

Northern Illinois University Consumer Behavior

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Chapter 8 Case

An Inquiry into the College Choice Process

Mr. Walker, the admissions director at a well-known Ivy League university, is meeting with his staff to discuss the changes that characterize today's students' college selection processes and the significant implications of that change on admissions and financial aid policies of schools nationwide. This meeting was considered by Mr. Walker to be a necessary step in view of the recent changes taking place in our society today. With student debt rising, and those enrolled failing to graduate in four years, there appears to be a growing sentiment that college may not be the best option for all students.

To be able to assess future trend in college enrollment, Mr. Walker and his staff considered a number of reports regarding the number of students who are expected to graduate from high school. That number in academic year 2011 through 2012 was around 3.2 million students, including 2.9 students from public high schools and 316,000 from private schools. Not all these students, however, were expected to pursue a college education. For example, in 2009, the percentage of students enrolling in college in the Fall immediately following the completion of high school was 70.1 percent.

The committee also reviewed a report regarding total enrollment of students in college for the school year 2011. In the Fall of 2011, a record 19.7 million students attended American colleges and universities. That number constituted an increase of about 4.4 million since the Fall of the 2000 school year.

One interesting statistic, the committee observed, was the higher number of female students seeking college education compared with their male counterparts. In 2011, females comprised the majority of college students, reaching 11.2 million females compared with 8.5 million males. Most of these students were planning to attend school on a full-time rather than part-time basis.

The committee also observed that the record college enrollment has been driven by the increase in the number of individuals within the traditional college age range. Between 2000 and 2010, the 18-to-24-year-old U.S. population rose from approximately 27.3 million to 30.6 million.

For further analysis, the issue of how students choose a college was brought up at the meeting. Student decisions regarding college choice were influenced by many factors, such as cost, fit, school size, school reputation, major, faculty, financial aid, and location. Selection has also been influenced by the special annual issues published by *Money* magazine and *U.S. News & World Report*, which rank colleges according to criteria such as "the best value" per dollar. Such guides seem to have grown in popularity among many students in guiding their college choice.

Students also shop for colleges online at sites such as GreatSchools.org, collegesearch.com, collegeboard.com, and gocollege.com. Most high school juniors and seniors have Internet access at home or at school. They surf the Internet and check the social media to determine which school can give them the best value for their money. In this sense, many students have come to regard the college experience as a product rather than a process. These consumerist students shopping for a college tend to study the product's long-term yield—that is, the potential job that will materialize or the quality of the graduate program for which the degree will qualify them.

This change has forced college recruiters to defend tuition rates by citing job placement and graduate school acceptance figures that prove there is a payoff to the large investment required to obtain a college education.

Mr. Walker claimed that from his experience and from the reports he has been reading, *value* seems to have been the most important factor in college choice among many high school seniors as well as transfer students. The college choice decision has become much more money driven, and availability of student aid has become a significant component of that decision. It is not uncommon today to see college recruits lavish high school seniors with gifts, merit awards, and hard-to-refuse financial aid packages to get them to apply to a specific school. Such practices are common today among many public as well as private college recruiters.

Chapter 8 Case Questions

1. The concept of *value* treats selecting a college like purchasing a car. It ignores the important issue of *fit* (is a particular school the *right choice* for a specific student?). How do you feel about this issue?
2. In your opinion, what factors truly affect most students' choice of a college? Did these same factors apply in your own choice of a school?
3. What additional information, activities, or incentives could schools provide to help students, perhaps in conjunction with their parents, arrive at a better-informed choice of which college to attend?