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### Influencing College Choice: Enrollment Factors for International Students at a Private Research University in the Northeast

Erin Slocum

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Influencing College Choice: Enrollment Factors for  
International Students at a Private Research University in the Northeast

Erin Slocum

PIM 78

A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts in  
International Education at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

May 4, 2020

Advisor: Dr. Alla Korzh

## INFLUENCING COLLEGE CHOICE

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand the factors that influence international students' decisions to enroll at a private research university in the Northeast. Through interviews with current students and staff members at the university, the study gathered data about trends in enrollment, how students learned about the university, obstacles faced by international students in the application process, and finally what factors were most important in their enrollment decisions. The most important factors in an international student's decision to enroll in the university were cost, environment, and recommendations. Due to the limited diversity in the demographics of the student participants, there is room for further research to reveal how the factors may differ for different groups of international students.

*Keywords:* admissions, enrollment management, international students, international education, higher education

### **Learning Objectives**

I had several learning objectives for my Independent Practitioner Inquiry Capstone. As a student and learner, I hoped to increase my research and analytic skills through this project. As a practitioner in the field of international education, I aimed to focus on how college choice is different for international students studying in the United States as compared to their domestic peers. Lastly, I hoped to provide useful findings on this process that can influence recruitment strategy for the international team at the Office of Undergraduate Admissions.

### **Introduction**

In the United States, while there is general support for the mission of education as a public good, many aspects of the field are subject to criticism from different parties. Recently, higher education, in particular, has endured numerous scandals that have divided the nation. Concerns about freedom of speech, incidents of sexual harassment and assault, rising tuition costs, unmanageable student debt and even cases of admissions fraud have all made national and local headlines in recent years. Issues have crossed international borders as well, as international students are denied entry into the United States because of travel bans or visa denials. Institutes of higher education throughout the United States are searching for ways to remain relevant in this tumultuous environment, while still espousing core values, balancing budgets, and recruiting new students.

In addition, for the first time in decades, enrollment in higher education in the United States has declined for both domestic and international students (NCED, 2017). For colleges to continue operating, educating students, and performing research, admissions offices must find new ways to not only recruit students, but to enroll them. There are some universities that have

not yet been affected by these national enrollment trends. Contrary to these national trends, the private research university located in the Northeast has seen an increase in overall enrollment numbers and a marked increase in the enrollment of international students in recent years (Barta et al., 2015). It leads the nation in the percentage of international students in the undergraduate student body (U.S. News & World Reports, 2019a). What has caused the increases in enrollment at this research university? How can the university sustain its current enrollment rate given national and international trends and scandals? Why is the university so attractive to international students as compared to peer institutions? The university must investigate the decision-making process of current international students in order to address these questions and sustain a healthy student enrollment each year. Thus, this research study was guided by the following research question: From the perspectives of current international students and university staff, what are the most important factors in international student college choice and in the ultimate decision to enroll at a private research university located in the Northeast?

This study reveals important insights into international student choice, which will allow staff at the university to create admissions and enrollment strategies based on student data. The findings will help staff better recruit and support international students and will ultimately promote the enrollment of a healthy and sustainable international student population at the university despite national declining enrollments in the field of higher education.

Professional staff in university undergraduate admission offices are responsible for bringing in an incoming class of students to campus each academic year regardless of international policy changes, national scandals, or local issues. Admissions officers must uphold institutional priorities while finding enough appropriate students for their school. The

responsibilities of a college admissions officer can be broken down into three main divisions: recruitment, admissions, and enrollment. Admissions officers have control in recruitment and admissions. They decide where to recruit, which regions and high schools to prioritize and which college fairs to attend. During the application review process, they ultimately decide which students should be admitted, waitlisted, or denied. Enrollment, however, is different. While admissions officers may develop creative methods to encourage students to enroll in their institutions once admitted, they have no control over a student's final decision. Admitted students must evaluate important factors about each school they were admitted to, and decide where they would like to enroll and attend college. Thus, it is important in the field of college admissions and enrollment management to understand the student decision-making process for college selection. Having a better understanding of why and how students make decisions about college allows college administrators and admissions officers to make changes to content or process to influence enrollment decisions.

The conceptual framework for this study is built on current literature regarding college choice. In researching college choice for domestic students enrolled in higher education in the United States, both Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Paulsen (1990) developed useful models. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) developed a three-stage model for describing the college choice process: developing an interest, finding information, and making a choice. Paulsen (1990) identified three categories of influencing factors: sociological, psychological and economic. Hossler and Gallagher and Paulsen's models have been widely applied in further research with students in the United States and will be utilized in this study as well. However, since this research study examines college choice specifically in international students, another framework

is used as well. The work of Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) is extensive and has also served as the framework for much work in the field of international college choice. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) created a three-stage model that incorporates push and pull factors for international students deciding to study abroad, selecting a host country and finally, choosing an institution. In their work with international students studying in Australian universities, they identified six key factors that influence college choice. My conceptual framework builds on the research of Hossler and Gallagher (1987), Paulsen (1990), and Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), and will be further detailed in the subsequent section.

In the literature review, I compare domestic and international student enrollment trends over time in the United States. This helps to contextualize the changing landscape of higher education and enrollment management and provides further rationale for this study. Next, I present the unique aspects of the research university to situate the larger topic into the specific context of the research question and highlight how the university and its international students may be different from universities or students used in previous studies. After the literature review, I discuss my research design and methodology. I justify the use of focus group and individual interviews and outline the ethics of the research study including risks, benefits, informed consent, privacy, anonymity of participants, and confidentiality of data. I define my positionality, as well as the delimitations and limitations of this study. I then present my findings from the interview data and provide conclusions that incorporate applicability of findings and recommendations for further research.

### **Literature Review**

While there are many factors that influence one student's decision to enroll in one college versus another, it is helpful to situate this individual experience in educational theories and in the larger societal context of national and international trends. Statistics on national enrollment and international student mobility offer insights into macro-level trends and the larger context within which individual students are making their choices. Conceptual frameworks for both domestic and international students help to explain why students are motivated to pursue bachelor's degrees and enroll in specific institutions of higher education.

### **Enrollment Trends**

Analyzing enrollment trends in institutions of higher education in the United States helps to provide context and significance to the research questions. Enrollment in post-secondary institutions in the United States steadily rose for 40 years starting in 1970. However, in a recent shift in trends, enrollments have started to decline for the first time (NECD, 2017). From 2010 to 2015, there was a 5% decrease in the number of students who enrolled in U.S. undergraduate degree granting programs (NECD, 2017). New data shows that the decline has persisted from 2015 to 2019 (National Student Clearinghouse, 2019). Estimated national enrollment in two and four-year institutions in the United States dropped from approximately 20.56 million students in 2011 to 18.24 million students in 2019 (National Student Clearinghouse, 2019). Experts say that a declining birth rate in the United States may be one relevant factor resulting in fewer students graduating from high school and fewer students enrolling in college (Greene, 2018). Other researchers point to the rising cost of a college education, the strong economy in the United States, and low unemployment rates for reasons why eligible students might be opting out of

college (King, 2019). This data suggests that colleges need to seek out additional students to recruit for higher education to make up for this decline in overall student enrollment across the nation.

There have also been recent shifts in the funding structure for higher education in the United States. Historically, state governments provided a larger share of funding to higher education institutions than the federal government (Stauffer et al., 2019). The federal government allocates funding to research projects or individual students through need-based grant and financial aid programs, whereas the state money is used for general operations (Stauffer et al., 2019). After the Great Recession in 2008, there were massive cuts to government funding of public colleges and universities at the state level; for example, in 2018, state funding for higher education was \$7 billion less than 2008 levels (Mitchell et al., 2008). In response to the cuts, universities increased tuition fees, laid off faculty, and reduced student services on campus (Mitchell et al., 2008). These funding changes, coupled with declining student enrollment, have caused major financial issues at universities and colleges across the United States, which further fuels competition for more tuition revenue from fewer available students.

In contrast to recent declines in domestic enrollment, the number of international students studying in the United States has been steadily increasing for the past several decades. In 1977, there were approximately 200,000 international students in the United States at all degree levels, compared to just over one million students in 2017 (IIE, 2018a; IIE, 2018b). In addition to absolute numbers, the proportion of international students to the overall number of students in higher education has increased from 3.3% in 2006 to 5.5% in 2017 (IIE, 2018a). This increase in international students studying in the United States matches international student mobility trends.

From 2001 to 2017, the number of students studying outside their home country at university doubled from 2.1 million to 4.6 million students (IIE, 2018 March). While there were many changes in host country destinations, the United States remained the top destination losing a share of just 4% of students in that time (IIE, 2018 March). In 2017, almost one quarter of internationally mobile students chose to attend college in the United States, which is more than double that of the next most popular host country, the United Kingdom (IIE, 2018 March). While there are increasing numbers of possible destinations for those students seeking higher education abroad and increased competition for these globally mobile students, the United States remains a top receiving nation for international students pursuing higher education abroad. Among international students studying in the United States, the top five sending countries in 2017 were China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Canada, and 56% of students are studying engineering, business, math, or computer science (IIE, 2018a).

Despite decades of steady incline in the numbers of international students studying in the United States, there has been a recent decline. For three years in a row, the overall number of new international students enrolled at post-secondary institutions in the United States decreased (Redden, 2019). Some researchers attribute the decline to the current administration in the United States (Leiber, 2019), while others cite increasing tuition costs (Cooper, 2018), or increased global competition for internationally mobile students (Moody, 2019). The decline first occurred in the 2016-2017 academic year and has continued since then. The decrease has slowed from 7% to 3%, and finally 1% for the 2018-2019 academic year.

Enrollment in higher education in the United States is declining for both domestic and international student populations at the national level. While the university in this study has not

yet seen a decline in enrollment it is still imperative for them and universities throughout the United States to understand the process of college choice in order to remain successful as an institution of higher education. There has been much research on models of choice in both domestic and international students, and which will be discussed in the conceptual framework of this study.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### **Models of College Choice**

Before a student can choose which college to attend, they must make the decision to go to college. There are many reasons why a student chooses to attend college that include both educational and non-educational factors. The Common Application, a third-party application vendor, cites exploring curiosity, becoming purposeful, and exceeding potential as a few reasons to pursue a college degree (Common Application, n.d.). In national surveys administered through the U.S. Department of Education, there is evidence to suggest that both personal and parental expectations play a role in encouraging students to pursue higher education. In a longitudinal study of high school juniors and their parents, two-thirds of parents expected their student to attain at least a bachelor's degree and 62% of students expected the same (NECD, 2019). Five mainstream arguments for college have been summarized as learning in a rigorous and supportive environment, socializing and making friends, earning status, going through a process of self-discovery, and obtaining a degree that will increase future earning potential (Epstein Ojalvo, 2012).

Moving deeper than colloquial arguments, many researchers have examined college choice. Reviewing the literature on the subject, the process of selecting a college is complicated

and starts far before a student's senior year of high school. Bergerson (2009) defined college choice as the process of deciding "whether and where to go to college" (p. 2). Understanding college choice has become increasingly important in the field of higher education, and starting in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it has been researched from numerous perspectives both in the United States and abroad. The body of literature stems mainly from research by Paulsen (1990) on American students that demonstrates that there are three main categories of factors that influence a student's college choice. The categories are broken down into sociological, psychological, and economic factors and much further research has been done using these perspectives as conceptual frames.

Sociological factors focus on the status attainment aspect of going to college. Research from this perspective focuses on characteristics of a student's individual background such as socioeconomic status, race, parents' education and expectations, and high school curriculum that may influence whether and where to go to college (Bergerson, 2009; Paulsen, 1990). The psychological perspective shifts focus from the student to the institution (Paulsen, 1990). Research studies from this perspective look at a university's institutional characteristics such as academic programs, size, location, cost, financial aid, and how those affect student decision making (Bergerson, 2009). Lastly, the economic perspective focuses on financial factors and views education as an investment decision (Paulsen, 1990). Research from this perspective examines the student's cost benefit analysis including actual costs, foregone earnings and the perceived return on investment of a college degree (Bergerson, 2009; Iloh, 2018; Paulsen, 1990). It is important to note, that while the perspectives are separated into categories, they may interact with each other in different ways in an individual student's decision-making process.

While numerous models have developed from these theoretical perspectives, Hossler and Gallagher's model of college choice (1987) has been particularly influential in the field of college enrollment. This three-stage model proposes that the timeline may start in middle school and extend until college enrollment, and it identifies three phases in the process. College choice is seen as a three-step process where students develop an interest in attending college, search for information, and make a final choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). College enrollment professionals then can influence this process through the type and quality of information that is available regarding their institution.

Further research in college choice moves beyond a model of the overall process and analyzes the decision-making process of selecting which college to attend among many options. The U.S. Department of Education found three main influencing factors in a national survey. More than 70% of surveyed students rated academic quality or reputation of the institution, the presence of a desired program of study, and job placement as all very important in the college selection process (NECD, 2018). Another study of students and school counselors found influences including desired program availability, reputation, location and size, as well as recommendations from parents and school counselors (Erdmann, 1983). Numerous other studies cite the influential role of parents (Huntington-Klein, 2018) and school counselors (Clayton, 2019; Hossler, 1999; McDonough, 1997) on college choice across varying high school contexts in the United States. The theories and research presented so far are useful in explaining decisions of "traditional students" in the United States, or those students who enter college directly after high school and attend four-year residential institutions (Iloh, 2018). It is necessary to look at

further research that examines college choice in international students pursuing higher education abroad.

### **Push-Pull Model for International Students**

The studies mentioned so far address college choice in the context of the secondary and post-secondary education system in the United States; however, they fail to address the decision-making process of international students who are pursuing higher education in the United States. My study builds on the seminal work by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) and Alfattal (2017) that examined the college search and selection process for international students pursuing higher education outside their home countries.

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) developed a three-stage process to examine the process for international students intending to attend college outside their home country. Mazzarol and Soutar's model (2002) for international students is similar to Hossler and Gallagher's model of college choice (1987) as they both define three stages in the college search and selection process. However, the first two stages of the Hossler and Gallagher model, developing an interest in attending college and searching for information, are assumed in the Mazzarol and Soutar model. Mazzarol and Soutar instead, take the third stage of the Hossler and Gallagher model, break it down further, and apply it to the international student context. The three stages in the Mazzarol and Soutar model (2002) are deciding to study abroad, selecting a host country, and finally choosing a college (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In this model, large-scale factors such as government policy, culture, and the economy may influence the country selection stage. Individual colleges may influence the final stage, and thus it is important for college enrollment professionals to look closely at this final stage.

Along with this three-stage model, there is a widely used push-pull model that describes various factors that influence the decision-making process for international students. ‘Push’ refers to factors that encourage a student to leave their home country and pursue higher education abroad; push factors generally relate to economic and social conditions as well as educational opportunities in the home country (Altbach, 1991; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The ‘push’ then comes in the first stage of the model when a student is deciding whether to pursue higher education abroad. ‘Pull’ refers to factors that draw a student to a particular place, be it country or institution, and apply to the second and third stage of the model. Since this research study looks at one institution in the United States, the pull factors associated with the third stage of the model, selecting an institution, are more pertinent than those of the second stage of the model selecting a host country.

In their research on the college choice process of international students, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) studied international students attending university abroad in Australia. The researchers identified six important factors that ‘pulled’ students to a specific college. The factors include knowledge of the host country, personal recommendations, cost, physical and social climate, geographic proximity to the home country, and social network or friends, with the strongest influence found among the first three factors in order (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In their study, the strongest influence was knowledge of the host country; this pull factor relates most to the second stage of the model, selection of the host country. The study further compared influencing factors across domestic and international students. Comparatively, international students found the following factors to be more important than their domestic peers: recognition of home-country academic qualifications, quality and reputation of the institution, international

alliances, quality of staff, and an existing international student population (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Even though the study focused on universities in Australia, the six pull factors have been widely applied in further research in international student college choice across countries and settings.

There is a body of evidence that demonstrates a substantial influence from personal recommendations on college choice in international students. Personal recommendations come from a variety of sources including family, friends, and recruitment agents (Mazzarol et al., 1997). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) concluded that word-of-mouth referrals are one of the most powerful promotional tools, and the influence is especially strong from alumni of the institution. Altbach (1991) researched international students in Australia and found that decisions were often made together by the student and the family. Further research has been done on the college choice process of international students seeking higher education degrees from U.S. institutions. Tan (2015) researched international students attending universities in Texas and found that the main factor in college choice among international students was family and friend recommendations. Independent recruitment agents play a large role in international admissions and recruitment in the United States as demonstrated in these studies as well.

Cost was ranked as the third most influencing factor in college choice among international students in Mazzarol and Soutar's study (2002). However, there may be significant differences in the influence of affordability among international students who are self-funded and those that require need-based financial assistance. The majority of international students in the United States are funded primarily by their families. In 2018, 59% of international students noted that their primary source of funding was personal or family funds, 19% current employment, 5%

foreign government, and 15% university funding (IIE, 2018a). International students do not qualify for the need-based federal student financial aid program administered through the U.S. government. At many U.S. colleges, international applicants are required to demonstrate their ability to pay the full cost of tuition with no discounts as part of their admissions application (NAFSA, n.d.). However, there are a limited number of universities that do offer institutional aid or a merit scholarship program to international students. While the number of schools and the amount of aid they offer to international students is increasing, it is very small compared to the federal financial aid offered to domestic students. During the 2014-2015 academic year, 800 institutions awarded just over \$1 billion dollars in need-based aid to international students (College Board, 2015), compared to \$120 billion awarded annually by the Department of Education to domestic students attending thousands of colleges (Federal Student Aid, n.d.). Students who are funded by their families may be less sensitive to price when it comes to making a decision about college, whereas students who require need-based financial aid may have very limited options for universities in the United States based on tuition cost and available funding.

Other researchers have also studied the decision-making process as it relates to college choice for international students pursuing higher education abroad. Alfattal (2017) conducted a comprehensive study that examined college choice factors in both domestic and international students and compared the strongest influencing factors across those groups of students. The most important factors for both groups were availability of major, affordability of campus, and being admitted (Alfattal, 2017). The study found several differences as well. Domestic students were more influenced by need-based aid, which is often not available for international students.

International students found the following factors more important than their domestic peers: academic reputation, on-campus housing, and print or video materials (Alfattal, 2017).

The studies and theories reviewed in this paper do not address how need-based financial aid may affect college choice in international students. The studies mentioned focus mainly on fee-paying international students. These students represent over half of the international students in the United States, and due to their ability to help colleges maintain a balanced budget they are also generally the international students that are most recruited and competed over admissions offices. However, there are also many international students who receive financial aid, but there is little research on these students. This study attempts to fill this gap in the literature. I will now explain several unique aspects of the university researched in this study, including its population of international students who receive funding.

### **Contextualizing Private Research University in the Northeast**

The university is a private, four-year, R1 research institution located in the Northeastern part of the United States. The university has just over 5,500 full-time undergraduate students, 29% of whom are international students from over 140 different countries (University, 2019a; University, 2019c). The university is nationally and internationally ranked; it is among the top 30 national universities in the U.S. News and World Reports (2019b). The university offers a unique open curriculum with no required subjects and no general education requirements (University, n.d.-b). This gives students the freedom to explore their academic interests, makes it easy to enter the university as an undecided major, and also allows students to double or even triple major within their four years on campus. The university has a strong emphasis on undergraduate

research and is also home to a business school, music school, and medical center (University, n.d.-a).

The university is need-aware in the undergraduate admissions process, meaning that applying for need-based financial aid is factored into the admissions decision. However, it does meet 100% of demonstrated need for all admitted students, which means there are no gaps in a student's financial aid package. The university identifies an estimated family contribution unique to each family's financial circumstances, and offers an aid package that meets that number. The university offers this need-based aid to both domestic and international students, meaning that international students who require funding to attend a college in the United States can consider the university as an option (University, 2019b). This makes the university one of 800 institutions in the country that offer need-based financial aid to international students (College Board, 2015).

The high percentage of international students in the undergraduate student body sets the university apart from other U.S. institutions. It ranks in the top three for universities with the highest percentage of international students in their undergraduate student bodies (U.S. News & World Reports, 2019). Other universities have larger numbers of international students, but the university is unique in having such a large proportion of international students among the undergraduate student body (IIE, 2018c). The population has also increased drastically over the past two decades. In 2000, the international student body was 8% and it increased to 26% in 2014; this 18 percentage point increase makes the university third in the nation in terms of universities that have seen the biggest increase (Barta, et al., 2015). Given both the university's steady increase in undergraduate international student numbers and its international student

financial aid program, this study focuses on the most important factors that lead international students to enroll at this private research university located in the Northeast.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

### **Methodology Choice and Rationale**

To better understand the most important factors in international student college choice and what influences a student's ultimate decision to enroll at the university, this study employed the qualitative research methodology and used a case study approach. Case studies are used to gain in-depth understanding of a topic in a particular context, and focus more on process than outcomes (Law & McLeod, 2004). Case studies are also useful in situations where it is impossible to control variables amongst participants which applies to this study (Law & McLeod, 2004). Given the university's unique context with the area of international student enrollment, the design was a single-case, holistic study (Yin, 2009).

### **Site and Participants' Description and Sampling**

All research was conducted at the private research university. There were two groups of participants. Participants included current international students enrolled at the university, and current staff members in the Office of Undergraduate Admissions. The study employed purposeful sampling using specific criteria for each group of participants outlined below.

Students were eligible to participate based on their citizenship and enrollment status. Eligible participants were full-time international students at the university. They had to be non-U.S. citizens studying on university sponsored student visas and must have applied as first-year applicants to the university. Transfer students were excluded as their college search and selection process is much different. There were no limitations placed on participant eligibility in terms of

home country, high school, or financial aid status. In order to recruit students, I posted messages on university Facebook pages detailing the study and asking for participants. Interested students emailed me directly to learn more about enrolling in the study. Ultimately, nine students enrolled in the study. The nine students represented eight different countries. There were two students from South Asia (Sil and Ben), two students from the Middle East (Bobbie and Paul) and five students from Africa (Ro, Tony, Junior, Christopher, and Richie). This is different from the overall demographics of the international student body, as the majority of international students come from East Asia. There was one female student and eight male students, compared to the overall student demographics which is 51% female and 49% male (University, 2019a). Five of the students attended high schools or programs that are close partner institutions of the university. The remaining three students attended national high school programs in their home countries before matriculating at the university. All nine students received financial aid from the university; no students who pay the full cost of attendance elected to enroll in the study. The list of student participants can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Student Participant Information*

Participant	Gender	Region
Ben	Male	South Asia
Bobbie	Male	Middle East
Christopher	Male	Africa
Junior	Male	Africa
Paul	Male	Middle East
Richie	Male	Africa
Ro	Female	Africa
Sil	Male	South Asia
Tony	Male	Africa

Staff participants were eligible based on their current employment in the Office of Admissions at the university. The criteria were that they should have worked in the office for more than one year and have professional experience with international admissions at the university. I emailed the eligible staff members about the study and determined their interest in participating. Two staff members ultimately enrolled in the study as participants. Livia is the Executive Director of International Admissions and Ralph is the Associate Director of International Admissions at the university. The list of staff participants can be found in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Staff Participant Information*

Participant	Gender	Title
Livia	Female	Executive Director of International Admissions
Ralph	Male	Associate Director of International Admissions

**Methods of Data Collection**

Individual interviews and focus groups were the primary qualitative research methods used in this study. All interviews were semi-structured. I asked all groups of participants the same set of questions, but I was also able to ask specific follow-up questions as participants brought up interesting or relevant information. I invited first-year international students at the university to talk about their college selection process, more specifically about the most important factors leading them to enroll at the university, during a focus group. I conducted two focus groups; one focus group was with three students and the other focus group was with six students. The focus groups lasted approximately one hour and fifteen minutes, and were audio recorded for data collection purposes. Interview questions for the student focus groups are outlined in Appendix A.

I conducted individual interviews with two staff members to talk about student college selection from an enrollment management professional standpoint. Due to limited availability, both staff interviews took place online via Zoom video conferencing software and were recorded for data collection purposes. The interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes. Interview questions for staff are outlined in Appendix B.

### **Ethics of Research**

Ethical research is of utmost concern in this project. The following ethical principles were applied in this study: explanation of risks and benefits to participants, voluntary participation and informed consent, participant privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality of data.

#### ***Participant Risks and Benefits***

There were no known significant risks or benefits to participation in this study or refusal to participate in this study. Participants were not compensated for their time and there were no consequences to students or staff who chose not to participate. There were no direct benefits to participating in this study. However, there may be indirect benefits such as helping to improve admissions practices and service for international students through sharing personal experience and knowledge.

#### ***Voluntary Participation and Informed Consent***

All participants were invited to participate voluntarily and given a consent form prior to participation. The consent form outlined their rights as part of this study including the risks and benefits outlined above. Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any point or choose not to answer any questions during the focus group or individual interview.

### ***Participant Privacy***

Focus group interviews with students were conducted in a private conference room at the Office of Undergraduate Admissions at the university. This ensured that questions and answers were kept private to the individuals participating in the group. Individual interviews with staff were conducted online via video conferencing software. The staff participants were able to choose the location, time, and date of the interview and were able to ensure they had a private, comfortable space to do the interview. I transcribed all interviews myself as to keep the information private.

### ***Anonymity***

Steps were taken to limit the identification of participants. Participants in the individual and focus group interviews were given pseudonyms during the data collection and analysis process to ensure that their personal details were separate from their answers given in the focus group. Additionally, students' nationalities were not revealed in this paper, rather I referred to the region they were from. The identity of the university was also protected. The name of the university was not revealed in the final paper, instead I referred to the university in a regional context and excluded identifying information in the literature review. This protected the reputation of the university, limited any negative impact of the study, and also helped to prevent participants' identities from being revealed.

### ***Confidentiality***

The data collected in this study was and is protected. Participant information was stored in a separate file from the data. Data collected through the focus groups was stored with

pseudonyms in place of real names. My computer is secure and no one else has access to it. It is also backed up by university servers, which prevented any data loss. Data can be accessed only through my computer and will be deleted as this project ends. Following, the final paper will be saved indefinitely on my computer. The data will not be used again for any other research study without explicit approval from the subjects.

The findings from my research study will be shared online with my classmates and my academic advisor at SIT Graduate Institute for graduation requirement purposes via a private online learning website. The Executive Director of International Admissions has approved sharing the findings with the Office of Undergraduate Admissions at the university in this study for the purposes of improving admissions practices. The final research paper will be shared on SIT Graduate Institute's electronic capstone database. Research data with personally identifiable information will not be shared with anyone. All data and findings that will be shared will include aggregated data analysis and will not include any identifying information.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

I used Dedoose for data analysis. I created codes using both deductive and inductive methods, and applied those codes to both interview and focus group data. Inductive codes represent themes or ideas that a researcher does not anticipate, whereas deductive codes represent themes that the researcher expected to find before starting data collection (Rossman & Rallis, 2016). Based on current research in the field of college choice, I expected to find numerous factors that may have influenced college choice for international students enrolled at the university. Thus, some deductive codes that I expected to find were academic reputation of the university, availability and quality of desired program, recommendation from parents,

counselors and friends, and affordability. I also expected that the importance of affordability of the university will greatly differ among students who receive need-based financial aid and those that do not. In addition to these anticipated findings, I was open to understanding new influences that may not have been mentioned in the existing literature. I aimed to include all influences, regardless of my initial assumptions.

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness of Findings**

This study implemented two methods of data collection and used two different groups of participants. Although the study did not employ three methods or data sources for the purposes of triangulation, it used two methods of interviews and focus groups, and involved two participant groups, which added to the credibility of the findings. Additionally, I employed member-checking, asking participants to review transcripts of individual and focus group interviews for accuracy and approval. The research project proposal was shared with staff member participants before data collection for their review and approval. This member checking and involvement of participants also added to the validity of the study. I also employed critical self-reflection and constantly checked my own biases throughout the study including in data collection, analysis, and writing-up of findings.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of Study**

This study was delimited in scope and time. The research question narrowly focused on college choice of a small group of people, namely international students who are currently enrolled at the university. The number of participants in the focus group was limited to between five and ten current students to maintain a manageable data set. Ultimately, nine students participated in the study.

There are limitations given the demographics of the participants. There was one female and eight male students, and they were from eight different countries. Given the vast diversity of international students on the university's campus in terms of citizenship, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture, it would be impossible to find a truly representative set of students to participate in a research study. However, it must be noted that this particular set of students is not representative of all current international students especially due to the limitations in gender and national origin. Five of the students attended high schools or programs that partner closely with the university and three attended national high schools in their home country. Given the differences in access to information about both the college process and the university, their responses may be quite different from one another. Additionally, all students received need-based financial aid from the university. This is also not representative of the international student population at the university, as the majority of international students pay the full cost of attendance.

### **Findings**

This research study was guided by the following research question: From the perspectives of current international students and university staff, what are the most important factors in international student college choice and in the ultimate decision to enroll at a private research university located in the Northeast? In analyzing the data from the individual staff interviews and student focus groups, I categorized the data into several distinct groupings that reflect and expand upon information presented in the literature review. The categories include admissions and enrollment trends at the university, students learning about the university, obstacles in the application process, and factors that ultimately influenced enrollment at the university.

Enrollment trends at the university were largely consistent with national and international trends presented in the literature review. Students learned about the university through word of mouth, university recruitment efforts, and brand recognition. The largest obstacles in the college application process were lack of information, application process requirements, distance, geopolitics, and family expectations. Lastly, I drew on Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) model of college choice for international students to categorize and interpret the factors that influenced college choice for participants in this study. The most important 'pull' factors that influenced college choice were cost, personal recommendations, and university environment. I will discuss each finding in more depth in the subsequent sections.

### **Admissions and Enrollment Trends at the University**

In the staff interviews, I spoke with Livia, the Executive Director for International Admissions, and Ralph, the Associate Director for International Admissions, about trends at the university. Livia and Ralph noted that the admissions and enrollments trends at the university mostly aligned with the trends presented in the literature review. Both staff members noted that there have been increases in the number of international applicants and enrolled students at the university over the past decade or so. The number of staff members in the admissions office dedicated to international admissions has also risen from about one staff member to four. There was also an increase in the need-based financial aid budget for international students and because of this an increase in the socioeconomic and regional diversity of the international student body at the university. Both staff acknowledged that many of these trends can be seen nationally, but that the university is a leader specifically in the number of international students who receive

financial aid. Both staff members identified several external and internal factors that have influenced the changes seen at the university over the last decade.

### ***External Factors***

Externally, there was a general increase in the numbers of international students pursuing education abroad in the United States as noted by both Livia and Ralph. This trend is reflected in the Open Doors data presented in the literature review (IIE, 2018a; IIE, 2018b). Livia talked about how the applicant pool has grown exponentially, for example she stated that, “When I arrived about 13 years ago, we were about eight percent international. Now we’re about 29 percent international,” (personal communication, February 12, 2020). Livia added that individual students are also applying to many more schools than students in previous generations, which causes increased application numbers to all institutions, and that the United States has increasingly seen global competition for internationally mobile students as other countries offer degrees in English. Both staff specifically mentioned the growth of students from China and noted that there have been large increases in the number of applicants and enrollees from that country in particular. China has become an important market for prospective students for universities throughout the United States as it consistently tops the charts for sending the most students to study in the United States in general and this university specifically. Livia noted that 10 years ago students from China “were not [the university’s] largest market, and now it is by far the largest market,” (personal communication, February 12, 2020). Thus, increased mobility of international students from all over the world, and particularly China, has affected this university and influenced the increase in overall numbers of international applicants and students at the university.

Institutional peer pressure also had an influence on admissions trends at the university. Both staff members noted that admission practices at one university influence activities at peer institutions. Once one school starts something new, many other universities of a similar rank or caliber follow suit. In this case, once some colleges started recruiting internationally, many others followed that lead. Staff members said that the university both influences and has been influenced by its peer institutions in terms of international recruitment and enrollment trends. Livia noted that the university is influenced by other schools, as she stated “feeling that our peers are doing the same things and so we need to be doing that as well,” but further went on to say that the university is also an “industry leader” especially with regards to the percentage of international students on campus and the amount of financial aid that is given to international students (personal communication, February 12, 2020). Ralph made a similar comment in his interview, stating that trends at the university have “outstripped national trends. [The university] expanded far more quickly than any of [its] peers,” in terms of percentage of international students in the student body (personal communication, February 14, 2020).

### ***Internal Factors***

There are also internal factors based on university policy that have influenced the enrollment trends at the university. Livia noted that changing demographics in the United States led university administration to find students in different places. She said that about 10 to 15 years ago, the university “had been seen very much as a regional institute” (personal communication, February 12, 2020). It recruited students mainly from the Northeast, however, there was a decline in the number of students graduating from high school in that region. The university made a concerted effort to expand its reach and become a global university.

Leadership at the top university and admissions levels supported these efforts through increasing international admissions staff numbers and expanding the funding and recruitment of a globally diverse student body over the past decade. Ralph noted that the university “had particularly strong advocacy on campus for international student recruitment” (personal communication, February 14, 2020). The university benefited from a clear goal to internationalize itself. Based on Livia and Ralph’s comments, the university seemed to have an articulated institutional commitment, support from leadership, and increased student mobility (American Council on Education, 2018). This commitment and support from leadership was important in allowing the university to expand its international recruitment and enrollment efforts.

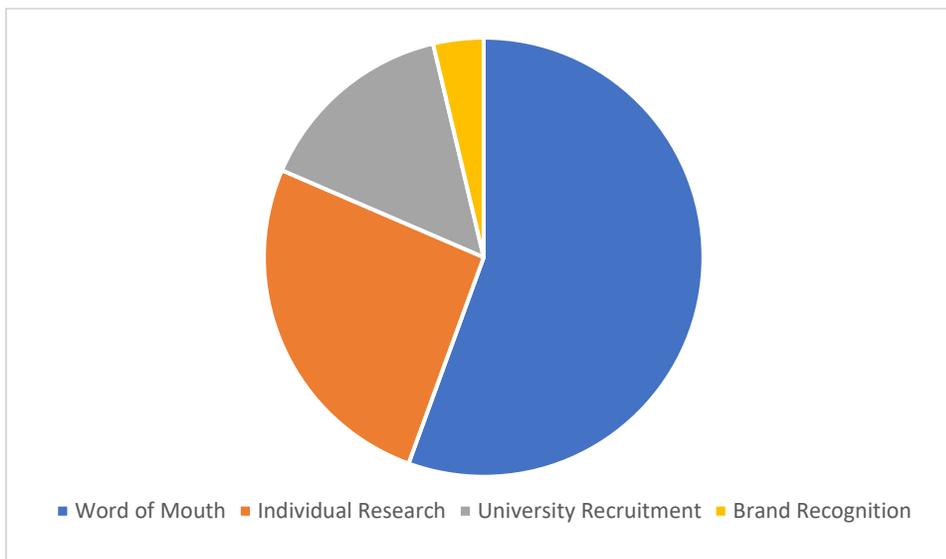
Staff supports for international students were built in starting in admissions, then down through the college as the university began to internationalize. Ralph noted that, “[The university] compared to other institutions I have seen, has been much better about addressing needs of international students on campus” (personal communication, February 14, 2020). Supports include immigration assistance through the International Services Office, international orientation, the creation of the International Student Engagement Office, and advisers dedicated to international students in academic advising and the career center. Livia and Ralph both noted that staff support for international students have increased in recent years and could be another attractive feature of the university to prospective international students. Livia noted that international students are “going to find that support network that they need... that the institution is going to understand a little bit more about their unique needs” (personal communication, February 12, 2020). Students may see this university as offering more support specifically to international students and may be attracted to it for that reason.

### Learning about the University

Referring back to Hossler and Gallagher's model of college choice (1987), there are three stages in the college selection process. The first stage of developing an interest in attending college is not a focus of this study. However, the second and third stages of gathering information and making a choice are relevant to the discussion. In order to apply to an institution, a student must first know the university exists and learn about it. This section focuses on the second stage of the model and describes how international student participants learned about the university. In interviews with both students and staff, learning about the university involved word of mouth, individual research, university recruitment efforts, and brand recognition. The number of times each category was mentioned by students is displayed in Figure 1.

#### Figure 1

##### *How Students Learned about the University*



***Word of Mouth***

Word of mouth is simply learning about the university through another person. Livia noted several avenues of word of mouth, such as “knowing an upper-class student who's at the university, having a family member who's come to the university, knowing a student who applied here and had a positive experience and ultimately ended up enrolling elsewhere but says, you should look at this school” (personal communication, February 12, 2020). Livia emphasized the importance of word of mouth by saying “word of mouth is probably the number one way that students hear about us” (personal communication, February 12, 2020). This importance was reflected in student interviews as well, as students talked about learning about the university through peers and other sources.

**Peers.** Among students, word of mouth was the most common method of learning about the university. Throughout the focus group interviews, it was mentioned 15 times and it was brought up by all nine students. Student participants said that peers were the largest source of information, and six participants cited knowing a current student as a way they learned about the university. This is consistent with Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) findings that word of mouth is one of the most powerful promotional tools, especially when it comes from alumni or current students. Sil learned about the university from a student who applied and enrolled elsewhere, but still had great things to say about the university. Peers also played a large role in supporting participants through the college search process. Seven participants said that peers were the most helpful throughout the process, and six said their counselors were either a major source of support or supportive in addition to their peers.

**Other sources.** While peers were the largest source of word of mouth, there were other sources as well, including counselors, staff, and family members. Five students learned about the university from their school counselors. For example, Richie received a business card for the Dean of Admissions at the university from his teacher and that was the first time he learned about the university. Staff also noted that word of mouth can come from peers, family, and counselors. The role of counselors in word of mouth was demonstrated in several studies in the literature review as well. Interestingly, while agents were mentioned in the literature review in this context, agents were not mentioned in any interviews. This may be because agents are fee-based and all student participants receive financial aid from the university, so they may have had limited access to agents.

### ***Individual Research***

While word of mouth is the passive reception of information, many students actively seek out information in the college search process through individual research. Staff members noted college ranking guides such as News and World Reports as a main source of information about the university. Students said they used the College Board website, and other sites such as College Confidential and Reddit as online sources of information about universities in general. Staff and students also mentioned using the school's website as a source of information. Students said they also sent emails to the university to ask specific questions, but three students noted that email is not a common form of communication in their countries so sending emails was often a thorough and nerve-wracking process.

### ***University Recruitment Efforts***

Universities also make concerted efforts to advertise their school to prospective students in several different ways. Staff and students both talked about university recruitment efforts as a way that students learn about the university. The two main categories of recruitment were noted as in-person and virtual.

**In-Person Recruitment.** Both staff members mentioned in-person recruitment efforts such as high school visits and college fairs in country. The university sends staff members to dozens of countries annually to meet students, parents and school counselors. While visiting a country, a staff member will organize visits to individual high schools to give short presentations to prospective students. They also meet with school counselors in and outside of school to build relationships and give updates on the college. Staff may also attend regional college fairs that are attended by hundreds of students and parents and give an opportunity to ask questions and have an individual conversation. Staff may also offer in-person admissions interviews during these trips. Three students mentioned meeting staff members during a visit to their high school. All three students attended high schools that have a close relationship with the university and have a steady pipeline of students applying and entering the university. While in-person recruitment was not common among these participants, it is a large part of the recruitment efforts for the university. Further research on admissions data may be needed to demonstrate a stronger connection between these efforts and enrollment.

**Virtual Recruitment.** In addition to in-person recruitment, there are several virtual methods of connecting with students. Livia talked about buying student information from sources like College Board and other testing agencies. The university then targets appropriate students by sending them emails about the university. Two students mentioned receiving emails

from the university. Ro recalled that she "was spammed by a lot of schools via email because once you take the SAT you check that box of yeah, I want to hear about universities" (personal communication, February 21, 2020), which directly relates to this method of buying names that is common in higher education admissions in the United States. While Ro's comment highlights the large volume of emails that prospective students receive from U.S. universities, it also demonstrates that it is effective in marketing the university. Staff members also mentioned having a presence on several social media platforms and offering virtual events to engage international students, however no students mentioned social media or virtual events when they were asked how they learned about the university.

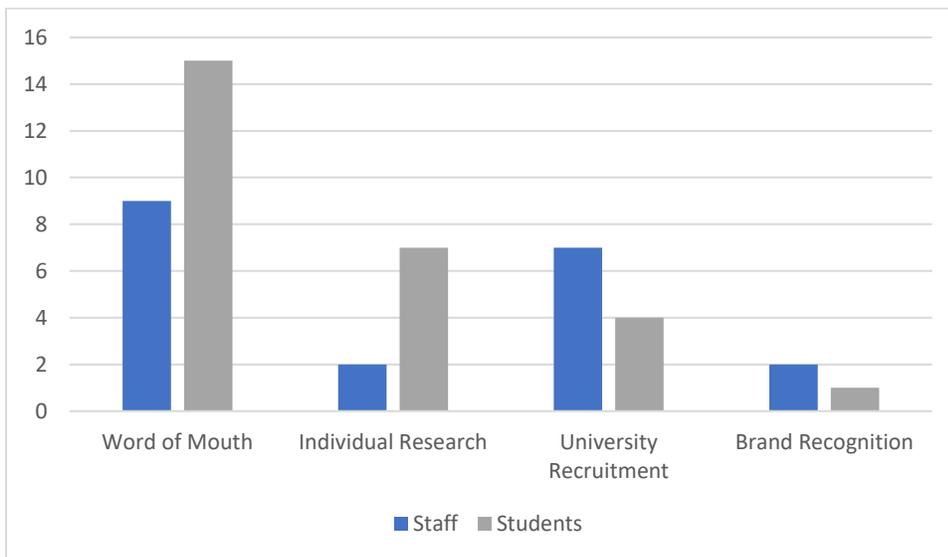
### ***Brand Recognition***

Brand recognition is a marketing term that describes a consumer's ability to identify a company or product based on logo, tag line, or advertisement. When applied to higher education it has to do with both recognition and reputation of the university. Livia talked about the importance of brand recognition in marketing the university. She noted that "most people around the world have heard of Harvard, Yale. We don't quite have that, but we do in some markets. And not that you could walk up to anybody, but you could walk up to students at top high schools and they will know our name or know some of our brand. So certainly, brand recognition of our institution is another way students find out about us" (personal communication, February 12, 2020). While no students explicitly mentioned the term brand recognition, a few students brought up a similar topic. Two students noted the prestige and strong reputation of the university as another way they learned about it. This supports Livia's assertion that in some markets the university is well known and recognizable by name.

Overall, there were some differences in how staff and students talked about learning about the university. Students mentioned word of mouth and individual research the most, and staff mentioned word of mouth and university recruitment the most. Figure 2 compares the number of times each category was mentioned by students and staff.

**Figure 2**

*Comparing Staff and Student Responses to Learning about the University*



**Obstacles in the Application Process**

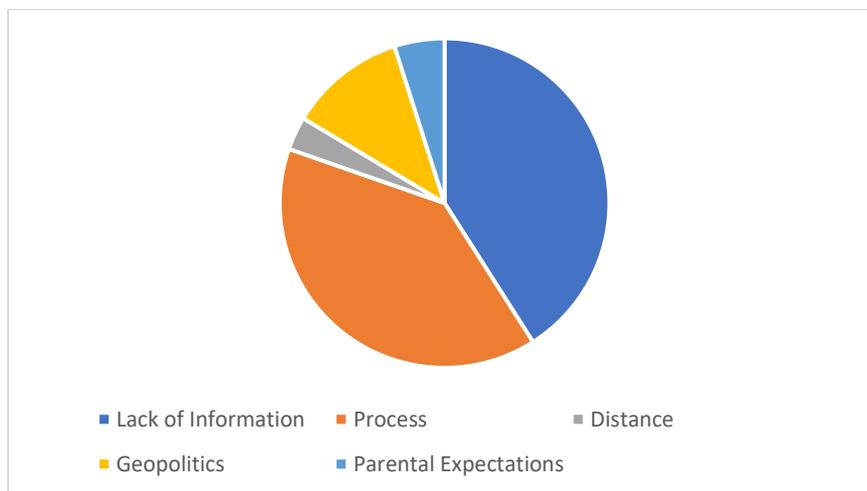
There are several significant obstacles that international students face during the U.S. college application process. It is important for enrollment professionals to understand these barriers so they may better support students throughout the application process and ensure a continued stream of international applicants. Reducing barriers may be one way to increase international student applications and enrollments at the university. These obstacles also relate to the second stage of Hossler and Gallagher’s model (1987) regarding finding information about

colleges, and the obstacles that may ultimately hamper a student's ability to search for information about colleges and make an informed enrollment decision.

While all students face obstacles in the college search and selection process, the ones mentioned in the interviews may be specific to international students but may not apply to all international students. When I asked about what obstacles they faced, Ro simply replied, “so many.” The main categories of obstacles that were mentioned during the interviews with both staff and students were lack of information, process, distance, geopolitics, and parental expectations. Figure 3 shows the number of times each category was mentioned by students.

**Figure 3**

*Obstacles Faced by Students in the Application Process*



### ***Lack of Information***

Lack of information was cited as one of the biggest obstacles for international students in the U.S. college admissions process by both staff and student participants. It was mentioned 26 times by seven students, and nine times by two staff members. Lack of information came in

many forms. One of the larger forms was lack of information about the process of applying to college in the United States. The student participants talked at length about having to figure everything out on their own and said that both themselves and the adults around them lacked information about the process. Many students mentioned that they completed the college application process without much guidance or support from counselors or teachers at their schools. Sil noted that “We didn't know anything. Like neither our counselors knew about anything, neither our teachers knew about anything. So we don't know anything...you just have to figure out every single step” (personal communication, February 21, 2020). Five of the nine students said they took a gap year to either join a college prep program or to prepare for college applications to the United States.

Many aspects of the U.S. college application process are not common in other countries and caused much confusion for international applicants. The subjective merit-based review used by many colleges in the United States was a new concept for many of the student participants. Ro and Sil both mentioned that in their home countries high school and college entrance is based solely on test scores. Extracurricular activities have much emphasis in the U.S. system, but are not prioritized in other countries. The personal statement is also a new concept for many students. Sil mentioned that he did not interview because he did not know the interview was such an important part of the application process.

Students also mentioned lack of information about financial resources such as the opportunity funds programs run by the U.S. Embassy or online resources such as the College Board website. These resources give information both about the overall process and specific colleges. While specific college websites can offer detailed information about universities and

programs, both staff and students noted that often times websites can be unclear or confusing for international students. This may be due to a lack of information specifically for international students or a language barrier. Ralph noted that, “How do you make [your website] more easy to understand for students who aren’t privileged and who don’t have a lot of resources. Sometimes it’s difficult for international students to figure out on each website. Well, what do I need to do to make my application complete?” (personal communication, February 14, 2020). His comments underscore how university websites, if unclear, could be an obstacle, rather than a support, in the college search process for international students.

Staff also distinguished between lack of information and misinformation and noted that there are unethical agents and other actors abroad that deliberately try to mislead students in the process. This can lead to students applying to schools that are not a good fit academically or even students paying too much for services related to the application process. Three students commented on misinformation as well. Sil noted that “you don’t know what things to believe or what things not to believe” (personal communication, February 21, 2020). Overall, lack of information was a large barrier for students to overcome in order to be able to apply to institutions in the United States, including this university.

### *Process*

**Application.** Eight students expressed how difficult the overall process of applying was for international students in terms of completing the Common Application and all the required testing. A few students noted that just filling out and submitting the Common Application was difficult. Christopher noted that his high school was in a rural area and access to technology was limited so sending the application online was difficult. Almost every single student cited the

essay or personal statement as a difficult challenge that came with the application process. Tony mused about the essay, stating “Of course the essays was a challenge for everyone right, but I wouldn't put it as a challenge within a negative light,” because it allowed him to reflect on himself and his life (personal communication, February 28, 2020). Christopher questioned the essay writing process, saying “How can I express myself to someone that doesn't know me?” (personal communication, February 28, 2020). Echoing the concerns of many of students, Bobbie said the following:

The fact that you're supposed to attract native speakers in your second language, we need to attract that person and draw his attention or her attention to a story, to a storyline that you can barely say even in your mother tongue. That's something that requires some skills, it needs lots of help in this, a lot of things. And then you must be concerned that that reader does care about one point, one semicolon, one dot one whatever you have on that sentence that would affect the perspective of that reader on your essay. (personal communication, February 28, 2020)

His comments emphasize the fact that while the personal statement is a challenging feat for any student, it is much more complicated to write in one's second language. Ro added that “the personal statement is so mysterious for [international students]” (personal communication, February 21, 2020), further highlighting that a narrative essay may be common in U.S. education, but the personal statement is a new concept for many students outside the United States.

Language barrier as an obstacle was recognized in both interviews with staff and students. Two students noted difficulties with completing both the application and testing in their

non-native language. Livia noted that “English maybe [a student’s] second, third, fifth language in some cases. They've got to have a high level of English language proficiency certainly to attend our university but to attend most schools in the US as well” (personal communication, February 12, 2020). This statement highlights the fact that most international students speak English as a second or other language but must have attained a certain level of fluency to be admitted and be successful in a U.S. college program. Ro and Sil also noted that there were also language barriers for their teachers. There were not enough teachers who knew English well enough to write a letter of recommendation for their college applications.

**Testing.** Several students expressed concerns over testing as well. When asked what obstacles they faced, Paul looked around and asked, “Let me guess, the SAT?” and his question was met with approval and laughter (personal communication, February 28, 2020). Preparing for the exam, finding test centers, paying fees, or finding colleges that were test optional were all cited as obstacles regarding standardized testing. Given that standardized tests can be linguistically and culturally biased, this puts international students at a disadvantage. One student noted that the English section of the SAT is particularly hard for international students as the content and style of questions are vastly different from the type of English they learn in their schools. Bobbie expressed frustration at having to prove his English language abilities solely through a test score from the TOEFL and IELTS exams after spending several years studying in English, writing his application in English, and taking the SAT exam in English. Students are also taking standardized tests, such as the SAT or ACT, in their non-native language. A couple students also noted that they have to prepare for American standardized testing while also preparing for national exams in their home country.

**Fees.** Students enumerated all the fees associated with applying to colleges in the United States including individual school application fees, individual school CSS Profile fees, cost to sit for the SAT, SAT subject tests, and TOEFL, the cost to send scores, and visa costs. These fees can add up to thousands of dollars for one student just to apply to colleges. Five students noted that these fees were a significant burden to their family finances and Ro referred to spending this money as “making parents go through risk, that may or may not turn out to be a good risk” (personal communication, February 21, 2020). Ro later added that she had many friends who eventually gave up on the U.S. college application process because of the fees. She continued saying, “I know for sure that none of the students who got those scholarships that cover the whole application process [fees] would stop in the middle of the process because [that money] was such a big advantage” (personal communication, February 21, 2020). Her comments highlight how these fees act as a barrier to international student applications and enrollments.

### *Distance*

Physical distance was also presented as an obstacle in the application process. Livia noted that distance from a student’s home country to the United States may be a barrier. In the United States, visiting a college campus before you apply or attend is common practice. Many international students, including all participants in this study, did not have either the funds or opportunity to visit campus during the application process.

Students noted that living outside a capital city can also be a barrier in the process. The two students from South Asia noted all resources that could support them in the college application process were located in the capital city. This included visits from college

representatives, SAT prep books, and other resources provided by the U.S. Embassy. Since they lived outside the capital, it was harder for them to access these resources.

### *Geopolitics*

Lastly, geopolitics was mentioned as an obstacle as well. Both staff and students talked about how obtaining a visa can be a huge and unpredictable barrier for some international students. From the staff perspective, Ralph said “a lot of international students are going to have challenges even making it to the U.S. If they overcome all the barriers and challenges to applying and getting admitted, they might not be able to get their visas” (personal communication, February 14, 2020). Sil echoed these concerns by saying “even if you get good financial aid, it's like you are not sure about the visa” (personal communication, February 21, 2020). Bobbie personally went through extreme challenges in getting his student visa because of the political relationship between his home country and the United States. He joked that he could speak for an hour or two just on issues obtaining a student visa. From the staff perspective, Livia noted that geopolitics can be a barrier to attending college in the United States for international students both when students cannot enter the United States or their home country, but also when students “don't feel our country is welcoming” (personal communication, February 12, 2020).

### *Parental Expectations*

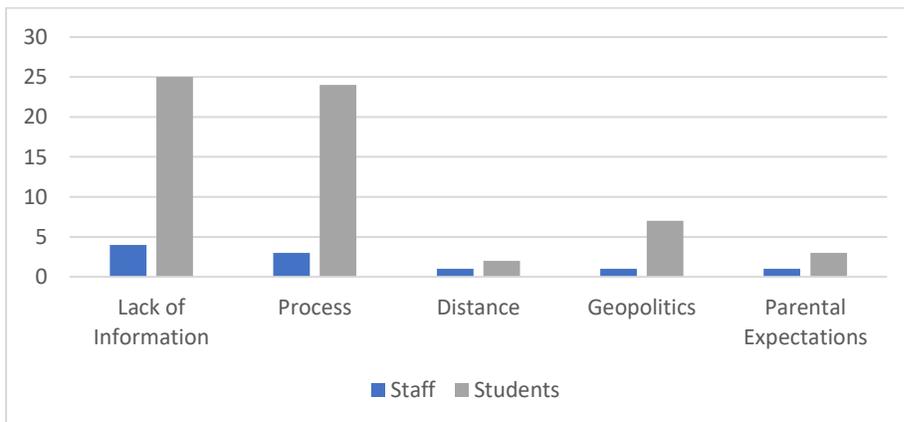
Two students cited parental expectations as an obstacle because their own goals did not align with their parents'. Ben noted parental concerns about politics in the United States as a reason why they did not want him to apply to schools there. Richie said he had to work “to get my family on the same page. They sort of had conflicting views as to what I want for myself in the next life, you know, some were saying I should stay [home] ... and then the other hand I had

a mom who was like no chase your dreams, it's all about you” (personal communication, February 28, 2020). These students expressed challenge in gaining family support for their education abroad.

All of the student participants were able to overcome these obstacles in order to apply and ultimately enroll in the university. However, this section illuminates the major issues that international students face. It is important to recognize and rectify these issues because if international students are unable to apply to an institution, they will not be able to enroll in it either. While all categories of obstacles were mentioned by both students and staff, there were some differences in magnitude. Both staff and students mentioned lack of information and difficulties regarding the process as the biggest obstacles, but both were mentioned many more times by students. Figure 4 compares the number of times each category was mentioned by students and staff.

**Figure 4**

*Comparing Staff and Student Responses to Obstacles in the Application Process*

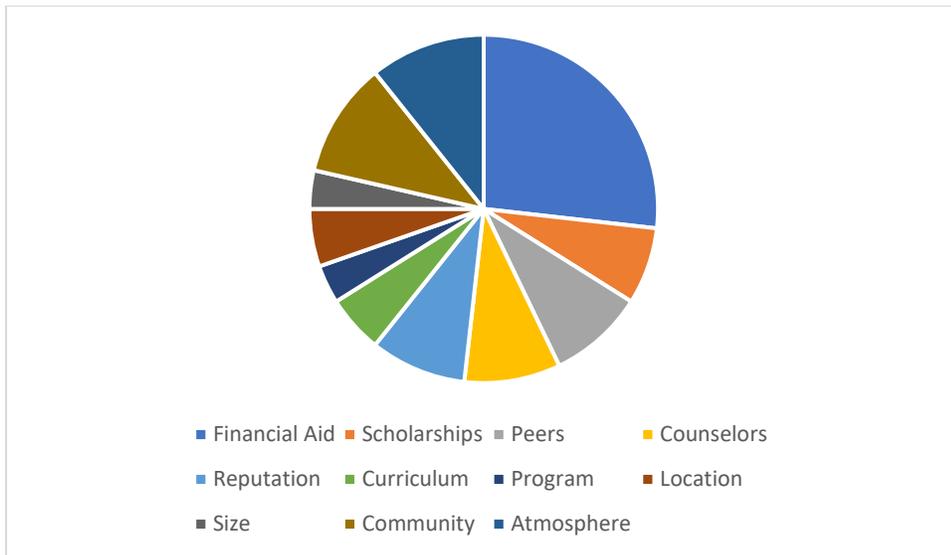


### **Factors that Influence Enrollment**

Staff and student participants brought up several factors that may influence international students' decision to enroll at the university. Using Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) model as a guide I have broken the factors down into three main categories: cost, environment, and personal recommendations. The other factors found in Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) research, such as knowledge of the host country, geographic proximity to home country, and social network were not found to be important factors in this study. The factors described in this section can be categorized as 'pull' factors that drew students to this university. Additionally, these factors operate in the third stage of Mazzarol and Soutar's three-stage model, selecting an institution (2002). Figure 5 shows the number of times each factor was mentioned by students. The chart includes the individual factors that make up the three categories. Cost includes financial aid and scholarships, recommendations includes peers and counselors, and environment includes reputation, curriculum, program, location, size, community, and atmosphere. It is clear in Figure 5 that financial aid was mentioned the most times by participants as an important factor in enrollment decisions.

### **Figure 5**

*Factors that Influenced Students' Decisions to Enroll at the University*



**Cost**

Staff and student participants emphasized that cost is an extremely important factor in an international student’s decision to enroll in the university. Cost includes both need-based financial aid and merit scholarships. However, it is important to note that both staff members and students acknowledged that the importance of cost likely differs based on the type of international student. The two types mentioned were international students who require need-based financial aid and those who are able to pay the full cost on their own. Since all student participants in this study received financial aid from the university, cost as a significant enrollment factors may be more representative of students who receive funding rather than those who do not.

**Financial Aid.** Financial aid refers to grants and loans given to students based on a family’s demonstrated financial need. All student participants in this study required need-based financial aid in order to attend a college in the United States and as such, every student participant emphasized that financial aid was a major factor in the college search and selection

process. Financial aid was mentioned 15 times in the student focus group interviews, almost triple the amount of times any other individual factor was mentioned. Ben said, “financial aid was the most important thing” (personal communication, February 28, 2020), while Ro noted that financial aid was “definitely the first factor...one factor that would so easily filter out so many schools” (personal communication, February 21, 2020). Sil said that his “first priority would be financial aid. Not the majors and curriculum. No because if you can't pay there's no point of getting in... if you can't pay, you can't pay” (personal communication, February 21, 2020). In talking about aspects of the university that were attractive, Richie noted “the school gives good aid. Great financial aid” (personal communication, February 28, 2020). All students had a list of several aspects of the university that they liked and that influenced their enrollment decision, but when forced to choose just one aspect that was the most important, eight of the nine students chose financial aid, which is highlighted by Tony’s comment “financial aid, if I had to pick one” (personal communication, February 28, 2020).

From the staff perspective, both Livia and Ralph said financial aid is likely the most important factor for students who need funding, and that it may severely limit their options for college. Livia noted that “we may be the only school that they’ve been admitted at with a package that’s large enough for them to come,” and Ralph added “any institution that offers international students a high financial aid package is likely to be the only, or one of very few options that the student has to come to the U.S.” (personal communication, February 14, 2020). This differs slightly from the student participants’ experiences, where several students noted that they had multiple offers with enough financial aid, and that they had to decide among these

offers where to enroll. It is clear however, that for students who need funding, finances either make a college a possibility or rule it out entirely.

Both staff members, when asked what the most important factor in an international applicant's ultimate decision to enroll in the university, said that it differs among the type of international student. It is unclear to what extent cost influences fee-paying students since no fee-paying students enrolled in this study. Ralph noted that while cost may be important to fee paying international students, it is likely one of many considerations and may look more like a cost benefit analysis rather than ruling out schools based on price.

**Merit Scholarships.** Merit scholarships refer to scholarships given to students based solely on the merit of their application, focusing on factors such as academics, leadership, and community involvement. Four students mentioned merit scholarships as an important factor in their enrollment decision. Three students attended high schools that are in a partnership program with the university, and as part of the partnership the university offers students from those high schools a \$25,000 annual scholarship to attend the university. There are several universities and high schools in this partnership agreement, and all three students said that the partnership list was an important tool in selecting which universities to apply to. Ultimately, the university's partnership with this scholarship organization played a part in their decision to apply and enroll at the university.

Other university merit scholarships were mentioned as well. Paul talked about the Research Innovation Grant that he received from the university as part of his acceptance package. He said the following:

I was given the RIG grant, the Research and Innovation Grant. It actually made a very important role in me making my decision because when I put the four offers that I had and I looked at the financial statements and all of that. Then I had this university who says hey we have this money for you like \$4,500 just for you to do research as an undergrad at our university. I just, I thought that was pretty awesome. They're telling you come to us, we're gonna put you in a lab... we're gonna give you money. I think I couldn't say no to that. (personal communication, February 28, 2020)

This quote highlights the importance that merit scholarships play even for students who receive large financial aid packages. Merit scholarships can make an offer from one university stand out over other similar offers.

Cost was clearly the most important factor in influencing the enrollment decision for the participants in this study. While Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) research cited cost as one of the six important factors in the enrollment decisions of international students, they did not detail the effects of need-based financial aid. This study helps to differentiate the effects of cost across fee-paying students and students who receive financial aid. While cost was important, all students listed several other aspects of the university that they found attractive and also influenced their decision to enroll such as university environment and personal recommendations.

### ***Environment***

Staff and students also mentioned various environmental aspects of the university as factors that influenced enrollment decisions. The environmental aspects include institutional specific characteristics that students found attractive about the university including ranking and reputation, curriculum, programs, location, size, community, and atmosphere.

**Ranking and Reputation.** Several students mentioned ranking or reputation as a factor in their enrollment decision. Both staff members cited rankings or reputation as a factor as well. This is distinct from brand recognition as discussed above because brand recognition was seen as one method through which students learned about the university. This section focuses on how the ranking and reputation of the university influenced student's enrollment decisions.

Although the two are often related, ranking and reputation are different. Universities are ranked by several organizations, but the most well-known ranking system is done by U.S. News and World Reports. Their methodology includes outcomes (retention rates, graduation rates, and social mobility), faculty resources (class size, faculty salary, terminal degrees, and student-faculty ratio), expert opinion (ratings from top academics), financial resources, and student excellence (standardized test scores and high school class standing) (Morse, Brooks & Mason, 2019). Reputation has to do with how the public perceives the university which may be based on a variety of factors including ranking and acceptance rates. A quick look at the top 20 ranked national universities will show that all these top schools have acceptance rates at or below 10% (U.S. News 2019b; U.S. News, 2019c), so acceptance rates are often conflated with ranking and reputation. Ro was the only student to explicitly mention rank. She said financial aid “was the main factor but then also the ranking of the school really mattered” (personal communication, February 21, 2020). She had great options in her home country, so the university needed to be better ranked than her other options.

Four students mentioned the reputation and prestige of the university as a factor in their decision. Ben noted “financial aid was the most important thing, but I also looked at the prestige” (personal communication, February 28, 2020). Tony said “the reputation is also another thing. I

feel like [the university] has managed to establish itself as a hidden Ivy and I feel like the school has garnered a lot of like respect out there, so like a [university] degree actually means something” (personal communication, February 28, 2020). Paul agreed that the university has a great reputation and said “I think the only thing that [the university] sometimes can't really offer is a one-digit acceptance rate. That's the only thing. I literally went through every single aspect, it's only not having a one-digit acceptance rate, which some people value too much,” (personal communication, February 28, 2020). These comments demonstrate that even though the university is not an Ivy and does not have a sub 10% acceptance rate, the reputation of the university is still strong and an important factor in enrollment decisions.

**Curriculum, Programs, Location, and Size.** Three students and one staff member noted the importance of the open curriculum in enrollment decisions. The open curriculum, as discussed in the literature review, gives students increased academic freedom compared to other universities. Students were excited about the ability to explore different academic departments, and to choose their major later, as well as the possibility of double majoring. Paul was the only student to list something other than financial aid as the most important factor, and instead said that the open curriculum “was definitely the biggest factor” (personal communication, February 28, 2020). Tony added that “the open curriculum was a big thing for me, like definitely, definitely, definitely” (personal communication, February 28, 2020). Two students noted special programs and course offerings the university offers through the business school and the music school that were very attractive elements. Both staff members and one student mentioned undergraduate research as another factor that influences enrollment decisions. Three students and one staff member noted the location as a positive aspect of the university, that it is located in a

medium-sized city was “perfect.” Additionally, one student and one staff member noted the size. For example, Tony student really liked the size of the university, saying it “wasn’t too big, wasn’t too small” (personal communication, February 28, 2020).

**Community.** Both staff and students talked about the importance of the university community in influencing enrollment decisions. Ralph noted that that university has “a very, very strong reputation for being welcoming and supportive to international students” (personal communication, February 14, 2020) and the student participants seemed to be aware of this reputation. Five students noted the university’s community as a positive aspect about the university. Junior said it was inclusive, and Paul said “one of the things that is really cool about [the university] is the acceptance, like general acceptance of people of color or people who come from like different social economic backgrounds” (personal communication, February 28, 2020). Two students and both staff members said the large community of international students was a positive aspect of the university. Ro noted the importance of having a preexisting social network on campus. She knew that many alumni from her high school were attending the university and found it reassuring to know she would have that support and connection, since attending school in the United States means that you are “away from everyone you ever knew” (personal communication, February 21, 2020).

**Atmosphere.** Lastly, a few students noted some intangible aspects of the university that drew them in. Tony tried to describe the importance of the intangible aspects of the university by saying “we look at the numbers, look at the reputation but there's a very unspoken element in picking your school, which is the vibe. How you actually you just see it and it calls you” (personal communication, February 28, 2020). Ro mentioned something similar saying that the

Dean of Admissions visited her school and gave “us the feeling that this is the right school for us, that was also very important” (personal communication, February 21, 2020). Based on the students’ comments, it is clear they needed to be able to see themselves on campus as part of the university community; they needed to have a strong positive feeling toward the university.

Overall, several individual aspects of the university environment were significant factors in students’ enrollment decisions, including ranking, reputation, curriculum, programs, location, size, community, and atmosphere.

### ***Recommendations***

In addition to cost and environment, students also cited recommendations as a factor that influenced their enrollment decisions. While staff mentioned recommendations in the context of learning about the university, they did not cite it explicitly as a factor that influenced enrollment for students.

**Peers.** Seven of the nine students noted that they received recommendations for the university from their peers who were already attending the university. This gave the students an opportunity to learn about the university and ask questions to their peers rather than staff. Some students seemed to look up to these peers, like Bobbie who said, “I looked at my upper-class students who came here and [they] were really well-rounded people in my opinion” (personal communication, February 28, 2020). Some students really liked what they heard about the experience at the university through these peers, such as Paul who noted that “every person who came to the university somehow experienced some growing ... told me about how they grew up as they went through their experience here and how the university actually challenged you in many ways, but not too much that you feel like you're somehow like below the average ... and

not too little that you feel too comfortable” (personal communication, February 28, 2020).

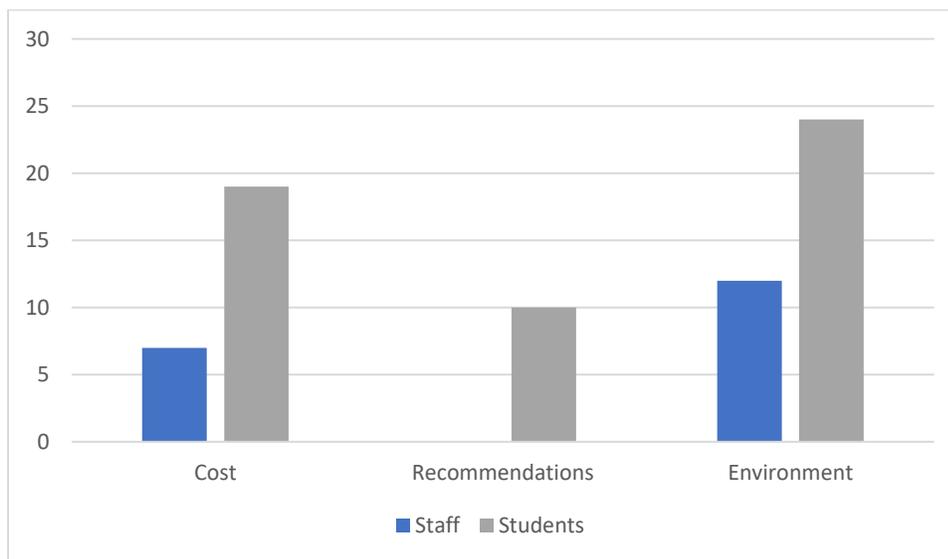
Among many other aspects, Tony noted “just having someone I can look up to in the school. It just checked all the boxes because he was close. I knew him” (personal communication, February 28, 2020). Ro noted how a student pipeline can be very important by saying “I heard a lot about the university at [my high school], so yeah it was it was just natural to apply and see. Because you've got so many students coming from [there] to here” (personal communication, February 21, 2020). Sil said he received a recommendation from a friend who applied and was accepted to the university but went elsewhere.

**Counselors.** In addition to peer recommendations, three of the students who attended international high schools or college preparatory programs also received recommendations from their school counselors. Tony said that his high school counselor met Livia at a conference and recalled “I was always talking to my counselor, so we developed a partnership beyond just like a student-counselor relationship. And so, he's just like this school has to be for [you], so he came back and told me about the [university]” (personal communication, February 28, 2020). This quote highlights the importance of school counselors as connectors between universities and high school students. Since Tony had an excellent relationship with his counselor, he took the recommendation for the university very seriously. Junior added that when trying to choose a college, his high school counselor advised that the university could be “a really good fit” (personal communication, February, 28, 2020). One student at a national high school received a recommendation from a teacher who knew the university. Overall, recommendations for the university from both peers and counselors were an important factor in influencing college enrollment for the students in this study.

Staff and students mentioned several factors that influence international students' decisions to enroll at the university. When the individual factors are combined into categories, university environment was mentioned the most times. However, when looking at individual factors (see Figure 5), financial aid was the most important individual factor. There were some differences in factors among student and staff responses. Figure 6 compares the number of times each category was mentioned by students and staff. This figure has combined each individual factor into the larger category.

### Figure 6

*Comparing Staff and Student Responses to Factors that Influenced College Enrollment*



### Conclusions

This study aimed to answer the following research question: From the perspectives of current international students and university staff, what are the most important factors in international student college choice and in the ultimate decision to enroll at a private research

university located in the Northeast? Through my research, I discovered several important findings about the college search and selection process for international students. This included findings on admissions and enrollment trends at the university, how students learned about the university, obstacles in the application process, and factors that influenced enrollment decisions.

Over the past decade, the university has seen an increase in international student applications and enrolled students, an increase in international admissions staff, an increase in financial aid for international students, and an increase in the diversity of the international student body. These trends were influenced by both external factors like globalization and increased student mobility around the world, as well as internal factors such as internationalization efforts by the university that increased the number of international staff in the admissions office, the financial aid budget for international students, and the number of offices and support staff for international students throughout the university. As described in the literature review, international enrollment numbers increased for many years at post-secondary institutions in the United States, but have started to decline in the past three years. The findings of this study show that the university has not been affected by the national trend of declining international student enrollments.

My findings also revealed how international students learned about the university. This is an important area to consider because it relates to the second stage of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model of college choice, finding information about colleges, and it is a necessary and implicit condition for Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) three-stage model of college choice. Students cannot apply to or enroll in an institution that they do not know about. Several factors contributed to student's knowledge about the university. The biggest factor mentioned by both

staff and students was word of mouth from peers and counselors. This is similar to the findings of Mazzarol and Soutar's study (2002) that showed word of mouth to be one of the most powerful tools in university promotion. After that, students mentioned individual research, while staff mentioned university recruitment efforts including virtual and in-person methods. Both groups mentioned brand recognition or reputation.

The study revealed several unique obstacles that international students face in the college search process which were not explored in the studies presented in the literature review. The biggest obstacle mentioned by both staff and students was a lack of information about the process and individual colleges. A second significant obstacles mentioned by students was the overall process of applying to a university, including completing the application, testing, fulfilling other requirements, and navigating the language barrier. Staff and students also mentioned distance, geopolitics, and family expectations as additional barriers in the college search process. Acknowledging and addressing barriers for international students in the college search and selection process is crucial for the continued support and success of healthy international student enrollment numbers at the university.

Finally, the study revealed several factors that were most important in a student's ultimate decision to enroll in the university. The biggest factor, mentioned by both staff participants and eight of the nine students, was cost in the form of both need-based financial aid and merit scholarships. Cost was the third most important factor in college enrollment decisions in Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) research; however, it did not differentiate among students who pay fees and students who receive financial aid. In this study, both staff and students mentioned that the importance of cost may differ among international students who require financial

assistance and those who do not. The second most important factor in both groups was the environment of the university which includes ranking and reputation, curriculum, programs, location and size, community, and atmosphere. The third prominent factor mentioned only by students was recommendations from peers and counselors. Both personal recommendations and university environment were important factors in Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) research as well. Personal recommendations were ranked second and environment was ranked fourth of the six most important factors in their study. The students in my study broke down the environment into several distinct aspects of the university, providing detailed findings on which aspects of the environment were most important. In this study, cost, university environment, and personal recommendations had a significant impact on international students' decisions to enroll at the university, and can be leveraged by the admissions office to continue encouraging international student enrollment. Additionally, the study revealed that staff and students sometimes had different views on how students learn about the university, obstacles, and factors that influence enrollment.

### **Practical Applications**

These research findings can be applied in many ways by the Office of Admissions at the university. The office can address some of the obstacles that international students face in order to make the process of applying to the university easier for students. For example, the office can try to improve access to information about the college application process through online information sessions on various aspects of the process. The office can continue to make the university accessible to international students with test optional policies and reviewing the English language requirements since testing was mentioned as a significant obstacle.

For the students in this study, cost was the most important factor that influenced their enrollment decisions. Thus, the university can continue to offer both robust financial aid and merit scholarship packages to international students to continue supporting this population. The office can also leverage current international students to play a larger role in recruitment. Peers, or alumni from high school, were a significant factor in both spreading information about the university and influencing prospective students' decisions to apply and enroll. The office should work more closely with current students seeking their feedback and recommendations to increase the impact they can have on the recruitment and enrollment of international students

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

Given the limitations of this study, there is room for further research in this area. In order to truly understand the factors that influence international student enrollment at the university, a comprehensive study that includes a larger and more representative student participant group is necessary. That would include a more diverse representation of gender, citizenships, high schools and students with a variety of financial situations to be present in the participant group. Conducting a multi-case study at other universities may reveal similarities in practices and trends. This type of study could strengthen the results found in this study and demonstrate which factors are important across universities and which factors may be unique to this or other institutions. This study focused on students' experiences, and as such there is room for a study that analyzes admissions data to corroborate the data from student interviews. Additionally, this study was completed before the global COVID-19 pandemic. Conducting a study post COVID-19 would likely lead to new findings and conclusions.

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## Appendix A

## Focus Group Interview Questions – Students

1. When did your college search process begin?
2. How did you decide to attend college in the United States?
3. What obstacles did you face during the U.S. college search and selection process?
4. How did you first learn about the university?
5. What contact did you have either before or during the application process with the university? (i.e. Visits, events, interviews, virtual correspondence)
6. What attracted you to the university?
7. Looking back, what were the most important factors in deciding to enroll at the university (or apply Early Decision if applicable)?
8. Who helped you during the college process?
9. What were your parents' roles in the college search and selection process?
10. Did you have a counselor who supported you in the college process? If so, what was their role?
11. Did you know or talk to any current students at the university when you were applying? If so, what information did you learn from them?
12. How did finances influence your college selection process?

## Appendix B

## Individual Interview Questions – Staff

1. Please describe your career in college admissions including time spent at the university and other institutions as well as area of focus such as international admissions.
2. What changes have you seen in international student recruitment and enrollment at the university during your time here?
3. What changes are national trends versus unique to the university?
4. What external factors influenced these types of changes on a large scale?
5. What internal (i.e. institutional) factors influenced these changes at the university?
6. How do students typically learn about the university?
7. In your opinion, what are the most important factors in international applicants' ultimate decision to enroll at the university?
8. Do these factors differ for different populations of international students, if so, how?
9. What obstacles do international students face in the college search and selection process?
10. What are your goals as a member of the international team for the recruitment and enrollment of international students?
11. What strategies would you like to implement to meet those goals?