

Perceptions of Prospective Masters Students in Higher Education and Student Affairs

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This qualitative study examines how perceptions of Indiana University-Bloomington and its Higher Education and Student Affairs graduate program affect students' choice to attend the institution. Results focus on six key factors in the decision making process: personal factors, perceptions of campus, perceptions of faculty and students, perceptions of academic program, perceptions of assistantship process, and social climate. This study provides important information about perceptions of educational settings and identifies trends useful for graduate student recruitment

The process of choosing a college has gained increased attention in recent years. Public policy regarding the availability of student financial aid and a declining pool of traditional-age students are two factors that have increased competition among institutions. Colleges and universities are now more interested in how prospective students choose institutions (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). If the anticipated five percent decline in the number of baccalaureate degree recipients by the year 2000 occurs, an increase in competition for quantity and quality of graduate students will also occur (Kallio, 1995).

Most of the existing literature that addresses the decisions students make focus on undergraduates. However, graduate students differ from undergraduate students in that they restrict their application process to fewer schools, are more constrained by educational and living costs, are affected by employment opportunities, and are more likely to make decisions based on families and significant others (Olson & King, 1985). Olson and King also state that examining variables that affect graduate school selection has not been a priority for many institutions because, until recently, few colleges and universities had ever experienced a decline in graduate enrollment or resources allocated toward graduate programs. Now there is a growing need for a better understanding of students' decision

making processes and selection of a graduate program (Kallio, 1995; Olson & King, 1985).

This study examines how perceptions of Indiana University-Bloomington (IUB) and its graduate preparation program in Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) affect students' choice. The goal of the study is to determine how perceptions affect the decision to enroll in an institution. Although this study focuses on a specific graduate program, it will offer insight into the effects of student perceptions on choice and increase the body of knowledge on graduate student choice in general.

Literature Review

The literature identifies two categories of factors which affect the decision making process of undergraduate students and which may apply to graduate student choices as well. One category is student characteristics which include demographic and personal attributes (race, sex, parental income, academic ability, etc.). The second is external student variables which include influence of family and institutional characteristics such as costs, location, and curricula (Olson & King, 1985).

College choice models for prospective undergraduate students can be applied to the graduate school selection process. "In general, these models suggest that the decision process consists of a number of stages or phases in which various individual and organizational factors interact to produce outcomes that influence the next stage or phase" (Kallio, 1995, p. 110). Hossler and Gallagher (1987) derived a three-phase decision making process model that includes predisposition, search, and choice. In the predisposition phase, students determine whether or not to continue their education. During the search phase, students gather information about institutions, often through on-campus visits. During the third and final phase, students make a decision based on the information gathered in the first two stages.

Research describing the factors that carry the most weight during the selection process varies. Kallio (1995) identified six factors on which prospective graduate students base their decisions: "residency status, characteristics of the academic environments of the institution and its programs, work-related concerns, spouse considerations, financial aid, and

the social environment of campus life" (p. 119). Of the six factors, residency, academic, and work influences appeared to have the greatest effect on graduate selection (Kallio, 1995). The most significant trend found in one longitudinal study was the increasing importance of a positive association with the personnel and faculty of the institution in the student decision process (Olson, 1992). Additionally, Astin (1993) found that interaction with a student-oriented faculty positively affected students' tendency to enroll in graduate school. Interaction with students from an institution also has a positive effect (Astin, 1993; McCormick, 1995). The reputation of a college or university appears to greatly affect the selection process (Cleave-Hogg, McLean, & Cappe, 1994; Matthews & Hadley, 1993). According to Sevier (1994), when students are asked to choose between their top reasons for their final selection of a college "they invariably choose image" (p. 61).

A small number of studies investigated specific graduate programs. Richmond and Sherman (1991) found that decisions made regarding student affairs preparation programs were influenced by geographical and financial assistance more than by the reputation of the program. In a study on medical school enrollment, Cleave-Hogg, et al. (1994) concluded that location and reputation of the program were major factors in student choice, while the type of program and family or friendship considerations were less important. Webb (1993) found that prospective business graduate students were influenced by the reputation and accreditation of an institution.

The study employs a perceptual framework in which personal interpretation serves as the basis for understanding how each individual experiences their environment. This is important in the college selection because according to the perceptual model, an individual's perception of the environment influences behavior (Strange, 1991). More specifically, Moos (1979) submits a model of social climate comprised of three sets of dimensions found in any environment: relationship, personal growth and development, and system maintenance and change. According to Moos (1979), "the social climate perspective is based on descriptions of environmental 'press' obtained from an inferred continuity and consistency in otherwise discrete events" (pp. 10-11).

The purpose of this study is to discover what affects prospective HESA masters students' decisions to attend IUB or another institution. Thus, this study assumes that prospective students' perceptions of IUB and its HESA program, perceptions of faculty and students, perceptions of academic requirements, and perceptions of personal and financial factors will affect their decisions.

Method

Participants

Twenty-one graduate students who applied as prospective students to the HESA department at IUB in the Spring of 1996 were interviewed for this study. Twenty of these students visited the IUB campus. However, because prospective students drop out at different points in the admission process, one student was interviewed who eliminated IUB before interview weekends occurred. Fifteen of the participants had chosen to attend IUB, while six had chosen to attend other student affairs programs. The sample was purposive: participants were chosen carefully in order to maximize the variety of experiences prior to interviewing at IUB and to attempt to have the sample represent the diversity that existed among the full group of participants. The sample included 6 men and 15 women. Sixteen participants were Caucasian, two African-American, one Biracial, one Hispanic, and one Filipino. The ethnic background of the sample was similar to the breakdown of the current students in the student affairs masters program at IUB.

The students' voluntary participation was requested by calling them on the telephone. Information about the study was then faxed or e-mailed to each interested individual. Each participant read and signed a Study Information Sheet before their interview.

Procedures

Each participant was interviewed by a member of the research team using an interview guide that was developed for this study (see Appendix). The interviews with students currently attending IUB were conducted either in person or over the telephone. The interviews with students at other institutions were conducted over the telephone. The Study Information

Sheet was faxed, e-mailed, or handed to participants just prior to the interview.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Each included an opportunity for the interviewee to answer direct questions and to discuss other thoughts they had during the interview. All interviews were audio taped with the participants' permission. The first three interviews conducted were transcribed in full, the remaining interviews were partially transcribed. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) recommend this for studies with time and financial restraints. All interviews and notes were then reviewed by another member of the research team for accuracy of content and interpretation. Finally, a third researcher coded the data from the interview according to major themes. After all data was coded, the research team met to discuss the coding. Categories were collapsed and recombined based on the information that had been gathered. This process of coding data into categories and then reevaluating the categories was accomplished through the process described by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Member checks were conducted after the categories had been set. Twelve participants were contacted by e-mail and asked to comment on certain categories and several comments they had made to assure that the interpretation was correct. The final categories were personal factors, perceptions of campus, perceptions of faculty and students, perceptions of academic program, perceptions of assistantship, and social climate. These categories reflect the major themes found in the research, and so were used to organize the presentation of the results. All names have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.

Results

Personal Factors

Mentors. The involvement of mentors in the decision process was a seemingly powerful factor. Interestingly, the input on this topic was not included on the study instrument, yet 42.9% of the respondents discussed the issue. Furthermore, eight women discussed the importance of a mentor in their decision process, but only one man did. Mary, a Caucasian female, stated that her mentor completed the graduate degree at USC and encouraged her to apply to that program. Likewise, Judy a Caucasian female, knew a recent graduate of IUB, and several administrators that

were familiar with the IUB program, all of whom prompted her to apply. In addition, Carrie, a Caucasian female, was referred to the IUB program by professional mentors from her undergraduate residence life position.

Finances. Over half of the participants discussed the importance of financial concerns in their decision process. This supports findings from other studies (Olson & King, 1984; Kallio, 1995). Although not mentioned as often as admission to the academic program or the acquisition of an assistantship for admission and experiential purposes, financial incentive and tuition packages were important to several respondents. Judy considered it important to be in a program where the assistantship would pay for her education. William, a Caucasian male, stated, "I didn't want to take the chance of having to pay for my tuition. So it came down to a factor of money and time." Conversely, Rosa, a Hispanic female, commented that getting admitted was more important than the financial package.

Relationship. Of the ten respondents who reported being in a relationship during the selection process, only five mentioned relationship status as an influence on their decision. Three students already had a significant other in Bloomington. None of the students considered their relationship markedly influential due to a preexisting desire to attend IUB over other institutions based on more critical criteria. Janice, a Caucasian female with a fiancée in Indianapolis, chose to attend IUB over closer campuses, despite her relationship status.

Perceptions of Campus

Reputation of IUB. The reputation of the IUB campus was shadowed by perceptions of the IUB HESA program. Most participants who discussed IUB, were actually referring to the IUB HESA program. An important tie between these two topics was pointed out by Mona, a Caucasian female, who noted that "the reputation of the school is powerful in focusing on the reputation of the program." It was apparent that the reputation of IUB affected student choices in several cases.

Size of institution. Thirty-three percent of the students mentioned size as a factor. Athena, a Filipino female, thought that one of the other schools she interviewed with was "too small." However, four respondents had negative things to say about IUB's size. Cindy, a Caucasian female,

considered the large size of IUB its one drawback, stating that "it was intimidating."

Appearance of campus. Only seven respondents commented about the appearance of the campus. Four respondents found the IUB campus to be aesthetically pleasing and thus a more desirable place to attend. Hershey, a Caucasian male, shared that "the physical campus I thought was very pretty. It was also very well maintained." He found this comforting in its similarity to his undergraduate institution. Athena commented on the unpleasant appearance of another campus and its affect on her decision to attend IUB. Reginald, a biracial male, found that his expectations of the IUB campus were inflated. "The campus was not what I thought it would be. I wasn't as impressed as I thought I would be."

Location. Location of the campus played a role in the decision process of eight participants for various reasons. Reginald commented that IUB was closer to his parents than his undergraduate institution had been or other graduate programs he was considering. Mona wanted to be in the Midwest. Athena noted that one institution was not in a good location due to its climate. Erika, an African-American female, noted that one institution she considered was "in a cornfield." Interest in the host city of the institution was heard in several other responses as well. Athena commented that the host city of IUB had more to offer than the area surrounding one of her other top choices.

Perceptions of Faculty and Students

Interaction with faculty. One of the most important factors influencing participants' decisions was interaction with faculty. Nineteen participants (91%) discussed interaction with the faculty as influencing their decision process. Ten of the 19 respondents considered the interaction with faculty cursory or just a part of the interview process. Betty, a Caucasian female, felt "looked down upon" by the faculty at IUB. Further, she noted that other institutions treated candidates as potential colleagues, not as potential students. Jackie, a Caucasian female, considered her faculty interactions at IUB poor.

Conversely, some students enjoyed their interaction with the faculty at IUB and other institutions. Brett, a Caucasian male, really enjoyed the

faculty interview and considered the faculty component an important part of the decision process. Kendra, a Caucasian female, noted that she met "a couple of great faculty." Erika thought, "At Western, faculty had more personal contact with students." Three participants who had attended IUB as undergraduates stated that long-term relationships with faculty or administrators in the program were influential in their decision process.

Interaction with prospective students. The opportunity to interact with other prospective students was tied to attending an organized interview weekend. Seven participants offered comments on this topic. Half of the men in the study felt that interaction with prospective students was important. Bobby, a Caucasian male, liked the personal connection he gained with his future colleagues. Kendra thought getting to know other prospective students was important because "you're going to be working together." Elroy, a Caucasian male, thought less of one school he visited because the interview process was limited to three candidates per trip and did not allow him to interact with more of his potential classmates. However, Elroy also noted that this design offered a "personal touch" and "quality time" to each candidate.

Interaction with current students. There were mixed responses to the interaction with current students in the academic program. Four participants felt deceived or "put off" by the students in the program with whom they interviewed or interacted. Carrie considered the people at every school as being on their "best behavior" and saw no real distinctions.

The remaining seven respondents on this topic considered their interaction with current students as a positive influence, particularly when respondents perceived those students as being honest and straightforward. As Kendra asserted, "The first and second year students that I did meet were the most helpful of anyone. . . . they pretty much told me how it was gonna be, and that's what I wanted to know. . . . That really sold me on the program."

Perceptions of Academic Program

A strong majority (85.7%) of the students offered comments regarding positive perceptions of the academic program. Four of the six respondents that now attend other institutions had positive perceptions of the IUB

program. These comments fell into two categories, those related to the perceived reputation of the program and those related to program focus. In the first category, students spoke of gathering information regarding the reputation of the program from student affairs professionals, mentors, and other prospective students. In the second category, students talked about program focus being administrative, counseling, or academic/research based.

Perceptions of Assistantship Process

The topic of assistantships was popular among respondents, with 71% discussing some aspect as important to their decision process. Because assistantships are required in the IUB program, availability and the interview process were important to candidates. The organization of the interview process was discussed by several respondents as being poorer at IUB than at other schools. Ten had negative perceptions of the assistantship process at IUB. Some students looked more fondly on institutions that provided better organized and more timely processes for interviewing and issuance of offers.

Another theme under this topic was the availability of positions. Several students indicated a desire for a specific position. Sue, a Caucasian female, would not have attended IUB if she had not been offered the assistantship she desired. Furthermore, participants had the perception that IUB offered few positions outside of residence life. Mary, who chose not to attend IUB, stated that the IUB process focused on housing. LaShanta, an African-American female who chose IUB, suggested that if you are "not interested in [residence life], go elsewhere."

Timing. The timeline institutions used when making offers of assistantship positions was also important to prospective students. Numerous comments suggested that IUB made offers too late or without other pertinent communication to remain competitive in candidates' search. At least three students' decisions were affected by receiving an offer from another institution prior to hearing from IUB or by not having an offer issued by a rival institution on their list. William waited a week for an offer from IUB and, after receiving none, committed to another institution. Likewise, Mary contacted IUB two weeks after her interview and there was no decision on positions. She selected another institution. Overall, the

assistantship process was one of the most influential factors on the decision process of prospective students. Erika, speaking about the assistantship, asserted, "I would have to say that was what determined what school I attended."

Social Climate

One theme not included in our original assumptions, but which came up repeatedly during the interviews, is the idea of "comfort" and "fit." Sue states, "You've got to get a program that you think will fit with you." The words "comfort" and "fit" were specifically used by 57.1% of those interviewed when talking about factors that influenced their decision making process. However, these terms were also used in a more general way by the participants. Bobby's questions, "Will this fit for me? Is this what I'm looking for?" were similar to many others' general statements of "fit."

In reviewing the data the researchers questioned how to categorize the general concept of "fit" and "comfort." Brett gave us the answer. During the interview stage he recounted his visit to Michigan which coincided with "Hash Bash." He stated, "I didn't care for it . . . I could tell, it wasn't a good fit for me." As a part of the member check process, Brett was asked in a follow-up phone call to define "fit" in this context. He stated:

I suppose it has to do with a feeling of being welcome in an environment by the people, the available opportunities, the institution, even the climate and the campus artifacts. I feel it's important to find a comfort level available in an environment...I just simply wasn't completely comfortable in that environment as I recall.

Brett's comments and those of several other participants supported Moos perceptual model of person-environment interaction, particularly his focus on the social climate's influence on the people who inhabit it. Our data supports Moos' (1979) relationship dimension (involving interpersonal relations among the people in the environment) and the personal development dimension (relating to growth opportunities made possible by the environment). The researchers categorized these uses as "social climate influences." William recommended that other prospective students spend an adequate amount of time on campus during the interview process to

determine fit with the general attitude of the student body. LaShanta insisted on talking to other minority students about IUB and the community to determine "atmosphere" and "fit." During member checks she stated:

Because I am a minority I sometimes feel that starting over is a little more of a trying experience. When I was asking about atmosphere, I was seeking information on how difficult it would be for me to be here. . . .in the end, I decided that . . . there was enough of a fit for me to be reasonably happy here for two years.

Discussion

Moos (1979) asserted, and this study supports, that students' perceptions provide needed and important information about educational settings. Additionally, this study supports the research of Kallio (1995) and Olson (1992) in finding that faculty interaction, work related concerns, financial aid, and relationship status are important considerations during the process of choosing a graduate program. This study found trends useful to faculty and administrators for graduate student recruitment and retention efforts. The study also provides a better understanding of perceptions held by students and how their decisions are influenced by the perceived factors forming the choice process.

Mentors, assistantships, and social climate were factors that were found to be important during the decision-making process. These factors had not been identified as significant in previous research. Moreover, the importance of mentors in the decision process is underscored by the spontaneity of its mention.

A number of limitations to the study must be acknowledged. First, the use of a small sample from a single university is prohibitive of generalization to other campuses. However, this study does show the need for future studies spanning various universities and/or programs. Second, interviewer bias is also a consideration because each researcher recently went through a similar decision process and the researchers have personal relationships with some of the members of the sample. Third, time influenced the study in that it was conducted over a 15-week time period and several months after the participants actual decision making process. In addition, Pennington, Zvonkovic, and Wilson (1989) found that student

satisfaction was lowest at midterm. Since most of the interviews in this study occurred very close to midterm, satisfaction reported in this study may be lower than if reported at another time during the semester. Fourth, the subjective perceptions of participants are open to varying interpretation. Finally, the participants' exposure to their college of choice since the final decision may have changed measured perceptions.

In conclusion, faculty and administrators should remain aware of the impact of all of the factors mentioned above on prospective Masters Students' decision making process. In particular, institutions should continue or improve the fostering of relationships with alumni and other student affairs professionals as an important recruitment tool. Program administrators should also devote energy to providing adequate information to prospective students regarding assistantships. Institutions should take heed of students' need to feel comfortable in their environment. More interaction with faculty and students may provide a method of gaining answers to their questions. Some of the participants in this study made crucial decisions based on limited information, potentially establishing inappropriate expectations. Finally, institutional representatives should offer prospective students insight into the social climate of the institution and the surrounding community to aid in their decision making.

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Appendix - Interview Guide

Introduction: Thank you, again, for agreeing to interview with me. As described on the consent form, this study is intended to investigate the perceptions held by prospective graduate students that influenced their decision to attend IUB or another graduate program in college student personnel or a related field.

To begin, I would like to take some descriptive information...

Name: _____ Age: _____

Phone: _____ (if applicable) Consent form: _____

Gender: _____ Relationship Status: _____

Ethnicity: _____

Undergrad. Inst.: _____ Date of Grad.: _____

Activities since graduation (i.e. professional employment):

To what other graduate programs or institutions did you apply?

Of those programs/institutions, with which schools did you interview?

Did your interviews include campus visits? If so, would you like to elaborate on any elements (i.e. the physical campus, faculty, or student group)?

What assistantships did you apply to at Indiana University-Bloomington?

What assistantships did you apply to at other institutions?

Thanks for allowing me to gather that background information. Now I would like to start off with a general question or two and see where the conversation takes us...

- 1) What factors influenced your decision upon which graduate institution to attend?
- 2) What specifically about IUB prompted you to attend or not attend?
- 3) If the following factors have not yet been covered in the discussion, additional questions can be posed:

Relationship status	Interaction with students
Assistantship/financial aid	Interaction with faculty
Reputation of IUB	Reputation of HESA program
- 4) Have you been pleased with your chosen program? Why or why not?
- 5) Looking back at the decision process, what insight might you offer, for example, to a prospective student this spring?

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Minority Admissions Policies and the Courts: What's a School to Do?

Ryan Forsythe

Recent legal cases have defined admissions policies which differ for minorities and nonminorities as racist and illegal. This paper examines the challenge of reconciling institutional commitment to diversity with these legal decisions. The options available to institutions are considered, followed by suggested directions for administrators.

In 1992, four applicants who were denied admission to the University of Texas Law School sued the school and claimed that their rights under the Fourteenth Amendment had been violated (Edley, 1996). The law school used different test score requirements for minorities than for non-minorities when making admissions decisions. Based on a "Texas Index" score (a function of LSAT scores and undergraduate grade point average), applicants were divided into three categories: those who would likely be offered admission, those who would likely be denied admission, and those who would receive more scrutiny before a decision was made ("Admissions," 1996). To be in the admit category, white students required a score of 199, while preferred minorities required a score of 189.

The case, *Hopwood v. State of Texas*, was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which refused to hear it. As a result, the decision remained that "the law school may not use race as a factor in law school admissions" (Admissions, 1996, p. 1187). The decision of the court indicated a belief that using a higher criteria for one group of applicants constitutes discrimination.

A closer look at standardized tests reveals that utilizing the same criteria for all individuals may discriminate against members of certain groups. Critics of standardized tests believe the tests are biased (Beaver, 1996). FairTest is an advocacy group that monitors such tests. The group argues that many of the concepts of the Scholastic Aptitude Test refer to elements of white culture with which minority students might not be familiar. They cite a question that over 50% of white students answered