choosing a Christian liberal arts college were shocked and pleased to have their professors open their class sessions with devotions or prayer.

Thiessen, on the other hand, examines how the conservative traditions of Christian liberal arts colleges inspire strict rules that might turn prospective students away (Thiessen, 2001). At both institutions, students mentioned that they did not know how strict the rules were before they came to the college. The participating college has strict visiting hours for when opposite sex students can visit their friend’s dorm rooms and the university has sharp restrictions on when and under what circumstances students can watch “rated R” movies. Two of the students at the college talked about how they thought the visiting hours were outdated and how the behavior they were put in place to prevent was happening anyway, off campus. Students at the university, who mentioned the “rated R” movie rule, quickly followed up their comment with the loopholes they had found in the rule so that they could watch them anyway. The general feel was those students who really had an issue with the policies of these institutions probably never applied or enrolled there; the remaining students found their way around them.

Chickering, Dalton and Stamm also confront the difference between public or secular institutions and Christian institutions, asking whether students at Christian schools were simply avoiding the “cognitive dissonance” of fragmenting their identities to fit in within a “god-less” classroom and an “on-fire” religious student group (Chickering, Dalton & Stamm, 2006). When speaking about the perceived difference between their current school and public universities, students expressed joy at being able to integrate their faith into all parts of their lives. When they chose a Christian liberal arts
school they were looking for a place for their faith to be challenged in a safe way, as in “have you read your Bible today?” challenges instead of the assumed challenges they would encounter at a public institution, such as “how can you believe in God, when it cannot be proven God exists?” sorts of challenges. One of the students interviewed noted that he felt ready for that other kind of challenge and felt a little too safe in his Christian community.

Students also expressed a need to avoid schools which were too strict or conservative. Tisdell mentions in his article that some Christian institutions require all members of their community, from students, to administrators, to faculty, to sign a uniform statement of belief (Tisdell, 2003). Students from both participating institutions mentioned examples of schools they ruled out or did not enroll in because of those statements of belief. These students expressed the need to continue on their spiritual journey with a large measure of freedom. They wanted to be able to choose their daily behaviors without having the administration handing restrictions and beliefs down to them. These same participants also mentioned that their current institution did not force a specific religion on them, although the university does require students to attend thirty chapels a semester.

Discussion of Findings – College Choice

The literature on college choice defines three stages therein: the decision of whether to go to college or not, the decision of where to apply, and the decision of where to enroll (Hoxby, 2004; Paulsen, 1990; Pope & Fermin, 2003). Pope and Fermin claim that the first step might as well be removed because most students these days do decide to
attend some amount or level of college (Pope and Fermin, 2003). This opinion is truly reflected in the responses from the interviewed students. This might be because they assumed that the college search was forgone conclusion, but only two students suggested that not going to college was a consideration for them.

Considering the first stage of college choice a nonissue automatically moves the action in college choice, as laid out by Hoxby, to the second stage (Hoxby, 2004). This movement was very clear in the results of this study. When they spoke about their college search, participants spent the most time discussing how they decided where to apply. There was enough emphasis put on this decision that three students were confident in applying to only one school. The third and final phase, supported by Paulsen as vital to the understanding of college choice because it is so individual, is when students decide where to enroll (Paulsen, 1990). Paulsen is on target with this understanding of the third phase, because where students’ paths to one school or the other looked similar in the second phase of college choice, the third phase allowed for drastic divergences in the decision making process. Three students noted that they put off their final decision until after graduation because they wanted to be absolutely sure that they were making the right choice.

As with the student college choice phases, the stages parents go through as part of the process were also supported by the words of the interviewees (Pope & Fermin, 2003). As a reminder, the phases are as follows: information from parent to student, help with college visits and applications, and encouragement in the decision-making process. Most students suggested that their parents wanted the best for them but did not want to influence their decision. Several of the students indicated that their parents went on
college visits with them and were willing to go over information from colleges with them. One student said that her father helped her compare statements of faith from different colleges to decide which ones fit best with her understanding of the Christian faith. On the other hand, some parents were less hands-off and gave their children incentives to choose a Christian college or a certain Christian college above the others.

The research from Miller et al. (2005) would say that parents pushing their students in a particular direction for college were working against their development. This particular bit of literature appeals to Erikson’s theory of adult development and in that the idea that ego development precipitates from the experience of successfully navigating crises. The college choice decision is one of the first crises that modern young adults face in their development. The participants indicated that their parents allowed them to make the final decision, and this approach by their parents was either empowering or unnerving for them. From their position as second semester first-year students, they were excited to have made a good decision for themselves. A few of the students identified that their college choice was a sign they had different priorities from their parents, which goes to support the idea that student identity development starts well before students matriculate (Miller et al., 2005).

The college choice factors touted by the literature—e.g. educational aspirations, parent education, scholastic opportunities, family economic class, social comfort—were supported by the results of the study in part (Paulsen, 1990; Pope & Fermin, 2003; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983). Educational aspirations were certainly important to the students interviewed; however, they were certainly colored by the Christian liberal arts nature of the colleges. In much the same vein, scholastic opportunities were important to students
as well; they wanted to have the best facilities, faculty, and chances to study abroad and engage in internships possible. Family economic class seemed to have less of an effect than the literature indicated that they would (Riley, 2005; Paulsen, 1990). Of the eight students who indicated their parents had a strong influence on their college choice, four said their parents would rule out one school or another because they were too expensive, and the students accepted their parents’ rulings. Students were less willing to limit themselves economically if their parents were not paying for their education in full. On the other hand, students were swayed when their parents offered more financial help if they did choose a certain college.

Factors affecting college choice indicated by the literature that did not translate into actual factors found in the data analysis were the issue of race put forth by Manski and Wise (1983), the issue of test scores put forth by Zemsky and Oedel (1983), and the increased likelihood of finding a mate put forth by Riley (2005). The issue of race is an ongoing issue in our country, but for the students interviewed, race never came up, and ethnic diversity was mentioned only in passing. Only one student mentioned the impact of test scores on his decision, although one might argue that the impact of test scores on the college search would come far before the stage of college visits or applications. Students would only consider colleges they knew they could get into. Similarly, only one student brought up the issue of the “MRS degree,” but it was something that she was skeptical of, even though she said she knew people who were there to find someone of a similar faith to marry.

The only other correlation between the literature reviewed and the actual results of the study was the impact of pastors or spiritual mentors on choice (Pope and Fermin,
Three students indicated that their pastor or spiritual mentor had a profound effect on their choice of college. The major factors related to campus atmosphere, campus location and size, and the liberal arts—especially Christian liberal arts—were significantly absent from the literature. While part of this is due to the fact that the majority of the literature dealt with college choice in general and this study was focused on the choice of Christian liberal arts colleges, it is surprising that campus atmosphere—climate or feel—were so greatly overlooked in the literature. In the end, Paulsen was right to simply define college choice as the intersection between the students’ ideal college and the characteristics of real colleges (Paulsen, 1990). With that simple of an approach, college choice transcends trends and themes and becomes about the individual student and his or her decision.

**Summary**

This section serves to review the thesis as whole to set the stage for the conclusions and recommendations. The first chapter set up the backdrop of college choice and how spirituality relates to that choice for individual students. The reader was given information on the evolution of college choice in the higher education spectrum and an introduction to Christian liberal arts colleges and fit in that spectrum. The research question is defined as why do students choose Christian liberal arts colleges. Assumptions and limitations for the study are then presented in list form. The final portion of chapter one is an overview of the rest of the study.

The second chapter is the literature review. It started with an introduction using the literature show the validity of a study connecting college choice with spirituality. The
first main section of the literature provided an in depth review of the literature of college choice in general. The separate phases of college choice are defined and the developmental impacts of college choice are explained. As the final portion of this section, the major trends in college choice put forth by the literature were examined before the chapter turned to a discussion of Christian liberal arts colleges. The importance of Christian liberal arts in our society are supported and challenged by different writers in the first part of this portion, and the central figures of the liberal arts tradition are defined. The specific effect of the “Christian” part of the Christian liberal arts label is held up to scrutiny, then Christian liberal arts colleges in danger of losing their “Christianity” were considered. Trends in Christian education and factors supporting the choice of a Christian liberal arts institution specifically were reviewed and the chapter was summarized in the conclusion.

The third chapter provided the methodology used in the enactment of the research. A total of 20 students were interviewed, 10 at a Midwestern Christian liberal arts college in the Reformed Christian tradition and 10 at a Midwestern Christian liberal arts university in the United Brethren tradition. The participants were randomly selected from the first-year students through email by contacts at the respective institutions. As part of the interview, a few demographic questions were asked in addition to those used from the interview guide. Data was collected through minimal field notes and a digital voice recording of each interview. The data was analyzed using the qualitative of approach of typological content analysis. This was done in order to correlate the participants’ responses to major themes present in the literature and create room for any new themes that might emerge from the data.
The fourth chapter provided the analysis of the data. It began with a profile of the interviewed students, in terms of major, spiritual affiliation, and spiritual commitment. The remainder of the chapter discussed the factors influencing college choice presented by the participants up into thematic categories. Also, as part of the analysis, the factors were ranked by the frequency they were used by students, and the likelihood that a certain factor would be in the top three reasons for the choosing the institutions in question for any particular students. Two tables were provided along with the textual data to provide the reader with a means of visualization. The categories were described in depth and examples from the interviews were used generously to give a clear picture of what really caused students to choose the participating institutions.

Conclusions

On the whole, this study was successful in providing further insight into why students choose Christian liberal arts colleges. The students who were interviewed were willing to offer up information about their college choice, and in the space of 25-30 minutes, it was possible to garner a great deal of information on college choice from every study participant. Although the literature indicated that the third phase of college choice was the most individual and specialized, it was not difficult for the researcher to divide the students’ reasons for their choice into categories. Even though the information provided by the students deviated from the literature in some cases, it was exciting to hear students support the literature with their own experiences.

The fact that 19 of the 20 students interviewed were committed to their faith and their daily enactment of it was more than expected. Even the only student who said her
faith was not particularly important to her, listed the Christ-centered community as her third reason for coming. Both of these schools would be excellent without the Christian influence, but hearing participants from one interview to the next expound on how important the Christian founding of the school was to them reinforced the need and desire for Christian institutions of higher education in the United States. The factor of Christian liberal arts was enough for 15 of the students to rule out public schools altogether.

Drawing comparisons between students’ responses at the college and the university respectively added depth to the analysis and showed how different Christian liberal arts colleges attract different students. Participants at the university were so much more likely to use overtly spiritual language in their descriptions of their college search, citing spiritual experiences that influenced their search or mentioning how prayer factored in. They were willing to talk about the specifics of their beliefs and did not hesitate to “give God the glory” for their appropriate college choice, willing accepting it as part of His plan for their lives. At the college, the spiritual language was more subverted. Students were excited about chapel or Bible studies on their floors, but they were not as willing or primed to share their story of conversion or the profound spiritual events that had led them to the college. Where the university students would talk about how one could feel “the Spirit of God working on campus,” students at the college would remark that they appreciated the feel of the campus and the openness of fellow students and faculty members to talk about anything, including matters of faith.

The influence of the literature lead the researcher to believe that the students would be less secure in their choice of Christian liberal arts institutions, but 15 of the students in this study knew they wanted a small Christian school from the outset. The
researcher thought that students would struggle more with the decision to ally themselves so profoundly with Christian education. Those students especially who wanted to bring Christianity to their respective fields were not at all concerned about how their degrees from a small Christian institution would hold up in comparison to degrees from more prestigious institutions. On the other hand, both participating institutions are highly ranked in the region and students had no need to fear how they might be seen in the “real world.”

The responses provided by the study participants confirmed many of the assumptions provided in chapter one. All but one of the students were interested in the religious affiliation of the institutions. Even students who did not apply to more than one school did consider other schools and went on multiple college visits. All of the study participants had both a church at home and a place where they were attending near their institutions. None of the students indicated that their parents were uncaring or uninvolved in the college search; they were all helpful and only a few pushed their own opinions on their children. Finally, the participants were in tune with matters of faith, even if faith or spirituality was not their main focus. The assumption that was furthest from the truth was the assumption that students had the ability to attend any school they desired to attend. Part of college choice is taking into effect the factors limiting choice and then making decisions from there. Students who were not from wealthy families could not go to any college they wanted, students who had lower grades and test scores could not go to schools where they were not accepted, and students who had physical limitations or family responsibilities were hemmed in by their life circumstances.
In terms of how the research was conducted, there are a few aspects to the research design that could stand changing. Several of the questions that were asked in almost every interview were not on the interview guide at all. They were discovered to be effective questions in the first few interviews and were written down in the margins of the interview guide. If attempting to add to the study or recreate it, the researcher would revamp the interview guide and add questions that would help target additional factors influencing student choice of Christian liberal arts institutions. In terms of the students interviewed, they were indeed randomly selected, but as was noted in the limitations, they were not a truly diverse group. Likewise, it turned out to be difficult to get students to volunteer, with invitations having to be issued several times; if this study was recreated, it would be in the researcher’s best interest to offer a small incentive from the outset to get participants in the door.

Recommendations

In terms of the implications of this study, the admissions teams at both institutions would benefit from hearing what works in bringing students to their campus. On a much larger scale, other Christian liberal arts schools would benefit from hearing what the literature and students who ultimately ruled them out as college choices have to say about their missions, campus atmosphere, and faculty and staff. Even though Christian liberal arts colleges have been doing well in terms of enrollment across the board, in these difficult economic times, it will be difficult for small private schools teetering on the edge financially to keep their doors open. Having successful admissions and recruitment strategies based in solid understandings of what this current generation of Christian
students—and college students in general—need is one important factor that could keep small, private schools alive.

In terms of suggestions for further study, there are many ways pursue topic which would add to the information presented here. To better understand the choice between Christian higher education and public higher education, a follow-up study should be done interviewing a group of first-year students at Christian liberal arts colleges who had chosen between Christian and public top choices. To better understand why students who are spiritually-focused would not attend a Christian institution, a study should be done interviewing students at public institutions who are spiritually-focused and decided to choose a public institution over a Christian liberal arts college. It is time to recreate Richard Spies large scale study of students engaging in the college search process, and see how the numbers and trends have changes in the last 35 years. A project of that scale would provide current quantitative data to back up the qualitative data produced by this study. A final suggestion for further research would be to follow a small group of high school juniors through their first year of college and interview them at intervals during their process to see how their perceptions of certain colleges and their ideal college shift and evolve within the process.

A great deal of emphasis is put on college choice in this society, and students believe that there is a “right” college out there for them. The more higher education professionals can do to educate students that their college choice will affect the course of their lives but that no one college will be perfect and in fact, that several colleges might be able to provide them with a comforting and challenging home for their college years, the more students will be willing to choose a college that meets their true needs rather
than their inflated perceptions of their own needs. In any case, the study of college choice should continue because it enables higher education professionals to better serve and prepare potential college students for the years ahead.
References


Appendix A

Interview Guide for “Exploring Student Choice of Christian Liberal Arts Colleges”
Rachel Schipull – ME.D. May 2009

Questions on spirituality/faith:
What are the most important components of your life (major sources of meaning and satisfaction) and how are they interrelated?
  Do you regularly reflect on issues of a spiritual nature
  What particular events or situations have been the most influential in some of the critical decisions, changes, gains, and losses?
  Do you have a sense that the balance of your life structure allows for the expression of your real self?

Questions on factors affection college choice:
What undergraduate institutions did you apply to and why?
  Why did you apply to only private colleges?
  Why did you only apply to this college?
  How did you decide where to apply?
What were your top two colleges to choose from?
  Why were these your top two choices?
  How did you decide to narrow it down to these two choices?
How did you make the decision between those two in order to choose Calvin/Huntington?
  What different aspects influenced your choice (give list: financial aid, educational reputation, degree programs, athletics, parents, peer influence, Christian tradition, housing and residential life policies, etc.)?
  What would you say were your top three reasons for choosing Calvin/Huntington?
  To what extent did your parents have an effect on your college choice?
  To what extent did your high school counselor have an effect on your choice?
  To what extent did your peers have an effect on your choice?

Questions concerning how spirituality/faith affected college choice:
Did Calvin/Huntington’s Christian affiliation affect your choice?
  How big of a factor was it?
  Would you have attended Calvin/Huntington if the religious affiliation was not viable?
  To what extent did your pastor or spiritual mentor affect your college choice?

Miscellaneous questions
Having attended Calvin for 1.5 semesters, do you feel like your reasons for choosing Calvin/Huntington have been justified?
What would you say to a high school student who is undecided about whether to attend Calvin/Huntington?
### Appendix B

Table 1.

**Number of Occurrences in Each Typological Category**

<table>
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<th>Christian/spiritual</th>
<th>Academic quality</th>
<th>Institution demography</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Peer/Mentor</th>
<th>Other</th>
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<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
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*Note: Created using original data from this study only*

Table 2.

**Most frequently occurring college choice factors**

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<th>Christian liberal arts</th>
<th>Location programs</th>
<th>Degree programs</th>
<th>Campus atmosphere</th>
<th>Financial</th>
<th>Parents</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of occurrences</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
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</table>

*Note: Created using original data from this study only*