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Influential Factors In International Students' College Choice Of A Rural, Regional University

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INFLUENTIAL FACTORS IN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' COLLEGE CHOICE OF A RURAL, REGIONAL UNIVERSITY

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This dissertation is dedicated to my mother

who is my heart, my soul

&

the inspiration behind every achievement in my life

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates college choice factors that influence the decision-making of international students to attend a regional, rural university. Specifically, the study examines students' priorities within and among four categories of characteristics, namely, institutional characteristics, program characteristics, marketing and recruitment characteristics, and significant others characteristics. Various items within each characteristic category measure the significance of the pertaining characteristic. Data was collected through a quantitative survey administered to enrolled international students at Eastern Kentucky University. Descriptive statistics including frequencies, means, and standard deviations were utilized to analyze the data. Results indicate that program characteristics (most importantly the programs' reputation and the quality of contact with faculty) are the most influential factors in international students' college selection. Institutional characteristics (most importantly cost of attendance and admission standards) follow very closely. Ease and efficiency of the admission process and personal communication with university personnel are among the marketing and recruitment characteristic variables that have the most impact on students' college choice in this category. The influence of significant others was found to have the least effect on students' decision-making.

Keywords: Internationalization of higher education, International student recruitment, College choice factors, College decision-making process, rural and regional institutions.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The rapid surge of globalization has presented new economic, geopolitical, and environmental challenges that require global competency to overcome. The focal feature of globalization is that it is multifaceted (Levin, 2001). Globalization comprises activities that range from humanitarian campaigns to activities that focus on economic exchange and multinational cooperation (Arthur, 2004). The pervasive effects of globalization have created a demand for individuals who are familiar with foreign policies, cultures, and international business operations. In this sense, international education is a central element of globalization (Altbach & Bassett, 2004).

Over the last few decades, following the expansion of tertiary education systems worldwide, the internationalization of higher education has evolved shoulder to shoulder with the globalization of economies and societies. Today, educational institutions that fail to adapt to the globalized era bear the risk of extinction (Gardner, 2004). As Harvard professors Suarez-Orozco and Qin-Hilliard (2004) attest, "educational systems which neglect the larger global forces are likely to become obsolete, while those that proactively engage globalization's new challenges are more likely to thrive" (p. 23).

The growing global demand for internationalization of higher education has sparked unprecedented interest in diversity issues among post-secondary institutions around the world (Thompson & Cuseo, 2009). Since the international student population of an institution is considered a key measure of international education exchange, international students play a critical role in the internationalization of higher education. In the last

decade, the number of students attending tertiary institutions outside their country of citizenship has more than doubled from approximately 2 million in 2000 to 4.3 million in 2011 (Open Doors, 2013). This increase represents an average annual increment of nearly 6%, which is a greater increase than the overall rise in tertiary enrollments globally (OECD, 2013). Projections indicate a continuing trend of growth with numbers estimated to reach 8 million international students in 2025 (Open Doors, 2013).

However, promotion of a global heterogeneous workforce is not the sole motive for internationalizing higher education. Internationalization of higher education is inextricably connected to a larger context of social, economic, and political shifting trends that influence the participating countries (Knight, 2000). With the current global economic crisis and the diminishing government resources, the financial contribution of international students has become one of the few hopeful outlets to secure an alternate source of funding for higher education (Arthur, 2004). Tysome (1999) recognized that "the academics are working in one of the world's most rapidly expanding lines of business" (p. 8). Today, education has grown into a multi-billion industry and occupies a major segment of the export sector. For example, in Canada, international student expenditures on tuition, accommodation, and living expenses outweigh the total Canadian exports of unwrought aluminum of Helicopters, Airplanes and Spacecraft (Canada international education advisory panel, 2012). In Australia, education is the third largest export after coal and iron ore (OECD, 2013), and Australian universities have come to rely on international student revenue to sustain their core teaching and research activities (Davis, 2013). According to the Association of International Educators (NAFSA), international students and their dependents contributed $24 billion to the U.S. economy

and created/supported 313,000 jobs during the 2012-13 academic year alone, making education the fourth largest service sector export in the country. Thus, it is not surprising that both public and private educational institutions are increasingly viewing international students as a supplementary source of revenue and are investing in cross-border recruitment. In addition to the full out-of-state, out-of-pocket tuition fees charged by higher education institutions, the revenues generated from living expenses of international students during their period of study is substantial to the local economy (NAFSA, 2013).

Internationalization of higher education has become an institutional and governmental priority in many developed countries, not only because it is perceived as a sign of global competitiveness and a source of financial gain, but also because it serves as a way to ensure high capacity for scientific and technological research (Gates, 2004). International students are now more likely to be enrolled in the highest levels of education, reflecting an increasing internationalization of academic research and science (OECD, 2009). According to the latest available report, in major destination countries, an average of one in five tertiary students enrolled in advanced research programs is international. This proportion exceeds 30% in Australia, France, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (OECD, 2013).

Cultural enlightenment and strengthening diplomatic relationships are other contributions of international students that make them attractive to any institution of higher education. International students add to the diversity on campus, bring distinguished perspectives into classrooms, and strengthen institutions' global networks (Thompson & Cuseo, 2009). On a larger scale, international students advocate the host

country's diplomacy by building business, professional, and academic ties after graduation (Rooney, 2003; Hughes, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

Since the end of World War II, the United States has been the number one education destination for international students. Today, American colleges and universities host the largest number of international students compared to any other country in the world. The most recent census reported 819,644 international students studying in the United States, which marks the seventh consecutive year of growth after the drastic declines between 2002 and 2006 (Open Doors, 2013). Underlying and often unmentioned in the accounts for America's accomplishments, however, are two striking facts:

1. The United States has the lowest percentage of international enrollment among the world's top five destinations. International students represent less than 4% of the total U.S. post-secondary enrollment at the graduate and undergraduate levels combined. Meanwhile, in Australia for example, international students make up over 26% of all tertiary-level enrollments (OECD, 2013).

2. While America's international education market appears to be recovering with growing numbers of international students in absolute terms, its global share of this sought-after market has been dropping significantly in recent years. The United States' share of the world's internationally mobile student population reduced from 23% in 2000 to 16.5% in 2011. In the same period, the United Kingdom's share edged up from 11% to 13% (OECD, 2013). These numbers are ample evidence that not only is the world catching up, but the United States' leadership position is in decline.

In essence, although the United States has historically enjoyed a quasi monopoly of the international education market, it has been slow in responding to the changing demographics of international student mobility. Brody (2007) noted, "this inertia has been their [institutions of higher education] intrinsic advantage. Yet today they are subject to the same forces and stresses created by globalization that confront all other aspects of society" (p.132). Growing globalization, changing market trends, increased competition, ineffective marketing strategies, financial/resource constraints, and unaligned immigration policies are recognized to have attributed to the chronic downward development of international student enrollment in the United States.

Intensifying Competition

Along with the changing patterns in global mobility, the international higher education sector has undergone quite profound changes in recent years. The ongoing impact of the economic crisis and diminishing public funds for higher education is compelling many countries to recruit more international students in a shorter time frame and within tighter budget constraints (Jaschik, 2007). In this way, the increased competition to attract and retain international students has diversified the map of destinations. New players have emerged in the international education market over the past decade. According to a recent report from the European Migration Network (EMN), the number of international students in Europe increased by 114% from 2000 to 2010, a substantially higher rate than the growth of international students in North America, which was estimated at roughly 55%. Similarly, significant numbers of foreign students were enrolled in Canada (5%), Japan (4%), and the Russian Federation (4%). While it still has only a small share of the international education market, the number of foreign

students in Korea has increased over 17-fold during this period (OECD, 2013). As these strong competitors escalate their efforts to recruit internationally and make their educational programs more attractive to overseas students, the U.S. percentage of the total market share of global mobility is almost certain to further decrease (Hudzik & Briggs, 2012). It is evident that United States' dominant status is facing serious challenges and may slowly erode.

The Institutional Scenario

Since the 1990s, Australia and the United Kingdom have viewed education as a global service industry. Over the years, they have launched many aggressive and strategic programs to recruit international students to their colleges and universities (Bok, 2003; Marginson, 2011). Australian and British scholars have conducted numerous studies on issues related to the effectiveness of various marketing tools. In Canada, competition to attract "the best and brightest" international students has emerged as a theme for higher education institutions (Canada international education advisory panel, 2012). After nearly doubling its international student population over the past decade, Canada is aiming to double its enrollment base again by 2022 (OECD, 2013). This sustained international student outreach by Great Britain, Australia, Canada, and other nations has shifted international education to a marketing-oriented structure. This way, United States' higher education is now facing more competitive market structures that threaten the survival of some of its existing institutions because they are now forced to compete with scarce resources for a greater number of potential candidates who have many alluring options available to them.

In such a fierce market, one would expect to see U.S. higher education institutions reinforce their efforts to internationalize their campuses. However, in reality, formal institutional commitment to internationalization is lackluster and uneven at best. Few institutions include global education in their mission statement; even fewer have a systematic recruitment plan to target international programs and opportunities; and not many dedicate a task force specifically to advancing international enrollment strategies (Koch, 2008). The bottom line is that internationalization does not permeate the fabric of most institutions in the United States, and institutional policies and practices have not yet caught up with the rhetoric of changing internationalization trends around the world (Viers, 2005).

The National Scenario

With the expansion of globalization, most governments around the world continue to emphasize the importance of the internationalization of higher education. They suggest it is important, in the context of international markets and knowledge-driven societies, to maintain a competitive edge in knowledge production and technological development. These outlooks often translate into implementation of policies that increase the presence of international students. For example, mobility in Europe got a big boost following the European Union's recent approval of a major expansion of the Erasmus+ program (OECD, 2013). This program expedites procedures for students from outside Europe who wish to study in Europe. The Bologna Process is another instance of such efforts, which is targeted at harmonizing the academic degrees within the European Union. With the harmonization of the different academic degrees, the mobility and employability of students, professors, and researchers will expand throughout Europe. Similarly, Australia

and the United Kingdom have executed systematic, government-funded programs designed to attract internationals to their universities (Hughes, 2007; Woo, 2006). Other nations such as Canada, New Zealand, China, Singapore, Malaysia, and the United Arab Emirates have also sponsored several initiatives to encourage institutions to recruit internationally. Unlike countries with tightly coordinated higher education systems, the vast scope and decentralization of the American college/university landscape does not lend itself to a consistent international education strategy. Hence, the nation has never had a comprehensive policy for international education in general or international student recruitment in particular (Heyl & McCarthy, 2003).

In general, international students perceive the U.S. higher education system valuable for providing high quality education, however, not easily accessible to most. In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy of September 11, 2001, the Department of Homeland Security enforced two pieces of legislation, the 2001 USA Patriot Act and the subsequent 2002 Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Act. These acts tightened measures for what disciplines international students could study and entry into the country, especially for those from Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. Thousands of applicants have been rejected student visas, and those who qualified have been experiencing long delays in the process and face fingerprinting and photographing requirements upon entry to the United States. As a result, in the 2002-3 academic year, the United States experienced its first shocking decline in international student enrollment in 32 years (Open Doors, 2013; Jaschik, 2007). The decline has been widely associated to post 9/11 student visa restrictions and recognitions abroad that the United States has become less welcoming to international students (Colondres, 2005; Coffman, 2007). Thus, perception is spreading

that it is easier to attend higher education institutions in countries serving the next highest percentages of international students such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada (Bollag, Brender, & Mooney, 2004; Mooney & McNeill, 2006). Altbach (2004) has argued that if post 9/11 immigration barriers are not eliminated, "the U.S. will inevitably see a decline in both the quality and the influence of its universities—and this will have lasting implications for the economy, for science and research, and for America's global role" (p. 9).

Purpose of the Study

Due to the increasing demand for international education and the emergence of new competitors as a result of changing global trends, postsecondary institutions are more than ever involved in an intense struggle to attract international students. Given the financial and intellectual benefits that this group of students bring to campuses, it is not surprising that many institutions of higher education, regardless of type, are investing greater efforts into recruiting and accommodating international students. However, most institutions fail to properly identify and address the needs of their potential customers (i.e. prospective students). This is mainly due to a lack of information about the characteristics of the target market. Many institutions continue to treat overseas student recruitment as a single task with a single marketing and communication strategy. In reality, proper market segmentation should be undertaken with each target group addressed according to its values, choice factors, and relative priorities (Doorbar & Associates, 1997).

In this sense, colleges/universities may maintain their competitive advantage by raising awareness of the underlying factors that influence the college choice behavior of prospective students and recognizing the relationships among those factors when evaluating recruitment strategies (Ivy, 2001; Vaira, 2004).

As more enticing options become available to international students worldwide, it behooves institutions of higher education in the United States to gain knowledge of the reasons and motivations that drive prospective students to attend a particular institution. Although some high-prestige institutions can focus on their reputation and name recognition as a way to attract international students, other institutions should obtain accurate information related to all the variables that influence international students' college decision-making if they are concerned with the long-term effectiveness of their international enrollment practices.

Within this context, the purpose of the present study was to identify factors/ characteristics that potential international students perceive most important in choosing one college/university over another. While it was anticipated that this study would add to the knowledge base of the decision-making process of international students, it was also hoped that it would motivate regional and smaller colleges/universities to become more deliberate in addressing the international student market. By reaching a better understanding of international students' college selection process, higher education institutions can reassess/refocus their efforts and take appropriate measures to match their recruitment initiatives with international students' priorities.

Research Question

International students' priorities in selecting a college/university are a relatively recent topic of study. Hence, there is scant literature analyzing the factors that affect the college choice process of international students in general. This body of literature is even sparser within studies that have been conducted in the United States. From the pool of research conducted in the U.S., an exceptionally limited number of studies have focused on regional and rural institutions. In attempt to rectify this negligence and contribute to filling the existing gap, the following research question was developed:

1. How do international students rate factors that influence their decision to attend a rural, regional university?

This study made no preconceived assumptions of the prioritizing rationale and instead examined the characteristics, perceptions, and college choice behavior of individual students in an effort to better understand the variables affecting college/university selection by international students. Answers to the above question unveiled factors that international students consider prominent in their decision to attend a rural, regional university in the United States. Implications of this study allow college recruitment specialists to market their programs more effectively to international students. Furthermore, the results of this research may provide some basic conceptualizations of international students' decision-making process to study in the U.S. These conceptualizations can guide researchers who seek to understand the college choice behaviors of specific subgroups of this population.

Conceptual Framework

Review of the literature confirms that selecting a higher education institution is a complex and multidimensional process for both domestic and international students. Over the years, a variety of economic, status attainment, and combined multi-stage models have been proposed in attempt to explain the college choice process. Among these models, combined models have been particularly popular because they allow for consideration of several variables during each stage. Many previous studies on international student college choice process have confirmed the validity of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) combined model (e.g. Waters, 1992; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Kim, 2001; Ruby 2007).

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) present college choice as a developmental process that occurs within three phases. The predisposition phase is the initial stage in which students make the decision whether or not to continue their formal education beyond the secondary level. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) concluded that beyond providing information about the college/university, institutions have minimal influence on students during the predisposition phase. The outcome of this phase is for students to either move into the college search phase or decide on alternate options.

For students who decide to continue their education, the next stage is the search phase. During this stage, students collect information about particular institutions and their characteristics. Search activities include information-gathering and its processing. It is during this stage that the most interaction between students and colleges/universities occur. At the end of this phase, students will develop a choice set of colleges and universities to which they will apply.

The choice phase is the third and the final phase of this model. Students proceed through the choice phase by assessing their available options and ultimately deciding on their preferred college/university. The result of this phase is the final enrollment decision.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) provide a general framework that conceptualizes the process of college choice by incorporating the effects of institutional characteristics, program characteristics, marketing and recruitment characteristics, significant others' characteristics, individual student characteristics, and the connection between these variables. In this way, Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model allows for simultaneous examination of multiple variables, as well as their interactions, that influence the college decision-making process. For this reason, the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model was selected as the appropriate conceptual framework to guide this study. It is important to note that although Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model has been employed as the conceptual framework for this study, it was not in the scope of this study to cover all three stages of this model. The present study merely focused on those college choice factors that influence international students' enrollment decision (i.e. the choice phase).

Significance of the Study

Literature on the college choice process of domestic matriculates is reasonably sophisticated and includes numerous references to variables involved in their decision-making (Hossler, 1984). For policy makers and campus officials who are interested in recruiting international students, however, there is a scarcity of research that investigates who/what influences foreign students' perceptions and decisions to attend a particular college/university in the United States.

Much of the literature on flows of international students is related to push/pull factors of pursuing higher education abroad, the selection process of a destination country, academic and social challenges, or international students' adjustment process. While these studies illustrate the great interest of researchers in issues of international education and recognition of the significance of international students, literature that specifically considers international student flow from the perspective of the student college decision-making process is limited to a handful of studies. Similar to Litten's (1991) observation of the choice process research in the United States:

> In spite of all the attention, we do not have a very satisfactory understanding of just what is done by whom, and why. Our telescope has turned out to be a kaleidoscope with lots of brightly colored pieces that form engaging but shifting patterns (p. 59)

This absence of information leaves enrollment administrators with little guidance as to how to design and tailor recruitment activities that will best assist international students in choosing their institution.

This especially pertains to smaller, rural, and regional institutions that often do not possess sufficient resources (both financial and personnel) to cover the broad spectrum of the international education market. In the 2012-13 academic year for example, only 5% of all the institutions of higher education in the United States (all located in metropolitan areas) dominated the market by recruiting nearly 70% of the total international student population who came to this country to study (Open Doors, 2013). This is evidence that despite their tremendous potential, rural and regional institutions are often overlooked as an option by international students.

In this context, the present study drew upon previous research on college choice to explore the underlying motivations and factors that lead to international students' decision to enroll in a rural, regional university. This study contributes to the literature by focusing directly on pivotal variables in international students' enrollment decisions and how these variables may affect the development of reinforcing recruitment and marketing strategies at rural, regional, and less competitive colleges/universities.

Definition of Terms

Globalization- is the increase in connectivity throughout the world due to social, economic, and political changes (Altbach, 2007).

Internationalization- is the response to external global changes from individuals and institutions that prepares them for successful participation in an increasingly interdependent world (Francis, 1993).

Internationalization of Higher Education- refers to the specific activities, initiatives, or policies of individual academic institutions, systems, or countries that advocate global trends. These activities and policies are related to recruitment of foreign students, collaboration with academic institutions or systems in other countries, establishment of international curricula, promotion of student mobility, and development of global competency (Altbach, 2002). Knight (1993) sees internationalization of higher education as "the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution" (p. 21). The internationalization of higher education is a response to the impact of globalization.

International Student- refers to individuals who have traveled outside of their home country to pursue full-time tertiary education. In the United States, international students have non-immigrant status and do not hold permanent residency while studying in the country and generally hold F-1 or J-1 visas. In this study, the terms 'foreign student' and 'international student' are used interchangeably.

College Choice Process- is defined as "a complex, multistage process during which an individual develops aspirations to continue formal education beyond high school, followed later by a decision to attend a specific college, university or institution of advanced vocational training" (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989, p. 234).

Decision-Making Process- is identified as one that requires a high level of involvement resulting in an active search for information and acceptance of a small number of alternatives.

Student Perceptions- refers to students' understanding regarding how each of the college choice factors affects their decision-making to attend a particular college/university.

International Student Recruitment- refers to legitimate activities and strategies that are designed to attract international students to a particular institution. Such activities can take many forms and may be performed by a variety of persons or agencies.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the past four decades, the focus of international higher education has shifted from a model of providing public services to a marketing-oriented industry model (Harman, 2004). The fact that internationalization of higher education has been included as one of the twelve service sectors in the General Agreement on Trade in Services is sufficient proof that importing and exporting of educational services is a lucrative practice for post-secondary institutions around the world (Knight, 2004).

In terms of world trends, the 1970s were a pivotal decade for internationalization of higher education and drastically altered the philosophy behind receiving international students by placing an entirely different value on their presence (Jenkins, 1983; Mashiko, 1983). This movement initiated an entrepreneurial age in international recruitment at higher education institutions (Jenkins, 1983). The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the most rapid increase in foreign student numbers across the main host countries. However, the growth rate somewhat slowed towards the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s. One explanation for the decline in international enrollment in this period may be the dramatic reduction in government funding in many host countries which resulted in steep increases in tuition fees at both public and private institutions (Chandler, 1999).

Faced with declining enrollments, higher education institutions ventured into aggressive marketing-oriented models and recruiting activities in competition for foreign student revenue (Fuller & Scott, 2009). "A marketing model applies marketing principles, such as marketing mix, segmentation, positioning, and marketing research, to higher

educational institutions" (Chen, 2008, p. 6). It helps institutions identify students' college choice factors and examine their decision-making process so that institutions can adequately respond to the prospective students' needs, desires, and interests (Chen, 2008).

Against this background, as the 21st century begins to unfold, development of internationalization has become a conscious priority for many higher education institutions around the world (Knight, 2000). The increasing global nature of societies along with the unprecedented growth, complexity, and competitiveness of the world economy have created added pressure on institutions of higher education to respond to the challenges of this changing dynamic (Bartell, 2003; Fuller & Scott, 2009). Being keenly aware of the immense financial, cultural, and intellectual benefits that international students bring with them to their institutions, colleges and universities are increasing their efforts to attract more international students. Recruiters and marketing agents from foreign countries have an increasing presence on campuses worldwide, often offering attractive and sometimes affordable alternatives to studying in one's home country (Verbik & Lasanowski-Hobsons, 2007). However, an internationalization commitment by higher education institutions alone is not adequate. This endeavor is stabilized when translated into concrete policies and recruitment practices that promote internationalization. Inclusion of international student recruitment as an integral part of a comprehensive plan with clear objectives and full institutional support is required from policy-makers in order to reach high internationalization levels (Green, 2005).

European countries and Australia have implemented national policies and immigration regulations that complement their academic structures and enhance internationalization of higher education (Altbach & Bassett, 2004; Bollag et al., 2004;

Woo, 2006; Hughes, 2007). For example, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden, and Finland have set a series of ambitious goals concentrated on increasing the numbers of international students they recruit. In a similar attempt, the United Kingdom is attracting more foreign students than ever before by establishing a brand of higher education at its colleges/universities. While the United States has been involved in international development on a substantial scale during the last five decades, American public and private colleges/universities have just recently begun internationalizing their higher education institutions to any considerable extent (Bartell, 2003).

Changing Market Trends in International Education

The size of the international education industry is significant in terms of the number of international students and export revenues. At present, approximately five million students worldwide study outside of their home countries. By 2025, the global demand for international higher education is estimated to reach 8 million placements (Open Doors, 2013). Countries and higher education institutions competing globally have recognized that innovative marketing and strategic partnerships are crucial in attracting and retaining larger numbers of international students. More than ever before, students are seeking an international experience that offers them high quality education that could lead to opportunities for placement, employment, or even long-term immigration (Verbik & Lasanowski-Hobsons, 2007). While increasing number of countries are developing programs and strategies to bring foreign students to study in their institutions, those that provide the resources and knowledge desired by students ultimately stay at the center of the world market (Chen & Barnett, 2000).

According to the most recent report by the Institute of International Education (IIE), the United States is the leading destination with 819,644 international students pursuing their education at its tertiary institutions followed by the United Kingdom (488,380), China (328,330), France (289,274), Germany (265,292), Australia (245,531), Canada (214,955), and Japan (137,756) (Open Doors, 2013). Table 2.1 illustrates the top international education destinations and how their foreign student population has changed since 2011.

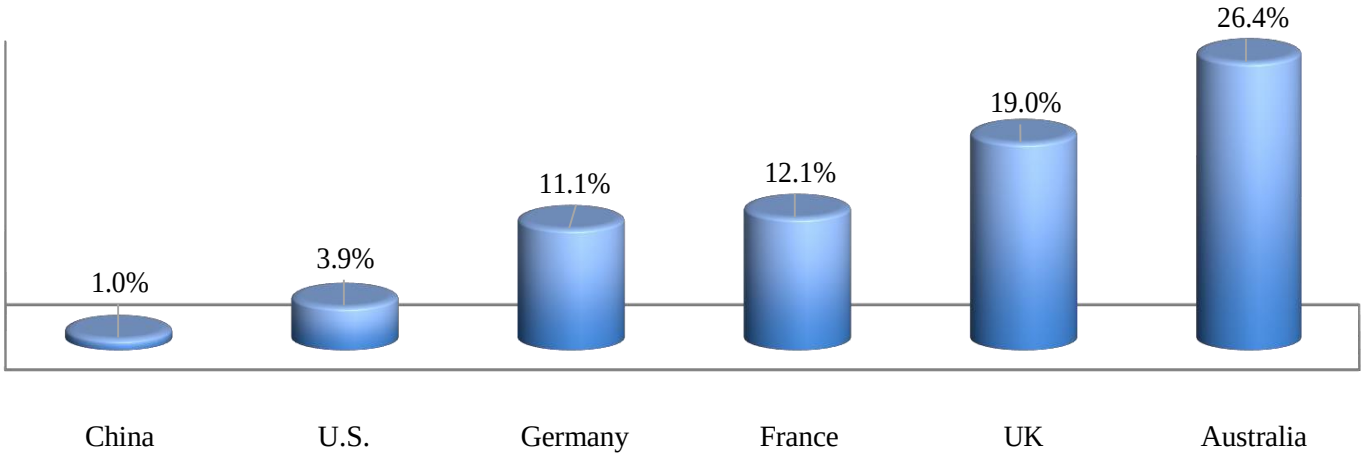
Table 2.1 International Students' Top Educational Destinations

Foreign Host Country	2012-13 Total International Students	% Change from 2011-12
United States	819,644	7.2%
United Kingdom	488,380	1.6%
China	328,330	12.2%
France	289,274	1.5%
Germany	265,292	5.3%
Australia	245,531	1.3%
Canada	214,955	11.0%
Japan	137,756	-0.2%

Source: Open Doors Annual Report on International Educational Exchange, 2013

Although the United States continues to be the dominant player in terms of the sheer number of international students in its post-secondary institutions, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Australia surpass America in the percentage of foreign students

they host in their institutions. At 26.4%, Australia currently has the highest proportion of international students in higher education. The United Kingdom is the runner-up with 19%; France and Germany follow at 12.1% and 11.1%, respectively. The United States appears toward the bottom of the list with international students comprising only less that 4% of the total U.S. higher education enrollment. Figure 2.1 demonstrates how global student mobility patterns are changing with new entrants breaking into the traditional international education market.



Source: Open Doors Annual Report on International Educational Exchange, 2013

Figure 2.1 International Enrollment as a Percentage of Total Higher Education Enrollment, 2012

Australia's higher education system has secured a major position in the international education market in a very short time. Their successful marketing model of international education has been noted by other countries as a representation of what effective educational recruitment can potentially achieve (Marginson, 2011). With a modest population of 21 million people, Australia commands 6% of the world market in

international education which has made it the nation's fourth largest export sector. This means that in Australian colleges/universities, more than one in four students are full-fee-paying international students whom help support Australia's public universities (Altbach & Bassett, 2004). Australia's research universities have more than half as many foreign students as does the entire U.S. doctoral sector, though the U.S. population is 15 times larger than that of Australia (Marginson, 2011). These developments reflect the value of distinct internationalization policies and proactive marketing strategies employed in the Asia-Pacific region in comparison to a more local and institution-driven approach in the traditionally dominant United States.

United States' Deterrents on Increasing International Student Enrollment

Although the global demand for international higher education is anticipated to increase to over 8 million placements in 2025 (Open Doors, 2013), political, economic, and social circumstances contribute to some uncertainty about the future destination trends for international students (Bohm, Davis, Meares, & Pearce, 2002; Fischer, 2009). While the United States remains the leading stakeholder in the international education market, its long-term top-place ranking is not guaranteed. The United States continues to attract international students for its academic system excellence, reputable institutions, and high quality of facilities and resources (Muche & Obst, 2006). However, heightened national security procedures, especially post 9/11, and difficulties in securing visas have deterred foreign students from entering the United States (Johnson, 2009). Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) have identified the ease of obtaining residence visa and immigration procedures as the second most important factor in foreign students' destination selection.

Impact of 9/11

International student enrollment in United States' tertiary institutions curtailed in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11th, 2001 (Altbach & Bassett, 2004). This catastrophic event ended 32 consecutive years of international student enrollment growth in the United States as the federal government brought global terrorism to the forefront of U.S. foreign policy and tightened up entry for foreigners (Lee, 2008).

International student enrollment growth dropped from 6.4% in 2001-02 to 0.6% in 2002-03. The decline continued in the following years and regressed to an abrupt -2.4% in 2003-04 and remained in the negatives in 2004-5 (-1.3%) and 2005-06 (-0.05%) (Open Doors, 2013). China and India suffered the sharpest decreases in this period. International student applications to the United States from China fell by 76%, and those from India fell by 58%. Meanwhile, international student applications from China and India increased in Australia by 25% and 31%, respectively. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, Chinese applicants grew by 36% and Indians by 16% (Pardee, 2004).

Implemented Policies

Since the tragedy of 9/11, the U.S. government has put into place over twenty-five new laws and regulations that make it more difficult for foreigners to obtain visas (Bollag, 2007). The complicated immigration procedures often impose greater scrutiny and higher processing fees on international students causing a confusion and dissatisfaction that may lead to some doubt about studying in the U.S. (Lee & Becskehazy, 2005).

The Department of Homeland Security launched the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) on January 1, 2003. SEVIS is an international student and scholar tracking system that requires all institutions to enter international students' information and academic status into a database (Rosser et al., 2007). To register in the database, international students must submit an additional $100 fee accompanied by their fingerprints prior to their arrival at an American college/university. Implementation of SEVIS has increased the workload of international student advisors by 80% at higher education institutions, which leaves them with less time for attending to students' advising needs (Lorenzetti, 2004; Rosser, Hermsen, Mamiseishvili, & Wood, 2007).

Another U.S. visa regulation puts a 6-month moratorium on international students' visas. This law requires additional background checks on international students whose application indicates that they will study in any one of the 200 scientific disciplines on the U.S. Government's Technology Alert List. These security checks take an average of 67 days with possible extension for students coming from 'terrorist-sponsoring' countries (Hebel, 2001). Even after they are cleared, admitted, and entered the country, some international students must reapply for a visa and go through the entire process again if they decide to travel outside the United States.

In this sense, while many countries are actively pursuing international students, U.S. policies continue to be less engaged in this issue. Victor C. Johnson, senior advisor for public policy at NAFSA urged the U.S. government to adopt an approach that embraces the opportunities of a new era in global student mobility. He outlines a comprehensive set of policy actions that will enhance the ability of the United States to benefit from the important contributions of international students and global talent (Johnson, 2009).

Kass (2007) has also suggested that implementing purposeful immigration and international recruitment policies would improve advising and information dissemination for students seeking to study in the United States.

Transformation of the International Education Market

Although international student visa issuance somewhat recovered from the impact of terrorist attacks by 2008-09 and reached a robust 7.7% on the growth curve, it yet again collapsed in 2009-10 to 2.9% (Open Doors, 2013). The reality is that the visa issuance process is only one among many factors that affect U.S. competitiveness for international students (Johnson, 2009). The recent decline in foreign student numbers is a function of the transformation of the international education market and can be directly linked to the decrease in applications to United States' institutions (Viers, 2005). The current global economic crisis and the emergence of strong competitors has led to drastic changes in patterns of foreign student enrollment over the past ten years (Hvistendahl, 2009).

Since the new millennium, international student mobility worldwide has increased at more than twice the rate of international student enrollment in U.S. higher education institutions (Open Doors, 2013). This gap illustrates that over the past decade international students have been increasingly choosing to pursue higher education abroad in countries other than the United States (Johnson, 2009). While other countries are improving their services and adopting aggressive national strategies to entice more international students to their colleges and universities, United States' institutions are falling behind in catering their support services to the unique needs of international students (Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado, & Rhoades, 2006). As a result of this competition,

the United States is being pushed to the sidelines and deprived from taking optimum advantage of benefits of international students.

Contributions of International Students

International students bring many benefits to the United States' institutions and communities. They not only contribute economic value, but also support U.S. innovation through science and engineering coursework; bring global perspectives into U.S. classrooms and research labs; support programming and services on campuses for all students; and build bridges between the United States and other countries.

Economic Contributions

International education scholars affirm that the principal factor driving global student mobility in almost every country is financial gain (Marginson, 2011). Engaging in international education by increasing foreign student enrollments and exporting education has made a significant economic contribution to higher education institutions worldwide. Higher education is among the United States' top service sector exports, as international students provide revenue to the national, state, and local economy through their expenditures on tuition and living expenses.

According to the Association of International Educators (NAFSA), international students, who only represent 3.9% of the total tertiary student population, and their dependents, contributed $24 billion to the U.S. economy during the 2012-13 academic year. This is nearly a 10% increase in dollars contributed to the U.S. economy from the previous academic year. Open Doors (2013) reports that the primary source of funding for about 72% of all international students comes from sources outside of the United

States, including personal and family sources (about 64%) and assistance from their home country governments or universities (about 7%). This percentage is even higher for undergraduate students. Over 80% of all undergraduate international students rely on personal and family funds to support their higher education in the U.S.

NAFSA's economic analysis also reveals that with a growth of 6.2%, approximately 313,000 jobs have been generated or supported as a result of international student expenditures while in the United States. In other words, for every 7 international students enrolled, 3 U.S. jobs are created or supported by money they spend on higher education, accommodation, dining, retail, transportation, telecommunications, and health insurance. Among the total generated/supported jobs, 53% are directly created within the higher education sector. Table 2.2 depicts the breakdown of international students' economic contributions in the United States.

Table 2.2 Foreign Student Contribution to the National Economy, 2012-13

Total number of foreign students	819,644
Contribution from tuition and fees to U.S. economy	$17,702,000,000
Contribution from living expenses	$14,715,000,000
Dependents' living expenses	$393,000,000
Less U.S. support of 27.2%	$ -8,815,000,000
Net contribution to U.S. economy by foreign students and their families	$23,996,000,000
Jobs directly created/supported	114,812
Jobs indirectly created/supported	198,448
Net jobs created/supported in the State economy by foreign students and their families	313,260

Source: Association of International Educators (NAFSA), 2013

Since this dissertation was conducted in a regional higher education institution in the state of Kentucky, it is worth noting that the 6,378 international students attending Kentucky colleges and universities contributed over $158 million to the state's economy in 2012-13 academic year (NAFSA, 2013). Table 2.3 depicts the breakdown of international students' economic contributions in the state of Kentucky.

Table 2.3 Foreign Student Contribution to Kentucky Economy, 2012-13

Total number of foreign students	6,378
Contribution from tuition and fees to U.S. economy	$113,802,000
Contribution from living expenses	$89,447,000
Dependents' living expenses	$2,330,000
Less U.S. support of 23.1%	$ -46,989,000
Net contribution to U.S. economy by foreign students and their families	$158,590,000
Jobs directly created/supported	759
Jobs indirectly created/supported	749
Net jobs created/supported in the State economy by foreign students and their families	1,508

Source: Association of International Educators (NAFSA), 2013

Academic and Intellectual Contributions

International students have been traditionally recognized as giving U.S. institutions of higher education a competitive edge in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Pandit, 2007). In fact, U.S. higher education institutions have been encouraged to recruit more international students and scholars to stimulate interest in the STEM disciplines (Feller, 2005; IIE, 2013). They are believed to bring distinct perspectives into U.S. classrooms, helping prepare American students for global

citizenship and careers that can further lead to long-term business relationships and economic benefits (Biddle, 2002). In the 2012-13 academic year, foreign student enrollment in science and engineering programs accounted for a steady 42% of total international student enrollment in the United States followed by Business and Management majors at 22% (Open Doors, 2013). Half of these international students are enrolled in advanced graduate programs and work closely with their professors and colleagues as research/teaching assistants either designing future cutting-edge advancements in various science, technology, and medical fields or conducting academic research for publication (Brainard, 2005). In their report, Obst and Forster (2005) declared, "many academic programs rely on [international students] to conduct research and serve as teaching assistants in key fields of science and technology" (p. 2).

Diversity and Cultural Contributions

Equally important, if not more important than monetary contributions, international students increase awareness of diversity and intercultural issues in U.S. campuses and communities. Institutions of higher education are more than ever realizing that diversity in their student and faculty population plays a significant role in providing quality education (Thompson & Cuseo, 2009).

Diversity promotes personal growth and expands worldliness. Research consistently shows that presence of international students broadens the global and cultural horizons of U.S. students by exposing them to diverse perspectives (Bevis, 2002; Harrison, 2002; Marino, 2007). Interaction with people different from themselves increases their knowledge base and helps them learn to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds. This will not only increases their appreciation for cultures around the

world, but also challenges stereotyped preconceptions. In this sense, a college/university campus becomes an open door to the entire world without having to leave home. International students, in turn, gain a greater understanding of U.S. culture and develop an appreciation for and sensitivity to the people within cultures (Dalton, 1999).

Diversity also promotes cognitive skills and creative thinking. Exposure to diversity and differences develops students' capability to view the world from multiple standpoints. The ability to examine an issue from multiple perspectives can work to students' advantage when encountering various options and making decisions (Heyward, 2002).

Diversity enhances social development. Interacting with people from a variety of groups widens students' social circle by expanding the pool of people with whom they can associate and develop relationships. Students learn from those whose experiences, beliefs, and perspectives are different from their own. A highly diverse intellectual and social campus can best provide such opportunity to American students (Thompson & Cuseo, 2009).

Diversity prepares students for future career success in a global society. Allen Goodman, President of the Institute of International Education (IIE), has noted that "the careers of all of our students will be global ones, in which they will need to function effectively in multi-national teams. They will need to understand the cultural differences and historical experiences that divide us, as well as the common values and humanity that unite us" (IIE, 2013). In this sense, successful performance in today's diverse workforce requires sensitivity to personal differences and the ability to relate to individuals from

different cultural backgrounds. International students' diverse practices and experiences assist American students to become competent global citizens (Thompson & Cuseo, 2009). According to Ryan, Assistant Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs, "International education promotes the relationship building and knowledge exchange between people and communities in the United States and around the world that are necessary to solve global challenges" (IIE, 2013).

Political Contributions

International students contribute to global development, international trade, and building diplomatic relationships (Rooney, 2003; Hughes, 2007; Marginson, 2011). The United States educates international students among whom many will eventually take leadership positions in other countries. Their American higher education experience gives these students an appreciation for the United States' political values and lays the foundation for establishing constructive relations and goodwill between nations. In his speech, Ryan emphasized that "the connections made during international education experiences last a lifetime. International students enrich classrooms, campuses, and communities in ways that endure long after students return to their home countries" (IIE, 2013).

The Current Status of International Education in the United States

The most recent Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange**,** released on November 11, 2013 notes the number of international students in United States' higher education institutions increased by 7.2% to a record high of 819,644 students in the 2012-13 academic year. Undergraduate enrollment increased by 10% (to a total of 41%) to 339,993 students and graduate level international enrollment grew by 4% (to a

total of 38%) to 311,204 students. The 2012-23 year was is the second year in a row that international undergraduates outnumbered international graduate students after 12 years in which more international students in the U.S. were studying at the graduate level. From the remaining 168,447 international students, 12% are in the Optional Practice Training (OPT) programs, and 9% are pursuing non-degree programs.

With a 10% growth rate in new international student enrollment in 2012-13, there are now 55,000 more international students attending U.S. colleges and universities compared to last year. These data mark the seventh consecutive year that Open Doors reported expansion in the total number of international students in U.S. higher education. There are now 40% more international students studying at U.S. higher education institutions than a decade ago, and the rate of increase has risen steadily for the past three years. Despite the increases in recent years, international students still constitute only under 4% of the over 21 million total enrolled students in U.S. higher education.

Places of Origin

China with 235,597 (29% of total), India with 96,754 (12% of total), and South Korea with 70,627 (9% of total) students currently serve one-half of the total number of enrolled international students in the United States. There were increases in the number of students from sixteen of the top twenty-five places of origin: Kuwait (37.4%), Saudi Arabia (30.5%), Iran (25.2%), China (21.4%), Brazil (20.4%), Germany (5.0%), Indonesia (7.6%), Nigeria (4.1%), Colombia (3.9%), Vietnam (3.4%), United Kingdom (3.1%), Mexico (2.2%), Spain (2.2%), Canada (2.0%), France (0.8%), and Malaysia (0.7%). With an increase of 25.2% to more than 8,700 students in the United States, Iran has moved up from the twentieth leading sender to number fifteen this year. Moreover,

with the addition of Kuwait at number twenty-four, Russia is no longer among the top twenty-five sender countries. All places of origin on the top twenty-five list now have 5,000 or more students in the United States. However, with the exception of the top three countries, no country represents more than 5% of the total international enrollment.

During the same time period, there was a decline in the number of students from several major sending countries, including the second and third leading senders, India (-3.5% for the second year) and South Korea (-2.3%). Also showing declines this year were Nepal (-7.3%), Taiwan (-5.9%), Turkey (-5.8%), Thailand (-4.1%), Japan (-2.0%), Venezuela (-2.0%), and Hong Kong (-0.1%). The factors driving these declines likely include a mix of global and home country economic factors. Growing higher education opportunities and stronger employment opportunities after graduation at countries of origin make foreign students reconsider the merits of studying abroad (Open Doors, 2013).

Host States and Institutions

The increased international student presence has been felt across the United States, with all of the top twenty host universities and the top ten host states receiving more international students than in the prior year. California hosted over 100,000 international students for the second year in a row, followed by New York (88,250), and Texas (62,923). The top three receiving states host 32% of all international students in the United States. Among the top ten destinations, Massachusetts with a 12.7% increase, and Pennsylvania and Indiana, with about 10% increases, had the highest rates of growth.

At the institutional level, the University of Southern California hosts the largest number of international students for the twelfth year (9,840), followed by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (9,804), Purdue University (9,509), New York University (9,362), and Columbia University (8,797). The University of Pennsylvania and University of California – Berkeley were new to the top twenty list this year, replacing Harvard University and The University of Texas at Austin. In this manner, only 5% of higher education institutions host 69% of the entire international student population in the U.S.

The Current Status of International Education in Kentucky

Since this dissertation was conducted at a regional university in the state of Kentucky, it was important to examine the current trends in international student attendance in this state. Table 2.4 concisely illustrates the most recent information on Kentucky's higher education institutions and how they compare to national foreign student enrollments.

Table 2.4 International Student Enrollment in Kentucky

Foreign students in the state	**%Change**	**Rank in U.S.**
6,364	10	#32
Leading places of origin for foreign students in the state		**%Total**
China		24.3
Saudi Arabia		19.8
India		8.0
South Korea		5.9
Brazil		2.5
Institutions with the highest number of foreign students		**Total**
University of Kentucky		1,898
Murray State University		1,029
Western Kentucky University		801
University of Louisville		763
Northern Kentucky University		614

Source: Open Doors Annual Report on International Educational Exchange, 2013

The History of College Choice Research

In order to entice an increasing number of students, institutions of higher education must understand the students' college decision-making process (Kotler & Fox, 1995). An explicit evaluation of the college choice process can serve as a robust foundation for developing effective recruitment and marketing strategies in tertiary institutions (Plank & Chiagouris, 1997). However, understanding the college choice process is not simple. The outcome of such a process involves a unique and long-term decision that not only affects the students' life in numerous ways but also has an impact on their families, public policy-makers, and institutions of higher education (Litten, 1980; Smith & Cavusgil, 1984; Yost & Tucker, 1995).

Post-secondary institution choice has been widely researched throughout the years (Bowers & Pugh, 1973; Murphy, 1981; Hossler, 1985; Webb, 1993; Joseph & Joseph, 1998). In the 1940s and 1950s, this process was comparatively straightforward. Students made decisions based on the defined and limited options that were available to them. During the 1960s and 1970s, due to the upsurge in the college going population following World War II, college enrollment steadily increased. Accordingly, colleges and universities became more streamlined in their admissions and administrative practices. This trend changed towards the end of the 1970s when colleges and universities hit a plateau in their enrollment numbers. In this period, the rising competition for students prompted colleges and universities to respond with sophisticated corporate-style marketing techniques that enlarged the geographic distribution of potential students.

Consequently, the college choice process became more elaborate, began earlier in high school, and was marked by an overload of information available to students and their families.

In the 1980s, a decline in the number of high school graduates pushed tertiary institutions to counter this downfall by business- and market-oriented strategies to recruit, enroll and retain traditional and non-traditional students (Collins & Hoenack, 1990). As a result of the pressing challenges facing higher education institutions and in an attempt to generate effective marketing strategies, colleges and universities became more interested in investigating the factors that influenced the college choice of students who were predisposed to attend college. Subsequently, the study of college choice expanded and flourished during the 1980s. Several research models were developed to explain students' decision to attend college as well as the variables that convinced them to select a particular institution (Hossler, 1984). This movement toward extensive research and the increased significance attached to choosing the right college, established a growing interest in the college choice process and intensified the pressure surrounding college decision-making.

In the past three decades, as higher education has transformed in many ways, the college decision-making process has become even more complex. This period has more than ever seen significant increases in tuition and application fees at public and private post-secondary institutions. Students begin the college choice process much earlier in high school and are inclined towards options that offer financial aid. Colleges and universities have responded by employing financial aid strategies such as tuition discounts and early admission incentives to attract more students.

In the 21st century, obtaining a four year college degree continues to be considered the most reliable path to economic success and personal fulfillment. Many studies clearly state that higher education leads to higher salaries, higher job security, more career mobility, and an improved quality of life (Bowen, 1977; Leslie & Brinkman, 1988; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Swail, 2000). Since the tuition paid by enrolled students accounts for the majority of their revenue, it is not surprising that college and university policy-makers have a vested interest in understanding how students choose a college. Factors such as changing demographics, public policy, institutional practices, and marketing strategies all influence the college choice process. Hence, it is important that administrators keep up-to-date with emerging trends to be able to survive in the escalated competition for recruiting students.

College Choice Models

Scholarly inquiry in the area of college choice began within sociology in the 1970s. This research concentrated on studies of social mobility and status attainment (Sewell & Shah, 1967; Alexander & Eckland, 1977). Additional areas of interest included research in the field of economics, which examined student demand for higher education and related public policy issues, especially costs and benefits (Litten, 1982; Hossler et al., 1989). In this period, the college choice process was considered a complex decision-making within the context of deciding on major purchases among families (Wright & Kriewall, 1980). Most studies that have tried to explain the factors that influence the college choice process could be classified under three main categories: economic models, status attainment models, and combined models (Hossler, Schmidt, & Vesper, 1999). Literature on each of these models is summarized in the following sections.

Economic Models

Economic models (also known as econometric models) consider college choice as an investment decision. They predict that students choose to attend a particular higher education institution if the perceived benefits of attending that institution outweigh the perceived benefits of other alternatives (Manski & Wise, 1983; Hossler et al., 1989; Becker, 1990). Economic models are based on the assumptions that students a) maximize perceived cost-benefits of their college choice, b) obtain perfect and reliable information, and c) are engaged in a rational process, and d) will always do what is best for them (McDonough, 1994). These studies tend to isolate the effects of tuition, scholarships, financial aid, housing, commuting, and living expenses on students' analysis of college cost (Jackson, 1978; Manski &Wise, 1983). Economic models have a few shortcomings. Kallio (1995) argues that the assumption of rational behavior is not valid, and perfect information is never available. Hossler et al., (1989) contend that these models do not address college decision-making as a process nor do they address how that process may be influenced by institutions. Therefore, to use only an economic model is insufficient for determining how students select the college to attend.

Status Attainment Models

Status attainment models (also known as sociological models) are based on Social Theory and measure how various social and psychological constructs interrelate with students' college choice behavior (Alwin & Otto, 1977; Jackson, 1982; Litten, 1982; Hossler et al., 1989; McDonough, 1994; Plank & Jordan, 2001). They analyze the impact of students' social status on the development of education aspirations, which is positively linked to educational attainment (McDonough, 1994). These models

demonstrate that students' desire to attend college, or "college aspirations," are influenced by variables such as family socioeconomic status, social networks, influence of parents/peers, and academic conditions such as academic ability and high school environment. Kotler and Fox´s (1995) model is one example of a status attainment model. Status attainment models reject the assumption that students and families are rational decision-makers (Plank & Jordan, 2001). These models are limited in that they do not include any economic considerations of college choice.

Combined Models

Combined models capture the essence of both the economic and status attainment models (Waters, 1992; McDonough, 1994). These kinds of models offer a more comprehensive view on students' college choice process by allowing the interaction of sociological aspects with rational decision-making (Hossler et al., 1999). While economic and status attainment models consider college choice as a single decision, combined models regard college choice as a process. While the specifics and the number of stages vary from model to model, they typically depict college choice as a process that begins with the desire to attend college, followed by a search/evaluation stage, and a final decision stage. In general, students begin with a broad conception of post-secondary opportunities available to them. Then they gradually narrow down these options to a few selected institutions to which they apply. Further in the process, they continue to collect information and ultimately make the final choice based on the information they have obtained and their ability to process that information in a practical way (Chapman, 1981; Litten, 1982; Hossler, 1985; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989).

Chapman (1981) proposed a three-stage Model of Student College Choice in which a combination of student characteristics and external factors determine the college selection. Chapman (1981) included socioeconomic status, aptitude, aspirations, and performance as student characteristics. The three major external influences include: 1) significant others: friends, parents, and high school personnel; 2) institutional characteristics: cost, financial aid, location, and availability of program; and 3) college marketing strategies: college efforts to communicate with students, written information, campus visits, and admissions/recruitment procedures.

Jackson (1982) suggested that students go through three-stages in the college choice process: preference, exclusion, and evaluation. Jackson was the first researcher to introduce the concept of choice set. The choice set is a list of post-secondary institutions to which a student will apply. Cost-benefit analysis of expenses (e.g., tuition fees, foregone expenses, opportunity cost of attendance, cost of leaving home, and loss of friendships) versus benefits (e.g., distance from home, value of degree, quality of institution) guide students toward an application decision. Students then evaluate their choice set and eventually choose a particular institution to attend.

Hanson and Litten (1982) developed a five-stage model that identified additional variables that affect each stage of college choice. In this model, categorizing the potential student population based on sex, race, academic achievement, and parental education level endorses the use of targeted recruitment policies (Bateman & Spruill, 1996).

The Hossler and Gallagher Model

Among the many studies that have presented combined models, the Hossler and Gallagher College Choice Model (1987) is the most prominent. Hossler and Gallagher provide a general framework to conceptualize the process of college choice by incorporating the relationships between individual student characteristics, institutional factors, and the outcomes of these interactions (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). They propose that college choice is a developmental process that occurs within three phases: predisposition, search, and choice.

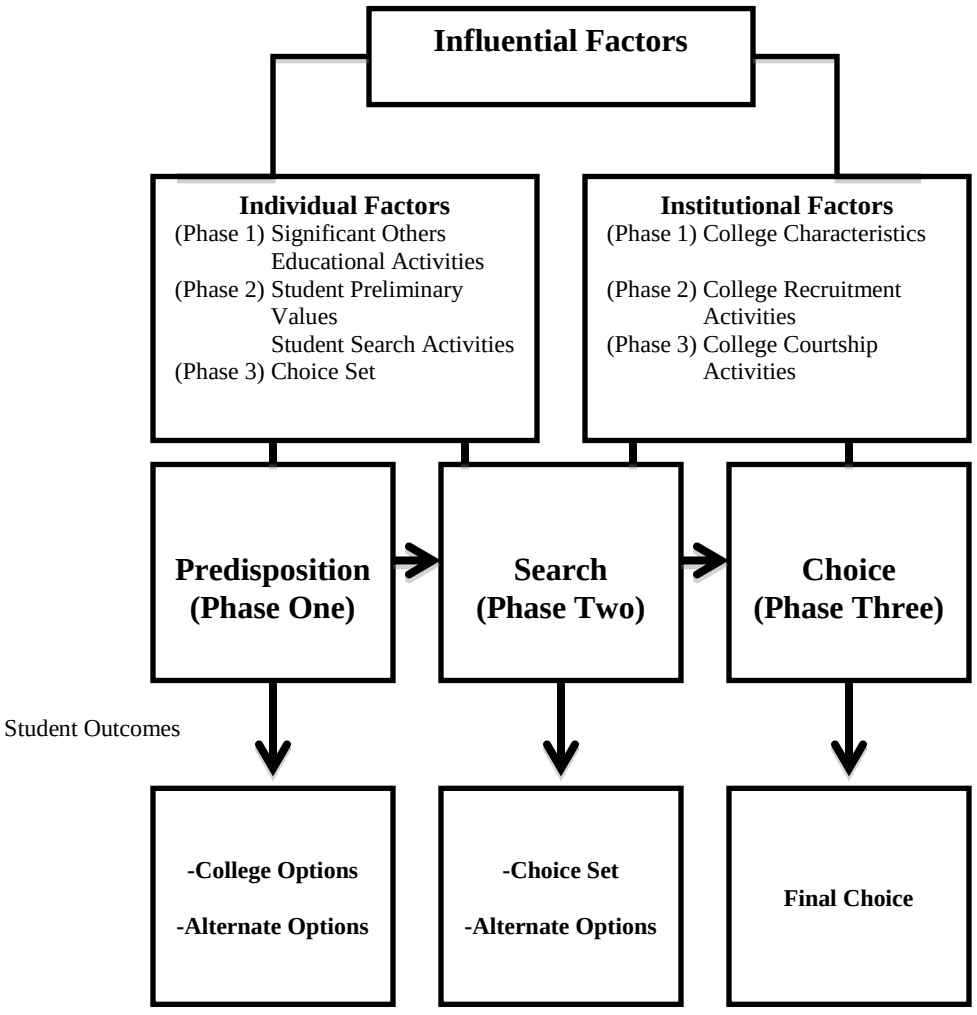


Figure 2.2 Hossler and Gallagher College Choice Model

The Predisposition Phase

The predisposition phase is the initial stage in which students make the decision whether or not to continue their formal education beyond the secondary level. It is in this phase that students form their early impressions of college and develop the intention to continue their education after high school. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) identify three main factors that influence the predisposition to attend college. These factors are 1) the attitudes and influence of significant others especially parental encouragement, 2) the educational activities of the student, and 3) the college/university characteristics (i.e. availability of information about college and the perceived cost-benefits of attending college.) Hossler and Gallagher (1987) assert that beyond providing information about the institution, colleges and universities have minimal influence on students during the predisposition phase. The outcome of this phase is for students to either move into the college search phase or decide on alternate options.

The Search Phase

For students who decide to continue their education, the next stage is the search phase. During this period students collect and assimilate information about specific institutions and their characteristics. Among the major influential factors in this stage are students' initial values. Students begin to gather information regarding college attributes that are particularly important to them in deciding which colleges or universities to consider. Students are also influenced by their own college search activities and the search activities of higher education institutions. In this sense, the search phase is directly affected by the communication and recruitment strategies that institutions employ to attract students (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). It is during this stage that the majority of

interaction between students and colleges occur. At the end of this phase, students will develop a choice set of colleges and universities to which they will apply.

The Choice Phase

After students have applied and been admitted to their chosen set of institutions, they enter the final stage (i.e. the choice phase.) Students proceed through the choice phase by comparing and ultimately deciding on their preferred college to attend. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) have identified two general categories of factors that influence students' college choice process in this stage. The first category is the recruitment and marketing activities of the institutions to which students have applied. The second category is those college choice variables that have been salient during the entire college choice process. These factors include socioeconomic status, parental education, parental encouragement, social network support, ethnicity, students' academic ability, high school context, the college's size, location, academic programs, reputation and quality, prestige and selectivity, alumni, net cost of attendance, scholarships, and financial aid (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989). These same variables also play a role during the predisposition stage, which showcases the interrelatedness of Hossler and Gallagher's College Choice Model. The result of this phase is the final enrollment decision (Paulsen, 1990).

Review of the literature confirms that selecting a higher education institution is a complex and multidimensional process for undergraduate and graduate students. Combined multi-stage models have proven to better explain this process by considering several factors during each phase. Among the various college choice theories that have been presented, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) offer a more interactive and developmental

model that allows for including multiple layers of variables that influence students' college choice (Bateman & Spruill, 1996). Moreover, there are precedent studies that have successfully used this model to investigate foreign students' college choice (e.g., Waters, 1992; Kim, 2001; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Ruby, 2007). Thus, Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model was selected as the appropriate conceptual framework for this study.

It should be noted that although this study has employed the Hossler and Gallagher model to assess the influence of various college choice factors, the focus is solely on the choice phase. It is beyond the scope of this study to evaluate the entire Hossler and Gallagher model.

College Choice Characteristics

In general, research on international education may be categorized under two distinct approaches. One approach has been to investigate the macro-environmental variables that influence students' decision to study abroad. Another approach, which is the focus of this study, is to identify reasons for institutional selection at an individual level by examining the perceptions of prospective students (Duan, 1997). The institution-specific studies attempt to explain why international students choose to attend a particular institution.

Although students' choice of their education destination and institution is a complex and multi-level process, the literature in this area is reasonably sophisticated and offers insight into the decision-making process of potential students (Hossler, 1984). The literature includes references to a wide range of variables and priorities reported by the general population of college students. Related studies analyze the influence of elements

associated with (1) institutional characteristics, (2) academic program characteristics, (3) marketing and recruitment characteristics, (d) significant others' characteristics, or (5) student characteristics. Decisions made regarding every group of characteristics shape the plausibility of potential options in subsequent decisions.

Institutional Characteristics

Institutional characteristics refer to permanent features of an institution. Such characteristics are specific to each college/university and include academic reputation, academic facilities, professional reputation of faculty, program rigor, research opportunities, cost, availability of financial aid, and campus location. Institutional characteristics are the most frequently mentioned variables in determining college/university choice among both domestic and international students.

Academic Reputation

In any major purchase, the customer's satisfaction is determined by their expectations and the quality of the service they receive (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993). In the case of higher education, the perceived quality of the institution is a central and strategic element (Peters, 1992). From this perspective, a favorable image can positively influence students' decision to attend a certain college/university (Bourke, 2000; Gutman & Miaoulis, 2003). An institution's reputation has been acknowledged as a particularly important factor in selecting a college/university by both domestic and international students (Martin, 1996). Research results vary in recognizing this factor as *the* most forceful variable in prospective students' choice criteria. Yet, almost all studies are found to rate the institution's reputation as one of the top three influential variables in driving students' final college choice.

Studies of domestic students (e.g. Holland, 1958; Bowers & Pugh, 1973; Chapman, 1979; Murphy, 1981; White & Hernandez, 1990; Webb, 1993; Moogan, Baron, & Harris, 1999; Poock & Love, 2001) and studies of international students (e.g. Zikopoulos & Barber, 1986; Solomon & Young, 1987; Waters, 1992; Kemp, Madden, & Simpson, 1998; Joseph & Joseph, 2000; Kim, 2001; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Soutar & Turner, 2002; Smith, Morey, Foster, & Teece, 2002; Lee et al., 2006; Hamrick, 2007; Pyvis & Chapman, 2007) have reported that the institution's national ranking and global reputation was among the most significant factors in choosing which college/university to attend.

Holland (1958) is one of the earliest researchers that identified the prestige of a college/university as the key variable in students' choice of their host institution. Considering the changing tertiary demographics over the past five decades, it is interesting to note that subsequent research over the past fifty years appears to support this conclusion. Similarly, Zikopoulos and Barber (1986) noted that over the years, institution quality issues have maintained their position on top of international students' priority list. They claim that on average two-thirds of international students declare that their application decisions are highly influenced by the reputation of a particular college/university and the anticipated significance of that reputation on their future careers.

However, students' assessments of an institution's reputation are not always similar. Differences in students' perception may be attributed to the institutional type (i.e. public or private) (Richardson & Stacey, 1993; Webb, 1993, 1996; Poock, 1997), or it may simply be the result of dissimilar opinions, ideas, and impressions that prospective

students have of the institution (Kotler & Fox, 1995). The most common variables that are presumed to impact a student's assessment of an institution's quality include: academic facilities (e.g. library size and advanced technology), professional reputation of the faculty (e.g. quality of instruction and faculty accessibility), program rigor (e.g. course variety and curriculum), and research opportunities (e.g. university research profile and research distinction).

Regardless of what it entails, review of the literature reveals that, in general, an institution's academic reputation and quality is one of the most compelling reasons for students to select a particular college/university. Students seek the best educational quality whether it is measured in terms of academic facilities (Terkla, 1988; Webb, 1993; Poock, 1997; Joseph & Joseph, 2000; Price, Matzdorf, Smith, & Agahi, 2003; Sultana & Smith, 2011), reputation and quality of faculty (Waters, 1992; Richardson & Stacey, 1993; Conard & Conard, 2001; Taylor, 2001; Magaya, 2004), program rigor (Terkla 1988; Webb 1993, 1996; Poock, 1997; Joseph & Joseph, 2000; Conard & Conard, 2001; Magaya, 2004; Holdsworth & Nind, 2005; Sultana & Smith, 2011), or research opportunities (Martin, 1996, Grunig, 1997; Mazzarol, Soutar, & Sim Yaw Seng, 2003).

Costs

From a marketing point of view, price is a crucial factor in influencing customers' decision-making (Litten, 1986). In higher education, the cost of attending a college/university has been found to be critically important for domestic and international students alike. In fact, Chapman and Jackson (1984) declared that "colleges which were perceived to be too expensive (even taking into account expected financial aid) may have been ruled out of consideration during the college search phase, prior to the information

of an application set" (p. 5). Hoxby and Long (1999) argued that the effect of cost-related issues on the choice of a particular college/university has gained increasing importance as the returns on higher education investments have become more closely tied to the type of institution attended. While Vaughn, Pitlik, and Hansotia (1978) and Houston (1979) placed college expenses toward the bottom of the scale, later research identified cost of education among the five most important factors to influence choice of a tertiary institution by both domestic and international students (Hossler, Bean, & Associates, 1990; Webb, 1993; Kallio, 1995; Joseph & Joseph, 2000; Bourke, 2000; Conard & Conard, 2000; Doorbar, 2001; Kim, 2001; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Holdsworth & Nind, 2005; Shanka, Quintal, & Taylor, 2005; Sultana & Smith, 2011). For example, Geraghty (1997) compared first year students' attitudes toward college costs and found that each year a growing percentage of freshman report to base their college choice decisions on financial reasons. Although there is no evidence on how many prospective international students avoid enrollment due to high costs, both Stewart and Felicetti (1991) and Dunnett (2000) observed that attendance of international students at institutions with lower tuition rates has increased over time.

The overall negative impact of high college costs may be mitigated by financial aid. Considering the steady rise in tuition rates since the mid-1980s, Avery and Hoxby (2004) conclude that college choice is sensitive to tuition and living expenses; hence, students are attracted to institutions that offer financial aid to reduce their net cost. Numerous studies have supported the significance of financial aid in domestic students' college decision-making (e.g. Maguire & Lay, 1981; Manski & Wise, 1983; Discenza, Ferguson, & Wisner, 1985; Hossler, 1985; Richardson & Stacey, 1993; Kallio, 1995).

Availability of financial aid, usually in the form of grants, scholarships, or assistantships, is especially pertinent to self-funded international students who pay out-of-state tuitions (Zikopoulos & Barber, 1986; Hossler et al., 1990; Stewart & Felicetti, 1991; Waters, 1992; Mazzarol, Kemp, & Savery, 1997; Dunnett, 2000; Kim, 2001; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Zeszotarski, 2003; Sultana & Smith, 2011). In most cases, this option is not available to potential undergraduate students. Undergraduate students, in general, do not receive financial aid and are typically non-sponsored. For most undergraduate international students, the primary source of funding for tuition fees and living expenses continues to be family funds (NAFSA, 2013). For this reason, undergraduate international students rank this factor less important in influencing their choice of an institution (Webb, 1993).

Location

Research has consistently demonstrated that an institution's location is a significant factor in students' decision to attend a college/university. For domestic students, location is typically measured by the school's geographic proximity to students' homes (Holland & Richards, 1965; Bowers & Pugh, 1973; Murphy, 1981; Holdsworth & Nind, 2005). Several studies have stated that distance from home is negatively correlated with the likelihood of enrollment (e.g. Lewis & Morrison, 1975; Muffo, 1987).

For international students, once they decide on the host country, the geographic proximity of where the institution is located within that country becomes less relevant to their college choice decision-making (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). International students mostly associate location with the environment and the social climate of the campus (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Santovec, 2002; Zeszotarski, 2003; Ellis, Sawyer, Gill,

Medlin, & Wilson, 2005; Doku, 2007). Related environmental factors that international students consider most influential include: availability of recreational and cultural activities (Zikopoulos & Barber, 1986; Lee, 2008; Sultana & Smith, 2011), safety and low crime rates (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Santovec, 2002; Sultana & Smith, 2011), racial discrimination (Lee, 2008, 2010), an established population of international students (Zikopoulos & Barber, 1986; Mazzarol et al., 1997; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Sultana & Smith, 2011), and quality of international student services (Edgerton, 1975; Mazzarol et al., 1997; Kim, 2001; Magaya, 2004).

Program Characteristics

Academic program characteristics concentrate on department-related variables. Examples of program characteristics are program reputation, quality, relevance, and flexibility of programs, faculty academic credentials, and accessibility of faculty members.

Program Reputation

The importance of program suitability as a factor to influence students' college choice is well documented in the literature (Hooley & Lynch, 1981). In the college decision-making process, students tend to compare different programs between institutions in order to ensure that their selected program is suitable and meets their specific needs (Krampf & Heinlein, 1981). Peng, Lawley, and Perry (2000) define program evaluation as the attitude of prospective students toward the targeted program. For international students, major elements in program evaluation are quality and content relevance of the program (Zikopoulos & Barber, 1986; Lawrence, 1997; Smith et. al., 2002), availability and flexibility of special programs (Kim, 2001; Sultana & Smith,

2011), and departmental requirements (Zikopoulos & Barber, 1986; Sultana & Smith, 2011). Both domestic and international students place the institutions' departmental and program reputation among their highest priorities when deciding on what college/university to attend (Poock, 1997; Mazzarol, 1998; Joseph & Joseph, 1998; Kim, 2001; Soutar & Turner, 2002; Mazzarol et al., 2003).

Faculty Reputation

Professional reputation and accessibility of faculty are other motivating factors in students' college selection process. Many studies have concluded that faculty who maintain a good academic reputation and who are highly credentialed and competent in their fields attract more potential students (Campbell, 1977; Knight & Johnson, 1981; Poock, 1997; Conard & Conard, 2000; Sultana & Smith, 2011). The quality of contact with faculty is an equally significant program characteristic that influences students' college decision-making. Faculty and student interaction is particularly relevant during the admission process when students require personalized counsel from the faculty (Hossler, 1991; Poock, 1997; Sultana & Smith, 2011). Olson (1992) suggests that students who receive favorable responses from faculty are more likely to enroll than students who do not receive a supportive first impression from faculty members.

Marketing and Recruitment Characteristics

Marketing and recruitment characteristics constitute another influential variable in students' college choice process. Such characteristics mainly pertain to strategies and techniques that institutions employ to promote the institution and its programs. It involves the distribution of information about the institution and programs to prospective students in order to assist them in making informed enrollment decisions. Commonly

utilized sources of information include distribution of brochures, catalogs, and college guidebooks; personal contact with faculty; web-based advertising; and use of education representatives.

However, during the past four decades, changing demographics and institutions' involvement in more corporate-like marketing strategies have presented new challenges to higher education. In an admissions environment characterized by student demands for timely and accurate information, ease of admission procedures, the application processing time, the number of required contacts, and the friendliness of the admissions personnel have been linked to student satisfaction with the enrollment process of an institution (Olson, 1992; Fisher, Todd, & Weyman, 2000; Taylor, 2001). For international students, process time also includes issuance of visa-related documents. Since obtaining a visa is usually a lengthy and complicated process of its own, international students tend to accept the first admission approval they receive to propel the visa application process (Waters, 1992).

In attempt to compensate for criticisms of poor quality of their communication with students, institutions' enrollment-management divisions now integrate marketing, admissions, public relations, financial management, and cutting edge technology to win more students (Kim, 2001; Magaya, 2004).

Brochures, Catalogs, and Guidebooks

College brochures, catalogs, and commercial guidebooks have been useful sources of formal information for international students in selecting a college/university (Zikopoulos & Barber, 1986; Waters, 1992; Kemp et al., 1998; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The nature

of these sources supports the idea that 'physical evidence' is an important decision-making tool in the higher education industry due to their tangibility (Mortimer, 1997). Such sources typically provide information on tuition and application fees, housing costs, available programs, size of the institution, and facilities (Stewart & Felicetti, 1991).

Faculty Contact

Personal contact with faculty members can have a significant effect on students' college choice (Freeman, 1984; Olson, 1992; Waters, 1992; Poock, 1997). Olson (1992) found that students were more likely to select a university whose faculties are attentive and friendly. Many other studies have also identified the quality of faculty contact, their response time, and friendliness as important enrollment factors for both domestic and international students (e.g. Poock, 1999; Ceja, 2000).

Internet

With the advances in technology, web-based information has begun to replace printed materials. Hoyt and Brown (2003) and Pope and Fermin (2003) found that students considering enrollment in a higher education institution ranked college/ university websites as the most influential information source. Recent studies have focused on the Internet as a critical source of information for international students and suggest that electronic marketing strategies may help in developing a trusting relationship to overcome the geographic and cultural distance between the host institutions and foreign students. Gomes and Murphy (2003) found that more than one-half of students used the Internet to help them choose an overseas study destination. Olson (1992) pointed out that technologically user-friendly colleges/universities are perceived as more credible

and are able to provide useful information in a concise manner. Word of mouth can also greatly influence students' perception and decision-making (Hogan, Lemon, & Libai, 2004). With changes in technology, face-to-face interaction is no longer necessary for spreading the word of mouth as electronic communication has gained popularity in recent years through social networking websites (Lee, 2010).

Use of Agents

Education agents are another important source of information and can play a vital role in students' college choice. Agents are often considered to provide the most up-to-date and reliable information to potential international students (Pimpa, 2003). Focusing on international Chinese students in New Zealand, Chung, Holdsworth, Li, and Fam (2009) found that representative agents were among the top three information sources for college/university selection. Another large-scale study among African students in the U.K. indicated that more than half of the information that participants received came from education agents. A high percentage of students reported having made the decision to attend a particular university based on agents' recommendations (Maringe & Carter, 2007).

Overall, the literature suggests that institutions that effectively reach the target audience and clearly articulate what services they offer are perceived more favorably (James, Baldwin, & McInnis, 1999). Despite the wide variety in available information sources, international students have limited access to information regarding course descriptions, program completion requirements, institutions' teaching quality, immigration issues, and insurance among many others (Zikopoulos & Barber, 1986; Joseph & Joseph, 2000; Gomes & Murphy, 2003).

Significant Others Characteristics

Significant others' characteristics refer to influential individuals that guide students through the college decision-making process. The most influential "significant others" are parents. Other influential people include family and friends at home or in the host country, alumni, and counselors.

Parents

Much of the literature on the influence of significant others since the 1950s has accentuated the role of parents in students' college choice process. Numerous studies have identified parental influence as pivotal in college selection among undergraduate students (e.g. Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1999; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Consistent with these findings, Lovejoy and Lobsenz (1954) stated that "the proper choice of a college is one of the most critical jobs a family faces" (p. 48). Studies of international students confirm the integral parental role in students' decision-making process (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Shanka, Knight, & Pope, 2002; Pimpa, 2004; Bodycott, 2009). These findings indicate that parents serve not only as sources of advice (Hossler & Maple, 1993) and financial support (Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Hossler & Vesper, 1990) but also as a major influence in steering the college choice process.

Parental influence is initially expressed by shaping higher education aspirations and proceeds with sharing college evaluations and recommendations (Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Jackson, 1982; Hossler & Stage, 1992; McDonough, 1994). In this sense, students are likely to mirror the attitudes of their parents throughout the college decision-making process (Sanders, 1990). Several studies have reported a strong relationship between parental educational levels and parental encouragement with the choice of

college/university that students ultimately decide to attend (McDonough, 1997; Kelpe Kern, 2000; Terenzini, Caberera, & Bernal, 2001). Parents with higher educational levels typically hold higher expectations for their children's education than parents who have acquired minimal education (Hossler & Maple, 1993).

Family and Friends

Review of the literature over the last decade has consistently demonstrated the significance of family and friends' recommendations in international students' college decision-making (Bourke, 2000; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Zeszotarski, 2003; Pimpa, 2004; Shanka et al., 2005; Chen & Zimitat, 2006; Doku, 2007). In a recent large-scale study conducted on 1,500 international students, 77% of students reported that their college/university decision was influenced by the opinions of their family and friends (Archer & Winters, 2011). A study by Shanka et al. (2002) showed that 37% of international undergraduate students rated family and friends as their major sources of information for selecting a college/university. Similarly, Sultana and Smith (2011) reported that students' social links to the host institution (i.e., presence of friends, siblings, or spouse) was the second main reason students chose to attend a particular university.

The influence of family and friends are all related to the importance of word of mouth communication, which is seen as objective, reliable, and not commercially oriented. These sources are much easier to trust as they are presumed to not be motivated by personal gain (Zeszortarski, 2003; Doku, 2007; Ottinger, 2009; Bohman, 2010). After all, "word of mouth referral is one of the most powerful forms of promotion that international education institutions can use" (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 85).

Alumni and Counselors

Alumni can play a role in international students' college choice by creating social links within their home countries (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). However, Solomon and Young (1987) reported a decline in the effectiveness of alumni recommendations over a 10-year period. By contrast, they emphasized the increasing influence of guidance counselors in students' college choice process. Lawrence (1997) found that more than two-thirds of respondents reported being influenced by their teachers or advisors.

Despite all the evidence on the importance of significant others in students' decision-making process, not all students take advice from parents, relatives, or friends. It seems that as students progress through the process, the primary role in college selection shifts from opinions of significant others to the students themselves. Lovejoy and Lobsenz (1954) argue that parents should merely inform and advice their children about their college options because unless students make the final decision themselves, they will not be completely satisfied with their college life. Similarly, Murphy (1981) found that 81.8% of students considered themselves as the final decision-makers. Litten, Sullivan, and Brodigan (1983) also reported that parents did not have a strong influence on the final college selection of students in their sample. Thus, the influence of significant others may manifest itself more in the predisposition and search stages of the college choice process and be much more subtle in the final choice phase (Hossler et al., 1989).

Student Characteristics

Student characteristics are personal level variables that impact students' college choice. A number of such characteristics constrain students' choice sets and their ultimate college/university decision by filtering college options through a lens of socioeconomic

status, academic achievement, aspiration, gender, age, and race and ethnicity (McDonough, 1997; Bourke, 2000; Terenzini et al., 2001; Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003).

Socioeconomic Status

Students' socioeconomic status has been found to be positively correlated with post-secondary matriculation (Hossler et al., 1989). In other words, students from higher socioeconomic families are more likely to pursue tertiary education than students with lower socioeconomic status. Among the elements that define socioeconomic status, parental education level outweighs the effects of family income and size on students' college choice (Hearn, 1988; McDonough, 1994).

Socioeconomic status is also related to the level of selectivity of the institution that students choose to attend. Zemsky and Oedel (1983) and Hearn (1991) found that students with a lower socioeconomic status were more likely to attend less selective colleges/universities. This may be because higher socioeconomic status has been associated with higher grade point average and higher scores on college entrance examinations (McDonough, 1997; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Students' grade point average and scores on college entrance exams are measures of achievement that are commonly used for screening college applicants.

Academic Achievement

The literature regarding the college choices of high achieving students strongly suggests that academic ability is positively correlated with institutional selectivity (Dahl, 1982; Zemsky & Oedel, 1983; Hearn, 1984; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1989). This is not surprising since colleges/universities admit students based on grade

point average or class rank, and students apply to colleges based on their perceived chances for admission approval (Chapman, 1981). Consequently, high achieving students are more likely to attend selective institutions as well as out-of-state institutions, whereas students with weaker academic credentials are more likely to attend less selective and in-state institutions (Hearn, 1984; Braxton, 1990; McDonough, 1997; Kelpe Kern, 2000).

Aspiration

Students' aspirations are crucial in the narrowing of the college choice set (Braxton, 1990; McDonough, 1997; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) suggest that when evaluating college/university options, students are in fact investing in the benefits that higher education can provide in terms of personal improvement, employment, socioeconomic status, and lifestyle among others. It is presumed that those individuals seeking to eventually work and live abroad are more likely to seek international education than those who are content to stay at home. In essence, among the main personal factors influencing international students' college choice, enhanced career prospects and higher status are prominent (Bourke, 2000).

Gender

Differences in college choice patterns related to students' gender are apparent in the literature. Men and women select a college/university for different reasons, and they differ significantly in their college selection processes (Harris, 1999; Kithyo & Petrina, 2002). Women seem more affected by parental influence (Harris, 1999), geographical proximity to home (Paulsen, 1990), financial issues (Hossler, Hu, & Schmit, 1998), campus safety (Shank & Beasley, 1998; Broekemier & Seshadri, 1999), and the

institution's academic reputation (Lackland & De Lisi, 2001; David, Ball, Davies, & Reay, 2003; Engle, 2003) than are men. Females, compared with their male counterparts, are also more likely to apply for "early decision" and submit their applications earlier (Hanson & Litten, 1982).

Age

Age of the students is a demographic variable that has been found to modify international students' decision-making process. Age of the students at the time they decide to study abroad has various implications as it affects the level of study, the influence of family and friends, and the sources of funding. Poock (1997) found that older students consider campus location, ability to pursue studies part-time, and the availability of evening classes as more important than younger students. Meanwhile, younger students give greater value to reputation of program and financial factors (Malaney, 1987).

Race and Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity play important roles in determining to what degree college choice characteristics influence international students' final decision. Although research on how and why racial and ethnic differences impact students' college destination is virtually non-existent, there is evidence that international students make their final college choices differently based on their country of origin (Hossler et al., 1989; Kelpe Kern, 2000; Terenzini et al., 2001). A majority of the studies conducted in this area focus on domestic African-American, Anglo-American, and Latino students (e.g. Hearn, 1984; Maxey, Lee, & McLure, 1995).

Regional Institution Characteristics

While there is a significant body of literature concerned with the experience of international students arriving to study and live at urban university campuses, studies that address non-metropolitan contexts and prioritize the perspectives of international students in regional tertiary institutions is scarce.

In general, a small regional university campus offers international students "a learning environment with many advantages," including "small classes" and "enhanced access to staff" (Ellis et al., 2005, p. 65). Remarks on intimate classroom environments, small class sizes, increased opportunities for educational involvement, student-centered teaching, and even the possibility of some tailoring of pedagogy to address individual student needs are commonly found in the studies of international students attending rural campuses (Ellis et al., 2005; Edgeworth & Eiseman, 2007; Sultana & Smith, 2011). There is also more accessibility and familiarity with university personnel reported on such campuses. Faculty members are typically perceived to be easier to approach, more personable, friendlier, and more open to student ideas (Sultana & Smith, 2011). The positive interaction between students and academic/administrative staff causes sensitivity toward the specific needs of international students and often leads to service at a more personalized level, a characteristic less likely to be experienced at metropolitan campuses (Levy, Osborn, & Plunkett, 2003; Ellis et al., 2005). Although international students seem to enjoy the positive interaction with faculty on small regional campuses, they tend to be unimpressed by their low academic credentials, limited connections in the corporate world, and the negligible number of international faculty in some of these institutions (Burns, 1991; Sultana & Smith, 2011).

An institution's location, social facilities, and community characteristics are other important factors related to environmental conditions that influence students' college choice (Price et al., 2003). This particularly pertains to institutions that do not have a strong reputation or those that present their geographic location as a benefit and selling point to the student (Kim, 2001; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Santovec (2002) pointed out that international students are attracted to the nurturing environment provided by a small and secure campus in a local community. In such a nurturing environment, students take less time to adjust to a new culture, and their transition process would be less stressful. The size of a campus is also associated with added safety and security. Klieger (2005) investigated international students' reasons for selecting to attend a four-year liberal arts college in rural Pennsylvania. The participants rated campus security close to the top of their list. Students described their sense of safety as a result of the institution's small size and distance from a large metropolitan city. Elements related to the dimension of the town/city impact students' choice in a similar way (Hooley & Lynch, 1981). The lower cost of living in rural areas is recognized as a positive attribute. In their study, Cleave-Hogg, McLean, and Cappe (1994) found that the cost of moving to a large city and the high accommodation and living expenses decreased students' enrollment in metropolitan colleges/universities. These findings are congruent with Zikopoulos and Barber's (1986) study of international students, especially in the case of undergraduate students who are usually under more pressure in terms of cost considerations.

Research in the field provides insight into the perceived negatives of the rural environment as well. Complaints about the small size of campuses and the lack of facilities and entertainment options are frequently reported in the literature. Engagement

with the community beyond the college/university campus is minimal for most students. Except to shop or enjoy an occasional recreational activity, international students rarely engage with the town and community (Edgeworth & Eiseman, 2007). Consequently, the majority of international students at regional institutions describe their social lives as "boring" and "uneventful" (Sultana & Smith, 2011). In Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) study, international students cited "exciting destination" 20% more frequently than the influence of family and friends in choosing a college/university. Zeszotarski (2003) concluded that an appealing social climate of the campus and its closeness to the entertainment industry were influential factors in students' college decision-making. Despite the widely held view that regional campuses and small towns do not meet students' social and entertainment expectations, such campuses are perceived as conducive to studying due to the lack of distractions, a characteristic especially appreciated by students' parents (Edgeworth & Eiseman, 2007; Sultana & Smith, 2011). Overall, international students do not concern themselves with the location and size of the institution as much as its' academic quality and costs (Zikopoulos & Barber, 1986).

Another extensively reported challenge for international students is developing relationships with local students (Al-Sharideh & Geo, 1998; Levy et al., 2003; Sultana & Smith, 2011). Their inability in establishing friendships with local students often results in loneliness and isolation, which in turn may reflect negatively on their academic performance (Volet & Ang, 1998; Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000; Levy et al., 2003). Although, "opting out" on the part of foreign students is not a rural-specific phenomenon, the gap between the two student groups seems to deepen in this context due to the limited opportunities for cultural exchange, diversity events, and cultural

awareness programs (Volet & Ang, 1998; Sultana & Smith, 2011). On the positive side, however, the low diversity on a regional campus forces international students to engage and communicate more with their local classmates. In a similar argument, Ellis et al. (2005) note that "out of necessity [international students] have more opportunity to speak more English than they may have if in the capital [cities]" (p. 72).

In the urban versus rural and the metropolitan versus regional debates, Edgeworth and Eiseman (2007) draw attention to an interesting point. They declare that for international students there usually is a degree of ignorance as to the location of the campus. Many respondents in their study did not understand the concept of rural or regional institutions and their distinctive characteristics. Similarly, Doku (2007) affirms that respondents to his survey could have perceived the suburban and urban locations as being part of the same geographic location. Therefore, international students may not have a distinguished preference to study in a rural location, but rather chose to attend such institutions because they did not meet requirements to receive admission to their higher priority institutions (Ellis et al., 2005; Edgeworth & Eiseman, 2007). For many others, attending a regional institution is seen as an expedient, a means to an end, with the ultimate goal of being transferred to a preferred metropolitan college/university. This "transitory" outlook on their college/university experience diminishes students' engagement with rural life (Edgeworth & Eiseman, 2007).

Regardless of the circumstances, international students tend to acknowledge the values of a rural setting such as scenery, cleanness, quiet, safety, and lower costs of living. Yet, limited recreational activities and opportunities for improving social and communicative skills remain a disadvantage to attending such institutions.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Recognizing the characteristics relevant to international students in their college/ university choice process can aid institutions of higher education in aligning their recruitment and marketing strategies with such characteristics. The purpose of the present study was to contribute to the understanding of the influential factors in international students' college choice process and the variables that affect their final decision to attend a particular regional, rural university. This study concentrated on identifying and establishing priorities within those variables that play part in the college decision-making of international students. The findings of the study would better inform educational practitioners about international students' perceptions of the college choice process and consequently help the development of more effective marketing and recruitment strategies directed at increasing international enrollment at regional, rural institutions.

A review of literature on international education and an examination of international students' decision-making process to enroll in U.S. institutions provided the basis for the following research question addressed in this study:

1. How do international students rate factors that influence their decision to attend a rural, regional university?

This study made no assumptions of rationality, and instead examined the characteristics and behaviors of individual students and postsecondary institutions to gain a deeper insight into the process of selecting a regional, rural university. This study considered the individual student as the export unit and the university as the receiving unit.

The Study Context

Eastern Kentucky University, where the present study was conducted, is a regional, coeducational, public institution of higher education offering general and liberal arts programs, as well as pre-professional and professional training programs in education and various other fields at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Eastern Kentucky University's main campus is located in Richmond, Central Kentucky. The main campus, along with its' four branch campuses across the state, serve 22 [mainly rural] counties in the EKU Service Region. Two of the university's guiding mission principles are regional stewardship and graduating students who can think critically and communicate effectively. As of Fall 2014 semester, the university boasted 16,500 registered students at all academic levels combined. The majority of the student population is white (84%), and the 313 enrolled international students constitute less than 2% of the total student body- a number far below the common best ratio of 5 to 10 %. The international students come from forty different countries, representing all five continents. The largest international student groups come from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (154 students) and India (25 students). Approximately 80% of the international students at Eastern Kentucky University are at the undergraduate level; of whom most study at the College of Justice & Safety and College of Business & Technology respectively. International students at the graduate level are largely enrolled in the College of Arts & Sciences (including math and computer sciences) and College of Health Sciences.

In order to promote programs and policies for diversity initiative, Eastern Kentucky University established a Comprehensive Diversity Plan in 2011. The primary objective was to facilitate the University's commitment to diversity and to improve recruitment and

retention of diverse students, faculty, staff, and administrators. The vision was to provide an accessible, nurturing, and academically rigorous institution of learning and scholarship that transforms lives and communities and enables students to adapt and succeed in a dynamic, global society. A key performance indicator for this plan was to enhance exposure to cultural diversity through increasing the enrollment of international students (EKU Comprehensive Diversity Plan, 2011-15). Consequently, Eastern Kentucky University created a Center for International Education (CIE) in 2012 to house the various aspects of international education, study abroad, and international student services. CIE mainly provides immigration and orientation assistance to international students and visitors. The International Education Coordinator advises all international students on maintaining legal immigration status while in the U.S. The Director of International Education facilitates international ventures and exchanges across the curriculum, assists with arrangements for visiting faculty, scholars, researchers, and develops new study abroad programs around the world for domestic students.

Population and Sample

The target population for this study included all international students enrolled full-time at Eastern Kentucky University in the Fall 2014 semester. Participation in this study was voluntarily, anonymous, and posed no known risks to the participants. Access to the online survey was granted to 313 international students of whom 132 completed the survey. This represents a completion rate of 42.2%. The following tables demonstrate respondents' demographic details. It may be noted that the tables include only valid responses to each demographic question on the survey, thus the total number of responses may not reflect the total number of participants in all tables.

Age

The 110 respondents to this question ranged in age from 18 to 40 years old. The average age of respondents was 24 (Mean=24.15) (see Table 3.1). Participants must have been 18 years or older to be eligible to take part in the study.

Table 3.1 Participants' Age Range

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	110	18	40	24.15	3.222

Gender

From a total of 115 respondents to this question, approximately 71% were male and 29% were female (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2 Participants' Gender Distribution

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Female	33	28.7
Male	82	71.3
Total	115	100.0

Country of Citizenship

Due to the uneven dispersal of student groups based on their country of origin, the sample did not represent the entire international student population at Eastern Kentucky University. The 35 students from Saudi Arabia (26.5%) and the 19 students from India (14.4%) were the largest participant groups of this study (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.3 Participants' Country of Citizenship

Country of Citizenship	Frequency	Valid Percent
Austria	1	.8
Bangladesh	1	.8
Belgium	1	.8
Brazil	2	1.5
China	7	5.3
Ethiopia	2	1.5
France	2	1.5
Germany	4	3.1
India	**19**	**14.4**
Iran	1	.8
Ireland	2	1.5
Japan	6	4.5
Kenya	2	1.5
Kyrgyzstan	1	.8
Netherlands	6	4.5
Nigeria	1	.8
Palestine	1	.8
Saudi Arabia	**35**	**26.5**
South Korea	2	1.5
Spain	2	1.5
Turkey	2	1.5
United Arab Emirates	2	1.5
Vietnam	3	2.3

Academic Level

From a total of 111 respondents to this question, almost 65% were undergraduate and 35% were graduate students (see Table 3.4).

Table 3.4 Participants' Academic Level

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Undergraduate	72	64.9
Graduate	39	35.1
Total	111	100.0

The largest percentage of respondents in both academic levels combined were enrolled in the Fire & Safety programs (including Fire, Arson & Explosion Investigation, Fire Protection Administration, Fire Protection & Safety Engineering Technology, and Occupational Safety) and Business programs (including MBA, Accounting, General Business, Marketing, and Risk Management & Insurance) respectively.

Duration of Attendance

The average duration of enrollment at Eastern Kentucky University was 2 years (Mean= 1.99) for the 102 respondents to this question. Respondents who had been attending Eastern Kentucky University for less than a year were assigned a value of zero. The maximum length of enrollment was 6 years (see Table 3.5).

Table 3.5 Participants' Duration of Enrollment at EKU

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
How long have you been at EKU?	102	0	6	1.99	1.486

Data Collection Instrument

The evolution of developments in public policy, institutional practices, and the structure and substance of international students' college choice are not linear or coordinated; therefore, determining how to distinguish among major trends is somewhat arbitrary. The present study sought to examine the perspective of international students from an integrated point of view. Hence, an appropriate data collection instrument must have incorporated a wide range of factors relevant to the decision-making process of international students in selecting a particular institution to attend.

The instrument used for the present study (Appendix B) was a survey developed by Ruby (2007) for her study of factors related to international students' graduate school choice. Review of the literature served as the premise for designing the survey and identifying the factors associated with each 'characteristic' section of the survey. This survey investigates trends and correlations associated with characteristics that may influence international students' choice of a college/university. The survey collects data regarding student perceptions of five categories of characteristics: (a) institutional characteristics (b) program characteristics (c) marketing and recruitment characteristics, (d) significant others characteristics, and (e) individual student characteristics. Furthermore, the survey collects information on students' demographics and background including gender, age, country of origin, academic program, academic level, and duration of attendance. The survey also includes questions regarding the number of universities to which the student initially applied and subsequent approval or denial of their application(s). Based on the literature review and unique dynamics of a regional, rural institution, the survey was slightly modified.

Variables and Measures

International students' choice of their educational destination and institution is a complex and multi-level decision-making process. A wide range of factors (both person and non-person) have been identified to impact international students' final selection of a college/university. A review of the related literature reveals five likely categories of factors that affect the college choice process of international students: (1) institutional characteristics, (2) program characteristics, (3) marketing and recruitment characteristics, (4) the influence of family members and friends -referred to as significant others- and (5) individual student characteristics. The survey used for this study is consisted of five sections that address each of the above-mentioned characteristic categories. Each characteristic section is consisted of multiple items that measure the significance of the pertaining characteristic category.

Institutional Characteristics

Institutional characteristics refer to permanent features of an institution. Institutional characteristics are, by far, the most frequently mentioned factor in the literature. The first section of the survey administered for this study addresses four institutional-related variables assumed to be important in international students' college/university selection. These variables are the institution's (1) reputation, (2) admission standards, (3) location, and (4) cost of attendance. A total of nineteen items measured the significance of each variable. Reliability item statistics for every institutional characteristic variable is demonstrated in the following section of this chapter. Reliability statistics (Cronbach's Alpha) was calculated with significance set at the .05 level.

Institutional Reputation

Items 1, 2, 3, 4, and 18 of institutional characteristics inquired about the importance of reputation of the institution in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. The reliability of these five items was calculated at .865 (N=5, Cronbach's Alpha= .865). It may be noted that respondents must have answered every item in order to be included in the reliability item statistic calculations. Table 3.6 illustrates reliability item statistics for questions that measured the institutional reputation variable.

Table 3.6 Institutional Reputation Reliability Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Academic reputation of the University	3.80	1.234	129
Academic reputation of the faculty at the University	3.73	1.310	129
Research opportunities	3.47	1.347	129
Academic quality	4.20	1.227	129
Library facilities and collection	3.91	1.305	129

Institutional Admission Standards

Items 5 and 6 of institutional characteristics inquired about the importance of admission standards of the institution in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. The reliability of these two items was calculated at .666 (N=2, Cronbach's Alpha= .666). Table 3.7 illustrates reliability item statistics for questions that measured the institutional admission standards variable.

Table 3.7 Institutional Admission Standards Reliability Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
High acceptance rate of the University	3.72	1.364	130
Admission standards (including English language proficiency requirements)	3.98	1.309	130

Location of the Institution

Items 7, 8, 9, 10, 16, 17, and 19 of institutional characteristics inquired about the importance of location of the institution in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. The reliability of these seven items was calculated at .808 (N=7, Cronbach's Alpha= .808). Table 3.8 illustrates reliability item statistics for questions that measured the institution's location variable.

Table 3.8 Institution's Location Reliability Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Location in the United States	3.33	1.565	125
Exciting place to live	2.93	1.375	125
Quiet and studious environment	3.87	1.338	125
Safe (low crime) environment	4.45	1.298	125
Size of the University	3.53	1.457	125
Physical attractiveness of campus	3.56	1.433	125
Established population of international students	3.60	1.492	125

Institutional Costs of Attendance

Items 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15 of institutional characteristics inquired about the importance of costs of attending the institution in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. The reliability of these five items was calculated at .705 (N=5, Cronbach's Alpha= .705). Table 3.9 illustrates reliability item statistics for questions that measured the institution's cost of attendance variable.

Table 3.9 Institutional Cost of Attendance Reliability Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Cost, including tuition and fees	4.39	1.367	130
Availability of on-campus housing	3.46	1.566	130
Affordability of living expenses	4.22	1.341	130
Availability of scholarship/financial aid from EKU (including athletic and/or academic scholarships)	4.06	1.665	130
Availability of scholarship/financial aid from home country (including athletic and/or academic scholarships)	3.61	1.682	130

Program Characteristics

Academic program characteristics refer to departmental related factors. The second section of this survey addresses five program-related variables that are identified as prominent in international students' college selection. These variables are the program's (1) reputation, (2) admission standards, (3) delivery, (4) approachability of department personnel, and (5) costs. A total of thirteen items measured the significance of these

variables. Reliability item statistics for every program characteristic variable is demonstrated in the following section of this chapter. It may be noted that respondents must have answered every item in order to be included in the reliability item statistic calculations. Reliability statistics (Cronbach's Alpha) was calculated with significance set at the .05 level.

Program Reputation

Items 1 and 2 of program characteristics inquired about the importance of program reputation in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. The reliability of these two items was calculated at .886 (N=2, Cronbach's Alpha= .886). Table 3.10 illustrates reliability item statistics for questions that measured the program reputation variable.

Table 3.10 Program Reputation Reliability Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Academic reputation of program	4.02	1.297	121
Academic reputation of faculty in program	3.90	1.261	121

Program Admission Standards

Item 5 of program characteristics inquired about the importance of program admission standards in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. Since this variable included only one item, reliability statistics were not calculated. Table 3.11 illustrates reliability item statistics for the single question that measured the program admission standards variable.

Table 3.11 Program Admission Standards Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Program admission standards	121	3.78	1.281

Program Delivery

Items 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13 of program characteristics inquired about the importance of program delivery in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. The reliability of these five items was calculated at .854 (N=5, Cronbach's Alpha= .854). Table 3.12 illustrates reliability statistics for questions that measured the program delivery variable.

Table 3.12 Program Delivery Reliability Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Flexible program requirements	3.86	1.324	111
Flexible course offerings	3.88	1.277	111
Small class size	3.65	1.475	111
Size of department	3.56	1.412	111
Time required to complete program	3.94	1.466	111

Approachability of Program Personnel

Items 3 and 4 of program characteristics inquired about the importance of program personnel approachability in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University.

The reliability of these two items was calculated at .956 (N=2, Cronbach's Alpha= .956). Table 3.13 illustrates reliability item statistics for questions that measured the approachability of program personnel variable.

Table 3.13 Approachability of Program Personnel Reliability Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Friendliness of department faculty	4.03	1.371	119
Friendliness of department staff	3.82	1.388	119

Program Costs

Items 6, 7, and 8 of program characteristics inquired about the importance of program costs in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. The reliability of these three items was calculated at .775 (N=3, Cronbach's Alpha= .775). Table 3.14 illustrates reliability statistics for questions that measured the program costs variable.

Table 3.14 Program Cost Reliability Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Opportunity for internship/assistantship	3.80	1.616	121
Availability of scholarship/financial aid for this specific program (from home country)	3.49	1.669	121
Program offered scholarship/financial aid (from EKU)	3.79	1.679	121

Marketing and Recruitment Characteristics

Marketing and recruitment characteristics refer to factors that promote the institution and its' programs. Marketing involves the distribution of information about the institution and its programs to interested students so that they can make informed enrollment decisions. Marketing and recruitment tools typically include providing formal information through catalogs, brochures, guidebooks, and websites. Personal communication between college/university personnel and prospective students is another effective recruitment/marketing technique. Ease and efficiency of an institution's admission process is also an important factor in encouraging prospective students to attend a particular institution. A total of thirteen items measured the significance of these variables. Reliability item statistics for every marketing and recruitment characteristic variable is demonstrated in the following section of this chapter. It may be noted that respondents must have answered every item in order to be included in the reliability item statistic calculations. Reliability statistics (Cronbach's Alpha) was calculated with significance set at the .05 level.

Formal Information

Items 1, 2, 5, and 6 of marketing and recruitment characteristics inquired about the importance of formal information in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. The reliability of these four items was calculated at .803 (N=4, Cronbach's Alpha= .803). Table 3.15 illustrates reliability statistics for questions that measured the formal information variable.

Table 3.15 Formal Information Reliability Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Catalogs from the University	3.17	1.310	119
Website of the University	3.89	1.466	119
Read information about EKU in a guidebook about universities in the U.S.	3.32	1.359	119
Saw EKU on a list of university rankings	3.63	1.484	119

Personal Communication

Items 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9 of marketing and recruitment characteristics inquired about the importance of personal communication in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. The reliability of these five items was calculated at .827 (N=5, Cronbach's Alpha= .827). Table 3.16 illustrates reliability statistics for questions that measured the personal communication variable.

Table 3.16 Personal Communication Reliability Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Campus Visits	3.24	1.448	115
Meeting with a university representative/agent in home country	3.07	1.497	115
University admission personnel were helpful and attentive	3.91	1.308	115
University international office (CIE) personnel were helpful and attentive	4.08	1.377	115
University faculty were helpful and attentive	4.00	1.389	115

Admission Process

Items 10, 11, 12, and 13 of marketing and recruitment characteristics inquired about the importance of the ease and efficiency of admission process in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. The reliability of these four items was calculated at .800 (N=4, Cronbach's Alpha= .800). Table 3.17 illustrates reliability statistics for questions that measured the admission process variable.

Table 3.17 Admission Process Reliability Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Ease of admission process	3.77	1.372	115
Timely admission process	3.87	1.513	115
Availability of online application	3.99	1.478	115
EKU was the first university to process and mail visa documents	3.71	1.800	115

Significant Others Characteristics

Significant others characteristics refer to influential persons that guide students through their college choice process. The fourth section of the survey identifies the groups and individuals who may influence international students' decisions in selecting a college/university. Four groups of 'significant others' included in this study are (1) family and friends, (2) educators in home country, (3) officials in home country, and (4) current/former students at the institution. A total of eleven items measured the significance of these variables. Reliability item statistics for every 'significant other' characteristic variable is demonstrated in the following section of this chapter. It may be

noted that respondents must have answered every item in order to be included in the reliability item statistic calculations. Reliability statistics (Cronbach's Alpha) was calculated with significance set at the .05 level.

Family and Friends

Items 2, 3, 4, and 11 of significant others characteristics inquired about the importance of input from family and friends in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. The reliability of these four items was calculated at .781 (N=4, Cronbach's Alpha= .781). Table 3.18 illustrates reliability statistics for questions that measured the input from family and friends variable.

Table 3.18 Family and Friends' Input Reliability Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Input from parents	3.31	1.633	112
Input from family/friends in home country	3.53	1.530	112
Input from family/friends in the U.S.	3.39	1.533	112
Presence of family/friends/spouse at EKU	2.93	1.769	112

Educators in Home Country

Items 6 and 7 of significant others characteristics inquired about the importance of input from educators in their home country in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. The reliability of these two items was calculated at .880 (N=2, Cronbach's Alpha= .880). Table 3.19 illustrates reliability statistics for questions that measured the input from educators in home country variable.

Table 3.19 Educators in Home Country Input Reliability Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Input from former teachers/faculty	3.30	1.469	114
Input from advisor/counselor	3.32	1.513	114

Officials in Home Country

Items 8, 9, and 10 of significant others characteristics inquired about the importance of input from officials in their home country in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. The reliability of these three items was calculated at .888 (N=3, Cronbach's Alpha= .888). Table 3.20 illustrates reliability statistics for questions that measured the input from officials in home country variable.

Table 3.20 Officials in Home Country Input Reliability Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Input from embassy/consulate	3.06	1.502	113
Input from sponsor	3.28	1.617	113
Input from the Ministry of Education in home country	3.06	1.588	113

Current and Former Students at the Institution

Items 1 and 5 of significant others characteristics inquired about the importance of input from current/former students at the institution in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University.

The reliability of these two items was calculated at .785 (N=2, Cronbach's Alpha= .785). Table 3.21 illustrates reliability statistics for questions that measured the input from current or former students variable.

Table 3.21 Current/Former Students' Input Reliability Item Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Input from EKU alumni	3.15	1.488	115
Input from students in the program	3.60	1.549	115

Student Characteristics

The final section of the survey collected demographic and background information on the respondents. Items were chosen to avoid unrelated personal information that could discourage participation. Student characteristics addressed in this study included gender, age, country of citizenship, academic program, academic level, and duration of attendance. Additional information requested included the number of universities to which students applied, the subsequent approval or denial of their application(s), and availability of scholarship/financial aid for other institutions.

On average, the 98 respondents who answered the first question in this set had applied to two colleges/universities in the United States (Mean=2.26). The 95 respondents to the subsequent question reported that they were accepted to an average of two other colleges/universities in the U.S. (Mean=1.97). From a total of 103 valid responses recorded for the availability of scholarship/financial aid from other institutions, 56 (54.4%) reported that this offer was available to them. Tables 3.22 and 3.23 demonstrate descriptive statistics and frequencies for these items.

Table 3.22 Student Characteristics Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
How many U.S. colleges/universities did you apply to?	98	0	10	2.26	1.620
How many U.S. colleges/universities were you accepted to?	95	0	6	1.97	1.325

Table 3.23 Scholarship/financial aid availability for other institutions Item Frequency

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	No	47	45.6
	Yes	56	54.4
	Total	103	100.0

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection instrument was administered through SurveyMonkey- an online survey development cloud based company. Employing an online, quantitative research approach for this study allowed for an efficient dissemination of the survey to 313 international students at Eastern Kentucky University.

Participants were asked to rate items that pertained to each characteristic variable on a 6-point Likert scale, with intervals from (1) not important at all to (6) essential in their decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. A 6-point rating scale was simple to comprehend and navigate by respondents, yet allowed for inquiry of specific information.

At the end of each characteristic section, extra space was provided for respondents to add any unlisted or overlooked factors.

Data collection occurred during the Fall semester of 2014. Participants were recruited through the Center for International Education (CIE), social networks, and personal contact. An invitation e-mail to participate in the study was forwarded to all enrolled international students by the Center for International Education at Eastern Kentucky University (Appendix A). The same invitation was posted on relevant social networks such as EKU International Students Association (EKU-ISA) and EKU Center for International Education Facebook pages.

The invitation e-mail included information about the study, human subject considerations, and participants' consent terms as well as the hyperlink to the online survey. The survey was accessible for seven days during which 132 participants completed the survey. This number represents a survey completion rate of 42.2%.

Data Analysis Procedure

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that international students considered prominent in their decision to attend a regional, rural university and how they prioritize those factors. A descriptive statistical analysis including means, standard deviations, and frequencies well served the purpose of this study.

Initially, the reliability item statistics with significance set at the .05 level was calculated for every variable. In order to rank the items within each variable, frequencies and descriptive statistics for every single item were determined. Individual predictor items were then grouped to properly represent their pertaining variable. Subsequently,

descriptive statistical analysis including mean comparisons, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were used to establish variable priorities within each characteristic category. A similar procedure was employed to analyze and assess priorities among the aggregate characteristics results. All analyses were conducted with SPSS 22.0.

Limitations of the Study

Although understanding basic factors and influences that encourage international students to select a specific college/university would enhance the development of effective marketing and recruitment strategies for higher education institutions, this is a decision that will ultimately be made by each individual student for possibly unique reasons and motivations. International recruiters deal with very diverse populations of prospective students that come from different cultures, education structures, social and economic backgrounds, and political climates. In describing the college choice process of domestic students, Litten (1991) pointed out that researchers look for "patterns and meaning in very complex phenomena. Both social environments and personality vary widely, and the interactions of the two create further permutations in the college choice process" (p. 2). It is safe to say that the phenomenon of international student college choice process is likely to be even more complex than that of domestic students. In this sense, the importance of any single factor may vary from individual to individual.

Due to a small sample size, this study, similar to many other studies in the field (e.g. Zikopoulos & Barber 1986; Waters 1992; Kemp et al., 1998; Joseph & Joseph, 2000) considered international students as a single population. The small sample size of this study did not provide the statistical power to disaggregate results based on cultural,

national or other differences that might have existed between various groups of international students.

Moreover, all participants in this study were enrolled [international] students who were already attending Eastern Kentucky University. Thus, as with all survey research, responses may not have represented true attitudes of the respondents in the sense that they may not have recalled their preliminary perceptions of their college choice process. This possible disconnect is a large concern because students could have been reflecting on attitudes that existed as many as 6 years earlier, depending on when they chose to attend Eastern Kentucky University and how long they have been enrolled at the institution.

Finally, the value of this study will somewhat depend on institutions' approach to marketing and recruitment of international students. Because participants were recruited from one university, findings and implications of this study may not necessarily transcend to other institutions. Nevertheless, all institutions of higher education should be able to benefit to some degree from an understanding (from the students' perspective) of factors that students consider important in selecting a specific college/university.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The primary objective of this study was to identify factors that influenced the college decision-making of international students at a regional, rural university. Specifically, the study assessed students' priorities within and among four categories of characteristics, namely, institutional characteristics, program characteristics, marketing and recruitment characteristics, and significant other characteristics. The four characteristic categories and the variables used to measure each characteristic category are outlined below. The variables provide precise insight into the priorities within a particular group of characteristics that affect the college choice of international students. Each variable is measured by multiple pertaining items that will be discussed in details in the following sections of this chapter.

Institutional Characteristics
Institutional Reputation
Institutional Admission Standards
Location of the Institution
Institutional Costs of Attendance
Program Characteristics
Program Reputation
Program Admission Standards
Program Delivery
Approachability of Program Personnel
Program Costs
Marketing and Recruitment Characteristics
Formal Information
Personal Communication
Admission Process
Significant Others Characteristics
Family & Friends
Educators in Home Country
Officials in Home Country
Current & Former Students at the Institution

Descriptive statistics, means, and frequencies were utilized to determine the results of this study. Such analysis uncovers those characteristics/variables most strongly associated with selecting a college/university. A total of 132 full-time enrolled international students participated in this study. This is equivalent to a response rate of 42.2%. Respondents were asked to rate items on a 6-point Likert scale - (1) **N**ot **I**mportant At All, (2) **S**lightly **I**mportant, (3) **N**eutral, (4) **I**mportant, (5) **V**ery **I**mportant, (6) **E**ssential- in their decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University.

Institutional Characteristic Variables

The first part of the survey included four institutional-related variables to measure the significance of institutional characteristics in international students' college decision-making. These variables were the institution's (1) reputation, (2) admission standards, (3) location, and (4) costs of attendance. A total of nineteen items measured the significance of these variables.

Institutional Reputation

Items 1, 2, 3, 4, and 18 of institutional characteristics inquired about the importance of reputation of the institution in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. Academic reputation of the university was most commonly (29%) recognized as *very important* in international students' college choice process. Other items that measured this variable i.e. academic reputation of the faculty, academic quality, research opportunities, and library facilities of the university were all rated *important* in respondents' decision-making.

Table 4.1 displays the item frequency for this variable, where rows represent the five items measuring the institutional reputation variable and columns represent the valid percentage of respondents reporting each scale of importance. It may be reminded that tables include only valid responses to each item on the survey, thus the total number of responses may not always be equal to the total number of participants.

Table 4.1 Institutional Reputation Item Frequency

Item	NI	SI	N	I	VI	E
Academic reputation of the University	5.3	9.9	24.4	26.7	**29.0**	4.6
Academic reputation of the faculty at the University	8.4	9.2	25.2	**26.7**	23.7	6.9
Research opportunities	10.6	13.6	23.5	**30.3**	16.7	5.3
Academic quality	5.3	1.5	21.2	**27.3**	31.1	13.6
Library facilities & collection	5.3	8.4	22.9	**26.7**	26.0	10.7

A comparison between the means of items within the institutional reputation variable revealed that participants considered academic quality (Mean=4.18) as the most influential factor [in this category] in their college/university choice. Library facilities

(Mean=3.92) and academic reputation of the university (Mean=3.78) and faculty (Mean=3.69) followed closely right after each other. The least significant factor within this variable was research opportunities with a Mean of 3.45. Table 4.2 demonstrates the importance of institutional reputation factors in international students' college decision-making in descending order from most significant to least significant.

Table 4.2 Descriptive Statistics: Institutional Reputation Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Academic quality	132	4.18	1.259
Library facilities and collection	131	3.92	1.319
Academic reputation of the University	131	3.78	1.248
Academic reputation of the faculty at the University	131	3.69	1.342
Research opportunities	132	3.45	1.350

Institutional Admission Standards

Items 5 and 6 of institutional characteristics inquired about the importance of the institution's admission standards in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. Nearly 29% of respondents reported that the ease of getting accepted into an institution was *important* to them while selecting a college/university. Table 4.3 displays the item frequency for this variable, where rows represent the two items measuring the institutional admission standards variable and columns represent the valid percentage of respondents reporting each scale of importance.

Table 4.3 Institutional Admission Standards Item Frequency

Item	NI	SI	N	I	VI	E
High acceptance rate of the University	6.8	12.9	22.7	**28.8**	18.2	10.6
Admission standards (including English language proficiency requirements)	4.6	6.2	**26.9**	24.6	24.6	13.1

Although admission standards of a college/university was most frequently recognized as a *neutral* factor, with a Mean of 3.98, it was ranked as the more important factor within this variable to affect respondents' college choice (see Table 4.4).

Table 4.4 Descriptive Statistics: Institutional Admission Standards Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Admission standards (including English language proficiency requirements)	130	3.98	1.309
High acceptance rate of the University	132	3.70	1.374

Location of the Institution

Items 7, 8, 9, 10, 16, 17, and 19 of institutional characteristics inquired about the importance of the location of the institute in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. Majority (58.1%) of respondents identified a safe environment as *very important* or *essential* in their final selection. Table 4.5 displays the item frequency for this variable, where rows represent the seven items measuring the institution's location variable and columns represent the valid percentage of respondents reporting each scale of importance.

Table 4.5 Institution's Location Item Frequency

Item	NI	SI	N	I	VI	E
Location in the United States	16.7	15.9	**24.2**	14.4	18.9	9.8
Exciting place to live	15.9	**26.5**	24.2	18.9	8.3	6.1
Quiet & studious environment	4.6	8.5	**26.9**	24.6	21.5	13.8
Safe (low crime) environment	3.9	3.9	13.2	20.9	**36.4**	21.7
Size of the University	11.5	10.7	**26.7**	22.9	19.8	8.4
Physical attractiveness of campus	10.7	10.7	**27.5**	22.1	19.1	9.9
Established population of international students	9.8	13.6	**30.3**	14.4	20.5	11.4

Within the institution's location variable, students ranked the importance of safety issues (Mean=4.47) far above the physical (Mean=3.58) and social (Mean=2.95) attributes in deciding to attend a rural, regional university. Table 4.6 demonstrates the significance of the institution's location factors in descending order from most significant to least significant.

Table 4.6 Descriptive Statistics: Institution's Location Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Safe (low crime) environment	129	4.47	1.287
Quiet and studious environment	130	3.92	1.341
Physical attractiveness of campus	131	3.58	1.446
Established population of international students	132	3.56	1.489
Size of the University	131	3.54	1.437
Location in the United States	132	3.33	1.590
Exciting place to live	132	2.95	1.408

Institutional Costs of Attendance

Items 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15 of institutional characteristics inquired about the importance of costs of attendance in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. In general, cost factors were typically considered *important/very important*. Among the items that measured the cost variable, however, 50.7% of respondents identified affordability of tuition as either *very important* or *essential* in their final decision. This number was closely followed by the availability of scholarship/financial aid from the host institution (49.2%) and the affordability of living expenses (48.8%).

Table 4.7 displays the item frequency for this variable, where rows represent the five items measuring the institutional cost of attendance variable and columns represent the valid percentage of respondents reporting each scale of importance.

Table 4.7 Institutional Costs of Attendance Item Frequency

Item	NI	SI	N	I	VI	E
Cost, including tuition & fees	3.8	4.5	18.9	22.0	24.2	**26.5**
Availability of on-campus housing	14.5	16.0	16.8	**22.9**	19.1	10.7
Affordability of living expenses	4.6	4.6	21.4	20.6	**30.5**	18.3
Availability of scholarship/financial aid from EKU (including athletic and/or academic scholarships)	12.1	4.5	21.2	12.9	22.7	**26.5**
Availability of scholarship/financial aid from home country (including athletic and/or academic scholarships)	16.8	9.9	**23.7**	13.7	19.1	16.8

Within the institutional cost variable, affordability of tuition ranked the most influential factor -with the highest Mean of 4.38- in international students' college decision-making process. The importance of being able to afford one's living expenses was also highlighted with a small difference of .15 between the means of the two items.

Availability of scholarship/financial aid either from the host institution (Mean=4.09) or students' home country (Mean=3.59) were considered average on the 'significant cost factor' ranking list. On-campus housing appeared at the bottom of the list with a Mean=3.48 (see Table 4.8).

Table 4.8 Descriptive Statistics: Institutional Costs of Attendance Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cost, including tuition and fees	132	4.38	1.373
Affordability of living expenses	131	4.23	1.345
Availability of scholarship/financial aid from EKU (including athletic and/or academic scholarships)	132	4.09	1.669
Availability of scholarship/financial aid from home country (including athletic and/or academic scholarships)	131	3.59	1.691
Availability of on-campus housing	131	3.48	1.576

Aggregation of Institutional Characteristic Variables

Once frequencies and descriptive statistics for every single item included in 'Part 1' of the survey was calculated and items were ranked within each variable, individual items were grouped to properly represent their pertaining variable. Descriptive statistical analysis including mean comparisons, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were then utilized to establish priorities among the four variables within the institutional characteristic category. The most significant institutional characteristic variable to have affected international students' college choice in this study was the costs related to attending the university (Mean=3.94).

Institutional admission standards i.e. how easy it was for respondents to get accepted into the university was ranked as the second most important institutional characteristic variable (Mean=3.85). Importance of the institution's reputation closely followed with a Mean=3.82. The location of the university (Mean=3.60) was reported to have had the least impact on respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. Table 4.9 demonstrates the four institutional characteristic variables in order of importance in respondents' college decision-making.

Table 4.9 Descriptive Statistics: Institutional Characteristics Variable Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Institutional Costs of Attendance	130	3.9477	1.03656
Institutional Admissions Standards	130	3.8500	1.15747
Institutional Reputation	129	3.8233	1.03550
Location of the Institution	125	3.6091	.97181

Program Characteristic Variables

The second part of the survey addressed five program-related variables that are identified as prominent in international students' college choice process. These variables were the program's (1) reputation, (2) admission standards, (3) delivery, (4) approachability of department personnel, and (5) costs. A total of thirteen items measured the significance of these variables.

Program Reputation

Items 1 and 2 of program characteristics inquired about the importance of the program's reputation in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. The academic reputation of the program and the faculty in the program were very closely rated, as an equal 55.4% of the respondents identified the two factors *important* or *very important* in their college selection. Table 4.10 displays the item frequency for this variable, where rows represent the two items measuring the program reputation variable and columns represent the valid percentage of respondents reporting each scale of importance. It may be reminded that tables include only valid responses to each item on the survey, thus the total number of responses may not always be equal to the total number of participants.

Table 4.10 Program Reputation Item Frequency

Item	NI	SI	N	I	VI	E
Academic reputation of program	5.0	6.6	22.3	24.8	**30.6**	10.7
Academic reputation of department faculty	5.0	7.4	24.0	**28.1**	27.3	8.3

The 121 participants who ranked the two factors within the program reputation variable, identified academic reputation of a program as the more important factor to have influenced their final decision (Mean=4.02). However, the academic reputation of the faculty in the program followed very closely with a Mean difference of .12 (see Table 4.11).

Table 4.11 Descriptive Statistics: Program Academic Reputation Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Academic reputation of program	121	4.02	1.297
Academic reputation of faculty in program	121	3.90	1.261

Program Admission Standards

Item 5 of program characteristics inquired about the importance of programs' admission standards in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. This factor was most commonly (33.1%) considered as *important* in students' college choice process (see Table 4.12).

Table 4.12 Program Admission Standards Item Frequency

Item	**NI**	**SI**	**N**	**I**	**VI**	**E**
Program admission standards	5.8	9.9	22.3	**33.1**	20.7	8.3

Majority (53.8%) of the 121 respondents to this variable reported that how easily their desired program admitted them was an *important/very important* factor in their college choice decision. This item had a Mean of 3.78 and a standard deviation of 1.28 (see Table 4.13).

Table 4.13 Descriptive Statistics: Program Admission Standards Mean

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Program admission standards	121	3.78	1.281

Program Delivery

Items 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13 of program characteristics inquired about the importance of program delivery in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. Flexible program requirements (29.6%) and flexible course offerings (30.5%) were the two items in this variable that were most frequently identified as *very important* in respondents' college choice process. Table 4.14 displays the item frequency for this variable, where rows represent the five items measuring the program delivery variable and columns represent the valid percentage of respondents reporting each scale of importance.

Table 4.14 Program Delivery Item Frequency

Item	NI	SI	N	I	VI	E
Flexible program requirements	7.0	5.2	25.2	24.3	**29.6**	8.7
Flexible course offerings	7.6	2.5	26.3	28.0	**30.5**	5.1
Small class size	13.2	4.1	**28.9**	24.8	14.0	14.9
Size of department	10.7	9.1	26.4	**27.3**	15.7	10.7
Time required to complete program	9.2	4.2	21.7	**25.0**	24.2	15.8

Although flexibility of program requirements and course offerings were more frequently mentioned as *very important* factors, a comparison between the means of the factors constructing the program delivery variable revealed that the time required to complete a program was the most influential factor in this category in students' college/university selection (Mean=3.98). Flexible program requirements (Mean=3.90) and flexible course offerings (Mean=3.86) were ranked the second and third most important factors respectively. Size of classes and departments had the least impact on international students' college choice with a small difference of .07 in their Means. Table 4.15 demonstrates the significance of program delivery factors in international students' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University in descending order from most significant to least significant.

Table 4.15 Descriptive Statistics: Program Delivery Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Time required to complete program	120	3.98	1.449
Flexible program requirements	115	3.90	1.318
Flexible course offerings	118	3.86	1.247
Small class size	121	3.67	1.513
Size of department	121	3.60	1.429

Approachability of Program Personnel

Items 3 and 4 of program characteristics inquired about the importance of faculty and staff accessibility in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. An equal 28.3% of respondents acknowledged friendliness of department faculty and staff to have been an *important* factor in their decision (see Table 4.16).

Table 4.16 Approachability of Program Personnel Item Frequency

Item	NI	SI	N	I	VI	E
Friendliness of department faculty	6.7	6.7	17.5	**28.3**	27.5	13.3
Friendliness of department staff	8.3	8.3	21.7	**28.3**	22.5	10.8

The 120 participants who responded to the two factors within the approachability of program personnel variable, ranked the quality of communication with faculty slightly more important than the quality of communication with department staff. While friendliness of department faculty possessed the Mean of 4.03, the friendliness of department staff followed closely with a Mean of 3.81 (see Table 4.17).

Table 4.17 Descriptive Statistics: Approachability of Program Personnel Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Friendliness of department faculty	120	4.03	1.365
Friendliness of department staff	120	3.81	1.392

Program Costs

Items 6, 7, and 8 of program characteristics inquired about the importance of program costs in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. Within this variable, 39.7% of the respondents mentioned that opportunities for internship/ assistantship were *very important/essential* in their considerations to select a college/university. While availability of scholarship/financial aid for a specific program from one's home country was a *neutral* factor for most respondents to this item (24.8%), this factor rated *very important*/*essential* by most (39.6%) if the scholarship/financial aid was offered by the host institution. Table 4.18 displays the item frequency for this variable, where rows represent the three items measuring the program costs variable and columns represent the valid percentage of respondents reporting each scale of importance.

Table 4.18 Program Costs Item Frequency

Item	NI	SI	N	I	VI	E
Opportunity for internship/assistantship	10.7	13.2	19.0	17.4	**21.5**	18.2
Availability of scholarship/financial aid for a specific program (from home country)	18.2	9.1	**24.8**	17.4	14.9	15.7
Program offered scholarship/financial aid (from EKU)	14.0	9.9	19.0	17.4	**19.8**	**19.8**

For the 121 students who ranked all factors within the program cost variable, opportunities for internship/assistantship was the most influential factor in their final decision to select a college/university (Mean=3.80). With a Mean difference of just .01, this group of students ranked the availability of scholarship/financial aid from the department as the next most significant factor to have impacted their college choice. Table 4.19 demonstrates the significance of program cost factors in international students' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University in descending order from most important to least important.

Table 4.19 Descriptive Statistics: Program Costs Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Opportunity for internship/assistantship	121	3.80	1.616
Program offered scholarship/financial aid (from EKU)	121	3.79	1.679
Availability of scholarship/financial aid for a specific program (from home country)	121	3.49	1.669

Aggregation of Program Characteristic Variables

Once frequencies and descriptive statistics of every single item included in 'Part 2' of the survey was calculated and items were ranked within each variable, individual items were grouped to properly represent their pertaining variable. Descriptive statistical analysis including mean comparisons, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were then utilized to establish priorities among the five variables within the program characteristic category. The most pivotal program characteristic variable in international students' college choice was the program academic reputation (Mean=3.95). The quality

of communication with department faculty and staff was closely ranked as the second most important program characteristic variable (Mean=3.92). Program delivery and program admission standards were almost considered equally important with a mean difference of .0015 between the two variables. Among the program characteristics variables, costs related to enrolling in a specific was identified to have had the least impact on respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University Mean=3.69). Table 4.20 demonstrates the five program characteristic variables in order of importance in respondents' college decision-making.

Table 4.20 Descriptive Statistics: Program Characteristics Variable Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Program Reputation	121	3.9587	1.21207
Approachability of Program Personnel	119	3.9286	1.35028
Program Delivery	111	3.7784	1.10712
Program Admission Standards	121	3.7769	1.28119
Program Costs	121	3.6915	1.37448

Marketing and Recruitment Characteristic Variables

The third part of the survey included three marketing and recruitment-related variables to measure the significance of marketing and recruitment characteristics in international students' college decision-making. These variables were (1) providing formal information, (2) personal communication, and (3) the institution's admission procedures and process. A total of thirteen items measured the significance of these variables.

Formal Information

Items 1, 2, 5, and 6 of marketing and recruitment characteristics inquired about the importance of providing formal information in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. The two information sources that were most commonly perceived as *very important* within this variable were information provided in guidebooks about American universities (30.3%) and U.S. university ranking lists (26.9%). Table 4.21 displays the item frequency for this variable, where rows represent the four items measuring the formal information variable and columns represent the valid percentage of respondents reporting each scale of importance. It may be reminded that tables include only valid responses to each item on the survey, thus the total number of responses may not always be equal to the total number of participants.

Table 4.21 Formal Information Item Frequency

Item	NI	SI	N	I	VI	E
Catalogs from the University	14.3	11.8	**37.8**	17.6	16.0	2.5
Website of the University	8.4	7.6	**24.4**	21.0	23.5	15.1
Read information about EKU in a guidebook about universities in the U.S.	14.3	10.1	27.7	**30.3**	12.6	5.0
Saw EKU on a list of university rankings	15.1	2.5	26.1	**26.9**	19.3	10.1

119 participants ranked the items relevant to the formal information variable. University's website was ranked as the most important source of information for international students (Mean=3.89). However, receiving catalogs from the university was reported to have had the least impact in students' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University (Mean=3.17). Table 4.22 demonstrates the significance of providing formal information factors in descending order from most significant to least significant.

Table 4.22 Descriptive Statistics: Formal Information Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Website of the University	119	3.89	1.466
Saw EKU on a list of university rankings	119	3.63	1.484
Read information about EKU in a guidebook about universities in the U.S.	119	3.32	1.359
Catalogs from the University	119	3.17	1.310

Personal Communication

Items 3, 4, 7, 8, and 9 of marketing and recruitment characteristics inquired about the importance of personal communication with university personnel in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. Personal communication between prospective students and university officials was generally regarded as an important factor in respondents' college choice process. For example, about 30% of respondents identified assistance from faculty and administrators at the admission office as an *important* factor in their decision to select a college/university. Table 4.23 displays the item frequency for this variable, where rows represent the five items measuring the

personal communication variable and columns represent the valid percentage of respondents reporting each scale of importance.

Table 4.23 Personal Communication Item Frequency

Item	NI	SI	N	I	VI	E
Campus visits	19.5	7.6	**28.8**	24.6	14.4	5.1
Meeting with a university representative/agent in home country	23.1	11.1	**24.8**	**24.8**	10.3	6.0
University admission personnel were helpful & attentive	5.9	6.7	22.7	**30.3**	24.4	10.1
University international office (CIE) personnel were helpful & attentive	5.9	5.1	22.0	22.9	**28.0**	16.1
University faculty were helpful & attentive	7.6	6.7	16.8	**29.4**	26.1	13.4

Participants in this study ranked the quality of communication and the assistance they received from the international office as the prominent factor within this variable to have had influenced their decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University (Mean=4.10). Attentiveness of faculty (Mean=4.00) and admission office personnel (Mean=3.91) closely followed each other as second and third most important factors in students' college choice. Campus visits (Mean=3.22) and meeting with university representatives

(Mean=3.06) did not play a significant role in respondents' final decision. Table 4.24 demonstrates the significance of personal communication factors in descending order from most important to least important.

Table 4.24 Descriptive Statistics: Personal Communication Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
University international office (CIE) personnel were helpful and attentive	118	4.10	1.374
University faculty were helpful and attentive	119	4.00	1.390
University admission personnel were helpful and attentive	119	3.91	1.295
Campus Visits	118	3.22	1.451
Meeting with a university representative/agent in home country	117	3.06	1.499

Admission Process

Items 10, 11, 12, and 13 of marketing and recruitment characteristics inquired about the importance of easy and efficient admission procedures in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. 53% of respondents recognized the ease of an institution's admission process *important/very important* in their college selection. Timely processing and mailing of visa documents were also recognized as *very important* or *essential* for 39.8% of international students who responded to this item. Availability of online application was another *very important* factor for 30.3% of participants in this study. Table 4.25 displays the item frequency for this variable, where rows represent the

four items measuring the admission process variable and columns represent the valid percentage of respondents reporting each scale of importance.

Table 4.25 Admission Process Item Frequency

Item	NI	SI	N	I	VI	E
Simple admission process	7.7	10.3	21.4	25.6	**27.4**	7.7
Timely admission process	11.0	4.2	**23.7**	22.9	22.0	16.1
Availability of online application	10.1	2.5	23.5	19.3	**30.3**	14.3
EKU was the first university to process & mail visa documents	20.3	4.2	19.5	16.1	18.6	**21.2**

Among the factors that measured the importance of admission process and procedures, availability of online application was reported to have been the most influential factor in international students' college choice (Mean=4.00). Although students frequently mentioned the timely processing of visa documents as an important factor, this item appears at the bottom of the ranking list with the lowest Mean of 3.72. Table 4.26 demonstrates the significance of admission process factors in descending order from most important to least important.

Table 4.26 Descriptive Statistics: Admission Process Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Availability of online application	119	4.00	1.461
Timely admission process	118	3.89	1.507
Simple admission process	117	3.78	1.365
EKU was the first university to process and mail visa documents	118	3.72	1.783

Aggregation of Marketing and Recruitment Characteristic Variables

Once frequencies and descriptive statistics of every single item included in 'Part 3' of the survey was calculated and items were ranked within each variable, individual items were grouped to properly represent their pertaining variable. Descriptive statistical analysis including mean comparisons, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were then utilized to establish priorities among the three variables within the marketing and recruitment characteristic category. Ease and efficiency of the admission process was identified as the most pivotal marketing and recruitment characteristic variable in international students' college choice (Mean=3.83). An open line of communication between students and university personnel was ranked as the second most important variable in this category (Mean=3.66). International students' access to formal sources of information was the least significant variable (Mean=3.50) to influence respondents' decision-making (see Table 4.27).

Table 4.27 Descriptive Statistics: Marketing and Recruitment Characteristics Variable Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Admissions Process	115	3.8348	1.22469
Personal Communication	115	3.6609	1.08067
Formal Information	119	3.5021	1.11495

Significant Others Characteristic Variables

The fourth part of the survey examined the impact of 'significant others' in international students' college choice process. Four groups of 'significant others' included in this study were (1) family and friends, (2) educators in home country, (3) officials in home country, and (4) current/former students at the institution. A total of eleven items measured the influence of these 'significant others' groups.

Family and Friends

Items 2, 3, 4, and 11 of significant others characteristics inquired about the importance of input from family and friends in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. In general, these factors were not typically considered of much importance in respondents' college choice process. For example, 53.9% of students reported that input from their parents was either *not important*, *slightly important*, or *neutral* in their final decision. An exception was the significance of input from friends/family in students' home country. 43.9% of the respondents to this item identified the value of input from this group of people *important* or *very important*. Table 4.28 displays the item frequency for this variable, where rows represent the four items

measuring the family and friends variable and columns represent the valid percentage of respondents reporting each scale of importance. It may be reminded that tables include only valid responses to each item on the survey, thus the total number of responses may not always be equal to the total number of participants.

Table 4.28 Family and Friends' Input Item Frequency

Item	NI	SI	N	I	VI	E
Input from parents	**22.1**	9.7	**22.1**	18.6	17.7	9.7
Input from family/friends in home country	16.7	7.0	22.8	**24.6**	19.3	9.6
Input from family/friends in the U.S.	16.4	12.1	**22.4**	20.7	19.8	8.6
Presence of family/friends/spouse at EKU	**36.8**	3.5	20.2	15.8	14.0	9.6

Among the 'significant others' examined within this variable, friends and family in students' home country were identified as the most influential group in the college choice process (Mean=3.52). Importance of input from family/friends in the U.S. closely followed with a Mean=3.41. Table 4.29 demonstrates the significance of family and friends' input in descending order from most important to least important.

Table 4.29 Descriptive Statistics: Friends and Family Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Input from family/friends in home country	114	3.52	1.541
Input from family/friends in the U.S.	116	3.41	1.550
Input from parents	113	3.29	1.640
Presence of family/friends/spouse at EKU	114	2.96	1.767

Educators in Home Country

Items 6 and 7 of significant others characteristics inquired about the importance of input from educators in home country in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. Both factors in this variable generated very similar response rates. While both items were most frequently recognized a *neutral* factor in students' college choice process, 40% of the respondents identified the input from former teachers/faculty or advisor/counselors as *either important* or very *important* in their final decision (see Table 4.30).

Table 4.30 Educators in Home Country Input Item Frequency

Item	NI	SI	N	I	VI	E
Input from former teachers/faculty	18.3	7.0	**28.7**	23.5	16.5	6.1
Input from advisor/counselor	19.1	7.0	**27.0**	23.5	16.5	7.0

115 respondents ranked the importance of input from their advisors or counselors slightly higher than input from their former teachers/faculty in deciding to attend Eastern Kentucky University. There was a .01 difference between Means of the two factors (see Table 4.31).

Table 4.31 Descriptive Statistics: Educators in Home Country Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Input from advisor/counselor	115	3.32	1.508
Input from former teachers/faculty	115	3.31	1.471

Officials in Home Country

Items 8, 9, and 10 of significant others characteristics inquired about the importance of input from officials in home country in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. Input from officials in students' home country was not recognized to have a significant impact on respondents' college choice process. The most common response to all three items in this variable was *neutral*. Table 4.32 displays the item frequency for this variable, where rows represent the three items measuring the officials in home country variable and columns represent the valid percentage of respondents reporting each scale of importance.

Table 4.32 Officials in Home Country Input Item Frequency

Item	NI	SI	N	I	VI	E
Input from embassy/consulate	25.4	7.0	**28.9**	18.4	16.7	3.5
Input from sponsor	21.6	7.8	**26.7**	19.0	13.8	11.2
Input from the Ministry of Education in home country	26.1	8.7	**27.8**	16.5	13.9	7.0

Among officials in home country, students' reported that input from their sponsors were most important to them in selecting a college/university (Mean=3.29) (see Table 4.33).

Table 4.33 Descriptive Statistics: Officials in Home Country Input Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Input from sponsor	116	3.29	1.621
Input from embassy/consulate	114	3.04	1.507
Input from the Ministry of Education in home country	115	3.04	1.581

Current and Former Students at the Institution

Items 1 and 5 of significant others characteristics inquired about the importance of input from current or former students at the university in respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. Nearly 32% of the respondents were indifferent towards

the input they received from EKU alumni. However, 45.2% of students recognized the input they received from students enrolled in their desired program as an *important/very important* factor (see Table 4.34).

Table 4.34 Current/ Former Students Input Item Frequency

Item	NI	SI	N	I	VI	E
Input from EKU alumni	20.7	9.5	**31.9**	16.4	16.4	5.2
Input from students in the program	15.7	7.0	22.6	20.9	**24.3**	9.6

Participants of this study found the input they had received from current students at Eastern Kentucky University more useful than that of the alumni. Table 4.35 demonstrates the descriptive statistics for this variable where input from students in the program appears at the top with a Mean=3.60.

Table 4.35 Descriptive Statistics: Current/Former Students Input Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Input from students in the program	115	3.60	1.549
Input from EKU alumni	116	3.14	1.486

Aggregation of Significant Others Characteristic Variables

Once frequencies and descriptive statistics of every single item included in 'Part 4' of the survey was calculated and items were ranked within each variable, individual items were grouped to properly represent their pertaining variable. Descriptive statistical analysis including mean comparisons, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were then utilized to establish priorities among the four variables within the significant others characteristic category. Within the significant others characteristic variables, input from former/current students at the university were most important in the respondents' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University (Mean=3.37). Input received from educators in home country was the second most important variable in this category (Mean=3.30). Feedback that friends and family provided followed very closely in the third place (Mean=3.29). Respondents reported that input provided by officials in their home countries had the least impact on their decision to select a college/university (Mean=3.13). Table 4.36 demonstrates the four significant others variables in order of importance in respondents' college choice process.

Table 4.36 Descriptive Statistics: Significant Others Characteristics Variable Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Former and Current EKU Students	115	3.3739	1.37784
Educators from Home Country	114	3.3070	1.40874
Friends and Family	112	3.2902	1.25811
Officials in Home Country	113	3.1357	1.41886

The second section of significant others characteristics asked the respondents to rank from (1) most important to (5) least important the person/persons who had the most influence on their final decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. The purpose of this question was to determine that after evaluating all variables and factors related to college choice, who made the final decision for the student to enroll in this specific university. Table 4.37 illustrates the item frequency and item ranking for this question where rows represent the five influential persons and columns represent the valid percentage of respondents reporting each scale of importance.

Table 4.37 Final Decision-Maker Item Frequency

Item	# Respondents	Most Important Decision-Maker	Important Decision-Maker	Somewhat Important Decision-Maker	Slightly Important Decision-Maker	Least Important Decision-Maker
Yourself	113	**62.8**	24.8	5.3	5.3	1.8
Sponsor (government, university, ministry, embassy, etc.)	113	12.4	27.4	13.3	14.2	32.7
Friends	113	8.8	15.6	28.3	27.4	20.4
Parents	112	6.3	**31.3**	**30.4**	**31.3**	.9
Family/Relatives	111	9.9	1.8	23.4	22.5	**42.3**

A vertical comparison of frequency percentages reveals that 62.8% of students identified themselves as the primary decision-makers in their college choice process. While close to half of respondents (42.3%) ranked family and relatives as the least influential decision-makers, attitudes toward the role of parents were disperse. The influence of parents in students' final college choice ranged from *important* to *slightly important*. While 30.4% of respondents identified their parents' role as *somewhat important* in their final decision, an equal percentage of 31.3% ranked parents as *important* or *slightly important*.

Aggregation of All Characteristic Categories

Previous sections of this chapter discussed the results related to each individual characteristic category i.e. institutional characteristics, program characteristics, marketing and recruitment characteristic, and significant others' characteristics. Priorities within and among variables in each characteristic category were determined through descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, and frequencies. The last section of this chapter will establish international students' priorities among the four characteristic categories. Program characteristics (Mean=3.81), followed very closely by institutional characteristics (Mean=3.80) were recognized to have had the strongest impact on college decision-making process of participants in this study. Marketing and recruitment characteristics with a Mean=3.66 were identified as the third most important characteristics that students considered in selecting a college/university. The lowest Mean of 3.26 belonged to significant others characteristics and was the least important category reported to have influenced students' choice of a regional, rural university. Table 4.38 demonstrates the four characteristics categories in descending order from most influential to least influential in respondents' college decision-making.

Table 4.38 Descriptive Statistics: Characteristics Aggregate Means in Descending Order

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Program Characteristics	109	3.81	1.014
Institutional Characteristics	119	3.80	.83450
Marketing and Recruitment Characteristics	111	3.66	1.01496
Significant Others	106	3.26	1.11684

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the expansion of globalization and internationalization of higher education, applicants who seek tertiary education across borders are no longer passive consumers. They are informed consumers who assess their options and make rational choices of higher education destinations and institutions (Baldwin & James, 2000). Therefore, post-secondary institutions are increasingly facing more complex and more aggressive market structures that threaten the survival of some of the smaller and less competitive institutions, for the latter are now forced to compete with scarce resources for a greater number of prospect candidates (Bowen & Foley, 2002).

Within this context, identification of the factors that potential students may consider in choosing one college/university over another is a matter of importance to university administrators who are concerned with the long-term effectiveness of their institutions' international enrolment practices. Each year resourceful institutions of higher education allocate millions of dollars to recruiting and enrolling more international students. However, many of them fail to develop an accurate profile of prospective students who are most likely to attend their institution, thus wasting their resources. Hence, explicit knowledge of international students' college choice process is a plausible instrument for developing efficient marketing and recruitment strategies (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Plank & Chiagouris, 1997). Furthermore, this information has the potential to be utilized in support of institutional positioning (Maringe, 2006). Positioning is a marketing tool that involves "designing an organization's offering and image so that it occupies a distinct and valued place in the target customer's mind relative to competitive offerings" (Kerin

& Peterson, 2001, p.711). Positioning in the higher education sector requires an institution to effectively present its image and develop its position in the minds of the public (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). In short, the very essence of institutional positioning is to differentiate itself from competitors with the intent of maximizing the effective use of limited resources. Insight into international students' college choice characteristics allows institutions to identify and target students whose profile fit well with the institution's specific recruitment and marketing practices. This would give them an edge over their competitors in attracting, admitting, and ultimately enrolling prospective candidates.

The objective of this study was to identify those factors that international students regarded as most influential in their decision to attend a rural, regional university. More specifically, the study evaluated students' priorities within and among four categories of characteristics, namely, institutional characteristics, program characteristics, marketing and recruitment characteristics, and significant other characteristics. Since students are the primary consumers and stakeholders of higher education, this study considered the college choice behavior of individual student as the unit of analysis. Understanding the factors relevant to international students in their college decision-making process can assist colleges/universities in aligning their recruitment and marketing strategies to those factors. Although the value of this study will somewhat depend on institutions' approach to the recruitment and enrollment of international students, findings and implications of this study would be beneficial to all education practitioners, particularly recruitment administrators who are interested in increasing their international enrollment.

Discussion of the Results

Selection of a suitable higher education institution is a very significant and expensive decision that students and their families commit to (Mazzarol, 1998). In order to make a sound decision, prospective students set priorities and make a trade-off among exiting attributes of an institution accordingly (Soutar & Turner, 2002). Unlike domestic students, variables that influence international students' decision-making extend beyond the typical indicators presented in the college choice literature of the United States (e.g. gender, race, socioeconomic status, parents' education level, college readiness, etc.). International students' decision-making process has a unique set of influencing factors.

The college choice characteristics covered in this study comprised of a range of such factors that were combined to address institutional, program, marketing/recruitment, and significant others characteristics. As the results of this study indicate, the most important factors in the college choice process are primarily associated with program characteristics. This finding is consistent with Hooley and Lynch (1981) and Gatfield, Barker, and Graham (1999) whose analyses showed that program suitability was the most important factor in international students' college choice process. Among the elements that evaluated program characteristics, academic reputation and individualized faculty attention were profound variables in students' choice of their host institution. This supports Zikopoulos and Barber (1986), Terkla (1988), White and Hernandez (1990), Waters (1992), Richardson and Stacey (1993), Webb (1996), Poock (1997), Kemp et al., (1998), Poock (1999), Conard and Conard (2001), Doorbar (2001), Taylor (2001), and Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) that all aspects of reputation – program, institutional, and faculty- are predictive factors in college choice. Similar to Kim's (2001) study,

considerations such as duration of the degree course, flexibility of program requirements, and variety of programs/course offerings were also identified as significant factors within the program characteristics category. Comparably, Vaughn et al. (1978) ranked the variety of programs/courses as the sixth most important criterion for institution selection amongst sixteen choice criteria. Given that Eastern Kentucky University offers several well-accredited programs that are not commonly found at other colleges/universities, this ranking was predictable. Fire Protection & Safety Engineering Technology, Safety, Security & Emergency Management, and Emergency Medical Care are examples of programs that are heavily populated by international students at Eastern Kentucky University. This implies that prospective students convert their knowledge of offered programs into a priority when choosing to attend a particular college/university.

In rating the characteristics that influence international students' college choice, institutional attributes followed very closely. Variables that measured the institutional characteristic category in this study were cost of attendance, admission standards, reputation of the institution, and location. The significance of these variables in participants' decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University were in the above mentioned order from most important to least important. This study confirmed the previously identified eminence of financial considerations in the college choice process. Zikopoulos and Barber (1986), Kallio (1995), Moogan et al. (1999), Bourke (2000), Conard and Conard (2000), Joseph and Joseph (2000), and Doorbar (2001) all discerned cost factors as an important influence on college decision-making. Stewart and Felicetti (1991) and Kim (2001) concluded that international students are motivated by the moderate costs of attendance (i.e. tuition and fees) at public or state colleges/universities. A similar

rationalization applied to students who chose to attend a regional, rural institution. This is also pertinent to the extended costs of international education including living expenses. It is safe to say that costs of accommodation, food, transportation, fuel, clothing, etc. compare favorably in regional and rural areas against their urban and metropolitan competitors.

Another element of the cost variable was the importance of availability of scholarship/financial aid. Unlike many studies that found this to be a major factor in students' college selection (e.g. Waters, 1992; Webb, 1993; Kim, 2001), participants in this study ranked availability of scholarship/financial aid-whether offered by the host institution or by sponsors-towards the bottom of the list. One explanation may be that scholarships/financial aids are mostly offered to students at the graduate level in the form of assistantships, grants, or internships. Given that nearly 65% of the sample for this study were undergraduate students, such ranking is justified. Moreover, about 54.4% reported that they had offers of scholarship/financial aid from/for other institutions as well. Therefore, this factor alone was not a determinant of their college selection.

Participants ranked the university's relatively low admission standards (including English proficiency requirements) and its high acceptance rate as the second most important institutional variable to have affected their choice to attend Eastern Kentucky University. This is consistent with Sultana and Smith (2011) in their evaluation of international students' perceptions of Eastern Kentucky University. Nonetheless, from the 62 respondents to the question, 50 indicated that Eastern Kentucky University was their first or second choice when applying to colleges/universities in the United States. This finding suggests that international students tend to protect their investments by

securing their chances of admission. Investments of capital into the college choice process primarily reflect time and money (McDonough, 1997).

Many studies over the past fifty years have identified the prestige of a college/ university as the key factor in students' choice of their host institutions (e.g. Bowers & Pugh, 1973; Hossler et al., 1989; Lawrence, 1997; Moogan et al., 1999; Poock & Love, 2001). In this study, the significance of institutional reputation was ranked fairly low among the institutional characteristic variables. One reason for this deviation may be that reputation of the institution and reputation of the programs were separately addressed in the survey. While academic reputation of the programs ranked very highly among the college choice factors, reputation of the institution did not. This finding suggests that international students who consider attending a rural, regional university are more concerned about the academic reputation of their desired program rather than the commercialized prestige of the institution. Nevertheless, there was a significant consensus that academic quality was important. Such assertion is congruent with Kemp et al. (1998), Joseph and Joseph (2000), Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), and Smith et al. (2002) findings that the quality of education offered by institutions was very influential in students' college decision-making.

The third set of characteristics found to have influenced international students' choice of a rural, regional university was recruitment and marketing characteristics. Simplicity and efficiency of the university's admission process and procedures were ranked as the most persuasive factors within this category. In the same vein, Mortimer (1997) and Kim (2001) support the perception that a timely admission process inclines international students to select a specific institution.

Competency and attitudes of the service sector personnel (i.e. international student services staff, faculty, admission office staff) were also highlighted among the factors that could enhance or diminish students' desire to attend an institution. This finding advocates the importance of personal communication between prospective students and the institution. Zikopoulos and Barber (1986) argued that since overseas students are typically unfamiliar with the educational system in the United States and often don't have access to sources that appropriately answer their particular questions, they frequently experience difficulties during the admission process. Therefore, personal contact with expert and dedicated school personnel who would guide them through the process is of utmost importance.

Additionally, establishing a friendly relationship with prospective students and providing them with personalized information leaves a pleasant first impression that can greatly motivate individuals to select a college/university over competing institutions. Extending the international student services and increasing the involvement of university faculty and staff in reaching out to prospective students, however costly and labor-intensive, is beneficial to institutions' recruitment practices (Hossler, 1991).

Significant others' influence on students' college decision-making was ranked last among the four set of characteristics investigated in this study. Yet, the importance of input from current/former students at the institution was profound in the findings. Accordingly, this study supports the findings of numerous other studies that word of mouth is one of the most powerful promotional tools for institutions of higher education. Stewart and Felicetti (1991), Moogan et al. (1999), Bourke (2000), Zeszortarski (2003), Doku (2007), Hamrick (2007), Lee (2008), Bodycott (2009), Ottinger (2009), Bohman

(2010), and Sultana and Smith (2011) all acknowledged that recommendations of significant others can play a considerable role in international students' choice of an institution. The importance of word of mouth is especially crucial to those institutions that do not actively recruit overseas or do not have the resources to organize sophisticated international campaigns. For such institutions, a strong international student network comprised of alumni and enrolled students would be a valuable source of referral that competitors could not easily emulate. However, institutions must be cautious of the damaging impacts of negative word of mouth as well. In view of the fact that current/former students' input was rated so highly within the significant others' characteristics, it is worthwhile for institutions to evaluate their current students' educational experiences, which will determine what they say to others when they return home. It is clear that if enrolled students are satisfied with their college/university experience, the chances for positive word of mouth advertising will increase.

All and all, after taking all factors and variables into consideration, the majority of participants in this study identified themselves as the ultimate decision-makers in their college choice process which is in accordance with Shinn, Welch, and Bagnall (1999) who concluded that enrollment decisions are primarily made by individuals and their families and only indirectly affected by governments, sponsors, and aid agencies.

Implications of the Study

The process of selecting a college/university is a progressive and interactive continuum between prospective students and institutions of higher education. The college choice decision will ultimately depend on how closely students' needs, perceptions, and preferences match the attributes of an institution (Campbell, 1977). Hence, it is important

for institutions of higher education to examine prospective students' decision-making process in order to adequately fulfill those acclaimed college choice factors.

Patterns of international student mobility and the surge of higher education rankings worldwide are evidence that students are increasingly selecting their host institutions based on the quality of education offered. In this sense, colleges/universities are becoming more sensitive to external perceptions and aspire to promote their quality faculty and academic success. Given that program reputation was the highest ranked factor in students' college choice decision, utilizing reputation elements (e.g. academic quality, faculty accreditations, variety/flexibility of courses, and academic facilities, etc.) in institutional marketing/recruitment practices is advocated by this study.

Financial considerations were also repeatedly mentioned as a pivotal criterion in screening out the college choice set. As the costs associated with international education increase, it is only natural that the proportion of international students choosing to enroll in moderately priced institutions would grow over time. Therefore, in order to attract more international students, institutions of higher education must maintain their lower tuition fees and/or make financial aid more available to international students.

Although institutional characteristics of this sort are most salient in attracting prospective students, they are not as compelling in isolation from effective marketing and recruitment practices. As Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) argued, product and promotion variables have significant influence on choice. The fact that marketing and recruitment characteristics were ranked somewhat low in this study implies that Eastern Kentucky University's marketing and recruitment practices are not the institution's strongest suit.

For international students interested in applying to Eastern Kentucky University, the opportunity for a campus visit or even a face-to-face meeting with a campus representative [in their home country] prior to admission is virtually non-existent. It is not surprising then that students put very weak emphasis on the input received from campus visits and/or university agents in their home country prior to application. Consequently, one may assume that the university would increase its efforts in making other sources of information more available to prospective students overseas. However, this was not the case as students attached more significance to rankings and guidebooks about colleges/universities in the United States [in general] than to publications directly from the university (e.g. university catalogs, brochures, etc.). Lack of thorough information on the university can have a detrimental effect on students' choice. Therefore, it is important for institutions to properly communicate and promote their salient institutional and disciplinary advantages. Doing so will infuse students with a sense of approval about the university and its attributions in a way that they may not otherwise be achieved. Needless to say, institutions must ensure that their communicated image correspond to reality. If there is a mismatch between what students are promised and what they experience once enrolled, chances are they would drop out or transfer to a different institution (Campbell, 1977). In that case, the risk of negative word of mouth will rise which in turn could severely hinder future recruitment efforts [as previously discussed].

It is worth noting that although the influence of significant others was found to be somewhat weak in this study, recommendations and input from family, former educators, and officials in home country affect the college choice of prospective students to an

extent. Therefore, informing this group of individuals about the college/university would assist in new student recruitment as well.

Recommendations for Practitioners

According to Open Doors (2013), the number one reason for growth in international enrollments is the increased recruitment efforts on the part of institutions of higher education. Effective marketing and recruitment practices account for about 70% of the driving force behind the recent ascends in international student numbers in the United States. On the other hand, students are becoming more and more critical and analytical in their college decision-making process. This presents a challenge to institutions of higher education to strategically position their unique selling points in a way that would distinguish them from competition while considering the factors that matter most to the prospective students (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003). Following are a number of suggestions oriented around Eastern Kentucky University's strongest suits (most influential factors) and weakest suits (least influential factors) as found by this study. These suggestions may be useful in improving institutional marketing/recruitment practices aimed at attracting more international students.

Provide comprehensive information to the market- To secure their inclusion in prospective students' college choice set, institutions ought to provide as much information as possible as early as possible (Mortimer, 1997). Today, savvy students and families seek information from various sources such as social media, specialized guidebooks, and college-ranking publications. However, as previously mentioned, students tend to consider the information provided by the specific college/university most reliable.

As financial resources tighten, it becomes more important for institutions to utilize cost-effective outlets to promote their services to all ends of the globe. The expansion of the Internet has allowed even those institutions with the most modest resources to have an active presence in the international education market. The college/university's website is the main online source for obtaining official and accurate information for students (Gomes & Murphy, 2003). Therefore, a well-designed website that includes information specific to international students would be a valuable tool for communicating with potential students worldwide. Oftentimes, university websites contain only general information on the institution. Since most international students are unfamiliar with higher education dynamics in the host country, it is important that university websites also include detailed information on the educational structure such as enrollment procedures, test requirements, definition of educational terms (credit hour, placement test, general Ed courses, etc.), as well as links to related immigration websites. Including virtual tours, videos about on/off campus life, campus location, and the community are also useful in helping students picture what their "everyday life" would look like if they decide to enroll. Current international students may be recruited to help develop these videos; they can give testimonials about their experiences at the institution or even translate the information to different languages. A step further may be setting up an interactive guide such as a "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQS)" section or a "Q & A" session with faculty and staff. Official websites are not the only online platform that colleges/universities can promote their institution. Social media (e.g. LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, etc.) are powerful platforms that institutions may utilize to reach out to prospective students.

Although the Internet is a popular and cost-effective platform, there are still many countries in which access to the Internet is quite limited and problematic. Therefore, colleges/universities should consider diverse outlets for disseminating and promoting their institution. Modified catalogs and brochures specifically targeted at international students, college fairs, receptions and seminars, and recruitment tours are a few examples. By maximizing their accessibility, colleges/universities would have a better chance to introduce their institution not only to prospective students but also to educators and officials in other countries. In doing so, institutions must promote their unique attributions (e.g. lower costs) and highlight their blessings in disguise. For example, although regional, rural schools do not have the advantage to use social/recreational features as their selling point [as much], they can emphasize the factors that students do value in such environments such as campus safety, low crime rates, quiet and studious atmosphere, and scenery attractions.

Expand the market- Every year, the Institute of International Education (IIE) and the Association of International Educators (NAFSA) publish reports on what countries export the most international students and where the most growth comes from. In order to optimize their resource allocation, colleges/universities can use this information to focus their primary recruitment efforts in such regions/countries. However, whereas academic characteristics are more uniformly influential across various groups of prospective students, effective marketing techniques and specific recruitment strategies vary greatly from region to region (Kim, 2001). Thus, institutions of higher education must identify their target sectors of prospective international students and continuously evaluate their marketing/recruitment practices in terms of influencing factors among various groups of

students. A precise definition of potential students and their location will help institutions to successfully achieve their international enrollment goals. The informative materials (e.g. brochures, catalogs, etc.) can be routinely modified to synchronize with the specific recruitment strategies employed in a particular region or country.

An additional benefit to expanding the market to different regions/countries is in regards to the diversity and quality of the student body. If institutions enroll too many students from the same region/country, there is a risk that fellow international students would associate more closely and may be less likely to associate with their American classmates or other international students. This would detract from the goal of cross-cultural learning for both international and domestic students.

Listen to the market- In deciding which college/university to attend, more and more students are considering specialty programs and quality educational courses ahead of the institution's general reputation (Kim, 2001). If an institution offers distinctive programs for high demand occupations in a certain region/country, it is natural that they would attract more students from that region/country. Thus, developing programs that are desirable and fit the needs of different national groups may be helpful in increasing recruitment from various markets. Today, institutions can take advantage of the fact that international education is no longer limited to pursuing a four-year degree program in another country; dual degree programs, short-term certifications, open-access educational resources, physical or virtual branch campuses, and distant learning through online programs are all developing channels through which institutions can increase student mobility.

It is noteworthy that the growing quality competition between institutions has created a favorable environment for prospective international students to consult college/university rankings as a proxy for identifying academic quality of an institution. While more prestigious institutions vie for higher ranks, more obscure and smaller institutions are content with gaining a mention on the list. Regardless, colleges/universities should strive to maintain and upgrade their academic standing and infrastructure and improve their quality management techniques to convey a stronger quality image (Ford, Joseph, & Joseph, 1999).

Network within the market- All institutions, irrespective of their financial resources, are constrained by limits on time and personnel. By entering a consortium, colleges/universities can expand their international outreach without a significant increase in expenditures. Developing new partnerships, and strengthening existing ones, can pave the way to increasing international enrollment. The Association of International Educators (NAFSA), the Institute of International Education (IIE), and EducationUSA are few of many organizations that assist in providing international students with accurate, comprehensive, and up to date information about applying to accredited American colleges/universities. Several of such organizations collaborate with higher education professionals in support of their international student recruitment practices. Conferences, seminars, and events hosted by the Council of International Schools (CIS) and the Overseas Association for College Admission Counseling (OACAC), and various regional consortia (details maintained by the U.S. Department of Commerce) are among the many venues where institution representatives can meet and develop relationships with dedicated professionals in and outside of the country to share expertise with, and

extend their global outreach. Community colleges are another valuable venue for recruiting international students. At present, nearly 87,000 international students in the United States are studying at the associate degree level or in non-degree programs at community colleges (Open Doors, 2013). Through partnering with community colleges, universities can enhance the transfer of international students to their institution.

Be actively present in the market- In recent years, an entire industry of international education recruiting services and agents in prospective students' home countries has developed. Campus agents/representatives can provide more assistance and better connect students to the institution than any other source. In many cases, a face-to-face interaction with a college/university representative can significantly contribute to the likelihood that a potential student would progress through the application process and eventually enroll at the institution (Maslen, 1997).

With all said, appropriate marketing and recruitment approaches are only the first step in serving the international student population. As Lee (2010) declares, it is one thing to be successful in recruiting international students and it is another thing to be successful in giving them a pleasant experience. Students' satisfaction depends on the match between their expectations and their perceptions of the performance quality i.e. their actual experience at the college/university (Anderson & Sullivan, 1993). In essence, if institutions of higher education want to keep their students satisfied, they must continue to provide quality services (educational and support services) post-enrollment. For example, once international students arrive, colleges/universities have a responsibility to accommodate the unique needs of this group of students on campus. There should be support programs and services in place to assist international students overcome culture

shock/homesickness and adjust to the host country's educational system/social structure. Investigating international students' experiences and perceptions post-arrival was not in the scopes of this study and requires supplementary research.

To conclude, "the marketing concept holds that the key to achieving organizational goals consists in determining the needs and wants of target markets and delivering the desired satisfaction more effectively and efficiently than competitors"(Kotler, 1967, p.22).

Further Research

Based on the limitations of the present study, the following suggestions are put forward to be considered in future research. First, obtaining data from a larger sample size, possibly from multiple institutions, will add value to the findings of a similar study. A larger sample size is likely to allow for disaggregation of the results by participants' demographic characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc. Such research would help in recognizing the differences between college choice factors of international students based on their demographic characteristics which has the potential to foster an understanding of how individual students' characteristics affect the relative value they place on various college decision factors. Secondly, all participants in this study were currently enrolled international students who had already been attending the institution, some as long as six years. Findings of a similar study may be more representative of true attitudes and perceptions of participants if data were collected before or immediately after the students enroll in a higher education institution. Finally, conducting an in-depth qualitative study may allow for a deeper insight into international students' college choice process and factors that influence their decision-making.

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APPENDIX A: Invitation to Participate in the Study

I, Mahsa Abdolalizadeh, am a doctoral candidate of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies at Eastern Kentucky University. Currently, I am conducting a research on factors that influence international students' choice to attend Eastern Kentucky University. Hereby, I invite you to participate in my study.

The survey, available by clicking on the hyperlink provided at the bottom of this page, asks you to respond to statements regarding factors that influenced your decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. The survey takes approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Please note: Participants must be international students at Eastern Kentucky University and 18 years or older to be eligible to take part in this study. Participation is voluntary and anonymous. All collected information will remain confidential and will not be shared with any third parties. The results of this study will be reported in group format. There are no known risks associated with your participation in this study and participation will not affect your grades or academic standing in any way.

By completing the survey, you agree to participate in the study. You may withdraw from participation at any time before submitting the survey and no results will be recorded.

Your cooperation may assist Eastern Kentucky University and other institutions in their mission to better serve the needs of prospective international students.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at mahsa_abdolalizad@eku.edu with any questions or concerns.

Your participation is highly appreciated.

APPENDIX B: Influential Factors in International Students' College Choice Survey

Part 1: Institutional Characteristics

In deciding to attend Eastern Kentucky University, how important were the following institutional characteristics?

	1 Not Important At All	**2** Slightly Important	**3** Neutral	**4** Important	**5** Very Important	**6** Essential
Academic reputation of the University						
Academic reputation of the faculty at the University						
Research opportunities						
Academic quality						
High acceptance rate of the University						
Admission standards, including English language proficiency requirements						
Location in the United States						
Exciting place to live						
Quiet and studious environment						
Safe (low crime) environment						
Cost, including tuition and fees						
Availability of on-campus housing						
Affordability of living expenses						
Availability of scholarship/financial aid from EKU, including athletic and/or academic scholarships						
Availability of scholarship/financial aid from home country, including athletic and/or academic scholarships						
Size of the University						
Physical attractiveness of campus						
Library facilities and collection						
Established population of international students						
Other (specify) ----------						

(Continued)

Part 2: Program Characteristics

In deciding to attend Eastern Kentucky University, how important were the following program characteristics?

	1 Not Important At All	**2** Slightly Important	**3** Neutral	**4** Important	**5** Very Important	**6** Essential
Academic reputation of program						
Academic reputation of faculty in program						
Friendliness of department faculty						
Friendliness of department staff						
Program admission standards						
Opportunity for internship/assistantship						
Availability of scholarship/financial aid for a specific program (from home country)						
Program offered scholarship/financial aid (from EKU)						
Flexible program requirements						
Flexible course offerings						
Small class size						
Size of department						
Time required to complete program						
Other (specify) ----------						

(Continued)

Part 3: Marketing & Recruitment Characteristics

In deciding to attend Eastern Kentucky University, how important were the following marketing/recruitment characteristics?

	1 Not Important At All	**2** Slightly Important	**3** Neutral	**4** Important	**5** Very Important	**6** Essential
Catalogs from the University						
Website of the University						
Campus visits						
Meeting with a university representative/agent in home country						
Read information about EKU in a guidebook about universities in the U.S.						
Saw EKU on a list of university rankings						
University admission personnel were helpful and attentive						
University international office (CIE) personnel were helpful and attentive						
University faculty were helpful and attentive						
Simple admission process						
Timely admission process						
Availability of online application						
EKU was the first university to process and mail visa documents						
Other (specify) ----------						

(Continued)

Part 4: Significant Others' Characteristics

In deciding to attend Eastern Kentucky University, how important were the following characteristics of significant others?

	1 Not Important At All	**2** Slightly Important	**3** Neutral	**4** Important	**5** Very Important	**6** Essential
Input from EKU alumni						
Input from parents						
Input from family/friends in home country						
Input from family/friends in the U.S.						
Input from students in the program						
Input from former teachers/faculty						
Input from advisor/counselor						
Input from embassy/consulate						
Input from sponsor						
Input from the Ministry of Education in home country						
Presence of family/friends/spouse at EKU						
Other (specify) ----------						

Rank from most important to least important, who had the most influence on your final decision to attend Eastern Kentucky University. (1. Most Important, 2. Important, 3. Somewhat Important, 4. Slightly Important, 5. Least Important).
For example: If your friend was the most influential person in your final decision to attend EKU then Friends =1 and if your parents were most influential in your final decision to attend EKU then Parents =1. **Please use each number only ONCE.**

Yourself

Sponsor (government, university, ministry, embassy, other)

Friends

Parents

Family/relatives

(Continued)

Part 5: Student Characteristics

Please answer the following demographic questions.

What is your gender?

Male Female

How old are you?

Age:

Where are you from?

Country of Citizenship:

What program are you in?

Program:

Are you a (n)

Undergraduate Graduate

How many U.S. colleges/universities did you apply to?

How many U.S. colleges/universities were you accepted to?

Please list the top 5 colleges/universities which you applied to in order of preference.

Did you have scholarship/financial aid available for other colleges/universities which you applied to?

How long have you been at EKU?

(End of Survey)