

EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN DURING A
PRE-ENROLLMENT VISIT TO CAMPUS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

by

SCOTT ROBERT ARGO

(Under the Direction of Laura Dean)

ABSTRACT

As the world changes, institutions of higher education are constantly adopting new business practices in order to ensure future success of their institutions. While enrollment managers are focused on their marketing and recruitment tactics, high school students are being inundated with recruitment materials including invitations to visit campus, a traditional method of promoting a college experience. Although students who visit a college campus are twice as likely to matriculate as students who do not visit prior to the application process, there is a lack of knowledge on what specific factors of the visit influence that process. This generic qualitative study used Strange and Banning's 2015 campus ecology framework as a model to examine the experiences of seven first-time freshmen and understand which aspects of a campus visit at a small, four-year institution in the Southeast were most meaningful as they moved through their individual college search process. This study concluded that the campus visit experience of prospective college students was influential in their college search process, and although students often visited campus with a specific set of priorities, other factors emerged as a result of the visit and become important priorities. Ultimately, multiple visits to campus impacted students' college choice process as they were able to begin to understand the campus culture and better

envision themselves attending the institution. The results of the study include suggestions for institutions of higher education as they continue to invest in campus visits and shape the institution to meet students' expectations.

INDEX WORDS: campus visit, college choice, higher education, enrollment management

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SCOTT ROBERT ARGO

B.A., Augusta State University, 2004

M.P.A., Augusta State University, 2008

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SCOTT ROBERT ARGO

Major Professor: Laura A. Dean
Committee: Diane L. Cooper
Merrily S. Dunn

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my mother, Kim Argo, who instilled in me that education is a lifelong learning adventure. A UGA Triple Dawg, her commitment to education through her efforts as a teacher, administrator, and school board member has taught me that to lead is to serve. Mom, this work is dedicated to you not only as a gesture of my sincere appreciation, but also as an acknowledgment of my responsibility to future students whose care will be entrusted to me. Thank you for the example you provided; I am lucky to have learned from the best!

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“You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.”

Christopher Robin to Winnie the Pooh

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Admissions and marketing for higher education in today's society is competitive (Secore, 2018). Institutions have made a large financial investment, allocating considerable portions of their budgets in recruiting students and yielding them to an institution. Institutions of higher education are in competition with other institutions, making the challenge of enrolling students difficult (Johnson, 2010). The traditional means of marketing to students through brochures and college fairs are giving way to newer methods including social media and websites (Johnson, 2010). Colleges utilize multiple strategies when recruiting high school students including email marketing, institutional websites, and campus visit opportunities (NACAC, 2019). As many institutions of higher education are expected to either maintain or increase enrollment annually, many rely on the campus visit as it is repeatedly the most influential element during the college choice process (Secore, 2018).

The campus visit has proved to be more influential than high-tech sources including websites and social media (Johnson, 2010). Previous research shows that campus visits were the most influential aspect on a student's application decision followed by influence from parents or family members, current students and alumni testimonials, websites, and mailings by the institution (Hesel, 2004). Over 90 percent of students surveyed in Hesel's (2004) study indicated that they visited a prospective college. Additionally, the higher the socioeconomic status of a prospective student's family, the more likely they visited a college campus (Hesel, 2004).

Enrollment Trends

According to the National Association of Collegiate Admissions Counseling's (2019) *State of College Admissions Report*, there has been an increase in recent years in the number of four-year colleges to which each student applies. While there has been an increase of applicants to institutions of higher education, individual students applying to multiple institutions has resulted in a decline in yield of accepted students who matriculate into an institution by one percent (Hussar & Bailey, 2014). In addition to a decline in yield, enrollments have also declined due to a stagnation in high school graduation rates and limited family access to financial resources (Selingo, 2017). Selingo (2018) stated that U.S. high school graduation rates were mostly flat from 2010 - 2018. In addition to the decline in yield and stagnation in high school graduation rates, enrollment has been falling even in periods of unemployment when enrollments traditionally have grown (Fincher & Katsinas, 2017).

As institutions plan toward the future, the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education's 2020 report, *Knocking on the College Door*, states that unlike previous years, the number of high school graduates is now increasing; however, it is expected to peak in the mid-2020s before entering a period of modest decline through the mid-2030s.

As enrollment professionals seek to understand enrollment trends, it is also important to understand factors other than just the overall number of graduates as institutions of higher education work to modify campus visits in order to meet the demands of current high school students. The current generation of college students, Generation Z, is more racially and ethnically diverse and includes more first generation and low-income students than previous generations (Selingo, 2018). The traditional-aged college student is defined by IGI global (2019)

as a student between the age of 18 and 22 who is a full-time student, receives financial support from parents, and lives on or near the campus of an institution of higher education.

As institutions of higher education are tasked to build a freshman class each year in an increasingly competitive environment, campus visits are predicted to continue to be an important factor in the college choice process (Okerson, 2016).

College Choice Process

The process of college choice can be explained as the decision of whether and where to attend college (Bergerson, 2009). Institutions of higher education continue to seek and understand the components of the choice process that influence that decision. The competition for increasing student enrollment creates a need for institutions to evaluate how recruitment practices, including campus visits, can impact a student's decision-making process (Burdett, 2013). This study will examine the experiences of students during a campus visit and explore which elements of a campus visit are most meaningful and their impact on the college choice process.

Problem Statement

As the world changes, so do traditional-aged college bound students. Institutions of higher education are forced to adapt with the changes in order to meet the demands of the world around them. In the current state of higher education, institutions are increasingly and constantly adopting new business practices and often altering their course offerings and approach to educating students in order to adapt to change and ensure future success of their institutions (Rossi, 2014). While enrollment managers are focused on their marketing and recruitment tactics, high school students are being inundated with recruitment materials including mailed

literature, requests to follow colleges on social media, and emails inviting them to visit campus (Gregory, 2014; Johnston, 2010).

The campus visit is a traditional method of promoting a college experience. Research shows that students who visit a college campus are twice as likely to matriculate than students who do not visit prior to the application process (Brown, 2010; Magolda, 2000; Okerson, 2016).

The strong influence a campus visit has on a student's decision to matriculate puts a massive weight on institutions to deliver an effective and enjoyable visit experience, whether it be a campus tour, informational session, open house, or accepted student event. As higher education continues to evolve while the needs and desires of prospective students simultaneously change, it is more difficult for institutions to understand what factors and experiences are most influential during a visit to campus. Traditional-age, college-bound students have changed. Often referred to as Generation Z, these students are described as concerned about their environment while wanting to maximize learning through technology and social media use, and through communication platforms and preferences (Loveland, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge 2017). Therefore, higher education recruitment must adapt. Despite general research on the influence of campus visits on a student's decision to matriculate at a college or university, there is little research on the elements of a campus visit that preferentially influence a student's college choice.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand which aspects of a campus visit at a small, four-year institution in the Southeast influence a student's college choice process. This research will explore the experiences during the visit that influenced prospective students. The experiences of the students will be explored to uncover what aspects of their experience are most

meaningful and contribute to heightened interest in the institution. In other words, this study will explore how students perceived the institution through a pre-enrollment visit to campus and what elements of the campus visit influenced their decision-making process.

Theoretical Framework

A theory in qualitative studies is a way to understand a broad explanation of behaviors and attitudes (Creswell, 2014). To guide this study, I will use Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology framework as a model for examining how campus environments affected the campus visit experience of enrolled students during their pre-enrollment visit to campus. Building on Lewin's 1926 person-environment theory, Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology model is a valuable model to categorize features of the campus that may be meaningful to potential students during a visit to campus. The campus ecology model offers a framework for understanding the experiences of the participants through generic qualitative inquiry. Through qualitative, semi-structured interviews, I will seek to understand and make meaning of which elements of a campus visit influenced a student's college choice process.

Research Question

To better understand the aspects of a visit that heighten interest in the institution, the proposed study will seek to answer the following research question:

How do students describe the influence of aspects of the campus visit on their college choice process?

Research Paradigm

According to Creswell (2014), a paradigm is a way of looking at the work as it is compiled of certain philosophical assumptions and traditions that guide thinking and action in the research process. For this study, I will use a constructivist paradigm as a framework to guide

my research methodology for data collection and analysis. A constructivist operates under the assumption that reality and knowledge are socially constructed and evolve through the lived experiences of the research participants (Creswell, 2014). A constructivist often examines and explores in-depth processes and experiences in social sciences that cannot be captured through objective processes. Therefore, researchers employing the constructivist paradigm are focused on characteristics and behavior of individuals or groups who occupy and particular culture (Creswell, 2014).

A constructivist paradigm aligns with the theoretical framework that I have chosen to guide this study. Students who participated in a visit to campus will be able to share their experience, and as the researcher, I will be able to better understand how students' experiences during the campus visit influenced their college choice process by applying Strange and Banning's (2015) environmental framework.

Operational Definitions

To fully understand the study being conducted, it is important to define key terms as they relate to the research. The following definitions are provided for clarification of the terms used throughout this study:

Admissions: Within the context of this study, Admissions is the process of applying and entering an institution of higher education (Lauren, 2008).

Campus visit: An experience available to prospective students and families to take a journey through a college or university's campus in the form of including information sessions with an admissions office, campus tours, class experiences, meeting with professors or department advisors, visiting campus buildings of special interest such as museums, visiting the bookstore,

touring residence halls, eating on campus, or exploring the town or city where the college is located (Westman & Bouman, 2009).

College choice: College choice refers to the outcomes or patterns of enrollment (Bergerson, 2009).

Enrollment managers: The higher educational professionals responsible for establishing marketing plans for the recruitment and retention of students and meeting goals related to enrolling student.

High school graduate: An individual who has received a diploma for completing a prescribed course of study at a secondary school by a school authority (Hussar & Bailey, 2014).

Prospective student: A student who may attend a post-secondary institution in the future (Lauren, 2008).

Tour guide: A college or university student tasked with showing prospective students and their families around the college or university campus (Westman & Bouman, 2009).

Traditional-aged college student: Students between the age of 18 – 22 who proceed directly to an institution of higher education from high school with a clear idea on their next educational step (Massey, 1997).

Assumptions and Delimitations of the Study

The college choice search process is a complex experience as there are numerous factors that traditional-aged students consider when drafting a list of institutions to examine (Cabrera, 2000). This study will only examine students looking at a small, four-year, undergraduate institution located in the southeastern United States and their campus visit experience. Since the study examines campus visits at one institution, rather than a variety of institutions, it is understood that this delimitation frames the study.

Another important factor to consider is that this study will involve interviewing a small group of students. Since not all students at the institution were interviewed immediately after the campus visit, the data collected may not be representative of the experience of the greater population of prospective students at one southeastern college, which for the purpose of this study will be referred to as Golden College.

The students that will be interviewed in this study all chose to attend Golden College. It can be assumed that those who enrolled may have had a more positive campus visit experience than those who did not enroll.

Significance of the Study

Campus visits are one of the most influential factors in the college choice process and are one of the core ways high school students interact with institutions of higher education (Mattern, Woo, Hossler, & Wyatt, 2010; Yost & Tucker 1995). The campus visit provides a prospective student the opportunity to experience an institution and its culture first-hand. Ultimately, a campus visit allows a prospective student to envision themselves as a student on the campus, which can help them determine if the campus is the best fit during the college choice process. The concept of institutional fit is an important theme in college choice, and a student who feels a sense of belonging at an institution during a visit to campus during the search process often forms an emotional bond to that particular institution (Mattern, Woo, Hossler, & Wyatt, 2010; Hoover, 2009). The emotional connection that a student may feel because of a visit can sway a student's decision to apply to a college, and ultimately it can affect whether or not a student attends the institution (Cohen, 2009; Yost & Tucker, 1995). It is crucial for enrollment officers at institutions of higher education to understand what elements resonate most with students in order to improve recruitment methods.

While the findings from this study may be useful for institutions to improve recruitment tactics, it can also benefit prospective students by sparking change to create more meaningful visit experiences. Hoover (2010) argued:

The ritual has never been more important, for colleges and applicants alike. In a bleak economy, tuition-dependent institutions face increasing competition for paying customers, and administrators are pulling out all the stops to recruit them. In turn, the choices applicants make have lifelong consequences—and often come with big price tags. For both parties, the tour is crucial. Research shows that nothing influences a student's decision about where to apply and enroll as much as the visit. So plenty's at stake when families pack up the minivan and drive from college to college, hoping to glean something at each stop. (pp. 35-36)

Unpacking the elements of the campus visit is significant to both institutions of higher education and prospective students, as it highlights one aspect of the college choice process. For institutions of higher education, the study can be used by enrollment officers to understand elements of a campus visit that are most important to prospective students. Institutions of higher education often rely on student tour guides to connect with prospective students (Washburn & Patroshius, 2004). Since tour guides are an integral part of the campus visit, it is important that enrollment officers have a strong understanding of what experiences during the visit to campus impact prospective students.

Ultimately, the primary job of enrollment officers is to understand the desires of prospective students in target markets and employ tactics to meet those desires (Paulsen, 1990). By gaining insight from prospective students as they examine the elements of a campus visit,

institutions of higher education may adapt their visit experience to boost the effectiveness of recruitment efforts.

Subjectivity Statement

As a professional within the enrollment management field who has worked closely with campus visits, I come into this research process with knowledge and experiences that may influence the research process. As an example, knowing that the profession needs more literature on which aspects of a campus visit are most meaningful to current traditional-aged, college-bound students fuels my interest in this research topic. Furthermore, my connection to the enrollment management field may make it more difficult to separate myself from the research topic. As described by Creswell (2014), I will attempt to block any preconceived ideas I have about campus visits in order to conduct the research with a focus on making meaning of the participants' experiences. While my professional career influences my interest in the research topic, by using a constructivist approach, I hope to acknowledge the experiences students had during their visit to campus and the aspects of those visits that were most meaningful from the perspective of the students studied.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the current state of recruitment efforts by institutions across the country and the study of campus visit as it outlined the research problem. The chapter provided context on the factors that influence college choice. The connection that a student makes with an institution during a campus visit can influence a student's decision to apply and ultimately enroll to a particular institution of higher education. Hesel (2004) described the significant impact a visit to campus can have on a prospective student's interest in an institution when a campus is perceived as having a welcoming nature during a visit. While there is vast research on the

influence of campus visits on a student's decision to enroll at an institution of higher education, there is little research on the aspects of a campus tour that ultimately impact a student's college choice.

The next chapter, Chapter 2, will examine the existing literature focused on the influence that a campus visit can have on influencing college choice. It will describe the generational characteristics of the students examined in this study, explore the literature on campus environments, and evaluate the research problem by further describing the theoretical framework for this study.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature review will explore a history of the college choice process and how the campus visit influences a students' decision-making process. Additionally, it is important to understand what experiences during the campus visit are most meaningful to prospective students and the implications of these views on prospective students' personal and academic decision-making processes. The following literature review is organized into five main sections. In the first section, I will examine the historical research on the college choice process. In the second section, I will focus on college choice factors. In the third section, I will focus on today's college student and the traits of generation Z. In the fourth section, I will provide an overview of the research on the premise of the campus visit and its purpose in the students' college choice process. Finally, I will provide an overview of Strange and Banning's (2001) campus environmental theory. This review provides a foundation for pursuit of this study.

College Choice Models

According to Okerson (2016), the college choice process is difficult to understand as influence on the decision-making process and the path to higher education is an individual process for prospective students. Over the last fifty years, colleges and universities have attempted to gain a better understanding of how prospective students choose an institution of higher education. As competition increased and marketing practices became more advanced, institutions of higher education began focusing on the recruitment of students rather than selecting from students who applied (Okerson, 2016). A considerable amount of research

focused on college choice over the past several decades and is rooted in the findings and conceptual models of three publications.

During the first 300 years of American higher education, admission and recruitment practices were primarily an onboarding process that did not use sales tactics. However, post-Civil War and World War II, when college and university enrollment experienced immense growth, recruitment efforts became standard practices to attract and screen applicants. College recruitment practices were initially dependent on market principles for success, but over time, practices shifted to provide more information and increased attention to prospective students (Johnson, 2000). From the 1970s until now, colleges have developed two basic market-oriented desires including forecasting enrollment more effectively and influencing the college-going decision-making process of desired students (Robinson, 2011).

Chapman's (1981) model of college choice was developed based on factors that prior researchers (Nolfi, 1979; Tillery & Kildegaard, 1973) identified as the most influential in a student's consideration of attending a post-secondary institution. Chapman's (1981) research was furthered by Litten (1982) in an effort to expand upon biographical and demographic factors of students influence the college choice process. Finally, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) developed a three-phase, developmental model of college choice built upon the work of Chapman (1981) and Litten (1982). Each of these models will be discussed as they serve as a foundation for college choice theory.

Chapman's Student College Choice Model

Chapman's Student College Choice Model (1981) was developed during a time when institutions began to invest resources to market their institutions to prospective students due to fears of a decline in high school graduates choosing to attend college. Prior to his research,

Chapman (1981) stated that colleges believed they could affect students' choice of college by targeting their recruitment or modifying the description of their institution. Chapman conducted his research in response to a lack of admissions officers operating from a systematic model of the influences on student college choice, stating that without a model, colleges may overlook ways to increase the effectiveness of their recruiting. Chapman (1981) reviewed prior college selection literature to create a model that examined how student characteristics and external influences impacted the student's decision to attend a particular college. Chapman identified student characteristics as including socioeconomic status, academic ability, level of educational aspiration, and high school performance. The external influences included the influences of people, an institution of higher education's characteristics, and the communication between the institution of higher education and the student (Chapman, 1981). By determining student's characteristics and the influential factors, Chapman (1981) sought to understand the most meaningful factors in college choice so that institutions of higher education could redevelop recruitment strategies and printed recruitment materials.

Influences of people. Chapman (1981) found that the influence of others, such as parents, high school teachers and counselors, peers, and students currently enrolled at the postsecondary institution were an integral part of the college choice process. Peer influence was the most impactful on a student's consideration of a particular institution. Furthermore, Chapman (1981) stated that if a currently enrolled student shared with a prospective student what attending a particular college was like, it was the most influential factor. Parents also influenced a student's behavior during the college choice process as they influenced the student's choice based on cost of attendance (Chapman, 1981).

Institutional characteristics. Chapman (1981) also considered the role played by institutional characteristics, most notably their academic compatibility, as an important factor in college choice. Chapman (1981) stated that prospective students often pursued institutions of higher education that had students with similar academic capabilities as their own. To determine this, students often examined the average standardized test scores, high school grade point average, and the class rank of the previous year's admitted class. Other factors included distance of the college to a prospective student's home, academic offerings and majors, and financial aid awards (Chapman, 1981).

Communication by the institution. The third factor of influence in Chapman's (1981) study was the communication by the institution. From his research, Chapman suggested that an institution's printed material did not directly affect a student's decision during the initial selection process but found that it was used to confirm a student's perception that they had about a given institution. Chapman (1981) concluded in his model that additional research should be done to confirm a student's perception of an institution based on marketing and influence by student's families.

Chapman's (1981) model was one of the first attempts to better understand how students experienced the college choice process. Chapman's (1981) model has proven to be a noteworthy contribution to the study, but serves as a fairly elementary understanding of students' choice behaviors in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different students experience the college choice process. Litten's Model of College Choice (1982) furthered Chapman's research that was based on existing data sets that then informed enrollment trends.

Litten's Model of College Choice

Litten's (1982) research provided additional insight into Chapman's (1981) model as it relates to the experiences of students as they move through the various stages of the college choice process. Litten's research provided college administrators with the information needed to have more insight while developing recruitment strategies including the campus visit. Overall, Litten (1982) sought to better understand the college choice process as he criticized Chapman's (1981) work as being highly generalized and focused on the outcomes of the college selection process.

Litten (1982) employed principles derived from general marketing theory that informed the practice of segmenting students based on biographical and demographic traits in order for institutions of higher education to most effectively reach students during the college choice process. Litten (1982) evaluated different groups to distinguish how they differed in their conduct when segmented and what commonalities they had during the college selection process to understand when segmentation may be appropriate during the marketing and recruitment processes. Based on a review of existing research, Litten (1982) developed six aspects of the college selection process as the focus of research including timing of the process, number of institutional options considered, type of information sought, attributes of the institutions that are considered, type of information media used or preferred, and influential people. Segmentation variables included the race, sex, ability level, parents' educational level, and geographic location of prospective students (Litten, 1982). The results of Litten's study (1982) and review of literature will now be discussed in the context of each segmented group.

Race. Litten (1982) found many differences among varying racial groups. These differences included when students began the college choice process, as non-white students often

started the process later than other groups of students. The research also concluded that non-white students often considered a wider variety and number of schools. Other factors included the number of campus visits attended, influences by admissions representatives, and the use of parents as resources (Litten, 1982).

Sex. Litten (1982) found that the differences based on sex are smaller than those between races as both males and females began the information-gathering phase of the college choice process around the same time. While women often begin the application process earlier, both complete the process around the same time (Litten, 1982). Litten found that women are more likely to be influenced by peers and other significant influences, and that residence life was more important to females than males (Litten, 1982).

Academic ability. For the study, the academic ability of a student was based on the results of standardized testing on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (Litten, 1982). The higher the ability of students, the more likely they are to apply to more schools (Litten, 1982). Likewise, students who appear to have a higher academic ability start the process earlier than the lower groups. Litten (1982) also found that high ability students rely on their high school counselors as a primary source of information at greater rates as they often have more access to them. Litten (1982) also concluded that the higher the ability of a student, the less likely it was that the cost of attendance was a factor.

Educational attainment of parents. Litten's (1982) model stated that the timing of a student's application submission as well as the number of applications a student submitted were different based on their parent's educational level. Students who were not first-generation college students were influenced more by their parents rather than high school counselors as compared to students with parents that did not have a college education. Students whose parents

have a college education are also more influenced by campus visits than those of their peers (Litten, 1982).

Geographic location. By focusing on institutions of higher education in six different geographic regions, Litten's (1982) study found that depending on the location of the state of an institution, students often conducted their college choice process during different months. Additionally, based on the geographic location, interest levels of recreational and co-curricular activities were more important to prospective students (Litten, 1982). Finally, students from the Northwest relied more heavily on seeking information from printed materials while students in the central and mid-west regions relied more heavily on receiving information from alumni (Litten, 1982).

Through his study, Litten (1982) was able to provide further insight to Chapman's (1981) model by further detailing the experiences of student as they navigate the college choice process. Litten's (1982) model allowed institutions of higher education to better understand students' experiences as they developed new and inclusive strategies for recruiting students. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) conducted research that built upon the work of Chapman (1981) and Litten (1982) and serves as one of the most influential models of the college choice process (Bergerson, 2009).

Hossler and Gallagher's Three-Phase Model of College Choice

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice built upon the historical research of how students experience the college choice process. Through each phase of Hossler and Gallagher's three-phase model, prospective students and their families interact with institutions of higher education in a variety of ways including building relationships with admissions recruiters, information gathering or searching about institutions, and the synthesis of

the information that they have received during the gathering process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) stated that individual and organizational factors interact and affect various outcomes on whether or not a student will consider an institution of higher education during each phase of the model. Additionally, the model considers characteristics of high schools and colleges in the student's process of college selection, in addition to traits of a student.

Predisposition phase. The predisposition phase is the initial phase of the Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice. The outcome of this phase is a prospective student's decision on whether or not they will pursue a college education. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) suggested that the predisposition phase is the least studied and therefore the least understood as a prospective student's background has a strong correlation with college choice. The predisposition phase can take place at any point in a student's pre-college life as some students show behaviors as early as grade school and other prospective students only begin to show interest in obtaining a post-secondary education during high school (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Several factors during the predisposition phase influence a student's decision on whether or not to pursue a college education, including a student's socioeconomic status, academic ability and prior academic achievements, parental encouragement, and influences of peers and other influential people (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In addition to peer and family influence during this phase, Hossler and Gallagher speculated that several structural and organizational factors may be influential. Their speculations included involvement in co-curricular activities as studied by Astin (1985). Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) study also speculated on research by Anderson,

Bowman, and Tinto (1972) and stated that the closer the proximity to the campus of an institution of higher education, the more likely a student will decide to attend the institution.

Search phase. The search phase of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model starts when students determine from which institutions of higher education to gather more information. Students do this by developing a choice set of institutions and beginning to seek information about these various institutions. Likewise, institutions of higher education are also recruiting students during this phase, making the search phase a two-way process (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

The search phase is not static as students often seek information about specific institutions of higher education in very different ways (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The researchers suggested that prospective students have similarities in this process based on similarities within cultural and social groups. While students with a higher academic ability often conduct more complex searches, students from low-income socioeconomic status often rely more on school counselors for information. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) suggested that the cost of a post-secondary institution becomes a very influential factor during the search phase. Based on the information discovered during this phase, some students will decide not to progress to the third and final phase of the process due to a multitude of reasons such as the enjoyment of their educational experience and lack of understanding of cost of attendance (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Their individual differences may lead them to different directions due to this enjoyment or the perceived costs. These directions may include enlisting in the military or entering directly into the workforce. Research suggests that if the job market remains the same in future years, there will continue to be more of an increase in available jobs in the United States that require a college degree than there will be qualified people to fill them (Mckillip, Raws, & Barry, 2012).

Regardless of the increase in available jobs that require a college degree, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) concluded that institutions of higher education should not always consider students as potential enrollees, even though they are part of the search phase, as their intentions of enrolling may change throughout the process. Regardless of what institutions do to inform students on the need for a post-secondary education, many students will make their own choices and may ultimately choose not to enroll.

Choice phase. The final phase of Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three Phase Model of College Choice is the choice phase. During this phase, students make decisions about colleges to which they will apply and enroll. Institutions of higher education communicate back and forth with a student about the institution as they offer admission to the institution and financial aid during this phase. According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), this phase is a very interactive process between students, their parents, and the institutions that remain in the student's choice set. The relationship the student has developed with the institution, their personal preferences, and the characteristics of an institution are all key factors in a student's choice decision (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Students and their family's interaction with institutions of higher education increases throughout each of the search phases as they build relationships with counselors, gather information about different institutions, and synthesize that information (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). They build relationships with recruiters, gather a range of information about different institutions and post-secondary attendance in general, and process the information in order to make an enrollment decision (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model provides a foundation for further research involving college choice and the factors that influence a student's decision to enroll in an institution of higher education.

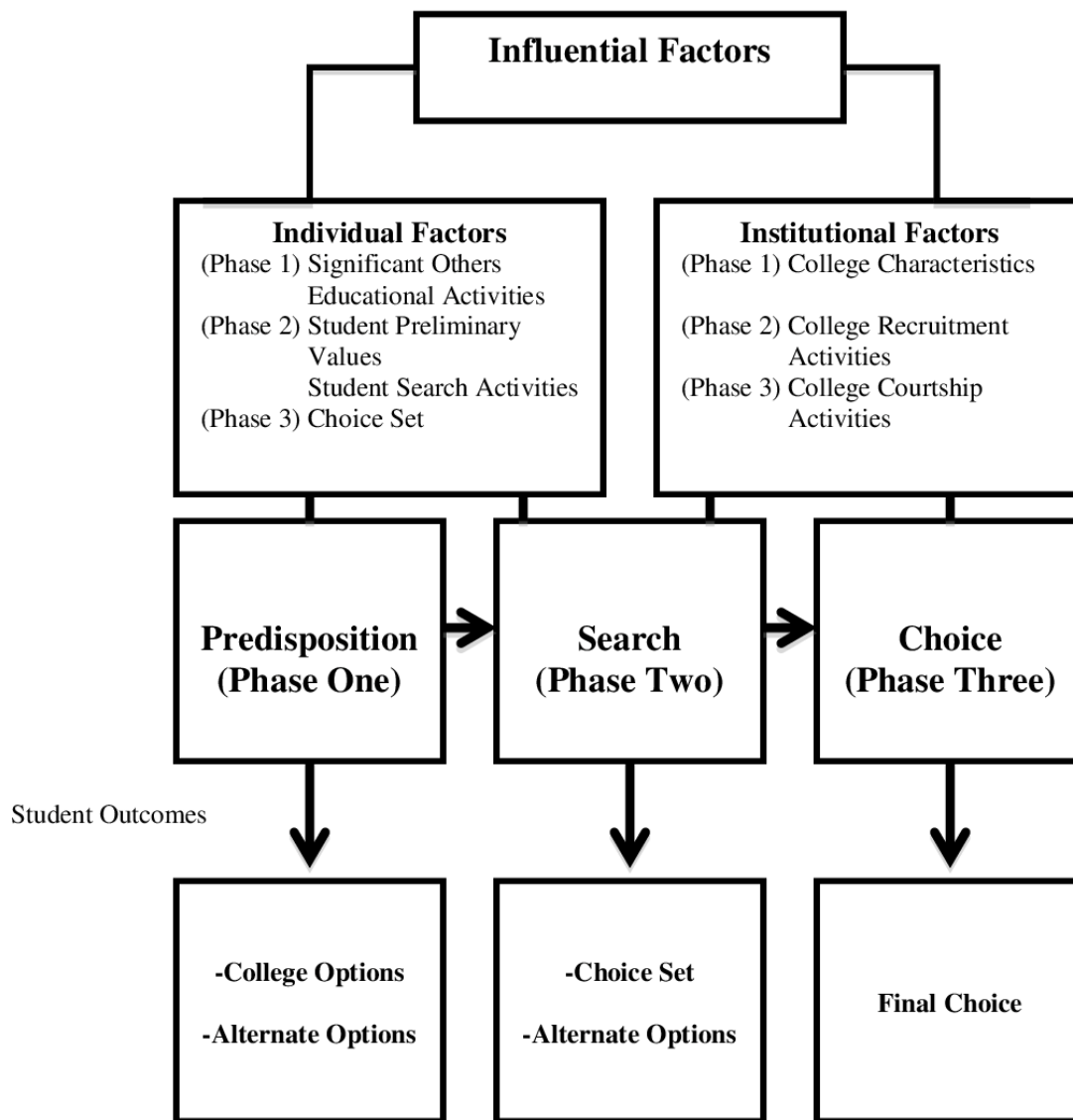


Figure 1: Hossler and Gallagher (1987) College Choice Model

Influence of College Choice Models

The historical research provided by Chapman (1981), Litten (1982), and Hossler and Gallagher (1987) provides a historical context of the college search process. Although college choice models from the 1980s are still widely used today to inform current college counseling practices, according to Hossler & Palmer (2008), there is still a need for further research on the extent of influence regarding each variable. While many college choice models exist, they have

been categorized in recent into one of three significant subgroups: economic, psychological, or sociological (Hossler & Palmer, 2008).

Economic. The literature is dominated by economic models focusing on college choice as a rational-decision making process (Bergerson, 2009; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Paulsen, 1990, Hossler & Palmer, 2008). The economic perspective of the college choice process is impacted by a variety of factors that include family income, financial aid, college costs, geographic location, gender, race, culture, and career choice (Bergerson, 2009; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Desjardins et al, 1999; Hossler & Palmer, 2008; Paulsen, 1990). Much of the research builds upon the three prior models by Chapman, Litten, and Hossler & Gallagher to segment groups in order to better understand how economic perspective affects their college choice process.

According to DesJardins et al. (1999), the income of a prospective student's family plays a direct role in that individual student's decision to enroll at institutions that may cost more or that are private rather than public. Paulsen (1990) suggested that families are influenced by the investment value of a particular institution during the early phases in the college choice process. This factor remains consistent throughout a student's education, as the cost of attendance, including tuition, housing, and travel costs continue as long as a student is enrolled

According to Hossler and Palmer (2008), college choice is viewed as a rational decision-making process in previous models that that are focused on an economic perspective. By ignoring social and external influences in the research, these previous models focused on the cost of tuition and availability of financial aid and other resources as a factor that determines which institution of higher education a student ultimately chooses to attend (Hossler & Palmer, 2008). Another approach under the economic perspective focuses on income potential based on the

institution of higher education that an individual student chooses to attend or the availability of specific majors (Hossler & Palmer, 2008). Bergerson (2009) indicated that a student's decision to enroll at a specific institution is influenced by their thoughts of an improved life after completing a degree.

Sociological and Psychological Models. Much of the literature in the past several decades have focused on the sociological and psychological aspects of the college choice process in order to understand what factors influence prospective students' behavior. Sociological models include characteristics of students including their race, high school curriculum, student and parental expectations, peer groups, and prior academic achievements (Bergerson, 2009). Psychological models focused on how the student perceives a particular institution of higher education and the impact of attending a particular institution (Paulsen, 1990).

Summary of College Choice Models

The literature address college choice models in a variety of methods. While the major theories include Chapman (1981), Litten (1982), and Hossler and Gallagher (1987), there are other theories that include the college choice process from an economic, sociological, or psychological lens. Although the models of the 1980s are not recent, according to Shaw et al. (2009), they still provide a useful foundation that illustrates the college choice process as students consider a variety of elements as they progress through the process. Although the models discussed have different perspectives, these models complement each other in the college choice process. Although some factors may be the same for students, it cannot be assumed that a single college choice model can be applied to all students since it is a process that is influenced by individual characteristics and preferences.

Characteristics of Generation Z

Understanding today's college student is an important element for administrators at institutions of higher education to consider as they create recruitment tactics including a campus visit experience that attracts prospective students. Current traditional-aged college students are defined as Generation Z, which includes individuals born between 1995 – 2010 (Loveland, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge 2017). Seemiller and Grace (2016) further shared that these individuals make up one-third of the current U.S. population.

Turner (2015) stated that Generation Z is diverse in ethnicity and sexual orientation, they are financially aware, and they hold a general belief that the world is unsafe due to their exposure to war at a young age. They tend to avoid risks; therefore, they party less, drive less, drink less, and focus more on financial security and careers (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). This generation is rational in its thinking and does not want to let others down. Generation Z want to be advocates for others who are less fortunate and are more concerned with the well-being of the whole rather than the one (Seemiller & Grace, 2017).

According to Seemiller and Grace (2016), Generation Z students are more loyal and compassionate than the previous generation and they are less concerned about appearances. Much like Baby Boomers, a characteristic of Generation Z students is the desire to have a strong work ethic. Like their Generation X counterparts, Generation Z students have a sense of responsibility and resiliency (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Many students of this generation fear that they will not have the ability to take care of their families in the future (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

According to Turner (2015), several characteristics have the greatest influence on college enrollment for Generation Z students, including the perception of a sense of care and concern for

their immediate environment, maximized learning through technology and social media use, and communication platforms and preferences.

Environment Influence on Gen Z

According to Seemiller and Grace (2016), when individuals interact with others, the context in which those actions take place shapes the way they see the world. As children, Generation Z students experienced the tragedies of 9/11 at a very young age, a failing economy and insecurity, unemployment, and a world at war and violence (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge, 2017). As a result, individuals classified as Generation Z have often been over-protected as their parents are eager to always keep them safe (Twenge, 2017).

Generation Z students have a desire for institutions to be more like their home environment and must focus on protection, safety, and comfort (Twenge, 2017). Generation Z students are growing up more slowly and because they are unprepared to be independent, thus the reason that they are seeking college to be safe and more like home (Twenge, 2017).

Because of these contexts and experiences, Generation Z has its own trends and norms that will require institutions of higher education to adapt new tactics in order to attract these students (Loveland, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Importance of College

Eighty one percent of Generation Z students believe that college is a crucial step in beginning their careers (Loveland, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Unlike the previous college bound generation, millennials, whose parents were Baby Boomers, Generation Z students' parents are Generation X, who tend to be more distrustful of institutions and more protective of their students (Loveland, 2017). While institutions of higher education have traditionally focused on things like parking and student's options through weekend activity, questions for prospective

students and their parents now consist of things such as safety, student loan debt, and graduation rates (Loveland, 2017). Generation Z students spend more time at home with their families, do not work as much as millennials during secondary school, and are watched more closely by their Generation X parents (Twenge, 2017). These students are looking for faculty and staff to take on the role of the authoritarian parent (Twenge, 2017). In order to attract and retain Generation Z students, institutions must find a way to connect to these new concerns in order to attract students and gain the trust of the students' parents.

College Affordability

Seemiller and Grace (2016) found that three-quarters of traditional-aged college students live on or near campus, are full-time students, and receive financial support from parents. The top concern for these students is college affordability (Loveland, 2017). An increased cost of attendance creates a barrier to entry for prospective college students who want to attend a four-year university, especially those who come from a lower income background (Selingo, 2017). Nationally, even students who come from high-income families are choosing to begin their educations at more affordable community colleges instead of four-year universities (Selingo, 2017). Seemiller and Grace (2016) further confirmed this concern as they cite fiscal responsibility as an important trait among Generation Z students. They stated that these students were raised to fend for themselves due to the recession of 2008 affecting the parents of Generation Z students (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Nationwide, institutions of higher education have been forced to increase tuition rates in order to meet budget needs due to continuous reductions in state funding (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). The rising cost of attending a four-year university is a common condition at higher education institutions that are experiencing declining enrollments. While Generation Z students

understand the importance of gaining a college education, they are intimidated by the cost associated with it (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Generation Z students are concerned due to the negative impact the cost of obtaining a college degree will have on their financial status in their adult lives (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Because of this concern, students are looking for ways to avoid the unnecessary costs associated with college. Instead, they often seek out only college offerings that are needed for them to graduate (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Therefore, this population enjoys independent learning and prefers a limited college/university experience (Buzzetto-Hollywood & Alade, 2018; Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Technology

Generation Z's dependence on technology is so strong that the current culture consists of people utilizing this technology as a way to control how people view individuals and their relationships (Buzzetto-Hollywood & Alade, 2018). Turner (2015) reported that Generation Z spends close to eight hours on social media per day. Unlike students of higher education before them, technology has been available since they were born (Turner, 2015).

Twenge (2017) stated that Generation Z students spend more leisure time on their devices and away from family and friends, which has been linked to a decrease in happiness and increased depression. Twenge (2017) also noted that adult mental health tends to improve with in-person interaction and observed that college students' mental health was deteriorating and Millennials were reported to be happier than Generation Z students. As stated by Selingo (2018), institutions of higher education must increase technology in order to connect with this new population of student. As institutions increase these levels of technology, they must also find ways to resolve challenges in regards to student mental health.

Communication

Although Twenge (2017) stated that Generation Z students tend to spend more time alone, they still prefer one-on-one communication (Loveland 2017; Twenge, 2017). Even though they prefer this style of communication, it is important to note that their interpersonal skills may be lacking due to the amount of time they spend with technology (Twenge, 2017). When it comes to social media platforms, Generation Z uses Instagram and Facebook. Unlike their millennial counterparts who utilize Facebook less, Generation Z is drawn to it as they value their relationships with their parents and have desire to keep in touch with family members (Twenge, 2017). According to Gupta (2020) other forms of media that Generation Z students currently use in addition to Instagram include social media platforms such as Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube and TikTok.

Loveland (2017) provided several suggestions to admissions recruiters to attract students to a university, including face-to-face communication, personalized information, and altered admission applications that include self-produced videos. Conversely, Loveland (2017) discouraged the use of paper handouts, long campus tours, and e-mail marketing campaigns with automated messages. Loveland (2017) recommended that in order for institutions of higher education to connect with these students, they must utilize text messaging rather than email communications. In order to prevent boredom, institutions must also alter campus visits by breaking up information sessions and campus tours.

Summary of Generation Z

In summary, Generation Z students understand the importance of a post-secondary education and its importance in their personal success. While the financial burden of obtaining an education is creates anxiety in the students, students seek a limited college experience and do

not want the typical college experience that includes living on campus and attending various college related events. Generation Z students seek colleges that provide them the safety and comfort of home and are interested in flexibility as they complete this required step in beginning their career.

The Campus Visit

The campus visit is often used as a sales and marketing tactic by institutions of higher education as it is a tool to promote the institution to prospective students (Hesel, 2004; Secore, 2018; Yost and Tucker, 1995). A central component of the college recruitment process, the campus visit is a physical experience that is often the most influential factor in the college choice process (Hesel, 2004; Secore, 2018). The campus visit also allows prospective students and their families to examine a four-year institution's quality and institutional characteristics (Yost & Tucker, 1995). While research on the relationship between the college choice process and the campus visit describes that the visit has the most influence on decision-making about whether or not to apply and ultimately attend an institution of higher education (Brown, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Hesel, 2004; Kuh, 2009; Magolda, 2000; Okerson, 2016; Yost & Tucker, 1995), there is currently minimal research on the aspects of a campus visit that ultimately impact a student's college choice.

Types of Visits

Overall, the campus visit includes many elements that can help forge a bond between a student and the institution; this bond is incredibly influential on college-choice. Campus visits come in a variety of forms including tours, overnight experiences, open houses, or other student-oriented events (Secore, 2018). Jacobs et al. (2015) explained that there are several important things students may do on a campus visit including information sessions with an admissions

office, campus tours, class experiences, meeting with professors or department advisors, visiting campus buildings of special interest such as museums, visiting the bookstore, touring residence halls, eating on campus, or exploring the town or city where the college is located. Regardless of the type of visit, it often allows students to experience campus in order to aid in making a decision during the college choice process based on their perception on how they will fit in on a college (Okerson, 2016; Secore, 2018).

Timing of Visits

Regardless of their academic ability or socioeconomic status, students reported visiting their first and second choice schools (Hessel, 2004). Hesel (2004) described that nearly all students are visiting college campuses at some point prior to enrollment. Greenough (2003) found that the timing of when a student visits campus is also important to its overall effectiveness. Students who visited a campus when the classes were not in session, including summer and holiday breaks, were less likely to feel the campus visit was helpful as prospective students are often influenced by more than an actual tour while on campus. It is important for students to visit when classes are in session. They are trying to see if there is a match with their personality and the campus, and viewing empty buildings cannot always answer those questions (Aviezer, 2000).

Cohen (2009) studied 1,100 high school seniors and concluded that the campus visit was the most influential factor assisting students in deciding whether or not to apply to a particular school, assuming the students had visited prior to the application process. Seventy percent of students in Cohen's (2009) study visited one to four institutions while thirteen percent visited five to eight colleges, with parents accompanying their children most of the time. Similarly, in a three-year longitudinal study at a large, state institution conducted by Brown (2010), a student

who visits a college campus prior to applying is twice as likely to matriculate compared to a student who does not visit at all prior to applying for admission. While these students do not always choose the institution they toured, the experience does allow them to leave with a better understanding about the institution and its offerings (Brown, 2010). Overall, the student's reaction to the campus appearance as well as their experience during the campus visit contributed to their college decision-making process (Cohen, 2009).

In Greenough's (2003) research, one student commented that attending an admitted student day event, typically held during the spring prior to enrolling in a fall term, was very helpful as it made the campus and college experience less intimidating and more tangible, ultimately allowing the student to commit to a specific institution.

Campus Culture

According to Kuh (2009), institutions differ in size, control (public or private), curricular interest (liberal arts, technology, healthcare), and the amount of external funding. Other factors include prestige and affluence as well as the ways students learn and their personal development (Kuh, 2009). The campus environment is the most influential factor in the campus visit experience (Kuh, 2009). According to Kuh (2009), the campus environment serves as a set of symbols that are larger than the individual items themselves. These items include everything physical on a campus such as buildings, signage, people, campus landscape, and equipment. A prospective student's connection to the campus environment and their campus visit experience has a direct correlation to their college choice process (Kuh, 2009).

Hesel (2004) found that there was a significant positive impact in regards to the vibe of the campus community and the friendliness of the people that students encountered during a campus visit. While institutions are unable to alter their size or location, the ability to share with

prospective students the distinctions and character of their particular institution is the most effective way to impact prospective students (Hesel, 2004). Although students are interested in seeing facilities, students become more interested in an institution during a visit when they had the ability to talk to professors and attend classes. For prospective students, talking to professors, attending classes, and seeing facilities often make students more interested in the institution of higher education in which they ultimately enroll (Hesel, 2004). During a campus visit, if a student experiences an unwelcoming professor or a hallway in a building that is not perceived as clean, it can cause a negative perception and effect their decision on whether or not to apply to the institution (Yost & Tucker, 1995).

According to Magolda (2000), the term community on a four-year college campus is a socially constructed concept that relates to the feeling of a close and supportive campus environment. By visiting campus, prospective students and their families are able to familiarize themselves with the layout of buildings and the sense of community. Additionally, Magolda (2000) described an experience of rituals and traditions that are relayed to provide prospective students and their families with the feeling of the campus community. Magolda (2000) stated that the campus visit is an opportunity for institutions to break down the social patterns and codes that describe a campus community. Magolda further explained that campus visits allow an institution of higher education to share the rituals of the institution through a description of traditions and continually foster ideas about the college community to prospective students (Magolda, 2000).

The Scheduling Process

For many students, the campus visit experience begins at home as they sign up for the event (Secore, 2018). Items such as confirmation messages, campus maps, parking passes,

directions, and details about the visit often position an institution as professional and caring (Mass, 2016; Secore, 2018).

Arrival to Campus & Wayfinding

As students arrive to campus, way-finding systems that provide clear directions and building identifiers often leave a good impression on prospective students during the pre-tour impression-building process (Secore, 2018). Institutions of higher education that do not provide clear directions and wayfinding systems often make the pre-arrival experience stressful and seem unprofessional (Mass, 2016; Secore, 2018).

Information Sessions

As part of the campus visit, most institutions of higher education offer an information session prior to a student-led campus tour (Mass, 2016; Secore, 2018). Information sessions are often presented by a professional admissions staff member and include facts and figures about the institution followed by information about the admissions process and requirements (Mass, 2016; Secore, 2018).

The Physical Tour

Administrators at institutions of higher education often focus on the campus tour as a specific aspect of campus visits during the college choice process (Secore, 2018). According to Secore (2018), the highlight of a campus visit is the physical walk or tour around campus. This walk is typically a driving force in a student's college choice process (Secore, 2018). Mass (2016) stated that physical campus tours usually include notable facilities and amenities on campus including cafeterias, new facilities, high-tech classrooms, fitness centers, and athletic venues. However, while institutions also showcase these facilities on a tour, it is not the facilities alone that are generally a tipping point that affects a student's college choice process (Mass,

2016). Institutions offer a wide variety of selling points, which are highlighted throughout the tour. Common elements addressed in the campus tour include the following; academic programs, internships and shadowing opportunities, housing and dining, and extracurricular activities (Spoon, 2006).

According to Hesel (2004), not every aspect of a campus tour has a positive impact on a student's decision to apply and ultimately enroll. Students indicated that schools that were too large, campuses with an unappealing appearance, outdated residence halls, and an unfriendly atmosphere had a negative impact as a result of the campus visit (Hesel, 2004). Hoover (2010) found that the primary goal of the campus tour is for students to connect with the campus. Hoover (2010) stated that as a part of the campus tour, students are connecting with both the physical campus and culture of the institution. In essence, the campus tour can be described as a blind date in the admissions process as it is the aspect of where looks matter and first impressions shape future actions (Hoover, 2010).

Classroom Visits

According to Jacobs et al. (2015), there are several questions that prospective students look for answers to when visiting a class as part of a campus visit. These include whether or not professors present material in ways that are clear and organized as well as whether or not the professor knows their material. Students also look to see if the classroom has entertainment value, often accompanied by visual and multimedia. Jacobs et al. (2015) indicate that students seek to understand whether or not a professor cares about their students and whether they identify that professor as someone they would like to learn from. Finally, students look to see if the class is challenging and whether or not other students seem to be interested in the material being presented.

Campus Exploration

Hesel's (2004) study indicated that in addition to the guided campus tours, students and their families enjoyed being able to explore campus on their own in order to get a better sense for the campus climate.

Virtual Visit

New technology has expanded visit opportunities. As technology continuously evolves and the habits of students change, Judy Hingle of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) stated that web cameras, virtual tours, chat rooms with professors and current students, and details on campus activities allow the student to educate themselves about the campus community from a remote location (Klaunig, 2005).

According to Pavlik (2020), the Covid-19 Pandemic that took place starting in 2020 halted the way students engaged with potential institutions of higher education due to mandatory quarantines and less ability to travel. The pandemic required institutions to implement virtual tours and incorporate newer virtual reality technology, artificial intelligence, and implement widespread direct-to consumer social media due to the growing need to connect with prospective students.

The expanding influence of technology is another aspect affecting the campus visit. Institutions are challenged to incorporate technology into their communication strategies-- many institutions now provide online scheduling for tours, and institutions are also creating virtual tour experiences (Klein, 2004). Virtual visits allow prospective students and their families the ability to view pre-recorded or real-time lectures, hear students talk about their college experiences, experience campus programs including music and theatre presentations, and even experience athletic activities.

Many institutions have an interactive map of campus that allows prospective students the ability to virtually look round campuses. Additionally, students are able to use technology through video and film to see academic buildings, auditoriums, bookstores, dormitories, dining halls, laboratories, libraries, museums and sports facilities. (Dyrlil, 2002). However, according to Parks (2005), viewing a campus through the internet can only do so much as prospective students cannot always see proximity of buildings or aspects of the campus that are more notable than others (Parks, 2005).

Tour Guides

According to Cohen (2009) students' initial reaction to the campus and the tour guide was an overwhelming influence during a visit to campus. Similarly, Secore (2018) suggested that tour guides, typically current college students, are often one of the most important elements of the campus tour.

On the tour, the student tour guide serves as a performer who shares the history of campus and also serves as an admissions coach (Magolda, 2000). It is the responsibility of the student tour guide to change tone when talking about the history and traditions of an institution or when they respond to prospective student's questions (Magolda, 2000).

In order for a tour guide to be successful, they must be friendly, authentic, and able to relate to both parents and students (Mass, 2016). A combination of applications, presentations, and interviews allow admissions staff to select student candidates able to successfully sell the campus experience (Johnson, 2005; Miller, 2000).

Often, students are looking for individuals that they identify with during the tour. According to Washburn and Petrosious (2004), institutions often rely on the relationship a tour guide makes with a prospective student and their family in order to connect with them on a

personal level and attract them to an institution. The personal interactions between the tour guide and prospective students are also an important aspect of the campus tour. During the campus tour, a student can imagine himself or herself in the environment, and the connection that a prospective student makes with both the campus and tour guide can be influential in the decision-making process (Spoon, 2006).

Prospective students want to know that they would fit in on a college campus (Mass, 2016; Secore, 2018). The friendliness of the individuals encountered by prospective students, especially the tour guide, has a significant impact on their interest in a school (Hesel, 2004). If a tour guide does not relate to a student and provide a positive image, they can individually lead a student to remove an institution from consideration during the college choice process (Mass, 2016).

On some campuses, the Global Positioning System (GPS), originally a government-created, satellite geographical positioning system, is now being used for campus tours. Real student tour guides are sometimes being replaced with hand held computers, mobile devices, wireless headphones, and a campus map. Use of the campus map and computer lead the student to different spots and headphones allow the student to hear an accompanying audio tour (Carlson, 2004).

The Follow-Up

Much like a visit starts at home, it also ends at home for students (Secore, 2018). Many institutions of higher education extend communications with the student after the campus visit in an attempt to set themselves apart from competitors (Mass, 2016; Secore, 2018). These communications include items such as handwritten notes about the tour, surveys about a

student's experience, or personalized anecdotes specific to a tour experience (Mass, 2016; Secore, 2018).

Underserved Populations

Students from different backgrounds experience things like campus visits in different ways. There is limited literature that examines the experiences and motivation of students from underserved populations in the college choice process. However, several studies have been conducted that focus on the barriers and solutions to increase underserved participation in higher education. Gofen (2009) conducted research in regards to first-generation students' transition from high school to college. Gofen discovered that changing the intergenerational cycle of educational level inheritance involves day-to-day family life that prioritizes education through nonmaterial resources for first-generation college students. Gofen (2009) explained that although first-generation students face many challenges during the college choice process, the families of these students are often a key resource.

Cabrera's (2014) research focused on the influences in the lives of underserved students. According to Cabrera (2014), if parents, students, and school educators are involved then the student develops higher college aspirations and transitions successfully into college. Cabrera's research also suggested that students are able to pursue higher education because they wanted to get out of poverty and not struggle like their parents.

Remove extra space

Campus Visit Summary

While the campus visit is such an important piece of the college choice process, there is a lack of attention and resources, as compared to printed materials and websites, leaving the campus visit on sometimes undertrained or lackadaisical tour guides (Hesel, 2004). Regardless of

academic ability or income level, Hesel (2004) found that students were visiting college campuses during the college choice process. While prior research has proved that the campus visit has a significant effect on a student's decision for applying to and ultimately enrolling in a university, there is a lack of knowledge regarding which factors or influences during a campus visit affect a student's final decision (Brown, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Hesel, 2004; Okerson, 2016, Yost & Tucker, 1995).

Campus Environments

Campus environments serve as a set of symbols that together represent an experience larger than the individual items (Kuh, 2009; Okerson, 2016, Secore, 2018). Campus environments include the physical aspects of campus from landscapes and signage to buildings and the equipment and furniture inside of them (Kuh, 2009; Okerson, 2016; Secore, 2018). A student's connection to the campus environment has a direct correlation to their attitude towards college choice from the campus visit experience (Kuh, 2009; Okerson, 2016; Secore, 2018).

Strange and Banning's Environmental Theory

Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology framework is a model for examining how campus environments affect student experience. Although this framework was not created solely to understand the components of a college campus that influence a student's college choice process through a visit to campus, it will be utilized for the purpose of this study. Research shows that humans are persuaded by the environments in which they live (Strange & Banning, 2015). Institutions of higher education that are meaningful in their design can attract more students to an institution (Strange & Banning, 2015).

Strange and Banning's (2015) environmental model describes four key environmental components including the physical environment, human aggregate environment, organizational

environment, and the constructed environment. The assumption behind the framework is that higher education administrators are able to intentionally design campus environments to meet institutional goals (Strange & Banning, 2015). Strange and Banning (2015) explained that a campus culture can be interpreted through the four levels of culture: artifacts, perspectives, values, and assumptions. Through their research of these four environments, we better understand the influence of institutions of higher education on what students learn and where they learn, especially in an environment where institutions compete for new students. This campus ecology model is a valuable model to categorize features of the campus that are meaningful to potential students during a visit to campus (Strange and Banning, 2015). These features can influence the comfort level of prospective students and determine whether they choose to enroll.

Physical environment. The first of Strange and Banning's (2015) environments is the physical environment. The campus physical environment is complex and includes the layout, design, and space (Strange & Banning, 2015). In addition to classroom buildings, housing, and other physical spaces, the physical environment also includes people-made objects including landscaping and artwork (Strange & Banning, 2015). The way in which the physical design is built and the style of the learning spaces can have an impact on a student's perception of the behaviors of students within the space during the campus visit.

Students often experience campus spaces differently, and these spaces can have various effects on student's attitudes and behaviors. Strange and Banning (2001) suggested that the layout, location, and arrangement of space influence behaviors that are more probable than others. For example, classrooms or learning spaces with movable chairs and shared tables may indicate to a student that collaboration is valued, whereas a bolted-down, all-in-one desk may

indicate collaboration is not valued (Strange & Banning, 2015). Through the construction and renovation of campus facilities, institutions have the opportunity to evaluate and incorporate campus environmental characteristics into their architectural designs (Strange & Banning, 2015).

In addition to the built environment including buildings, sidewalks, and man-made objects, a sense of place associated with an institution of higher education may be an important deciding factor for prospective college students (Strange & Banning, 2015). Colleges are experienced as settings where the sense of place leaves lasting impressions of those who attend them. The artwork displayed on campus, the decorations, and colors often portray symbols that send strong messages about the values of an institution (Strange & Banning, 2015).

In terms of showcasing the campus to prospective students, it is important for institutions to design physical environments that are welcoming, inclusive, appealing, thoughtful and sustainable (Strange & Banning, 2015). These factors, including the symbolic meaning behind them, may also play a role in the initial attitudes, perception, and decision-making for those visiting or considering enrolling at an institution of higher education. In order to attract prospective students and retain current students, administrators must constantly look at the physical environment in order to compete with other institutions (Strange & Banning, 2015).

Human aggregate environment. In addition to showcasing the physical design of educational settings, elements such as student organizations, special interest groups, and the first-year experience can be utilized to attract prospective students. The human aggregate environment includes an exploration of the collective personalities, styles, preferences, strengths, and engagement types of campus leaders and students who inhabit the campus (Strange & Banning, 2015). This aggregate is based on the understanding that these characteristics are conveyed through people and the collective features of individuals who inhabit the campus.

Students' strengths and talents may influence how they interact with others, process information, and navigate an environment (Strange & Banning, 2015). During the campus visit, prospective students are influenced by the students they meet and how they interact with each other.

Strange and Banning (2015) conveyed that the people of a campus could be characterized by six different personality types as described by Holland's (1973, as cited in Strange and Banning, 2015) theory of careers. These included realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. The collective characteristics can include demographic features such as gender, age, race, and ethnicity (Strange & Banning, 2015). Psychological aspects include personality types, interests, learning styles, and strengths. Prospective students are often likely to choose institutions that match their personality type as well as academic factors that meet their needs (Strange & Banning, 2015).

Organizational environment. Strange and Banning (2015) explored the organizational environment through four key factors and their role in the environment including complexity, centralization, formalization, and morale. The complexity of an organization refers to the division of work and responsibilities; structural complexity or the number of units or departments; and task complexity or intensity and number of tasks, knowledge, and expertise (Strange & Banning, 2015). Centralization refers to how decisions will be made and where the power resides in an organization (Strange & Banning, 2015). According to Strange and Banning (2015), formalization refers to the rules and regulations, the specificity of established rules, and the extent to which the rules are enforced. Morale includes the examination of the satisfaction of the members and participants in an organization (Strange & Banning, 2015).

According to Strange and Banning (2015), institutions with a balanced organizational structure of both expressed and implied goals often have a great impact on their community

(Strange & Banning, 2015). It is important for institutional leaders to understand how these factors contribute to a student's experience when visiting a college campus. Administrators at institutions of higher education often construct and reconstruct how decisions are made and communicated to achieve specific goals, (Strange & Banning, 2015). At many institutions, growing the institution through enrollment of new students is a primary goal.

Socially constructed environment. Environments can be understood through the perceptions of their users (Strange & Banning, 2015). The socially constructed environment includes the differing factors within physical, human aggregate, and organizational environments and how they are perceived. According to Strange and Banning (2015), the socially constructed environment is described as the general impressions and understandings communicated by members of an institution through shared stories, artifacts, and symbols observed in the environment. This includes campus events, personalities, specific regulations, campus programs, campus traditions and symbols, stories by members of the community, and interactions. If students are comfortable in their environment, their perception is positive.

Campus culture is part of the socially constructed environment (Strange & Banning, 2015). Campus culture refers to both the nature of space and time as well as the degree in which students interact with staff and faculty (Strange & Banning, 2015). A perceived reality is created by identifying how individuals describe their community. Through the socially constructed environment, members of the campus often provide a means of communication and advertising for the university.

Limitations of Framework. According to Arnold (2016), Strange and Banning do not provide new literature to defend their findings for their ongoing validity in higher education settings. Arnold (2015) also stated that when considering newer environments that have emerged

since the first version of their theory, Strange and Banning do not systematically consider developments to the original framework of environmental components and purposes. Virtual environments have become more prevalent since their original version, and their analysis of this environment is not strong.

Whether it be the physical, human aggregate, organizational, or socially constructed environment, each of the elements of Strange and Banning's (2015) model can influence individuals in a different way. Strange and Banning's (2015) environmental theory is appropriately aligned with this research because it describes four key components of human environments that have received substantial attention in literature: physical environment - the design and quality of campus physical features, human aggregate - the collective characteristics of the people who inhabit human environments, organizational environment - organizational structures related to the institution's purposes and goals, and socially constructed environment - the collective perceptions and culture of a college setting. Thus, the four components of environmental theory will serve as the conceptual framework for this study.

Chapter Summary

This chapter addresses the history of the college choice process and how the impact of the campus visit plays an important role in the process. Several general factors have emerged as influencing college student choice including a visit to campus (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Litten, 1982;). While the campus visit is such an important piece of the college choice process, there is a lack of attention and resources, as compared to printed materials and websites, leaving the campus visit dependent on sometimes undertrained or lackadaisical tour guides (Hesel, 2004). While prior research has proved that the campus visit has a significant effect on a student's decision for applying to and ultimately enrolling in a university, there is a

lack of knowledge regarding which factors or influences during a campus visit affect a student's final decision (Brown, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Hesel, 2004; Okerson, 2016, Yost & Tucker, 1995).

In order to analyze the student experience during a visit to campus, Strange and Banning's (2015) Environmental Model can be used as the theoretical framework. Chapter 3 will describe in depth the methodology that will be used to guide this study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter reviews the overall design and rationale, sample selection, and methods for data collection and analysis of this study. It will also include an overview of the trustworthiness of the chosen design, positionality of the researcher, and information regarding researcher biases and assumptions.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of a prospective student during a visit to campus and which aspects of that visit influence a student's college choice process at a small, four-year institution in the southeast region of the United States. Since the focus of this study required exploration into the personal experiences of students, the researcher used a qualitative research methodology in order to gather, analyze, and interpret stories as told by first-year, traditional-age college students in order to make meaning of their experiences during a visit to campus. Instead of understanding cause and effect, this qualitative study will seek to understand how students interpret their experiences, what meaning they attribute to their experience, and how they construct their worlds (Merriam, 2009).

According to Merriam (2009), qualitative research is a process that is inductive as researchers gather data to build concepts rather than testing hypothesis. Through interviews, qualitative research builds towards theory from observations (Merriam, 2009). A qualitative method was chosen as it is my goal to understand the experiences of the students being researched in order to interpret the students' experiences as they relate to their college decision-making process (Creswell, 2014).

Throughout the qualitative research process, the researcher keeps a focus on understanding the participants' experience rather than their own experience, in this case as an enrollment professional (Creswell, 2014). Merriam (2009) stated that in qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. The researcher is able to expand his understanding of the experience through nonverbal and verbal communication and is able to process data collected immediately (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2009).

Research Design

A constructivist paradigm will be utilized in this study. Constructivism responds to five major philosophical questions in research (Creswell, 2014). In regards to ontology or the nature of reality, a constructivist believes that the nature of reality is varied and socially constructed; therefore, inquiry often raises more questions than answers and research designs have to be flexible (Merriam, 2009). In regards to epistemology or the nature of knowledge and relationship between researcher and participants, the nature of knowledge in the constructivist paradigm is an interactive process between researchers and participants that produces quality findings and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In regards to the axiology or the role of values in research, constructivism embraces the biases, assumptions, and values a researcher brings to the study as they are an important part of understanding, a major purpose of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). In regards to methodology or the process of obtaining knowledge, constructivism utilizes an inductive process to generate knowledge in order to see what new theories can help make meaning of the topic under research (Merriam, 2009). Finally, in regards to the rhetoric or the language of research, a constructivist paradigm is very personal as the researcher and participants' voices are an important component in the study (Merriam, 2009).

A constructivist paradigm is a common form of qualitative research utilizing interviews, observations, and/or document analysis to collect data (Merriam, 2009). This study explored the experiences of the campus visit experience as described by current first-time freshmen. The study provided participants with an opportunity to express their perspectives on the influence of the campus visit experience on their decision-making process and to identify the factors that influenced that decision. The research design that was used for this study will be a general qualitative inquiry.

Generic Qualitative Inquiry as a Methodology

There are many qualitative methodologies, each with a specific focus, that aim to explore constructed realities. For example, narrative inquiry is a way of understanding an experience or a collaboration between a researcher and participants through a social interaction as it focuses on a participant's quality of life and their experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Phenomenology focuses on finding a deep meaning of a person's experiences while also being part of that theory in order to draw descriptions, interpretations, and self-reflections of the participants (Rossman and Rallis, 2003). Another example is grounded theory, which focuses on the meanings through which people construct their realities in order for a new theory to be developed which is grounded in the data collected (Maxwell, 2005). Another method, ethnography, focuses on the perceptions, knowledge, and classification of the world based on the construction of words through actions such as ritual and social practices by the participants (McLeod, 2001). Each of these methods aim to study a topic from a certain angle of interpretation as they have a specific focus of inquiry. According to McLeod (2001) the approaches mentioned above are all different ways of what is basically a single way of knowing.

The purpose of this study is not to find deep meaning, create interpretations of a phenomenon, or develop a theory based on a specific experience. Instead, this study will employ a generic qualitative approach. This generic approach aims to seek to explore a process along with the perspectives of the people involved (Merriam, 1998).

Percy et al. (2015) explained that generic qualitative inquiry is the investigation of individual's subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections on their experiences, of things in the outer world. Based on this explanation, we can conclude that in generic qualitative inquiry, the research centers on how the participant made sense of their particular experience and that the focus of the research is external.

Rationale for the Methodology Chosen

Generic qualitative inquiry will allow the researcher to collaborate with the research participants to co-construct meaning. Generic qualitative inquiry is an appropriate choice for this study as there is limited information regarding the experience of prospective students during a pre-enrollment visit to campus. By asking students to share their experiences on a visit to campus as it relates to their individual college selection process, this generic qualitative approach will allow the research to generate descriptions in the form of findings from the interviews with participants (McLeod, 2001).

Percy et al. (2015) shared that generic qualitative research can be used when the data to be collected cannot be gathered through another methodology or cannot be easily integrated into a quantitative study. They also suggested that a generic qualitative approach is appropriate when the researcher has a priori knowledge or a categorical set of pre-understandings with a belief that some parts of the research problem can be known prior to the study. While some objective reality

and knowledge may exist outside of the research, there will also be knowledge that is subjectively constructed due to the interaction of the researcher and participant.

The use of stories as data provides a first-person account of the experience told in story form, which has a beginning, middle, and end (Merriam, 2009). This qualitative study will investigate the lived experience of traditional-age freshman to understand their individual experience during the campus visit. Because there is no empirical research about the experience of first-time freshman who visit campus prior to enrollment at Golden College, this generic study can be an appropriate method of research.

A campus visit experience is not an isolated process that occurs the same way each time. Instead, each student has their own experiences, and the stories of each student, when understood together, can create coherence rather than disconnected experiences. It is through these experiences that we can understand how a student's experience during a visit to campus impacted their college choice process. The goal of this study is to describe process, and therefore a generic qualitative study that is exploratory in nature is appropriate as it is not bound by specific methods to generate knowledge.

Setting

This study was conducted at a four-year, public undergraduate college, named with the pseudonym Golden College for this study, located in the southeast region of the United States. The College was established in the 1960s as a junior college, but has since evolved into an institution that offers over twenty baccalaureate degree programs with over forty concentrations as well as several associate degrees. The college comprises three schools and has an enrollment of roughly 3,500 students. The primary campus of Golden College consists of approximately twenty campus buildings situated on nearly 200 acres of land.

Participants

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggested that living, telling, retelling, and reliving mark the qualities of a life. They described that people live stories, and in those stories, they reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones and then tell those stories to educate others, such as researchers, who are new to their story. In narrative research, stories are what the researcher collects, retells, and writes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended purposeful sampling to maximize understanding or to seek information-rich cases in order to learn about the issues that are central to the purpose of the research. For this study, the researcher used purposeful sampling to identify participants who met the criteria for this study (described below). The primary strength in utilizing purposeful sampling is that it relies on its strategic selection of information-rich cases in order to gain in-depth understanding of the research topic (Merriam, 2009). In doing so, individuals who do not meet the study criteria are eliminated. The study is based on the experiences of seven traditional-age, first-time college freshmen. According to Strauss & Corbin (1990), this sample size should be appropriate to obtain sufficient descriptive data for the design of the study.

To be eligible for this study, each participant had to identify as 1) a current full-time student as defined by Golden College (12 or more semester hours), 2) traditional-aged college student, defined as students between the age of 18 – 22 who proceed directly to college from high school with a clear idea on the next educational step (Massey, 1997), 3) a first-time freshman (within the first year of degree seeking enrollment, even if prior college credit was earned through advancement placement or dual enrolled courses) and 4) someone who participated in a visit to Golden College during their junior or senior year of high school. This study was conducted during the 2020-2021 academic year. The first round was conducted during

late Spring 2021, with students who matriculated as a beginning freshman during the Fall 2020 semester. During the second round of recruitment, during the summer of 2021, students had been accepted and registered for the Fall 2021 semester but had not yet arrived on campus for their first classes. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic that took place during the time of this research, many students elected to take courses online instead of attending courses on-campus.

Participants who met the above-mentioned characteristics were deemed best able to provide insight into the campus visit experience as the campus visit at Golden College is designed for these types of students. While other student types visit Golden College and enroll in the institution, they were not the focus of this study.

To begin the process of identifying participants, I utilized several approaches, after receiving IRB approval. First, I contacted colleagues in the academic advisement office, who advise all first-time freshman, and sought their assistance in notifying students via email of the study to request their voluntary participation. Next, I asked a colleague in the admissions office to identify first-year students who visited campus prior to enrollment. I asked that he email the prospective participants regarding the study to request their voluntary participation. This method was useful for selecting participants who were identified as important cases (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The potential participants received an electronic email communication that was initially sent to colleagues and then forwarded to the potential participants, outlining the purpose of the study and requesting their participation (see Appendix A). Through this email, potential participants were asked to complete a survey created through Google forms (Appendix B) to confirm their eligibility through purposeful sampling and their interest in participating.

If the student met all eligibility requirements, I sent another email (Appendix C) to arrange an interview time, date, and location. The interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams software. Throughout the course of the study, I utilized the Standard COVID Protections Self-Assessment Tool to ensure that current public health guidelines were followed.

Informed Consent

In accordance with Institutional Review Board guidelines, consent forms (Appendix D) were created for all participants of this study. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher provided participants the consent form, discussed the study, explained the data collection process, and provided a brief explanation about the reporting of findings. Following the interview, the consent form was sent electronically. I utilized my University of Georgia student email account for transmission of this form to be distributed electronically. All information was saved in a secure environment using my encrypted Google documents account, and any physical documents were scanned to the encrypted account as the originals were shredded.

Because of my role in the Office of Admissions, I established an open environment for each participant by addressing concerns of confidentiality during the participant screening process and the informed consent process. During the interview, I assured the participants that I would conceal any identifying labels that they would share about their experience during the campus visit. Because my employment at Golden College started in the last year, I also shared with the participants that I had no bias toward their experience and that they could speak freely with me. By encouraging the students to share their thoughts about their campus visit experience, I also sought to support the students during the interview process.

Procedures

Researchers experience shifts and changes, constantly negotiating, reevaluating, and maintaining flexibility and openness to an ever-changing landscape (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The concept of a cyclical, evolving, recreation of the student's experience allowed me to examine individual details of the participants' stories.

Interviews

Because this study was designed to explore how the experiences of prospective students' visits to campus shaped their college choice process, the best method for data collection was to conduct individual interviews between the researcher and the participant. Using generic inquiry, the goal of the interviews was to construct a vivid picture from the words and experiences of each participant (McLeod, 2001; Merriam, 2009). Interviewing provided in-depth knowledge about the campus visit experience of each participant based on their personal accounts and stories.

I used semi-structured interviews for this study. Semi-structured interviews contain a combination of structured questions designed to elicit specific information and loosely structured questions to allow for flexibility in the questioning (Merriam, 2009). Semi-structured interviews allowed for the interviewer and participant to establish rapport, which increased the validity of findings by inviting participants to provide depth and details, and allowed for any needed clarification and/or follow up discussion of any complex answers through the use of probing questions (Maxwell, 2005).

I created an interview guide outlining the questions used in the semi-structured interviews (see Appendix E). The interview guide was beneficial because it guaranteed the collection of comprehensive data, ensured consistency for all participants, and supported the conversational

nature of the semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) also stated that the guide would allow for flexibility if the conversation strayed away from the interview questions.

According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), there are four directions of inquiry that can be used to guide question development. The first direction is inward, which designates internal influences such as feelings, emotions and motivations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). An example is asking participants “What emotions did you feel during the campus visit?” The second direction is outward, which refers to external conditions such as environmental factors. An example of this direction can include, “What physical aspect of the campus visit was most salient or stood out the most to you?” According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), the backward and forward direction of inquiry refers to looking at the past, present, and future. An example could include, “What part of the visit to campus was most influential in your decision to enroll at Golden College?” By asking participants to reflect inward on internal influences, outward on external conditions such as environmental conditions, and backwards and forwards on their campus visit experience, I gained insight on each participant’s experiences as related to the college choice process. The interview protocol allowed me to elicit and analyze the stories of students in order to understand the experience of their pre-enrollment visit experience and then analyze that experience as it related to Strange and Banning’s (2015) campus environments.

Data Collection

Each interview was recorded. Interviews took place virtually utilizing Microsoft Teams. The recording functions available through this product were utilized. The records were sent and stored utilizing the interviewer’s encrypted Google account. By recording the interview in addition to taking notes, I was able to give full attention to the participant while the complete interview was captured for future reference and to create interview transcripts (Glesne, 2011). A

copy of each interview was saved through the documents drive on my encrypted Google account, where it will be kept for one year after the date of the interview in order to be accessed if needed for any clarification of this study throughout the dissertation process.

Each interview was expected to last a minimum of 60 minutes and no longer than 90 minutes. After going over informed consent, each interview began with introductions of the researcher/interviewer and the participant. I then provided an overview of the study and ask the participant if they wished to proceed with the interview. If the participant wanted to continue, the recording then began.

As stated earlier, an interview protocol (Appendix E) guided the interview process. Rapport-building questions were asked at the beginning of the interview in order to build a level of comfort between the participant and myself. Following these opening questions, questions were asked according to the interview guide. While the interview guide provided a framework for the interview, follow-up questions were also asked. After exploring the participants' experiences during the campus visit process, the participant had an opportunity to add any additional comments. During the period of time in which the interviews were conducted, I kept a research journal containing field notes, reflections on each interview, and questions and topics for further exploration.

Post-interview

After the completion of each interview, I transcribed the interview verbatim. According to Heritage (1988), transcription allows thorough examination of what is stated by the interviewee during an interview and helps minimize the influence of biases and pre-conceptions that may be held by the researcher. Transcription was completed after each interview rather than

at the conclusion of all interviews, so I would be aware of emerging themes from the data that might require follow-up interviews (Heritage, 1988).

Data Analysis and Representation

According to Merriam (2009), data analysis is the process of making sense out of data collected. Data analysis is one of few facets of qualitative research in which there is a preferred way, which is to start by doing it during data collection (Merriam, 2009). Creswell (2014) stated that data analysis in qualitative research proceeds hand-in-hand with data collection as researchers may begin analyzing an interview collected earlier, writing memos that may be included as a narrative in the final report, and organizing the structure of the final report.

For stage one of this research, I evaluated the interviews of the traditional-aged, first-time freshman. In order to analyze the data and reduce the data into significant themes that emerge, Creswell (2013), recommended evaluating each participants textual and structural description of the research topic. By evaluating the textural description, I sought to identify detailed insight into the meaning that the individuals have experienced during their pre-enrollment visit to campus. By evaluating their structural synthesis, I sought to go deeper than the intrinsic effect of the experience and into the deeper meaning that was experienced by students (Creswell, 2013)

In stage two, I analyzed the similarities as well as the differences of the participants' campus visit experience in order to search for common themes. During the third and final stage, I evaluated the coding of the interviews as they developed into themes, beginning with an initial list of a priori codes (Appendix F), and then subsequent emerging themes.

Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology model was utilized to discuss the themes that emerged. This allowed the participants to share their experience while allowing me to better understand how their experiences during the campus visit influenced their college choice

process. Additionally, I was able to connect the findings to other literature that explained the importance of the campus visit experience on a student's college choice process.

By utilizing the four frames of this model, I was able to relate the results to the themes rather than constraining the analysis by using only the theoretical framework. Through this process, the themes were developed as part of the thematic analysis process rather than being limited by the framework. .

Coding the Data

According to Saldana (2013), coding is a practical way to analyze and interpret qualitative data. Saldana explained that through coding, researchers are able to reflect on the data collected in order to examine its essential meanings and assist the researcher in recognizing patterns and themes. In this study, coding was used to help identify patterns and themes. Coding was performed by hand.

In addition to the initial list of a priori codes (Appendix F), as additional themes emerged, I included them in coding the material. The a priori list of codes were adapted from Okerson's (2016) study on college choice and the campus visit. The list of codes was then sorted based on Strange and Banning's (2015) campus environments model. To discover the additional themes, I used what Saldana (2013) called inductive descriptive coding in two cycles. For the first cycle, I summarized chunks of data by assigning a word or short phrase, or code, which provided me with what Saldana (2013) called an inventory of topics for indexing and categorizing. According to Saldana (2014), codes should emerge progressively during data collection and during the first cycle of data analysis. For the second cycle of coding, I generated pattern codes, labeling themes as they related to Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology model, including the physical, human aggregate, organizational, and constructed environments.

Trustworthiness

This research is grounded in qualitative research; therefore, there will not be any attempts to claim that the findings of this research contain an absolute truth (Glesne, 2011). Instead, they represent a situated truth as they are experienced by the participants and shared with me. I presented the findings of the research knowing that readers of this study will interpret the findings in their own ways. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the readers to determine if this study is deemed credible or not.

Trustworthiness is defined as a set of criteria that refers to the quality of research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). There were several measures taken to ensure trustworthiness. The first measure was through member checking or respondent validation (Merriam, 2009), or the process of verifying accuracy in transcription, analysis and representation to ensure that the participants and the researcher agree with the interpretation of the participants meaning-making. Although I am solely responsible for data analysis as the researcher, I sought input on the analysis from participants. The analysis was emailed to subjects in this study in order for them to be afforded an opportunity to make revisions and provide additional commentary via email or a subsequent interview if requested. In doing so, participant feedback ensured that the descriptions by the researcher corresponded to how the subjects viewed their own experiences during the visit to campus. Participants were asked to read and provide feedback on their own data and texts that I generated specific to them as part of the analysis process.

As the researcher, I also utilized peer review and debriefing to ensure trustworthiness. Peer review and debriefing is the process where my peers reviewed and offered input while I conducted research (Creswell, 2014). Peers in this study my doctoral advisor along with colleagues who are familiar with campus visits. Having external sources review the procedures

and analysis was helpful in obtaining additional perspectives (Creswell, 2014), and increasing the trustworthiness of the study.

Finally, I utilized reflexivity, which enabled the process of reflecting critically on oneself as the researcher or the human as instrument (Merriam, 2009). It was important to explain any biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the research that was undertaken in this study. In this study, I was explicit about my background as related to the campus visit in the study's written sections, aligning with principles posited by Creswell (2014) and Saldana (2013). In doing so, the reader can better understand how the researcher's values, expectations, and past experiences may have influenced the conclusions of this study (Merriam, 2009).

Positionality

As an employee of the Office of Admissions at Golden College, I have an interest in examining the experiences of prospective students during their college choice process. Research shows that students who visit a college campus are twice as likely to matriculate than students who do not visit campus prior to the application process (Brown, 2010; Magolda, 2000; Okerson, 2016). During my career, I have collected anecdotal evidence that campus visits provide prospective students with a way to experience an institution. Campus visits often provide a means by which prospective students navigate through the college choice process. By coding themes during data analysis, I was able to explore if attending a particular college is truly a student's choice, rather than some pre-determined factor such as cost, location, parent influence, or admissions requirements. Through purposeful, qualitative research, I sought to understand and also record what experiences were meaningful to a selected group of students during the visit to campus.

Because I have worked in enrollment management and specifically with campus visit programs for the majority of my career, I had to examine my preconceived ideas about this research topic before I began this study (Merriam, 2009). Through observations and experiences that have influenced my thoughts, I believe that a student who visits campus is more likely to enroll. I also believe that the relationship and relatability a prospective student has with a campus tour guide also influences their overall experience during the visit to campus, which can influence their decision to enroll. Although the majority of my assumptions are supported with the literature in chapter 2, it was important for me to be mindful of my previous experience in order to understand the experiences of the individuals interviewed as meaning was made as it related to this study.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I provided an overview of generic qualitative inquiry and included the rationale for using it for this study. I sought to understand the experiences of the campus visit of first-time, full-time, traditional-aged college in this exploratory study. To collect the data, students were solicited at Golden College. In order to protect their identity, I outlined measures to keep their experiences anonymous. I also outlined the steps of the data collection process and analysis of the data. I also outlined the methods that were utilized to understand the experiences of the campus visit and its impact on the college choice process. In the next chapter, I will present the analysis and the research findings.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to understand which aspects of a campus visit at a small, four-year institution in the Southeast influenced a student's college choice process. This study sought to explore the experiences in order to uncover what aspects of the experience were most meaningful and contributed to heightened interest in the institution for the prospective students. The study sought to answer the following research question: How do students describe the influence of aspects of the campus visit on their college choice process? This research was exploratory in nature.

Summary of Methods

This study was designed using qualitative methods to understand how students interpret their experiences, what meaning they attribute to their experience, and how the participants construct their worlds (Merriam, 2009). A qualitative method was chosen as it is my goal to understand the perspective of the participants in order to interpret their experiences as they relate to their college decision-making process (Creswell, 2014). The interview protocol that was used for this study allowed me to elicit and analyze the stories of students in order to understand the experience of their pre-enrollment visit.

I recruited participants utilizing several approaches. First, I contacted colleagues in the academic advisement office, who advise all first-time freshmen at Golden College. I then sought their assistance in notifying students via email of the study and requesting their voluntary participation. I also recruited participants by asking a colleague in the admissions office to

identify first-year students who visited campus prior to enrollment and to email them regarding the study to request their voluntary participation. This method was useful for selecting participants who are identified as important cases (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Purposeful sampling was utilized in this study in order to seek information-rich cases to learn about the issues that are central to the purpose of this research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the initial email that was shared with students by colleagues in the advisement office and admissions office, students were requested to complete a survey via Google forms to confirm their eligibility and their interest in participation. All twenty-one students met the requirements of the study, which consisted of them identifying as 1) a current full-time student as defined by Golden College (12 or more semester hours), 2) a traditional-aged college student, defined as students between the age of 18 – 22 who proceed directly to college from high school with a clear idea on the next educational step (Massey, 1997), 3) a first-time freshman (within the first year of degree seeking enrollment, even if prior college credit was earned through advancement placement or dual enrolled courses) and 4) someone who participated in a visit to Golden College during their junior or senior year of high school.

In order to complete this study, two rounds of recruitment and interviews were conducted. In the first round, during late Spring 2021, eight students indicated interest in participating in the study. Each of the students matriculated as a beginning freshman during the Fall 2020 semester. During the second round of recruitment, during the Summer of 2021, another thirteen students indicated interest in participating in the study. These thirteen students had all been accepted and registered for the Fall 2021 semester but had not yet arrived on campus for their first classes. During each round, after completing the survey, students were asked to select a time to participate in the interview process via an internet service, SignUp Genius. Due to social

distancing requirements and guidance by the University of Georgia’s Institutional Research Board, participants were interviewed in a virtual setting via Microsoft Teams. Of the students who demonstrated interest via the Google form, eight students from the spring and thirteen students from the summer, eleven students initially chose a time to interview, with a total of seven students completing interviews as part of this study.

Within the span of four months, seven students shared their stories by participating in a semi-structured interview that lasted from 30 – 60 minutes. A semi-structured interview protocol was appropriate for this study, as it contained a combination of structured questions designed to elicit specific information and loosely structured questions to allow for flexibility in the questioning (Merriam, 2009).

Participant Descriptions

The following table offers descriptive information as provided on the recruitment form about the demographic background each of the seven study participants who were interviewed as part of this study. I utilized pseudonyms, which are used throughout the chapter to provide confidentiality and protect the participants’ identities. Generalizations are employed in many areas of the findings, including information on specific majors, athletic teams, and locations, in order to protect the participants’ privacy and confidentiality.

Table 1

Participant Descriptions

Name (Pseudonym)	Enrollment Term/ Year	Race	Parent/Guardian (1) Level of Education	Parent/Guardian (2) Level of Education
Courtney	Fall 2021	White	Master’s degree	Master’s degree
Derek	Fall 2020	White	Baccalaureate degree	Some college but no formal award
Jonathan	Fall 2021	White	Some college but no formal award	High school diploma or equivalent

Kiara	Fall 2020	Black or African American	Some college but no formal award	High school diploma or equivalent
Melissa	Fall 2020	White	Some college but no formal award	Some college but no formal award
Nicole	Fall 2021	Black or African American	High school diploma or equivalent	High school diploma or equivalent
Tiffany	Fall 2021	White	Baccalaureate degree	Baccalaureate degree

Participant Summaries

In addition to the table above, summaries of the participants' experiences are presented in order to introduce them prior to explaining the findings of the study.

Courtney

Courtney attended Golden College because of athletics and its unique location near the coast. Courtney also chose to attend the institution because of its size - not too big but not too small. Courtney first learned about Golden from a friend whose older sibling had previously attended the institution.

Courtney first toured campus unofficially as a prospective student athlete during the fall of her senior year of high school. Courtney met with her potential coach and viewed an athletic competition as part of the visit. After enjoying the location and doing more research online, she then followed up during her senior year by taking an official tour with her mom and a different friend. At the time of her tour, Courtney was not sure on what her specific major and concentration was going to be but had narrowed it down to a broader subject area. Courtney indicated that while she was initially underwhelmed by the institution, she later grew to like it as she browsed more information about the institution online through the college website. This

researched made Courtney excited to learn more about the institution from her tour guide as part of the visit to campus.

Derek

Derek attended Golden College because of its unique location near the coast. Derek had initially made his mind up that he was going to attend college closer to home at a major metropolitan university prior to visiting Golden. However, Derek's dream was to attend a college on the west coast. Derek's dad had learned about the institution from a childhood friend of Derek who had previously attended Golden. Derek had begged his parents to go to an institution on the West Coast, or Hawaii, which prompted them to take Derek to explore Golden College because of its unique coastal location.

Derek took a surprise road trip with his dad to visit Golden, and immediately fell in love with the institution, primarily because of the location. Derek was unsure of a specific major, but had a general idea or subject area that he thought he would be interested in pursuing. Unlike the other participants in the study, Derek had not done any research about Golden prior to his visit to campus.

Jonathan

Jonathan chose to attend Golden College because of athletics. Jonathan had visited many campuses but was interested in Golden due to the opportunity to play sports and because of its unique location that offered many opportunities and facilities for him to practice his sport. Jonathan initially learned about the institution from a former coach who was familiar with the area and the athletic program at the institution.

Jonathan took two visits to campus before deciding to enroll. The first visit was an unofficial tour with a current member of the athletic team. The second visit was a formal campus

tour through the Office of Admissions. Jonathan commented that he learned a lot more about the institution on his tour and definitely became more comfortable with the possibility of attending, especially due to the smaller size of Golden and the ability to easily move around campus.

Kiara

Kiara attended Golden College because of the distance from her hometown. Kiara stated during her interview that it was not too close but that it was also not too far, as it was in the state that she grew up in, only a couple of hours away. Kiara is a first-generation student and has a twin brother who went to another institution because of military affiliated opportunities. Kiara first learned about Golden College from her high school counselor.

After deciding to consider attending college, Kiara and her mother toured several different institutions. Although she had never heard of Golden before and was not familiar with the area, Kiara visited campus due to a recommendation from her high school counselor. According to the counselor, the institution met several of Kiara's requirements: size, distance, and cost. Kiara conducted research via the internet prior to visiting Golden and felt like she better understood the campus layout, cost, and opportunities after the visit.

Melissa

Melissa attended Golden College because of a specific program of study. Although Melissa was not familiar with the institution, she became interested in Golden after conducting research online and learning more about it. There is limited availability of her major at other institutions in the state. Melissa is a first-generation college student but knew from an early age that attending college was expected of her after high school graduation.

Melissa visited campus twice prior to deciding to apply and enroll. The first visit was an unofficial visit to campus as her family was in the area for an event and they decided to explore

campus. The second visit was part of an open house event on a Saturday. In addition to taking a tour and learning more about the facilities, Melissa had the opportunity to meet with a faculty member and get an in-depth look at the program's facilities, which ultimately confirmed her intention to apply and enroll at Golden.

Nicole

Nicole decided to attend Golden College due to her major. At the time of visiting campus, Nicole had narrowed her list of majors to two different areas and was looking for an institution that offered both. She learned about Golden from a friend who had already decided to enroll. After hearing about the institution from the friend, Nicole decided to conduct research online, and once she confirmed that Golden offered her major, she decided to visit campus.

Nicole is a first-generation college student.

Nicole visited campus twice before deciding to enroll. She drove through campus with her mother on the way to vacation and then decided to take an official visit later on during her senior year. Nicole indicated that she confirmed her intention to enroll because of the information provided by her tour guide from her second visit to campus.

Tiffany

Tiffany decided to attend Golden College because of her major. Golden College was the only public institution in the state where she resided that offered her particular major. Tiffany initially looked at several schools out of state but ultimately decided to tour Golden due to its affordability. Tiffany initially learned about Golden by searching for her major using several college search engines on the internet. After discovering Golden, she researched the internet further to find out more information.

Tiffany visited campus twice before deciding to enroll at Golden. The first visit was part of an open house that was offered on a Saturday. At that event, she was able to talk to a professor within her major and became very interested in the institution. However, she did not feel that she was able to confirm what she had hoped about other parts of the institution as the tour was a bit rushed and her group was very large, meaning she was not able to connect with her tour guide or hear much of what he was saying. She later took an individual tour during her senior year to get answers to some of her questions. The two visits combined - the first one confirming her interest in the specific program and the second one allowing her to better understand what she had researched online - ultimately influenced her decision to enroll.

Summary of Participants

Prior to visiting Golden College, each of the participants of this study shared that there were a specific set of priorities that led them to considering the institution. As they researched in order to learn more about the institution, they each learned additional information and eventually chose to visit. Individually, each participant identified different factors that were most important to them. For all students, the campus visit became an influential experience that impacted their ultimate decision to enroll, regardless of the student's background. The specific factors they experienced during their visit to campus were influential in their experience.

Major Themes

Three distinct themes emerged from the research data. This research was exploratory in nature. The major themes identified from this study included:

1. **Influential Factors:** Although students had priorities during the search process that lead them to visiting Golden, the visit identified additional factors that became influential in their decision-making process.

2. **Sense of Belonging:** The visit to campus helped create a sense of belonging as the students began to understand the campus culture and better envision themselves attending Golden.
3. **Multiple Visits to Campus:** For most students, a single campus visit was not enough for them to decide to enroll; multiple visits, often serving somewhat different purposes, were necessary before they felt confident in their choice.

The major themes identified from the results of this study helped answer the research question: How do students describe the influence of aspects of the campus visit on their college choice process? Each theme is discussed in further detail below.

Theme 1. Influential Factors

Each participant indicated that throughout their college choice process, they had identified specific priorities or a list of important requirements when looking at institutions to attend. Through utilizing internet search engines, specific college search websites, or information shared by individuals such as parents, high school counselors, or family friends, students learned that Golden College met their main priorities. These priorities included academic major, campus location, athletic programs and fitness facilities, and campus housing. These priorities frequently fueled students' motivation to explore Golden in more depth and visit campus.

Initial priorities: “The college initially met my list of requirements.” To begin the interview, I asked each interviewee about their college choice process and how Golden became an institution they decided to explore. Students frequently learned about Golden because of influential people in their lives, including parents, family friends, or high school counselor. For those who did not learn by word of mouth, they regularly learned about it by searching the

internet based on specific keywords or priorities that they had identified as most important to them.

The students explained that their priorities, combined with the influence of influential people in their lives, prompted them to look closer at Golden. Jonathan and Courtney both learned about Golden because of athletics. They both wanted to continue playing their sport during college. Courtney went on to explain that she explored Golden because the older sibling of one of her friends went there and she had heard so much about her experience when she would return home during breaks. Meanwhile, Jonathan learned that Golden offered his desired athletic program from a former coach.

Tiffany's top priority was a rare major that is not offered at many institutions. She explained that her high school counselor would email her with schools that offered her major. Like Tiffany, Kiara learned about Golden from her high school counselor who encouraged her to consider attending college after high school.

Nicole learned about Golden because of a close friend who was also considering Golden College and encouraged her to visit campus. Derek's dad was the reason he visited Golden College. His dad had learned about Golden because of a family friend. Derek shared that he mainly went to his mom for guidance because she graduated college. Although his dad was not his primary source of information, the search process became a constant conversation between the three of them as they discussed different institutions to consider.

Melissa learned about Golden because of an internet search on her major of interest. She stated, "I had never heard of Golden before I did research on the computer. I just Googled my major and I made a list of everything and every requirement."

As they visited campus, additional factors emerged. These factors included campus size, campus life, interactions with faculty and staff, interaction with tour guides, campus diversity, the physical layout of campus, campus technology, campus dining, the influence of parents because of the visit, the affordability of Golden College, and the influence of an information session. Their initial priorities, combined with the new factors that emerged on the visit, were instrumental in the students' experience and influenced their college choice process.

Academic major: "I knew what my calling was in life." As described earlier, academic major was a main priority that led to several students' intention of visiting Golden College. For those students, the visit further influenced their college choice process. Similarly, four other students had narrowed down their list of potential majors and wanted to make sure they attended a college that did not limit their options.

Taking a campus visit to Golden allowed the participants to learn more in-depth information about the options in regards to a major or program of study. Nicole described learning more about her major on the tour and how she appreciated hearing directly from faculty within that major. She detailed how the faculty member not only talked about the curriculum but also the success of several graduates. For both Nicole and Melissa, the visit to campus allowed them to see the lab facilities, something that Nicole explained that really impressed her as she had never seen anything like it prior to the campus visit.

Tiffany and Melissa were both able to meet with professors within their major of choice as part of their visit to campus. Melissa shared her experience:

They had a big display of tables and people to talk about each of the majors.... I remember thinking, they must really want me to go to school here and be in their major.

Later in the day, we went to a session that talked specifically about my major... We got to

see classrooms which seemed normal but we also go to see the labs and it was very cool. They also told me about some of the internships and I thought that was very intriguing....What was most impactful is that the dean of my school actually talked to me afterwards ...she wanted me to come here, she made sure that I knew she wanted to work with me.

Even if a major was not initially the most important priority, several participants indicated that it was important to learn about potential majors or areas of study. While Jonathan was not exactly sure of a specific major, his visit to campus allowed him to learn more about the programs and hear first-hand from current students about the programs. Courtney had a similar experience as Jonathan. She explained:

I definitely made sure to look at places that had a lot of options with majors because I was not really sure exactly what I want to major in, so I need something that had all my interests. Golden has a variety of majors. There were two different programs I was interested in. We talked a lot about both of them and I was able to see the facilities and learn how good both of the programs were. The tour helped me decide on a major. I did not know that then, but I was leaning towards it and the tour helped highlight it a bit more.

For most of the participants, a major or program of study became a priority. By visiting campus, they were able to learn about the particular areas of study and also learn about other options should they change their mind in regards to what they wanted to study at Golden. Being able to see the facilities specific to their program or talking to faculty from their program also had a positive impact that influenced their college choice process.

Campus location: “I fell in love with the area.” Five of the seven students credited the location of Golden College as an important priority in their college choice process; it is both near the coast and in the state where several of the participants live.

Courtney was interested in attending an institution that had lots of things to do and felt like Golden had that, based on the location. She explained that the campus visit was able to validate that information as she learned more about the student life on campus. Courtney stated that “The fact that Golden was close to the beach was definitely a plus.” Through his visit to campus, Derek learned that Golden was a good option for his college pursuits as it offered a coastal environment but was still in his home state. Similar to Derek, Kiara stated that the tour showed her that Golden would allow her to find “a home away from home, but not too far away.”

Jonathan stated that he “always loved the area” and that it was certainly a draw to the institution and a contributing factor to his overall experience during his visits to campus. Tiffany shared similar thoughts as Jonathan as she explained that the exploring the area around the college on her trip to campus and seeing for herself the proximity of the campus to the beach was an influential factor in her college choice process. Tiffany stated, “I like paddle boarding and biking and I really was attracted by the location...I told myself I am kind of winning because it’s like summer camp at the beach.”

The students who indicated the location of Golden College was a top priority explained that it was more about the area around the college and the activities they could pursue when not on campus. The campus visit allowed the students to see the location first hand, influencing their college choice process.

Athletic programs & fitness facilities: “I want to be physically active.” Jonathan and Courtney, both student-athletes, chose to attend Golden primary because of the athletic programs. They shared a similar experience in regards to their first visit to campus, as it was primarily focused around the specific sport that they were being recruited to play, respectively. However, even though athletics was a top priority for both Jonathan and Courtney, they both indicated that there were other factors that influenced their decision to visit campus. According to Jonathan, “I was looking for the facilities we get to use in the town and all that and just the area. It's a great area and you can make a lot of good connections down here.”

Jonathan shared that as an athlete, he became impressed on the campus visit with the fitness facilities, both indoors and outdoors. His high school did not have anything that matched the magnitude of Golden. He was impressed by the facilities.

For the participants who were not student-athletes, the athletics and fitness facilities were still an influential factor during their visit. Nicole, Tiffany, and Derek stated that they were thrilled to see the outdoor fitness and athletic facilities on campus. They shared they were able to see the walking trails, outdoor volleyball and basketball courts, outdoor fitness center, and putting green. They were also able to tour the fitness center, the indoor gymnasium, and the CrossFit Gym during their visit to campus. They each remarked they were appreciative in seeing that they could be physically active as a student.

The visit to campus allowed the students who were attending due to athletics as well as the students who wanted to be physically active as a student to see the facilities and better envision themselves utilizing those facilities.

Housing: “It gave me a feeling of comfort.” A top priority for several students was the availability of campus housing and the ability to feel comfortable in the space in which they

would live. Courtney stated that the residence halls at Golden were “definitely nice and they were a big factor in my decision on where to go to college.” Courtney stated that she liked that each student was able to get their own room and that they were setup very similar to an apartment. Courtney, along with other participants talked in depth about being impressed by the size, the floorplan, and the bathrooms. Several participants were particularly excited to learn on the campus visit that they would not have to share a communal bathroom with other students.

Nicole and Kiara, both from underserved populations and first-generation students, stated that their parents were extremely interested in seeing the residence halls as part of their visit to campus. Their parents were both hesitant about them going off to college and each asked very specific questions during the campus visit as they were seeking to make sure that their student would be safe in campus housing. They were particularly interested in learning whether or not the rooms were co-ed, the temperature of the rooms, visitation policies, and more about the safety of the buildings. Nicole stated that her mom was less skeptical after taking the campus tour and being able to physically see where she was going to live. Likewise, Kiara further explained that the campus tour was able to answer a lot of her parents’ questions, and the tour guide was able to help her mother feel more comfortable with her choosing a school that was far away from home.

For the participants who did not indicate that housing was a main priority, they still wanted to see housing as part of their campus visit. Tiffany, Jonathan, and Derek all stated that they just wanted to make sure that housing was available and checked a box. Tiffany stated “I can live anywhere. I don’t need much. But I at least wanted to see what they looked like. What I found out is that they provided a feeling of comfort.” Tiffany went on to explain that her older brother had a terrible housing experience and after seeing the dorms, she knew she could attend

Golden because the residence halls were nice and she could find pride in where she was going to live.

Regardless of whether or not housing was a top priority, all participants indicated that it was important to see where they were going to live as part of their visit to campus. As a result of visiting campus, all students were able to see housing and it became a positive experience that led to their overall decision to enroll at Golden.

Campus size: “I knew I would be able to make it to class on time.” Throughout the interviews, all of the participants discussed the size of campus and how it became an important factor during their visit to campus. Several students explained that they had no idea what the size of campus was until they visited campus and were able to see it in person. Tiffany stated, “I just looked at the campus in general and I saw that it was a smaller campus. I could tell online that the numbers seemed smaller but the campus offered a lot of programs and clubs.” Tiffany explained that campus was not too spread out and was walkable, which became important as she began to understand that getting across campus between classes would not be a problem.

Both Kiara and Nicole explained that the campus tour allowed them to better understand the size of classes, and they learned that it was very similar to the size of their high school classes. Kiara went on to describe that although her counselor had shared with her about the size, seeing the campus in person gave her a better sense of understanding and because of the size, she began to be able to see herself as a student at Golden.

Several of the participants, including Derek, Tiffany, and Melissa, shared that they had envisioned attending college at a much larger institution prior to their visit to Golden. Melissa explained that although she was from a small town where everyone knows everyone she had

assumed that all college campuses were extremely large. Her campus visit allowed her to better understand why she may be more successful at a smaller institution.

Campus life: “I wanted to be able to be involved outside of class.” Nicole, Kiara, and Melissa all shared that being able to see campus life first-hand and hear about students’ engagement became an influential element of their visit experience. Nicole stated that her high school was very involved, whether it be community service events, athletic events, or student organizations, and that seeing that Golden also had an active campus life was important. Kiara was also excited to learn more about student life due to her involvement in high school. During her visit, Kiara learned about the requirements to start a club or organization. She explained that after the visit, when she went back to her high school and shared this information with her classmates, she realized right then and there that she was sold on attending Golden College.

While Nicole and Kiara were interested in the clubs, organizations, and activities, it became important to Melissa to make sure that she would have the opportunity to meet people once she enrolled as a student. The campus visit allowed Melissa to meet several students and she explained that the tour gave her the impression that it would be easy to meet even more students and make friends once she enrolled.

Both Melissa and Courtney explained that the campus visit allowed them to understand that Golden College was not a party school. Both were relieved in knowing that they would not have to deal with the pressure of attending a party school. Melissa explained that during her tour, the guide talked more about service projects and taking advantage of the nature and outdoors of the surrounding area rather than what people did on Friday nights. Courtney shared a similar experience of learning more about campus engagement than attending a college that had a party atmosphere.

Faculty and staff: “I really liked their energy.” The campus visit allowed students to connect with faculty and staff, which ultimately had an impact on their experience. When I asked about interaction with faculty and staff, several participants explained that they enjoyed the interaction. Learning about their major directly from their faculty member and seeing the energy from administration and from support staff impacted the students’ experience.

Nicole shared that as part of her visit to campus she met one of the faculty members. That faculty member shared with Nicole information about their class and Nicole thought it was really interesting. Even more, she was impressed that the professor gave their contact information to her and let her know that she could reach out if she needed help along the way. Nicole explained that the interaction with that faculty member and her learning that people were willing to help her became a top reason she chose to attend Golden College.

During Tiffany’s first visit to campus, she was able to meet with a professor in her program of study - the program being a major priority in her college choice process. Tiffany described that experience and the ability to talk to him about her program. She shared that it was this interaction that positively impacted her experience and influenced her decision to enroll.

In addition to faculty, Nicole shared that she met the president during her visit as the president stopped the tour group and introduced herself. Similarly, Kiara and Melissa shared that they met one of the vice presidents as well as admissions employees and that the interaction was positive. Melissa explained that the vice president was extremely nice and that her parents were very impressed. Likewise, they were impressed that they met the director of the writing center and the director of financial aid and shared that both staff members made her feel like they were invested in her success.

Tour guide: “I wanted to be like her.” When asked about the tour guides’ impact on their campus visit experience, most of the participants shared that they had a vast influence. Many of the students commented on the knowledge that the tour guides possessed and being impressed by the tour guides’ ability to share a lot of information about Golden College. Derek explained that on his visit to campus, he could tell that his tour guide knew what she was doing that “ she kind of just radiated energy.” Derek went on to further share his visit experience because of his tour guide:

She was everything I wanted to be - same degree, same social skills, same confidence in character. She was a huge influence on my choosing Golden... we were able to have a good conversation... She was so smart and knowledgeable and was able to provide so much information while making me feel so comfortable...My tour guide made me so excited about this college. My tour guide and her energy were definitely a huge reason that I chose to attend Golden!

Several students explained that their tour guide shared personal experiences with them, and it was those interactions and the transparency of the guides that helped them see themselves attending Golden College. Jonathan shared that he appreciated the honesty of the tour guide. He stated, “My guide wasn’t paid to sugar coating things when he talked about the different aspects of the school.” Similarly, Kiara stated that unlike a website where things are often shown as picture perfect, her interactions with her tour guide made Golden College feel more real. She explained that the guide gave a lot of information about the college and what it was like to be a student at Golden.

Campus diversity: “I wanted to fit in here.” I did not ask any questions about the diversity of campus or whether or not students sensed an inclusive environment. However,

several of the participants shared information about this topic on their own. Kiara and Nicole are both from underserved backgrounds. Kiara shared that when she visited Golden, she was looking for an inclusive campus where she would fit in. She shared that she was able to see the student activities center and the multi-cultural learning center as part of the tour. She explained that while the tour guide did not go into a lot of detail, just knowing that it was available became important to her.

Nicole explained that she noticed a lot of posters that advertised events that centered around diversity issues. Nicole was nervous about being away from her family, and seeing some of the events that were being advertised allowed her to understand that she would meet people that carried the same values as her family.

Derek shared that he was also able to see the diversity of the Golden College community on his visit to campus. He shared the following:

There are a lot of different people here. Some who were like me and some that were very unique and unapologetically weird! I'm weird. I love that. The campus tour showed me that you are allowed to be whoever you want to be. Do whatever you want to do and that to me is a huge bonus because I have always been introverted and I finally felt like I could be myself... I could be what I had dreamed I could be here. It was so different than high school and was a new start.

Physical layout: "I could see that the campus was well maintained." I asked the participants to share their impression of the physical features of the campus. For the most part, all of the participants stated that they were impressed by the campus facilities and the overall look of the outdoor spaces. They stated that they were able to better understand the layout of the campus.

Courtney, Derek, Tiffany, Melissa, and Nicole all stated that the campus was very clean and kept up. For Tiffany and Jonathan, it was the outdoor spaces that made had an impact on their campus visit. Tiffany said, “ I like the outdoors and I like the open space where you can like walk from one place to another.” Derek explained his view of the physical campus in detail:

When we arrived to campus and looked at the buildings...I could see that time was taken to clean these buildings and make sure that they didn't look shabby. That was important...Walking around, I definitely fell in love with the college very quickly...There were markers indicating what things were. Being able to see all that and understand that I will be able to find places was comforting...I felt like I was on a college campus and it definitely was enticing as it is the way I pictured a college should be like.

Kiara explained that she was a visual person and being able to walk around and see her surroundings made her feel at home. Kiara shared that her tour was mostly outdoors but that she was also able to see the inside of several buildings and classrooms.

Campus technology: “I was blown away by the innovation.” I did not prompt students to discuss technology or innovation as part of the visit to campus. However, when talking about the physical layout, several students indicated that they also learned more about technology across campus. Derek explained that walking through several of the classroom buildings showed him that Golden College was definitely investing in technology. He stated, “My high school had a lot of new and innovative technology but I was blown away by some of the things offered by Golden.” The interactive equipment in the tutoring center, the eSports facility, and just the technology throughout the buildings made an impact on his decision to enroll.

Campus dining: “I liked that there were options.” Without being prompted, six of the seven participants talked about the dining facilities as part of the campus tour. They all shared

more about the actual food and the information provided by their tour guide and less about the physical space of the primary dining facility. Several of the participants shared that they felt like their tour guide was very transparent and did not try to oversell the dining experience at Golden College. Nicole shared that she asked her tour guide about the food because she did not like her options in high school. She explained that she learned from the tour guide that “some days it is great and others not so much but that there were options.”

Melissa also shared that in addition to getting the opportunity to eat in the dining facility while on campus, her tour guide talked about the options and not having to worry about what she was going to cook and how the meal plans work. Derek explained that prior to his visit to campus, he did not know anything about how meal plans worked. His tour guide talked about how convenient the dining hall was and how good of an option it was because you did not really have to think about where you are going or what you were getting or learning how to cook.

Several of the participants discussed that the dining hall seemed like a major upgrade from their high school experience. Courtney explained that the look of the dining hall, along with her understanding of the options of meal plans had an impact on her search process as she began to understand what life would be like as a student at Golden College.

Parents’ influence: “The visit helped my parents support my decision.” Six of the seven participants in this study stated that their parents were very involved in their college choice process and that their experiences during the visit became influential in their support of the participant enrolling at Golden College. For some, the parents were involved from the beginning and conducted research via search engines or knew about the college from family friends. For others, the campus visit was an avenue for the parents to learn more information, which ultimately led to their approval of the student attending Golden University.

Tiffany and Derek both shared that their parents were very involved in the search process and the initial decision to visit campus. Tiffany shared that her mother is a high school math teacher and had done a lot of research about affordability. It was this research that prompted Tiffany to do her own research and find schools that offered her major that her family could afford.

As I asked Derek about his search process, he shared that he had never considered Golden College and that his dad learned about the institution from a family friend. Derek stated that it was his desire to go to a school on the west coast but due to cost and location, his dad introduced him to Golden. Derek stated that “I had a certain set of things I looked at in colleges like my major, the location, and all the fun stuff. But I know my mom constantly talked before the tour about housing if I went away and safety. And my dad was all about the cost. The tour sold me on my interests and my dad on the cost.”

Nicole shared that her family was also influential in the process. However, unlike Tiffany and Derek, Nicole described her family being very curious in learning about Golden during the visit. As a first-generation student from an underserved population, Nicole shared that her family used the tour to learn more information. She shared that everyone was involved in the decision, and everyone toured, including her mother, father, and step-mother.

Affordability: “The cost became a determining factor on my decision.” Most of the participants shared that affordability and cost were not an initial factor in visiting Golden. However, learning about cost during the visit was important to their parents, and the affordability became a factor when deciding where to attend. The visit provided them information that they needed to determine the cost, and learning that the college worked with students who needed funding also became important for the participants.

Melissa shared that she had a dream school but she did not apply because she compared it to the cost of Golden after her first visit to campus. She stated that after the campus tour, her parents encouraged her to look at her dream school for a graduate degree instead. Melissa further explained that her parents' interaction with the financial aid office, as part of her visit to campus, was very important. They learned more about scholarships and the different types of aid available. Neither of Melissa's parents graduated from college and so the information they received during the visit to campus helped them learn about all of the costs, from housing to fees, to meal plans, to tuition. She stated that "the tour also helped them create a plan and know what all to budget for when deciding where to attend."

Derek indicated that although the cost wasn't discussed in detail as part of his campus visit, he did receive an information packet that explained the cost of attendance. He shared that he remembered talking about it with his father on the ride home from the visit and that his dad then looked at all of it and handled it. "I didn't quite understand the cost of school until I toured, and my dad asked a lot of questions on the tour that aided in our decision that I would ultimately apply to Golden."

Information session: "I learned things that I did not know." Both Tiffany and Melissa received an information session since they visited campus during an open house event. Tiffany explained that while she didn't pay close attention during the session, her mother took notes and on the car ride home she discussed a lot of the information that was shared. However, Tiffany shared that during the opening session there were two students who spoke and it caught her attention. She stated, "They talked about what they did outside of class and the clubs they were involved in...and it caught my attention."

Melissa found the opening session to be more beneficial than Tiffany did. Melissa shared that during the opening session, she learned a lot more about the College and about the specific programs of study and majors. She clarified that, “for someone who's never really had much information on school...it was really good and taught me a lot about Golden.

Summary. Through this study, the participants indicated that they had top priorities or a list of important requirements when looking at institutions to attend. These priorities included academic major, campus location, athletic programs and fitness facilities, and campus housing. Because they learned more about the institution as part of the search process, the participants decided to visit campus and explore Golden in person.

Although students identified a priority that identified Golden College as a possibility in their college choice process, other factors emerged that influenced the process because of the visit to campus. These factors included campus size, campus life, interactions with faculty and staff, interaction with tour guides, campus diversity, the physical layout of campus, campus technology, campus dining, the influence of parents because of the visit, the affordability of Golden College, and the influence of an information session.

Theme 2: Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging emerged as a critical component of the participants' experience during their visit to campus. Defined by the participants as a feeling of connectedness, the participants' emotions and feeling of belonging in the campus environment was found to have a profound effect on their experience during their campus visit.

The participants described how a feeling of belonging, fitting in, and caring by the campus community helped them to move towards the decision of applying and ultimately

enrolling at Golden College. This section details the students' emotions during the campus visit and the students' understanding about the culture of the campus.

Emotions: "I get a very caring vibe." Participants were asked to share their emotions during their visit to campus. After pausing to let the student think about the question, I often followed up with a few clarifying questions, "What were you feeling when you first arrived to campus and how did you feel when you were on the tour?" Participants were also prompted to share what their emotions were at the conclusion of the tour.

Initial feelings: "I had a mixture of excitement yet nervousness." Almost all of the participants shared that they were excited to see the campus yet a bit nervous as they did not know what to expect. Jonathan shared that he grew up in a small private school before transitioning to a larger, public high school and that the transition was overwhelming. Jonathan explained that he was excited about visiting as he had hoped that coming to Golden would be like going back to a smaller school and that he was excited to see it in person. Although Derek did not know about his visit to Golden until he was almost there, he shared that at first, he was surprised but he became very excited as they pulled into Golden for the first time. Melissa, also excited about her visit to Golden, shared the following:

I was definitely excited. I am almost done with high school. Now, it is getting real. I was scared, too, because I was like, how am I going to transition? Am I going to be ok with everything?

Kiara shared the same excitement as other students but also shared there was some nervousness that she experienced. She explained that she was excited about her future but was also nervous at the same time. When asked why, she stated, "I have a twin brother so we're used to doing everything together and when he couldn't come and do it with me, it kind of made me

nervous because I was by myself so I had to make decisions by myself. I had to experience this by myself so in that aspect I was nervous.” Similar to the others, Courtney shared that she had been looking at Golden for a while and was excited to finally see everything. She shared, “I was definitely kind of a little nervous though on that day because it was an important day for me. I wanted to see everything.”

During the tour: “I felt a sense of ease.” The excitement among the students seemed to carry on throughout the campus visit. Derek stated that as the campus tour started, he really liked it and paid very close attention. He stated, “My dad was taking notes on his phone. There was so much information. I was thrilled that the school checked off so many of my wish list items- affordability, my major, the location. It helped me understand that there's a place out there that I want to go to, that I can get accepted to, that has my major, and in an awesome location. It was an awesome feeling.”

Several students expressed that that during the tour there were people that were reassuring them to not worry. Melissa went on to explain in detail:

Everyone says that housing is cool for someone who's always lived with their parents.

We went to the student center and I was like, I can see myself playing bingo with some people or in the game room. As we went through the tour, I'm thinking to myself, I'm basically a student now because I'm with a student and seeing the things students do and it was cool. And some of them walk up to you and are like - you coming to school here?

They were like it's nice to meet you.

Nicole shared the same sentiments as Melissa, “I felt at ease...Every time we passed someone, my tour guide knew them and they'd talk and they'd tell me they had hoped to see me at Golden in the future. So I got a very caring vibe.”

During the tour: “I became overwhelmed but that wasn’t a bad thing.” Several of the students, including Courtney, Tiffany, and Melissa shared that although they sensed a caring vibe, they were also overwhelmed as because they began to realize that they would have to decide on their future and wanted to make sure that they were seeing everything and could imagine themselves as a student. However, as Tiffany explained, they became more at ease as they learned more information and became more and more comfortable seeing themselves happy at Golden College.

Students had a range of emotions during the tour, from excitement to nervousness to being overwhelmed. However, as they went through these emotions, they began to feel a sense of belonging and began to see themselves as a student at Golden College, which ultimately influenced their decision to enroll.

Campus culture: “I wanted to feel like I belonged.” The participants were prompted to describe what the campus culture was like during their visit. Most of the students shared their opinion of the campus culture in detail and further illustrated that it highly impacted their overall campus tour experience.

Courtney described that learning about the campus culture was one of the reasons she wanted to visit campus. She explained, “I didn’t have a lot of questions. I wanted to know about the people.” Courtney felt like she saw very caring people at Golden during her campus visit. “Everyone is really nice. I really liked that it was a very chilled environment. I realized on the tour that I kind of liked environment of the school, I liked the size and feel and feeling like I belonged at the school. I was able to see myself belonging as part of the tour.”

Kiara illustrated similar feelings as those described by Courtney. She explained that she and her mother discussed the visit on the ride home and they both agreed that they liked the

culture. Kiara was asked to explain further and she stated that everyone was friendly and she felt like the culture at Golden resembled the culture of her high school. She said, “Being that everyone knew everyone, everyone was friendly, and everyone seemed to have their place. I remember the vice president and a staff member from admissions introducing themselves to me. I loved their energy.”

Several students explained that they felt like the culture of Golden College was a home away from home and they felt comfortable and felt like they fit in with everyone. Melissa stated:

They built a relationship with you... You just feel included here. You don't feel like this is a new place. I learned how much people want to connect with you...I felt like this is home away from home...everyone knows everyone.

Student success: “A culture of growth.” Jonathan and Derek explained that they found out on their visit to campus that the school wanted to grow and that was an appealing factor to both of them. Jonathan shared that he was drawn to the idea that Golden was going to eventually get bigger and was focused on students’ success. Derek stated, “It seemed that the school was trying to make sure the education was personal and was focused on the future...I felt that the school was putting an effort into taking care of me, and I became very satisfied with that feeling.” Derek further explained that the visit showed him that students are cared for no matter who they are and that he was important to a lot of people on campus.

As students explained their emotions during the visit, they were also able to explain the influence of the campus culture during the visit. Combined, these elements created a sense of belonging for the participants and ultimately influenced their campus visit experience and their decision to enroll at Golden University.

Summary. The participants' feeling of belonging, fitting in, and caring by the campus community helped them to move towards the decision of applying and ultimately enrolling at Golden College. Defined by the participants' feeling of connectedness, their emotions and feeling of belonging in the campus environment were found to have a profound effect on their experience during their campus visit.

Theme 3: Multiple Campus Visits

It became evident that as students moved through the search process, they often visited campus multiple times, and those visits became influential in their decision-making process. For most students, a single campus visit was not enough for them to decide to enroll; multiple visits, often serving somewhat different purposes, were necessary before they felt confident in their choice.

Initial visit to campus: "I liked the campus." Participants were asked to describe their first interaction with Golden College. To clarify, I asked each participant, "Did you ever attend a camp, athletic event, or theatre event?" None of the participants visited campus prior to their search process. Participants identified that they initially visited the campus in a variety of ways including unofficial tours to self-explore campus, daily campus tours that are offered throughout the week, and open houses or large campus events that allow students to tour campus and connect with individuals. For several participants, the first visit was not an official tour scheduled through the Office of Admissions. Melissa, Nicole, and Kiara all drove through campus with their parents and explored on their own. Melissa's first visit to campus was not intentional. Her sister had a softball tournament in a nearby city and she noticed a billboard about the campus on her way to the tournament. Because she had been exploring Golden College online, she convinced her parents to stop by and take a look. Melissa and her family stopped by

the Office of Admissions and were provided a folder with informational flyers. They then took it upon themselves to walk around and check out the campus.

Like Melissa, Nicole stopped by the campus on her way to vacation with her family. Nicole shared that she did not even get out of the car. Her family simply drove through campus and checked out the surrounding area. Nicole shared, “I liked it here and I told my mom I wanted to be here and she agreed that we needed to come back for a full tour and learn more about the school.” Similar to Nicole, Kiara came down unofficially with her mom. She stated that while the unofficial visit did not let her learn what she wanted about Golden, it did let her see the area. Like many other participants, the unofficial visit to campus that including self-exploration increased her interest in Golden and prompted her to schedule another visit to allow her to explore the campus more in depth later on.

Courtney and Jonathan’s first visit to campus was part of an unofficial recruiting trip to meet with the coach of their athletic program and watch the athletic team play. Courtney and Jonathan both indicated that they first visited campus during the fall of their senior year. Courtney stayed overnight and met potential teammates but she did not take a tour of campus or interact with any other faculty, staff, or students. In addition to meeting with the coach, Jonathan walked around with a teammate. Jonathan shared, “I liked the campus but it was hard to kind of get a feel for it since it was Saturday and no one was in class.” Like those who simply drove through campus or walked around campus, Courtney and Jonathan’s first visit to campus aided in their college choice process as they became more interested, due to their physical experience on campus.

Unlike the other participants, Melissa and Tiffany both visited campus during their junior year and followed up with another visit during their senior year. Tiffany shared that her first visit

to campus during her junior year was to attend an open house conducted by the admissions office. Tiffany shared that during that visit, she was able to connect with the professor, which was a top priority. However, she explained that although the visit highly influenced her college choice process, it didn't confirm her decision to enroll. According to Tiffany, during the open house, her tour group had a large number of participants. It was hard for her to connect with her tour guide and although she learned more information, she felt like a second visit to campus was needed to provide more in-depth information.

Additional visit: "I wanted to be here." Six of the seven participants shared that they visited campus multiple times prior to enrolling in classes. After initially visiting campus and understanding the general area and layout, many of the students then wanted to visit campus again in a more official capacity in order to learn more detailed information and ask questions about Golden College. The participants indicated that by visiting campus multiple times, the visit experience was more influential in their search process. Participants shared that the additional visit allowed them to become more confident in their decision to enroll at Golden as they moved through their college choice process. Courtney shared the following:

When I went on an official tour with the Admissions Office...I felt like the visit was more normal than my first visit since it did not include athletics, my future teammates, or my coach...I was able to get more detailed information and better see what it would be like to be a student at Golden College.

Tiffany stated that her second visit to campus was a daily campus tour that was much smaller than the open house she had previously attended. Tiffany stated that the "tour was more personalized. I wasn't in a huge crowd. I was able to get an entire tour of campus." Tiffany explained that during the second tour that she was able to see the residence halls again, tour

classrooms, visualize where she would study in the library, and really see herself at Golden as a student. Because she was so focused on her major during her first visit, the second visit allowed Tiffany to confirm what she had learned about factors other than her intended program of study by providing a more in-depth look at those factors and ensuring consistency as a result of the visit.

Jonathan stated that because he was focused on athletics during his initial visit, his second visit allowed him to learn more about a potential major or program of study. Jonathan also shared that by meeting additional people and experiencing the campus multiple times, he learned first-hand what other students' opinions of the academic programs of study were and stated, "I thought that was pretty important." Jonathan stated that after that visit, he knew for sure that he wanted to attend Golden University.

Melissa's second visit to campus was with her mother as well as one of her friends from high school. Melissa shared that after her initial visit to campus with her parents, she explored the campus website and became increasingly interested in the things she learned. However, she wanted to make sure that Golden College would be a good fit. The second tour, a Saturday open house where she was able to take a tour of campus, see housing, and meet with faculty, sealed the deal. Likewise, the friend that toured with her also chose Golden and became her roommate during her freshman year. Still have extra spaces?

Summary. Students typically visited campus multiple times prior to deciding to enroll. The visits took place in a variety of ways including unofficial tours to self- explore campus, daily campus tours that are offered throughout the week, and through open houses or large campus events that allow students to tour campus and connect with individuals. The first visit to campus provided many participants an overview of the campus and increased their interest in the

institution. However, the second visit regularly provided even more information. The second visit also provided a positive experience which increased their ability to navigate the college choice process.

Chapter Summary

The findings of this study were presented in this chapter. In order to provide context for the findings, participant profiles were given at the beginning of the chapter. This allows the reader to gain better understanding the backgrounds of the participants. In presenting the findings of this exploratory study, the information was organized around three major themes.

The first theme explained that although students had top priorities during the search process that lead them to visiting Golden, the visit identified additional factors that became influential in their decision-making process. The second theme illustrated that a visit to campus helped create a sense of belonging as the students began to understand the campus culture and better envision themselves attending Golden. The third theme identified that multiple visits to campus allowed a student to experience the institution further, ultimately impacting their college choice process.

Chapter 5 will provide a discussion and implications for the study. In order to tie the findings of this study to the conceptual framework, the research question is discussed, the relevant literature is revisited, and recommendations for future research and practice are provided.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As the world changes, institutions of higher education are forced to adapt with the changes in order to ensure future success of their institutions (Rossi, 2014). While enrollment managers are focused on their marketing and recruitment tactics, high school students are being inundated with recruitment materials including emails inviting them to visit campus (Gregory, 2014; Johnston, 2010). The campus visit is a traditional method of promoting a college experience. Previous research indicates that the relationship between the college choice process and the campus visit has the most influence on decision-making about whether or not to apply and ultimately attend an institution of higher education (Brown, 2010; Cohen, 2009; Hesel, 2004; Kuh, 2009; Magolda, 2000; Okerson, 2016; Yost & Tucker, 1995). Research shows that students who visit a college campus are twice as likely to matriculate as students who do not visit prior to the application process (Brown, 2010; Magolda, 2000; Okerson, 2016). However, there is minimal research on the aspects of a campus visit that ultimately impact a student's college choice.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand which aspects of a campus visit at a small, four-year institution in the Southeast influence a student's college choice process. In this generic qualitative inquiry study, I conducted seven semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences during the campus visit that influenced prospective students. The following research question guided my study: How do students describe the influence of aspects of the campus visit on their college choice process?

At the center of my study was Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology model. This framework aligns with a constructivist paradigm which allowed participants to share their experience while allowing myself to better understand how their experiences during the campus visit influenced their college choice process.

In this chapter, I discussed the findings from the study in the context of Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology model. In addition, I connected the findings to other literature that speaks to the importance of the campus visit experience on a student's college choice process. Next, I introduced limitations of the study and discussed implications for prospective students and for higher education administrators. Lastly, I provided recommendations for future research that I identified during the data collection and analysis process.

Discussion of the Findings

During the data analysis process, I identified three main themes that provided insight into the influence of the campus visit experience as part of a student's college choice process. The themes were 1) influential factors of the campus visit, 2) a sense of belonging due to the campus visit, and 3) multiple visits to campus that increased students confidence in the college choice process. These themes align with findings of previous studies (e.g., Mattern, Woo, Hossler, & Wyatt, 2010; Okerson, 2016; Yost & Tucker 1995) which indicate that the relationship between the college choice process and the campus visit has the most influence on decision-making about whether or not to apply and ultimately attend an institution of higher education. These themes also add to previous research as they provide insight onto what factors are most influential on the students' college choice process.

Participants indicated that throughout their college choice process that they had identified specific priorities or a list of important requirements when looking at institutions to attend. These

priorities included academic major, campus location, athletic programs and fitness facilities, and campus housing, fueling students' motivation to visit campus. As they visited campus, additional factors emerged including campus size, campus life, interactions with faculty and staff, interaction with tour guides, campus diversity, the physical layout of campus, campus technology, campus dining, the influence of parents because of the visit, the affordability of Golden College, and the influence of an information session. Their initial list of priorities combined with the new factors that emerged on the visit were instrumental in the students' experience and influenced their college choice process.

Campus environments' impact on influential factors. All four environments of Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology model help explain why the various factors that students experienced during their visit to campus influenced their college choice process.

Physical environment. The importance of the physical environment can be seen through the influence of factors including campus location, athletic programs and fitness facilities, campus housing, campus size, the physical layout, and campus technology. Both the built environment and a sense of place were existent, playing a role in the attitudes, perception, and decision-making for the participants during their visit to campus (Strange & Banning, 2015). The importance of the physical environment is not just in how it is designed, but also in how that space is used by people to create experiences (Strange & Banning, 2015). Physical environments that were described by the participants were both functional and symbolic, including components such as parking lots, fitness facilities, and campus buildings, which all present designs that vary in size, color, and arrangement. According to Strange and Banning (2015), it is the mutually influential relationship between these elements in the setting that shapes behavior. Tiffany commented on the layout of the buildings and their proximity to each other as she imagined

herself maneuvering from class to studying to eating in the dining halls. She further explained, “I liked how you could walk from one place to another. As you exit a classroom building, you walk outdoors to an open space where you can enjoy the outdoor facilities. “

Human aggregate. The influence of the human aggregate could be seen throughout this study when students described their reactions to factors of campus life, interaction with faculty and staff, interaction with tour guides, campus diversity, and the influence of parents as a result of the visit. Participants experienced these factors as they were conveyed during the visit through people and the collective features of individuals who inhabit the campus (Strange & Banning, 2015). Kiara shared that she enjoyed meeting people during her visit to campus. She shared that talking to current students and faculty during her tour was memorable. She shared that hearing about the institution from the current campus community was very reassuring during her visit.

Organizational environment. The organizational environment could be seen throughout the study as factors such as athletic programs and facilities, major, campus housing, campus life, and campus housing were discussed. Organizational environments are defined by goals and how those goals are achieved within a given organization. In these settings, participants’ sense of purpose and whether they could offer a contribution influenced the extent to which they felt that they belonged in that space. Courtney shared that during her visit to campus, she learned about student organizations and the different ways the students within those organizations made an impact to the community through their various projects and service. As an example, Melissa shared that learning about curfews in housing, campus safety measures, and mental health initiatives, were influential to her parents perceptions of the institution.

The four key aspects that make up Strange and Banning’s (2015) organizational environment were existent throughout the factors that influenced the students decision to enroll.

These aspects include complexity, understanding the departments and programs offered; centralization, learning about how decisions are made; formalization, the rules and regulations; and morale, the satisfactions of the participants; were existent throughout the influential factors identified as part of this study. Participants shared that the campus visit allowed them to understand the path to earning a degree in their major or program of study. Kiara talked about how she better understood the housing regulations and how things worked. Participants also shared that through the visit to campus, they better understood required meal plans and the regulations surrounding campus dining.

Socially constructed environment. Finally, the socially constructed environment, environments that Strange and Banning (2015) determined could be understood through the perceptions of their users and contribute to the campus culture, were present in several influential factors discussed by participants. These included athletic programs and fitness facilities, campus life, interactions with faculty and staff, interaction with tour guides, campus diversity, and the influence of parents because of the visit. Courtney shared that during her visit to campus, she learned about student organizations and the different ways the students within those organizations made an impact to the community through their various projects and service.

Previous research as it relates to influential factors. Previous research found that several influential factors have emerged as influencing college student choice including a visit to campus (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Litten, 1982). Chapman's (1981) model of college choice was developed based on factors identified as the most influential in a student's consideration of attending a post-secondary institution including influences of people, institutional characteristics, and communication by the institution. Litten's (1982) research provided additional insight into Chapman's (1981) model and developed six aspects of the college selection process as the focus

of research including timing of the process, number of institutional options considered, type of information sought, attributes of the institutions that are considered, type of information media used or preferred, and influential people. Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice built upon the historical research of how students experience the college choice process. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) stated that individual and organizational factors interact and affect various outcomes on whether or not a student will consider an institution of higher education during each phase of the model. These phases include the predisposition phase, search phase, and the choice phase. Because a limited amount of research has previously been done regarding the elements of a campus visit that impact a student's decision to enroll, this study was able to confirm existing research as well as add to it.

Academic major. Whether it be an initial priority that led a student to visit campus or an influential factor that developed as a result of the visit, the influence of academic majors on participants' college choice process aligned with previous research in regards to the importance of a program of study during the search process (Chapman, 1981). Several participants throughout the study indicated that the availability of a specific major was the most influential factor that made them visit campus. Others indicated that they wanted to make sure that there were options in regards to majors and that depending on their trajectory, they could have options along the way for a program of study. Although the participants researched the availability of majors or programs of study before visiting campus, the experience provided them an opportunity to confirm their interest or learn more in-depth information.

Location. Chapman's (1981) finding that the location of a college, specifically the proximity to a student's home, is important was also prevalent in this study. This study supported this finding as students discussed the importance of searching for a college in their home state in

order to reduce the cost of an education. Tiffany, for example, indicated that although she had also explored several institutions outside of her home state, the location was attractive because of the cost of tuition and ability to pay in-state tuition.

Additionally, because of Golden Colleges unique location near the coast, the location played an even greater impact in the students experience during the students visit. Five of the seven students credited the location of Golden University as an important factor on their decision to search and ultimately enroll. Strange and Banning (2001) suggested that the layout, location, and arrangement of space influence behaviors that are more probable than others.

Physical layout. Throughout the study, participants shared their perceptions of the physical appears of campus that made them feel that the campus was welcoming, inclusive, appealing, and sustainable. Derek explained his view of the physical campus in detail:

When we arrived to campus and looked at the buildings, some of them looked newer...every single building that I walked into I could see that time was taken to clean these buildings and make sure that they didn't look shabby. That was important. Walking around, I definitely fell in love with the college very quickly...when I saw the facilities I was like, yeah, I can do this. The outdoor seating not too far away from buildings. There were markers indicating what things were. Being able to see all that and understand that I will be able to find places was comforting. Even neater was seeing the layout of the buildings and the campus quad. I felt like I was on a college campus and it definitely was enticing as it is the way I pictured a college should like.

By visiting campus, prospective students and their families were able to familiarize themselves with the layout of buildings and the sense of community confirming Strange and

Banning's (2015) research that the physical environment was prevalent as students described this factor including the layout, design, and space of the campus as a result of the campus tour.

Housing. Housing was a common factor that was highlighted as part of the participants' campus visit, validating Spoon's (2006) research. For several participants, housing was a top priority prior to the visit. After visiting campus, all participants indicated that housing was an influential factor that affected their college search process. Participants indicated that they were impressed by the size, layout, and floorplans of housing, which confirms the influence of the physical environment. Participants also indicated that were more interested in learning more about the function of housing as it relates to the organizational environment as they indicated being affected by visitation policies, whether or not rooms were co-ed, and more about the safety of buildings.

Size. The study found that institution size became an important factor for students during the visit to campus. Even for students who had assumed that they would prefer to attend a larger institution, the visit to campus allowed them to better understand the size of campus and begin to understand the ease of navigating the campus or fitting in due to the small size. As indicated by Hesel (2005), institutions such as Golden are not able to alter their size, but the ability to share with prospective students the distinctions and character of the institution provided an impact that was influential as part of the visit.

Campus life. The study revealed that a vibrant campus life and the ability to become involved was important to a majority of the participants, confirming Astin's (1985) research. Furthermore, interest levels of recreational and co-curricular activities were also important to prospective students (Litten, 1982). Participants in this study shared that the visit to campus allowed them to meet several students. Melissa, for example, was able to confirm that she would

have the opportunity to meet students and become engaged by seeing campus life and learning about co-curricular activities as part of the visit.

Faculty & staff and tour guide. Interactions with faculty and staff along with connections with a student tour guide were also an important factor as it displayed campus culture, which echoes Strange and Banning's (2015) socially constructed environment. In regards to faculty and staff, students described their connection with faculty from their program of study as well as the welcoming nature of many staff members. In regards to the tour guide, students had positive experience and discussed the guide's impact on their visit and their college search process. This also confirms Cohen's (2009) findings that a tour guide has an overwhelming influence during a visit to campus and Secore's (2018) research that suggested that tour guides, typically current college students, are often one of the most important elements of the campus tour. Kiara and Courtney both talked about the transparency and friendliness of their guides, further confirming Mass's (2016) findings that guides must be authentic and be able to relate to students.

Diversity and inclusion. Strange and Banning (2015) conveyed that the people of a campus could be characterized the collective characteristics including demographic features such as gender, age, race, and ethnicity. Several students indicated that they were able to better understand the diversity of the campus as a result of the campus visit. This factor was important as the participants wanted to confirm that they would fit in at Golden College. Kiara shared that when she visited Golden, she was looking for like an inclusive campus where she would fit in. "My guide showed be the activities center and the multi-cultural learning center. She did not go into a lot of detail but I was ok with that. I was just glad it was available." Nicole explained that she noticed a lot of posters that advertised events that centered around diversity issues.

Campus technology. The influence of technology was another aspect affecting the campus visit. According to Buzzetto-Hollywood and Alade (2018), Generation Z's dependence on technology is strong. Selingo (2018) stated that institutions of higher education must increase technology in order to connect with this new population of student. This was evident during the study as Derek discussed technology in terms of the interactive equipment in the tutoring center, the eSports facility, and the technology throughout the buildings and their impact on his decision to enroll. Derek stated, "My high school had a lot of new and innovative technology but I was blown away by some of the things offered by Golden."

Campus dining. Spoon (2006) explained that dining, that can be categorized by Strange and Banning's (2015) physical and organizational environment, was a common element addressed during a visit to campus. Although not an initial priority for any of the participants in this study, visits to Golden College allowed participants to see the physical space, learn more about meal plans, and most prevalent, understand that the food was consistent and that there were options for students in regards to dining. Kiara stated "I wanted to know where I would eat and where I'd have to go from day to day... when I asked about the food on campus...my guide was like, you know it has its days to where it's great and some days where it's not so great. But there's also other options you can eat as well."

Parents' influence & importance of affordability. Chapman (1981) observed that parents influenced a student's behavior during the college choice process . Six of the seven participants indicated their parents' involvement was an influential factor and that the campus visit was an avenue for the parents to learn more information, which ultimately led to their approval of the student attending Golden University. All of the students were accompanied by

their parents on at least one of their visits to campus. This confirms Cohen's (2009) study that stated that parents accompany their children on campus visits most of the time.

This study also confirms Chapman's (1981) and Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) contention that during the college choice phase, when students make a decision about where to apply and enroll, the choice phase is a very interactive phase between students, their parents, and the institutions that remain in the student's choice set. During the study, Derek explained to great length how it was his dad who informed him of the institution and prompted the visit to campus. Derek's mom constantly talked about campus safety and the distance to the institution. Collectively, they were able to make a decision after the visit to campus.

As students discussed the cost of the institution and the importance of affordability, they always described that their parents were a driving force in wanting to understand this factor. This study suggested that visiting campus provided participants and their parents information that they needed to determine the cost, and learning that the college worked with students who needed funding also became important for the participants. This also suggested that the economic perspective of the college choice process is impacted by a variety of factors that include family income, financial aid, and college costs (Bergerson, 2009; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Desjardins et al, 1999; Hossler & Palmer, 2008; Paulsen, 1990). This aligned with Loveland's (2017) report that one of the top concerns for students is college affordability as cost of attendance and Seemiller and Grace's (2016) explanation that fiscal responsibility is an important trait among Generation Z students. Finally, as it relates to college choice, the study supports Hossler & Gallagher's (1987) and Litten's (1982) finding that the cost of attendance was a factor in deciding where to enroll.

Information sessions. A few of the participants indicated that their visit to campus included an information session, presented by a professional admissions staff member and including facts and figures about the institution. Mass (2016) and Secore (2018) indicated that in order to prevent boredom, institutions must also alter campus visits by breaking up information sessions and campus tours. Tiffany shared that while she did not pay attention to the various information provided by campus administrators, she became engaged when hearing stories from other students. This confirms previous studies findings that these stories allowed staff to successfully sell the campus experience (Johnson, 2005; Miller, 2000).

Sense of Belonging

Participants of this study reported that they experienced a sense of belonging as a result of visiting campus. This feeling of connectedness became a critical component that participants mentioned frequently. This validates previous research that found that the concept of institutional fit is an important theme in college choice, and a student who feels a sense of belonging at an institution during a visit to campus during the search process often forms an emotional bond to that particular institution (Hoover, 2009; Mattern, Woo, Hossler, & Wyatt, 2010).

Students experienced a range of emotions during the visit, including excitement about their future yet nervousness that they would fit in. They also experienced a sense of being overwhelmed by both the information they were learning on the visit and the decision they would need to make about where to attend. Consistent with prior research (Mass, 2016; Secore, 2018), prospective students want to know that they would fit in on a college campus. As they went through these emotions, they began to feel a sense of belonging and began to see themselves as a student at Golden College, which ultimately influenced their college choice process.

Throughout the study, students explained that the friendliness of the individuals they encountered during their visit, similar to prior research by Hesel (2004), influenced their sense of belonging. Hesel's study found that while institutions are unable to alter their size or location, the ability to share with prospective students the distinctions and character of their particular institution is the most effective way to impact prospective students. As students described their campus visit experience, it became clear that Golden College was also able to convey how they are unique and share the campus culture. Participants also explained that they often related to their tour guide and that the guide provided a positive image of the institution, which also aligned with prior research (Mass, 2016). Derek went into specific detail about how much his tour guide influenced him, as the tour guide was everything he wanted to be, including major of study, campus involvement, personality, and friendliness.

Taken together, the four environments explained in Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology model help frame the various aspects of a campus visit that influenced the participants' sense of belonging. The participants had various interactions throughout the tour related to their preferred physical environment, their beliefs and attitudes, organizational expectations, and views and experiences. "Being in places where people look like me" was a clear reflection of the human aggregate (Strange & Banning, 2015) and perhaps the most significant influence on participants' sense of belonging because it was a visible way individuals were able to identify with others and know that they shared similar backgrounds and experiences. In addition to the human aggregate environment, students' description of making a difference and being involved in student life confirms the central aspects of Strange and Banning's (2015) organizational environmental as it is an influential component of participant sense of belonging within organizations and formalized groups. Because the participants'

interactions throughout the visit were overwhelmingly positive, these aspects influenced the comfort level the participant felt with the environments and aided in determining a decision to enroll at Golden College as part of the college choice process.

Multiple Visits to Campus

It became evident that as students moved through the search process, they often visited campus multiple times, and the additional visits became influential in their decision-making process. The first visit to campus typically provided students an overview of the college. Greenough (2003) found that the timing of when a student visits campus was important to its overall effectiveness. Many of the students indicated that their first visit to campus was when the classes were not in session. These students visited again to better understand if it was a fit. Confirming what Aviezar (2000) stated, many of the students initially simply drove through campus or viewed empty buildings which did not confirm their answer of whether or not the campus was a good fit.

Research shows that students who visit a college campus are twice as likely to matriculate as students who do not visit prior to the application process (Brown, 2010; Magolda, 2000; Okerson, 2016). Participants in this study indicated that visiting campus a second time provided them a further opportunity to understand the various aspects of the campus and experience it firsthand. This furthers research as it creates an understanding that the more a student visits a campus, the campus and college experience becomes less intimidating and more tangible, ultimately allowing the student to commit to a specific institution.

In addition to aligning with the physical, human aggregate, and organizational environments of Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology model, multiple visits to campus also align with the socially constructed environment. Campus culture, part of the socially

constructed environment, can be perceived reality and the more a student visits campus, the more they are able to envision themselves as a student. Strange and Banning (2015) indicated that examining personal perspectives of an environment allows researchers to understand how students react to those environments. By visiting campus multiple times, participants were able to understand the campus environment and become more confident in their college choice process.

Summary

The findings of this study provide professional in higher education to understand the influential factors of the campus visit. It also allows professional to understand that through a positive interaction while visiting campus, students are able to feel a sense of belonging and begin to envision themselves as a student at the institution. Finally, the findings add to previous research as the study determines that the more times students visit campus, the more comfortable they are in making a decision as part of the college search process. Through these findings, practitioners can evaluate the campus visit experience and better align tactics to attract and enroll students at their institutions.

Limitations of the Study

The experiences of participants during a campus visit as it relates to the college choice process have not been previously researched, especially at Golden College. Therefore, a generic qualitative approach was chosen as the best method to conduct this study. There were several limitations discovered as a result of this study.

The results of this generic qualitative study were drawn from the reports of seven students that visited campus and enrolled at Golden College either in Fall 2020 or Fall 2021 semester. It is unknown how a larger sample would have impacted the results of this study.

However, the results of this study can be applied broadly as it relates to the experience of other students who visited campus. Finally, the results of this study may only be assumed for future participants of campus visits at this institution.

Demographics of Participants

Although the sample was somewhat diverse, it did not include students from varying demographics. Of the seven students who participated in this study, only two indicated a race that was underrepresented. The race indicated by those two participants was Black or African-American. No other participants were included from other underrepresented races. Five of the seven participants of this study were female. All of the participants in this study were from the same state as the location of the institution.

Experience of Participants

As stated prior to the study, experiences of students who visited campus but did not choose to enroll were not explored. Similarly, the results of this study revealed mostly positive and pleasant experiences among the participants of the study. This might be because of self-selection and only those with positive things to say volunteered for this study, or it might be because students chose to enroll at Golden College only had positive experiences as they navigated the college search process. It is certainly possible that the results do not include experiences of those who did not have a positive experience.

Implications for Practice

In summarizing the results of this research, there are several implications, beginning with the importance of understanding the factors that influence a student's college choice process. These implications are intended to provide guidance in order to enhance the relationship between college choice and the campus visit as it is clear that the campus visit is an influential component

in college choice decision-making (Cohen, 2009; Greenough, 2003; Hesel, 2004; Hoover, 2009; Yost & Tucker, 1995).

Implications for Institutions and Higher Education Administrators

The availability of this information provides higher education administrators and enrollment managers with data to utilize in creating, adjusting, and evaluating campus visit programs and services for prospective students and their families. Understanding the experiences of students' visits to campus as it relates to the college choice process raises awareness about student's needs, challenges, and experiences.

Affordability. Almost all of the participants in this study indicated that affordability and understanding the cost of attendance as a result of the campus visit was an influential factor in their college choice process. A number of students were looking specifically at colleges in their home state to reduce the financial burden for their families. Higher education administrators should look at when and how the cost of attending college is presented to students. Similarly, there should be a focus on funding and support for students where cost is a barrier to enrollment.

Institutional fit. Undergraduate Admission Offices should also be focused on the idea of a good fit for a student and a college, as students who find the right fit are more likely to persist and graduate from college. Several students mentioned feeling as if the campus visits blurred together from one campus to another, and students were constantly looking for schools that stood out or made them feel special. Higher education administrators should be concerned with making sure that students are able to understand whether or not an institution is a good fit for their post-secondary education as a result of the campus visit. Instead of relying just on facts and figures, institutions can also make sure students feel welcome on campus and that their

contributions are wanted on campus. Letting the stories of current students' experiences become the focus of the tour can help students better understand campus fit.

Caumont (2014) found that students who are happy with their college choice are more likely to be retained and ultimately graduate. Freshman retention rates and four-year graduation rates are common benchmarks among institutions. By focusing on institutional fit rather than enrollment goals, it is possible to also positively affect the institution itself. By focusing on how to help students find their best fit, colleges can spend time retaining those students and less time frontloading or bringing large numbers of new students in order to meet their overall enrollment goals.

Communication. As discussed previously, the theme of identifying priorities and aspects of the campus visit that factor into a student's decision-making process is important for practitioners as they find ways to communicate with students about these aspects. Generation Z are described as wanting to maximize learning through technology and social media use, and through communication platforms and preferences (Loveland, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Twenge 2017). Six of the seven participants of this study indicated that they utilized technology to research the institution prior to their visit to campus. Based on the factors that students identified in this study as influential in their college choice process, practitioners should find ways to utilize communications platforms to promote these priorities. While campus already use websites, email communications, and social media to promote various aspects of the campus, the findings of this study can be used to evaluate where information is placed and how to best communicate the most influential factors to students as they move through the college choice process.

Several participants indicated that they preferred individualized tours during their visit to campus rather than large group tours. Many indicated that they could not hear the tour guide or could not ask specific questions when touring with a large group. Generation Z students tend to spend more time alone, they still prefer one-on-one communication (Loveland 2017; Twenge, 2017). Institutions should continue to find ways to offer smaller, personalized tours as Twenge (2017) indicated that their interpersonal skills may be lacking and offering a more one-on-one approach allows them the ability to not be as intimidated during the visit.

Diversity. Research demonstrates that the likelihood of a student attending college is related to academic achievement rather than race, gender, or socioeconomic status, but differences still exist, as students of color are still less likely to attend college as compared to their academic counterparts (Hossler & Palmer, 2008). Participants in this study indicated that they felt a sense of belonging as a result of their visit to campus. Several of the students explained that while the tour guide did not go into a lot of detail, seeing the intercultural resource center, event advertisements, and students who shared their identities on campus was important. Understanding the various perspectives of students regarding college choice and their visit experience allows institutions to focus on improving their approach. As administrators look at increasing the diversity on campus, they can use the information provided by students to better communicate diversity initiatives on campus, train tour guides on sharing information related to diversity and inclusion, and ultimately implement measures to improve inclusion on campus.

Training tour guides. Institutions of higher education often rely on student tour guides to connect with prospective students (Washburn & Patroshius, 2004). Participants in this study indicated that their connection with their tour guide and the information they provided were instrumental in their college choice process. Since tour guides are an integral part of the campus

visit, it is important that enrollment officers have a strong understanding of what experiences during the visit to campus impact prospective students and identify ways to train tour guides to better highlight the important factors that are influential to prospective students. One way to accomplish this could be through establishing a peer review process, where tour guides observe other guides tours and provide constructive feedback on how to share information or other information, that could be included to better promote the important factors. Another tactic could include training tour guides by providing feedback, shared through surveys, completed by prospective students following a campus visit.

Implications for Prospective Students

While the findings from this study may be useful for institutions to improve recruitment tactics, they can also benefit prospective students by sparking change to create more meaningful visit experiences. The findings indicate that the campus visit is important for students as they seek to find a sense of belonging and a natural fit in an institution. Unpacking the elements of the campus visit is significant to both institutions of higher education and prospective students, as it highlights one aspect of the college choice process.

Educate students about college choice. When asked about their search process, most of the participants in this study indicated they originally heard about the institution and received advice from someone, whether it be a peer, parent, older sibling, or high school counselor. In order for students to become more confident in their college choice process, they must also understand how that process works and how it relates to the campus visit. The more students are able to reflect on their experiences and be able to reflect on their importance, the more likely they are going to be able to make a choice that makes them happy and allows them to be successful (Caumont, 2014). A tactic to help educate students about their college choice could

include a follow up conversations with an admissions representative that allows the student to discuss their top priorities and evaluate what they have learned through a visit to campus.

Another way to educate students about their choice is to provide more detail about affordability and provide them information about the cost early in the search process. Another tactic could include providing students with resources to assist with setting goals and making a plan to reach their goals. An example of this could be pre-enrollment advising, where a student can more clearly understand the path to earning the degree of their choice.

Institutional fit. Many areas of the visit seemed to be naturally evaluated by students, including the physical campus layout, housing, size, and location. However, while students also expressed a positive interaction with individuals on campus, they need to be able to better describe the campus community or define what made them feel like they belonged on campus. The students in this study mentioned that they observed flyers for campus events, reviewed menu options in the dining hall, interacted with students, and learned from their tour guide. It is clear that it was important for the participants that seeing themselves as a college student became more of a reality due to the visit. Similarly, the more they visited campus, the more they were able to see what their life would be like on the campus.

Checklist for visits. Some of the participants in this study explained that during the visit, they often became overwhelmed because they did not know what questions to ask their tour guide or because they knew what a big decision they would have to make regarding their choice of where to attend college. By utilizing resources available online through various college search engines, prospective students can create a list of important priorities and other elements that they want to see during the visit to campus. Prospective students can also create a list of questions to find answers to as part of the visit. Questions could include: What do new students need to

know? What's your favorite part of campus? What do you wish you could change? What is one thing you did not realize or expect prior to becoming a student? Although participants seemed to do their research prior to the visit, initial factors were created due to the visit and utilizing checklists and identifying those new priorities will help them stay organized and be able to assist them in their college choice process.

Summary of Implications

For institutions of higher education, the study can be used by administrators to understand elements of a campus visit that are most important to prospective students. Ultimately, the primary job of campus administrators and enrollment officers is to understand the desires of prospective students in target markets and employ tactics to meet those desires (Paulsen, 1990). By gaining insight from prospective students as they examine the elements of a campus visit, institutions of higher education may adapt their pre-visit communication with prospective students to motivate them to visit. Once they are on campus, administrators can utilize the experience to boost the effectiveness of recruitment efforts and better connect students throughout their visit.

For prospective students, the campus visit is an integral part of the college choice process. By being informed about the college choice process, being able to make meaning of the visit to campus, and using a checklist to find answers to their questions, they will be able to make an informed decision regarding which institution to ultimately enroll.

Recommendations for Future Research

The scope of this study represents only a few participants at a single institution. While the findings are meaningful considering the purpose of the study, many are specific to the limited scale of this study. Likewise, there were shortcomings in this study as there is with most research

studies. There are many directions for future research in regards to the campus visit as it relates to the college choice process. This section will highlight a few implications for future research that specifically relate to the findings of this study.

Visit Experience in Varying Regions and Vary Types of Institutions

In order to validate findings in regards to campus visits and their impact on the college choice process, it will be important to conduct studies in various geographic locations and locations. Likewise, the type of institution will become an important factor when conducting research on campus visits. The importance of the influential factors and priorities found in this study may change depending on the type or location of an institution. This study was conducted at a location that is unique because of its coastal location in a rural part of the Southeast. Factors may change for students seeking to attend campus in a metropolitan or urban area or in other parts of the United States.

Influence of Different Types of Visits

Participants in this study visited campus through a variety of methods including self-guided exploration, large scale open house events held on Saturdays, visits as part of an athletic function, and campus tours held on a weekday. While visit types may certainly make an impact on the institutional fit and sense of belonging, research might also examine the ways in which students tour campuses and how that impacts their overall perception. This research could examine the weight of different visit types and the impact on the students decision to ultimately enroll.

Visit Experience among Varying Demographics

This study focused on seven participants. While two of the students were from underrepresented populations and several students were first-generation, it is recommended that

future research might look at the role of the campus visit for varying demographics. This study found that a sense of belonging was an important factor for most of the participants. Depending on the students' backgrounds, they may view campus differently and their experience or the factors that are influential on a campus visit may have a different level of influence on their college search process. There is an opportunity to evaluate the college search process and what factors change for students seeking to enroll based on their demographics. Those differences will allow for higher education professions to better understand the priorities of various subgroups and allow tour guides to provide more relevant information to those subgroups during a visit to campus.

Campus Visit Impact on Retention, Progression, and Graduation

Colleges and universities are focused on efforts to improve the retention and graduation rates of students at their institutions. From student affairs to academic affairs, there are thousands of studies on these efforts; however, the role of the campus visit and its relationship to student retention and degree attainment has not been studied. Research could examine the effectiveness of the campus visit and how it fits in to larger goals of the institution. For example, do students who visit campus prior to matriculation progress and graduate at a higher rate than students who do not visit campus? This research could be impactful as it would allow for higher education professionals to understand the impact of onboarding students to the institution and setting expectations as they begin their college journey.

Visit Experience in a Virtual Environment

We live in a world of exponentially increasing technology advancements. Due to these advancements along with other factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual environments have become more prevalent in recent years as new technology has expanded visit opportunities.

According to Pavlik (2020), the Covid-19 pandemic that took place starting in 2020 halted the way students engaged with potential institutions of higher education due to mandatory quarantines and less ability to travel. The pandemic required institutions to implement virtual tours, incorporating newer virtual reality technology and artificial intelligence, and implement widespread direct-to consumer social media due to the growing need to connect with prospective students. Many institutions have an interactive map of campus that allows prospective students the ability to virtually look round campuses. Additionally, students are able to use technology through video and film to explore academic buildings, auditoriums, bookstores, dormitories, dining halls, laboratories, libraries, museums and sports facilities, all factors identified as important elements of a visit that contribute to a student's college choice process.

Virtual visits allow prospective students and their families the ability to view pre-recorded or real-time lectures, hear students talk about their college experiences, experience campus programs including music and theatre presentations, and even experience athletic activities. Throughout this study, students talked about exploring campus by visiting the institution's website and learning more information. As technology continuously evolves and the habits of students change, an understanding of a visit to campus through a virtual environment is needed.

Similar to understanding virtual visits of prospective students, Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology model is limited when making claims regarding virtual environments that have become more prevalent since their original version and their analysis of this environment is not strong. In the most recent update from the first version of their campus ecology model, Strange and Banning (2015) do not show new studies or evidence that addresses the virtual environment. At the same time, exponential technology advances and factors such as

the COVID-19 pandemic continues to change the world faster than studies and research can be conducted.

Conclusion

This chapter started with a discussion of the findings of this qualitative exploratory study. Following the discussion, limitations of this study were described. Implications for practice for various stakeholder groups, including higher education professionals and prospective students, were then outlined. The chapter also made recommendations for future research in the areas of campus visit programs and the college search process. Further studies that evaluate these topics will be essential toward enhancing prospective students' campus visit experience while also improving the college search process.

This study concluded that the campus visit experience of prospective college students is influential in their college search process, and although students often visit campus with a specific set of priorities, other factors emerge and become important as a result of the campus visit. The participants in this study were able to clearly identify and describe the benefits of visiting campus as they moved through their individual college search process. These students reported overall that their experience when visiting campus highly influenced their ultimate decision to apply and enroll. These reports were consistent regardless of the students' original priorities that led to their visit to campus.

This study, although specific to an individual institution with a specific set of characteristics that attracts students, fills a void in the research regarding campus visits during the college search process. While previous research by Chapman (1981), Hossler & Gallagher (1987), and Litten (1982) indicated the importance of campus visits in the college choice process, there was a lack of knowledge on what specific factors of the visit influence that

process. This study identified factors that are important elements of the campus visit including physical, human aggregate, organizational, and socially constructed environments as described through Strange and Banning's (2015) campus ecology model.

This study also indicated that throughout the visit to campus, students experience a range of emotions from excitement to nervousness to being overwhelmed to relief. As they move through these emotions, they often begin to feel a sense of belonging. This feeling allows them to better picture themselves enrolling at the institution and becomes an important factor in their college choice process.

Finally, As prospective students explore campus, this study found that a single campus visit was not always enough for students to make a decision to decide where to apply and ultimately enroll. However, as students made multiple visits to campus, they were able to better confirm the research they had done prior to the visit to campus, learn additional information, and become more confident in their decision to enroll.

The competitiveness to attract and enroll students at institutions of higher education will continue to be important in the future. In order to be successful and attract students, institutions will need continue to invest in their admissions and marketing strategies. Campus visits are an important investment as they are one of the most influential factors in the college choice process. By understanding the experiences of students during their visit to campus and identifying factors that are most important to students, institutions of higher education can continue to shape the institution to meet students expectations.

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APPENDIX A
PARTICIPANT EMAIL SOLICITATION
(TO BE FORWARDED BY CAMPUS CONTACTS)

Colleagues,

I am conducting a dissertation study on the experiences of college students during their pre-enrollment visit to campus to fulfill the requirements for the Student Affairs Leadership, Ed.D. program at the University of Georgia. I am seeking participants who meet the following criteria: 1) a current full-time student, 2) traditional-aged college student, defined as students between the age of 18 – 22 who proceeded directly to college from high school with a clear idea on the next educational step, 3) a first-time freshman (within the first year of degree seeking enrollment, even if prior college credit was earned through advancement placement or dual enrolled courses), 4) have participated in a visit to campus during your junior or senior year of high school. I am asking that you share this email with current students who you work with that may meet the above qualifications.

Greetings,

In addition to my role as Assistant Vice President at Coastal Georgia, I am also a doctoral student at the University of Georgia. I am conducting a dissertation study on the experiences of college students during their pre-enrollment visit to campus. I am seeking participants who meet the following criteria: 1) a current full-time student, 2) traditional-aged college student, defined as students between the age of 18 – 22 who proceeded directly to college from high school with a clear idea on the next educational step, 3) a first-time freshman (within the first year of degree seeking enrollment, even if prior college credit was earned through advancement placement or dual enrolled courses), 4) have participated in a visit to campus during your junior or senior year of high school.

If you agree to participate, you would meet with me for a one-on-one interview lasting 60 – 90 minutes. During the interview, I will ask about your experience during the campus visit prior to enrolling at the institution and how it may have impacted the decision to ultimately enroll. Participation in this study is on an entirely voluntary basis, with no consequences for choosing not to participate. You can withdraw at any time and your participation will be confidential.

If you are interested in completing the study, please visit the link below to sign up.

Click here to sign up to participate in this study

As an incentive for participating in this study, each participant will receive a \$20 gift card to the campus bookstore at the conclusion of the interview.

If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at 706-3XX-XXXX.

Scott Argo
Doctoral Candidate at the University of Georgia
saXXXX@uga.edu
706-3XXX-XXXX (cell)

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT ELIGIBILITY SURVEY

Thank you for your interest in being interviewed for my dissertation research on the experiences of students during the campus visit. Please answer the questions below. If you meet the qualifications of this study, I will reach out again via email (followed by a phone call) to set up the interview.

1. What is your name?
2. What is your email?
3. What is your age?
4. What is your student classification?
 - a. Freshman
 - b. Sophomore
 - c. Junior
 - d. Senior
 - e. Other
5. Please identify your Race
 - a. American Indian or Alaska Native
 - b. Asian
 - c. Black or African American
 - d. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
 - e. White
6. Please select the highest level of schooling your parent or guardian has completed (Parent 1)
 - a. Less than high school
 - b. High school diploma or equivalent (e.g. GED)
 - c. Some college but no formal award
 - d. Associates degree (AA, AS, etc.)
 - e. Baccalaureate degree (BA, BS, etc.)
 - f. Master's degree (MA, MS, etc.)
 - g. Doctoral/Professional degree (PhD, MD, JD, etc...)
 - h. Unknown

7. Please select the highest level of schooling your parent or guardian has completed (Parent 1)
 - a. Less than high school
 - b. High school diploma or equivalent (e.g. GED)
 - c. Some college but no formal award
 - d. Associates degree (AA, AS, etc.)
 - e. Baccalaureate degree (BA, BS, etc.)
 - f. Master's degree (MA, MS, etc.)
 - g. Doctoral/Professional degree (PhD, MD, JD, etc...)
 - h. Unknown

8. Did you enroll in college during either the summer or fall after graduating from high school?

9. Did you participate in a campus visit to this institution during your junior or senior year of high school?

APPENDIX C

E-MAIL TO PARTICIPANT TO SET UP INTERVIEW

Dear <<First Name>>,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview for my doctoral dissertation research, which focuses on campus visits and how the influence decisions to enroll. Based on the answer to your questions when signing-up to participate, I have identified you as an eligible participant for this interview.

I would like to interview you in person and hope you are available during the week of _____ via Microsoft Teams. The interview should last approximately one hour. I appreciate your consideration of my request.

Please complete the following Doodle link to provide your availability to interview. As a reminder, you will receive a \$20 gift card to the campus bookstore at the completion of this interview. Thank you so much and I am looking forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,

Scott Argo
Doctoral Candidate at the University of Georgia
saXXXX@uga.edu
706-3XX-XXXX (cell)

APPENDIX D

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORMEXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-TIME FRESHMEN DURING A VISIT
TO CAMPUS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**Researcher's Statement**

My name is Scott Argo, a doctoral student conducting research under the director of Professor Laura Dean in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at the University of Georgia. We are asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher(s) below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

Primary Researcher: *Scott Argo, Doctoral Candidate*
Student Affairs Leadership Program
Email: saXXX@uga.edu

Principal Investigator: *Laura Dean, PhD*
Professor, Student Affairs Leadership Program
Email: laXXXX@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand which aspects of a campus visit at a small, four-year institution in the Southeast influences a student's college choice process. This research will explore the experiences during the visit that influenced prospective students. The experiences of the students will be explored to uncover what aspects of their experience are most meaningful and contribute to heightened interest in the institution. In other words, this study will explore how prospective students perceive the institution through a visit to campus and what elements of the campus visit influence their decision-making process.

Study Procedures

If you agree to be in our study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in one, 60 to 90-minute individual interview to explore your experiences during a campus visit prior to your enrollment at the institution.
- Participants will be interviewed in a virtual setting via Microsoft Teams.
- Participants will be asked identifiable research questions and allowed the opportunity to reflect and respond to the prompts.
- The interviews will be audio recorded.

- The data from each individual interview will be transcribed and coded to name and categorize information presented in the interviews.
- Each interview and code will be analyzed to identify commonalities and themes among the participants.
- Upon synthesis of the interview codes, the researcher will provide participants with a transcribed interview, to ensure accuracy of the participant's stories.

Audio Recording

The interviews with participants will be audio recorded to assist the researcher with accurate transcription of the interviews. There is always a small risk of unwanted or accidental disclosure. The conversations will be transcribed only with your permission. Any notes, recordings, or transcriptions will be kept secure. The files will be encrypted and password protected. A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity. The recordings will be kept for the primary research for a maximum of one year, at which point they will be destroyed. We will be careful to keep your information confidential, and we will ask you to keep the discussion confidential as well.

- I give my consent to have discussions recorded: _____ (initial)

If you have any questions about the study, contact *Laura Dean, primary investigator, Counseling and Human Development services, at laXXXX@uga.edu*. If you have any complaints or questions about your rights as a research volunteer, contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at *IRB@uga.edu* or 706-542-3199.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below:

Name of Researcher

Signature

Date

Name of participant

Signature

Date

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. The purpose of this research study is to develop an understanding your experience during a pre-enrollment visit to campus and how it impacted your decision to enroll. This interview will last between one hour and 1½ hours. The information you share will be kept confidential. Should you wish to discontinue your participation in this study, you may do so at any time.

Today, I will be asking you a series of questions in order to help me understand your campus experience. Please note that there is no right or wrong answer. In addition, there may be times when you do not have an answer and that is completely fine. If at any time you wish to stop participating or skip a question, please let me know. Do you have any questions before we begin?

<p>1. Please tell me about your college search process?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How did you begin your search process? - Did you create a list of potential schools? - What were you looking for in a college? - What support did you receive (from family, guidance counselors, friends, websites, videos) in your search process? - What factors (size, location, majors, etc.) were important for you in deciding where to apply to college? 	<p>College Choice Models: Chapman (1981), Litten (1982), and Hossler and Gallagher (1987)</p>
<p>2. Can you describe your first interaction with this campus?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Did you ever attend a camp, a sibling's college, athletic event, theatre event/musical? - Did you visit with a school group or family, and was it part of a larger college tour trip with friends or family? - Did you take a virtual tour? 	<p>Types of Visit: Jacobs et al. (2015), Okerson (2016), Secore (2018)</p> <p>Virtual Visit: Dyril (2002), Klaunig (2005), Klein (2004), Parks (2005), Pavlik (2020)</p>
<p>3. Can you describe more about your experiences formally visiting this campus?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When did the visit occur? - What took place when you arrived to campus? - Describe the information session 	<p>Timing of Visit: Aviezer (2000), Brown (2010), Cohen (2009), Greenough (2003), Hesel (2004)</p> <p>Arrival to Campus: Mass (2016), Secore (2018)</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What was impactful after the visit to campus? - Do you recall any interactions with faculty or staff? - Did you learn anything about cost? - Did you learn more about your major or program of study? 	<p>Information Sessions: Mass (2016), Secore (2018)</p> <p>Cost: Seemiller and Grace (2017), Selingo (2017)</p> <p>Post-Campus Follow-Up: Mass (2016), Secore (2018)</p>
<p>4. Describe the physical aspects of the campus visit was most salient or stood out the most to you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What elements of the visit stood out as positive? Negative? - What emotions did you feel? 	<p>Physical Tour: Mass (2016), Secore (2018), Spoon (2006)</p>
<p>5. 5. Can you describe the campus environment?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What was the campus culture like? 	<p>Generation Z Environmental Influence: Seemiller and Grace (2016), Twenge, 2017)</p> <p>Campus Environments: Kuh (2009), Okerson, (2016), Secore (2018), Strange and Banning (2015)</p> <p>Campus Culture: Hesel (2004), (Kuh, 2009), Magolda (2000), Yost & Tucker (1995)</p>
<p>6. What was your experience with your campus tour guide and what was memorable about your interactions with them?</p>	<p>Tour Guides: Cohen (2009), Hesel (2004), Magolda (2000), Mass (2016), Spoon (2006), Washburn and Petrosious (2004)</p>
<p>7. What factors ultimately influenced your decision to enroll?</p>	<p>College Choice Models: Chapman (1981), Litten (1982), and Hossler and Gallagher (1987)</p>
<p>8. Would you like to share any additional comments or provide any information that I have not asked about as it relates to your experience while visiting campus or your college search process?</p>	

APPENDIX F

LIST OF A PRIORI CODES

Physical Environment (symbols, artifacts, campus design)	Human Aggregate Environment (faculty, staff, student characteristics)
Campus Beauty	Faculty/Staff Relationships
Dining	Family
Facilities	Friends/Peers
Housing	Major/Program
Location	School Counselor
Parking	School Spirit
Unique	Tour Guide
Organization Environment (organizational structures)	Constructed Environment (impressions and perceptions of specific individuals)
Admitted Student Event	Comparing Schools
Campus Tour	Informal Visit
Financial Aid	Negative Impression
Information Session	Positive Impression
Research Opportunities	Social Media
Safety	Top Choices
Size of School	Website
Student Life	

* These codes are adapted from Okerson's (2016) study on college choice and the campus visit.

** For the purpose of this study, these codes have been grouped into Strange and Banning's (2015) campus environments.