

THE INTERSECTION OF COLLEGE CHOICE AND CHURCH-RELATED HIGHER
EDUCATION: FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE A STUDENT'S DECISION TO ATTEND A
UNITED METHODIST COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

by

ANTHONY J. LEIGH

(Under the Direction of Robert K. Toutkoushian)

ABSTRACT

For several decades, researchers have considered college choice and the many variables involved which influence the decision-making of students. This study explored the college choice process of 33 first-year students at two United Methodist colleges using the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model of college choice. Through qualitative research, students described their aspirations to attend college, the search process they conducted to consider various colleges and universities, and the factors which ultimately influenced their choice decision. This study revealed that the small size of the institutions, location, co-curricular participation, academic programs and financial assistance were the top five choice factors of students attending United Methodist colleges. Additionally, this research sought to discern the impact the United Methodist Church affiliation or church-related identity of the institution has on influencing students' decisions to attend United Methodist colleges. While the United Methodist affiliation and faith-based nature of the institutions were deemed more positive than negative by research participants, the Christian identity of the institution was primarily irrelevant as a college choice factor for students interviewed in this study.

INDEX WORDS: College choice, Church-related higher education, United Methodist colleges and universities

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my wife, Wendy, and my daughter, Carey Mae, for the sacrifices they have made in allowing me to pursue this journey.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In the fall of 2014, 1.88 million of the 20.2 million students participating in higher education in the United States were enrolled in a religiously-affiliated college (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2018). This dissertation explores the question, “why?”

Church-related colleges have relationships with a variety of denominational partners, run the full spectrum of Carnegie classifications, and differ in their expressions of church-relatedness. Colleges in this sector must position themselves in the higher education marketplace to compete with state-supported institutions. Federal proposals to provide free access to community college and other public higher education institutions threaten the health and vitality of private colleges, particularly those in the church-affiliated sector with limited endowments and a high percentage of revenue coming from tuition and fees (Abdul-Amin, 2016). Demographic projections also yield warning signs to administrators of colleges and universities. Enrollment projections produced by the National Center for Education Statistics forecast a four percent decline in the 18 to 24 year old population between 2012 and 2022 (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). Despite the same report projecting a 13.9 percent increase in college enrollments over the same period, the decline in the number of students in the traditional college age bracket is a red flag for church-related colleges which primarily recruit students in this profile.

The challenge of recruiting students to private, church-affiliated colleges is further amplified by the growing sticker price of private higher education and the public’s increasing concern about student loan debt (Aldrovandi, Wood, Maltby, & Brown, 2015; Snyder et al.,

2018). The cost of attending an institution of higher education has never been higher (Snyder et al., 2018). Students and their parents are increasingly comparing the bottom line price of enrolling in the colleges they consider. In many cases, students attending a church-related college have passed up the opportunity to obtain a less expensive degree at a public institution. Understanding the reasons why students choose their college or colleges with similar characteristics is a matter of survival for many church-related colleges.

According to the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (2018), 1,024 of the 4,724 colleges and universities in the United States self-identified as a religiously-affiliated college in 2015, though many colleges founded by the church have moved away from their religious ties. Today, there is great diversity in the religious connection church-related colleges share with their partnering denomination (Dovre, 2001). Some faith-based colleges have tremendous denominational partnerships which bear fruit in producing enrollments for the institution while others are much more sectarian in nature. Religion in the curriculum, denominational financial support, religious involvement in governance, and the religious nature of campus life all vary from one-church related college to the next (Benne, 2001; Budde & Wright, 2004; Dovre, 2001). There is no one-size-fits-all description of a church-related college.

For over four decades, researchers have been studying the factors that lead individuals to matriculate to college, and the reasons why students choose one college over others. Believing that more college educated individuals leads to a better citizenry, state and federal government policy makers have desired research which shows motivation for college attendance (Bergerson, 2009). College and university administrators with financial models based heavily on tuition revenue, particularly those at church-related colleges, have sought data to better target prospective students and meet enrollment goals (Bergerson, 2009; Paulsen, 1990). This research

can help institutions shape recruitment and marketing strategies to attract students who are likely to succeed at their college or university (Hoyt & Brown, 2003; Urbanski, 2000).

Purpose

The purpose of my research is to discover the factors which influence students' decisions to attend a United Methodist college. While there is existing literature on factors which influence a student's decision to attend a church-related college, none of the previous studies have looked exclusively at the 96 colleges and universities of the United Methodist Church. The United Methodist Church affiliation makes United Methodist colleges distinct from other church-related colleges as well as from non-faith based private colleges. Using a basic qualitative research methodology, I collected data using open-ended, semi-structured interviews which allowed students to tell their individual story of how they made their decision to attend a United Methodist college. Student participants came from two United Methodist colleges with half of the participants self-identifying as United Methodists and the other half identifying themselves as a member of a different faith denomination or claim no religious affiliation. I brought a social constructivist worldview to this process which will allow me to discern patterns and themes which are common throughout the student interviews and to know more about the phenomenon of college choice from a student perspective (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The overarching research question of my study was "how do students attending a United Methodist college describe the college choice process?" This question spoke directly to my purpose of exploring why students make the decision to attend a United Methodist college. A secondary question to investigate is "to what extent does the Christian identity of a United Methodist college impact students' decisions to attend the institution?" Through these questions,

I was able to collect and compare qualitative data to existing literature on factors which influence a students' decision to attend a church-related college.

Background

Prospective college students and their parents have a plethora of choices to consider when selecting a college or university for the student to attend. For each student, there are a multitude of reasons why a student would choose one college or type of college over other sectors of the higher education industry. While much research has been conducted on college choice, the body of literature is limited on the intersection of college choice and church-related colleges. The existing literature on factors influencing a student's choice of a church-related college identifies parental and adult influence (Messer, 2016; Moss & Cockriel, 1990), the spiritual nature of the college (Benne, 2001; Budde & Wright, 2004; Noel-Levitz, 2010; Rood, 2009; Schipull, 2009; Seibert, 1994), cultural orientation (Davignon, Glanzer, & Rine, 2013; Davignon, 2016; Sauder, 2008; Wiese & Townsend, 1991; Wood, 2010), location (Schipull, 2009; Terkla & Wright, 1986), academic programs and reputation (Carlson, 1992; Davignon, 2016; Noel-Levitz, 2010; Schipull, 2009; Wood, 2010), size (Carlson, 1992; Easter, 2012; Schipull, 2009), the recruiting experience (Messer, 2016; Pampaloni, 2010; Seibert, 1994), and cost and financial assistance (Carlson, 1992; Davignon, 2016; Perna & Titus, 2004) as a few of the primary influences which factor into students' decisions.

Studies that address the topic have analyzed single church-related institutions (Messer, 2016; Rood, 2009; Seibert, 1994; Wiese & Townsend, 1991), multiple religious-affiliated colleges (Confer & Mamiseishvili, 2012; Davignon et al., 2013; Davignon, 2016; Noel-Levitz, 2010; Sauder, 2008; Schipull, 2009; Wood, 2010), mostly church-related colleges (Carlson, 1992), and multiple types of higher education options (Easter, 2012; Moss & Cockriel, 1990).

While single-institution studies can be helpful to administrators at the institution examined, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the reasons students attend all church-related colleges based on these studies because of the unique nature of each individual institution.

Most of the studies of college choice and church-related higher education have examined schools associated with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). Only 133 of the 1,024 schools which claim a religious-affiliation participate in this collection of highly intentional church-related colleges and universities (Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, 2018). Thus, the overwhelming majority of church-related colleges are not represented in much of the literature. While maintaining a religious connection, non-CCCU church-related colleges are much more diverse in their delivery of Christian higher education. Colleges of at least one Christian denomination are completely omitted from research that exclusively looks at CCCU institutions. No college or university recognized by the University Senate of the United Methodist Church is a member of the CCCU (Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, 2018; General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2018).

United Methodist Colleges and Universities

United Methodist colleges and universities have been part of the tapestry of American higher education since 1784. Today, 96 colleges and universities are recognized by the University Senate of the United Methodist Church (General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2018). This includes two-year colleges, four-year liberal arts institutions, research universities, historically black colleges, women's colleges, and professional schools (Overton, 2015). There are unique institutional characteristics of United Methodist colleges and a governance structure of United Methodist colleges which sets them apart from other church-related colleges.

John Wesley, the founder of what is known today as the United Methodist Church, was a tremendous advocate for education. During the earliest days of the Wesleyan movement, he established the Kingswood School in England to give children of coal miners an education so that they could eventually matriculate to Oxford or Cambridge (Overton, 2015). When the United Methodist Church was established in America at the Christmas Conference of 1784, the conference authorized the formation of Cokesbury College in Maryland which was the first United Methodist college in the United States (Overton, 2015). As Methodism spread throughout the states, the bishops of the church encouraged Methodists to build schools near every church as a way to civilize local communities and to pass on knowledge, wisdom, and intellect (Overton, 2015). Throughout the history of United Methodist higher education in America, schools have been formed to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ but also to provide education for those who did not have other opportunities (Johnson, 1989). United Methodist colleges have always been open to educating students who are not part of the denomination (Johnson, 1989).

In 1892, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church established the University Senate “to be certain that these institutions were worthy of bearing the name of the denomination” (Overton, 2015, p. 2). This was the first accrediting agency in the United States and created the peer review model for assessing educational quality that is still utilized today (Overton, 2015). Today, 27 members are elected to serve on the University Senate by several different constituencies. University Senate evaluations examine matters of interest to the Church – institutional integrity, educational quality, church relatedness and financial stability of the institution (Overton, 2015). This body has the sole power to determine which colleges and universities can be formally affiliated with the United Methodist Church and which non-United

Methodist theological schools can be approved to train and educate United Methodist pastors (Overton, 2015).

Overton (2015) noted that the 96 United Methodist-affiliated institutions are distinguished from other educational institutions primarily by their approach to faith and religious expression. Assessment of church relationships is part of the University Senate review process, but because these vary from one institution to another, the declaration of church relationship is left to each institution to design (General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2018). In 1996, the University Senate adopted seven principles which guide the body in assessing United Methodist relationships of member institutions. These include a requirement that United Methodist colleges and universities identify themselves as such in printed materials and other reports of self-description, include the teaching of religion as part of the curriculum of the institution, honor the practice of religion for those who choose to participate in Christian tradition, allow faculty to explore issues of faith throughout the curriculum and in co-curricular activities, encourage the consideration of the contributions of religious belief to public life, seek to create a community which facilitates social justice, and include in its faculty, administration, and board of trustees individuals who understand and respect the relationship with the United Methodist Church (General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2018).

Institutions affiliated with the United Methodist Church have crafted a variety of approaches to allow faith to be a significant part of the educational experience (Overton, 2015). Overton (2015) stated “rather than either isolating faith as something outside the curriculum or mandating a particular set of beliefs, United Methodist-related colleges and universities provide

courses and cocurricular programs that enable students to delve into questions of meaning and purpose” (p. 3).

There is a degree of difference between United Methodist colleges and the Christian colleges affiliated with the CCCU. Unlike some CCCU institutions, United Methodist colleges do not require faith statements for faculty and staff for employment. There is also no requirement for entering students at United Methodist colleges to declare a Christian worldview. Further, while United Methodist colleges and universities offer regular worship services, chapel events, communion, bible studies, small groups, and a whole host of religious gatherings on campus, there is no mandatory attendance requirement for students at United Methodist colleges to attend unlike some Christian schools with memberships in the CCCU.

While there is no uniform description of a United Methodist college or university, the colleges in this sector of church-related higher education are welcoming of all students and are non-discriminatory in practice. The inclusive nature of United Methodist colleges and universities sets them apart from other Christian and faith-based colleges. Different United Methodist colleges and universities engage with their denomination partners in unique ways and have great leeway in their church relatedness. In general, students attending United Methodist colleges and universities have the opportunity to receive as much or as little religious practice as they desire and have multiple ways they can engage in religious life on these campuses.

Significance of the Study

Discerning how United Methodist college students describe their college choice process is important because most church-related colleges, and specifically most United Methodist Church-affiliated colleges and universities, are tuition dependent and rely primarily on high school seniors making the decision to attend their institution. These colleges spend enormous

amounts of time and financial resources recruiting students and promoting the attributes which make their institution distinctive in hopes of attracting enough students each year to meet budgetary and enrollment goals (Paulsen, 1990).

Table 1.1 demonstrates the important role tuition revenue plays in the financial health of many United Methodist colleges. All 39 United Methodist colleges and universities in the southeastern jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church are included. Institutions are ranked by the highest to lowest five-year average of tuition and fees as a percent of core revenue. The data is compiled from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2013-2017.

Table 1.1: Tuition and Fees as a Percent of Core Revenues						
Institution	FY17	FY16	FY15	FY14	FY13	5-Year Average
North Carolina Wesleyan	84	84	89	82	71	82
Shenandoah	81	86	85	76	77	81
Florida Southern College	70	74	86	84	85	79.8
Methodist University	80	86	83	67	81	79.4
Martin Methodist	68	80	83	74	83	77.6
High Point	74	78	74	84	71	76.2
Lindsey Wilson	63	85	79	74	77	75.6
Virginia Wesleyan	72	80	82	81	60	75
Ferrum	57	94	83	66	69	73.8
Greensboro	72	79	77	73	67	73.6
Tennessee Wesleyan	74	71	65	69	88	73.4
Pfeiffer	51	82	72	74	79	71.6
Columbia College	73	82	72	61	69	71.4
Reinhardt	61	88	79	61	68	71.4
Louisburg	71	75	66	62	65	67.8
Bethune-Cookman	64	70	70	68	66	67.6
Union	68	72	75	55	66	67.2
Clark Atlanta	68	78	68	59	62	67
Brevard	75	82	67	63	47	66.8
Spartanburg Methodist	62	83	75	55	55	66
Claflin	64	64	62	57	54	60.2
Huntingdon	58	72	53	55	44	56.4
LaGrange	54	59	66	38	55	54.4
Randolph-Macon	49	84	52	38	44	53.4
Young Harris	41	92	62	33	24	50.4
Kentucky Wesleyan	51	60	41	58	30	48
Rust	42	57	53	42	45	47.8
Paine	38	40	50	57	51	47.2
Emory & Henry	40	67	53	24	37	44.2
Birmingham-Southern	32	62	50	38	38	44
Wofford	39	26	66	40	48	43.8
Wesleyan	42	60	54	28	31	43
Millsaps	28	76	31	25	24	36.8
Andrew	31	41	36	28	29	33
Randolph	25	43	47	14	29	31.6
Bennett	25	31	33	32	35	31.2
Meharry Medical College	26	29	23	20	20	23.6
Emory	17	22	29	16	18	20.4
Duke	13	25	17	11	12	15.6

Twenty of the 39 United Methodist colleges in the southeastern portion of the United States had five-year averages of 66 percent or more of their annual core revenue attributed to tuition and fees between 2013 and 2017. All 20 institutions in this tuition-dependent category also had endowment values below \$80 million at the end of fiscal year 2017.

Table 1.2: Endowments of Heavily Tuition Dependent Institutions	
Institution	Endowment End of FY2017
North Carolina Wesleyan	10,618,137
Shenandoah	63,422,495
Florida Southern College	77,818,590
Methodist University	26,469,103
Martin Methodist	14,643,134
High Point	56,668,533
Lindsey Wilson	24,272,687
Virginia Wesleyan	56,770,385
Ferrum	51,192,714
Greensboro	22,863,395
Tennessee Wesleyan	11,362,132
Pfeiffer	15,798,327
Columbia College	17,490,293
Reinhardt	41,641,189
Louisburg	14,088,280
Bethune-Cookman	42,323,284
Union	21,523,790
Clark Atlanta	68,523,694
Brevard	25,336,006
Spartanburg Methodist	21,475,824

Providing research data to leaders of church-related colleges, primarily those at United Methodist colleges with high percentages of tuition and fees as a part of their core revenue, will assist them in targeting their marketing efforts to recruit students who fit the profile of the institution. It will also help college and university marketing staff as they evaluate their

collateral pieces to determine if the factors that influence students' decisions to attend church-related colleges are being adequately promoted in college materials. This research will further be useful to development and advancement staff at United Methodist colleges and universities to aid them in crafting fund solicitations which remind alumni of the unique qualities associated with their alma mater.

Finally, exploring the extent to which the Christian identity or United Methodist affiliation of the institution impacts students' decisions to attend will be useful to college leaders in determining whether or not this is a value proposition in recruiting students to United Methodist colleges. This study will provide insight into student perceptions of religious life on campus and the impact it has on prospective students. Similar to the results of the Rood (2009) study, one would expect the church connection to be a positive reason for attending a United Methodist college or university for a segment of the students, a negative factor overcome by other desired aspects of the college for some students, and an irrelevant factor for a percentage of the interviewed students.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

College choice has been examined by sociologists with interest in the status attainment process and by economists who see college choice as an investment decision (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Paulsen, 1990). Paulsen (1990) further noted psychologists see the process with an eye on the “impact of college experiences and environments on students and optimal student-institution fit” (p. 23). College choice models, therefore, fall into categories of sociological, econometric, and psychological (McDonough, 1997) and use theories from economics and sociology (Harding, Parker, & Toutkoushian, 2017). The theories are helpful in discerning why students choose to go to college and how a range of factors aids or encumbers a student in this pursuit.

Sociological status attainment models examine how various factors such as family background, school environments, and peers and friends shape the college choice process (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Hamrick & Hossler, 1996; Hossler et al., 1989). Many of the sociological studies draw on Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital (Nora, 2004). Within this context, cultural capital might be considered the value middle and upper income families place on a college education as a way of continuing the family’s economic security (McDonough, 1997). Bourdieu’s (1977) theory highlights the predisposition toward college that occurs during the transmission of cultural capital from one generation to the next. This cultural capital combined with other family background characteristics creates Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of habitus. Cultural capital also explains the notion that a student whose parents graduated from a

prestigious college or university would be more likely to aspire to this achievement (Harding et al., 2017). Additionally, Sewell and Shah (1968) proclaimed “children of higher social class origins are more likely to aspire to high educational and occupational goals than are children of lower social class origins” (p. 559). Kao and Tienda (1998) noted that “parental influences on aspiration are crucial because parents control both financial and psychological resources and are key actors in socialization” (p. 352).

Connected to cultural capital is the concept of social capital. Harding et al. (2017) described social capital as “the interpersonal networks individuals have access to that can serve as a valuable resource in the college choice process” (p.6). One could argue that social networks may be at least as important in facilitating college choice as a student’s individual ability to discern for themselves (Plank & Jordan, 2001). Social capital is acquired through relationships and can be transmitted by parents, grandparents, teachers, counselors, neighbors, friends, and friends of each of the aforementioned people with whom a student shares a connection. Perna and Titus (2005) observed the deficiency of dominant social capital in the college search process for African-American and Hispanic students because of the lack of dominant resources geared toward this process through the social networks at the schools these students attend.

Economic models of college choice focus on the individual cost/benefit analysis in the college choice process (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996; McDonough, 1997; Southerland, 2006). Using Becker’s (1964) theory of human capital, students must first weigh the costs and benefits of college attendance, military service, or a job in the labor force (DesJardins, 2002). Human capital theory presumes that additional education leads to increased productivity which leads to higher earnings (Perna, 2006). Students and their families navigate federal and state financial aid programs along with institutional scholarship and grant opportunities to determine costs

associated with college attendance. Once they have assessed costs, students and their families consider the financial rate of return on pursuing a postsecondary education (Bateman & Spruill, 1996; Paulsen & Smart, 2007). Hamrick and Hossler (1996) noted that economic models “assume that students will act in their own best interests and choose a college that maximizes benefits” (p.181).

Economic studies can also be considered through the lens of the buyer behavior theory established by Howard and Sheth (1969). Howard and Sheth (1969) presented three fundamentals associated with buyer choice which included a set of motives, several alternatives to select from and decision mediators. Stephenson, Heckert, and Yerger (2016) used this theory to analyze the college decision process and explore the consumer decision framework. They concluded a student would have a motivation to attend college, possess a small number of colleges or universities they are considering, and eventually make a decision based upon unique factors of the consumer and the higher education products available to them (Stephenson et al., 2016). Howard and Sheth (1969) presented the concept that options for purchase do not have to come from the same product class. Stephenson et al. (2016) explained that the schools under consideration in a student’s college selection may be from several different types of colleges and universities.

Social psychological studies examine the influence of a variety of factors associated with college choice and student assessment of their belonging to the college selected (McDonough, 1997). Galotti (1995) examined college choice through a psychological lens. She studied 322 college-bound high school seniors in Minnesota and explored the characteristics of colleges they were considering and the students’ views of the characteristics at each of the institutions they were considering attending. Her results found that in general, high school students consider four

or five choices and evaluate them based on eight to ten factors. She makes the point that the college decision is actually multiple decisions stacked on top of each other. Galotti (1995) also noted that in the college choice decision-making process, there is “no single ‘correct’ choice to make” (p.462), and noted that any number of these choices might be “feasible or plausible” (p.462).

Most of the college choice models considered herein are combined models which have utilized both economic and sociological themes (Chapman, 1986; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Perna, 2006; Southerland, 2006; Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). Plank and Jordan (2001) noted that this has allowed for the consideration of both “sociological aspects of the college selection process while maintaining the decision-making perspective of economics” (p.952). Combined models present the college choice process in stages and present the decision-making process from a policy perspective “in order to find opportunities for intervention in the student college choice process” (Hossler et al., 1989, p.241).

College Choice Models

Several researchers have theorized college choice models to describe the college choice process prospective students and parents experience (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Chapman, 1981; Chapman, 1986; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Kotler, 1976; Perna, 2006; Southerland, 2006; Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). These models include three to seven stages and recognize that the college choice process depends on the variable life situation of each student, exploration of and consideration of college options, and ultimately the decision to apply, select, and attend a postsecondary institution.

Most models begin with a student’s decision to attend college which is influenced by a variety of personal characteristics and external influences (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Chapman,

1986; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Kotler, 1976; Southerland, 2006; Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). In general, these models highlight a process by which students and their circle of influencers seek out information about colleges and universities and have interaction with them (Chapman, 1986; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Jackson, 1982; Kotler, 1976; Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). Some models note the important step of applying for admission and receiving the admission decision as part of the college choice process (Chapman, 1986; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Kotler, 1976; Perna, 2006; Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). Finally, most models include as part of the college choice journey the decision to attend a specific college which also includes registering for classes, and matriculating to the institution (Chapman, 1986; Hanson & Litten, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Kotler, 1976; Southerland, 2006; Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016). A look at these models in chronological order of their creation reveals the evolution of college choice theory and how researchers have used each model as building blocks for the development of college choice theory.

Kotler's 1976 Seven-Stage Model of College Choice

Kotler (1976) is recognized with establishing the first model of college choice (Furukawa, 2011). Using marketing theory, he described a seven-stage college choice process which included the decision to attend; information seeking and receiving; specific college inquiries; applications; admissions; college choice; and registration. While subsequent theorists have agreed with the accuracy of Kotler's (1976) model, all condensed his college choice design into fewer stages (Chapman, 1981; Litten, 1982).

Chapman's 1981 Model of College Choice

Chapman (1981) proposed a model for college choice based on student characteristics, the student's family, and distinctive features of the college or university. He noted the impact of

a student's socioeconomic status as a predictor of college choice with students from higher income homes more likely to attend four-year colleges and universities than students from homes with lower socioeconomic demographics. Chapman (1981) further highlighted a student's aptitude as an influence on the student's college choice since high school achievement and performance on standardized tests are used by some colleges in the admission process. Students are also likely to seek an institution where they will find students with common aptitudes (Nolfi, 1979). Since colleges and universities publicize the average entering test scores and high school grade point averages of their students, high school students are able to identify institutions where their personal profile and academic ability fits with the majority of the student body (Chapman, 1981).

Chapman (1981) also suggested that external factors, in addition to background characteristics of a student, help shape the college choice of a student. Significant persons play a direct role in influencing a student's college choice. These include family, friends, and peers who help a student form an impression about specific colleges, provide counsel on which college or type of institution to attend, or even encourage a student to choose an institution they have attended (Chapman, 1981). Unique traits about the institution such as location, campus atmosphere, and access to desired programs are also factors that influence a student's college choice. Chapman (1981) also recognized special efforts made by the college or university to recruit the student to their institution influence a student's college choice. While marketing strategies and communication tools have evolved since the establishment of Chapman's model, colleges and universities continue to engage in aggressive recruiting tactics to influence the college choice of targeted students (DesJardins, 2002; Fant, 2003; Hoyt & Brown, 2003; Mentz & Whiteside, 2003).

Jackson's 1982 Three-Phase Model of College Choice

Jackson (1982) established a three-phase model of college choice based on preference, exclusion, and evaluation. He noted that a high school student's strongest indicator of their aspirations is their academic achievement. A student who demonstrates academic success in high school is more likely to have a preference for advancing their educational journey in college. A secondary indicator of preference is connected to a student's social context including their peers, neighborhood, and school. The third measure in Jackson's (1982) model related to preference is a student's family background. He notes a poor student is likely to have perceived limitations on college choice which impact their preference for one college over another or one type of institution compared to others.

The second phase of the Jackson (1982) model is exclusion. Once students begin the college search process, they exclude colleges from consideration that they do not know much about. Jackson (1982) observed that geography is a primary reason why students exclude many colleges because there is limited ability to gain information about distant colleges. Certainly this conclusion is dated since today's prospective students have information at their finger-tips about every college and university thanks to the advent of the Internet (Mentz & Whiteside, 2003). Geographic location of the institution does potentially impact a student's college choice, though, because of cost of travel to the institution, residential living expenses, and out-of-state tuition charges (Jackson, 1982).

After students have considered their preferences and excluded some options from consideration, the final stage in the Jackson (1982) model is evaluation as students rate the options available to them and make a decision. This includes the college options, non-college options, or both. Jackson (1982) opined that college and job attributes are considered in the

evaluation phase with cost of college attendance, job benefits, and location being the most important variables. Family background and academic achievement are also noted as strong factors in the college choice decision.

Hanson and Litten's Five-Stage College Choice Model

Hanson and Litten (1982) offered a five-stage college choice framework which includes the aspiration of the student to attend college, starting the search process, collecting information about a variety of schools, submitting applications to colleges and universities, and matriculating to the institution selected. Similarly to Chapman (1981) and Jackson (1982), they suggested the primary influences affecting the college choice are background characteristics, personal characteristics, high school features and distinctive factors about the college. Hanson and Litten's (1982) model is compared to a funnel with a large number of colleges and universities under consideration at the top and a declining number being considered at the end (Litten, 1982). The same funnel analogy is used by enrollment managers and college recruiters in describing the annual process of building an entering class. Colleges and universities start with a broad list of targeted students which produces a smaller number of matriculants at the end of the process (Litten, 1982).

Litten (1982) considered the Hanson and Litten (1982) linear model through the lens of several different demographic groups including race, gender, achievement level, parents' educational status, and location. He further examined group differences in the timing of the college search, the number of colleges considered, types of college information gathered, college characteristics desired, college information used, and influential people consulted in the college search process. His analysis found the primary difference in demographic groups was in the timing of the various college choice processes. Females were found to have completed college

applications earlier than males. Caucasian students expressed a desire to attend college sooner than African-American students. Students with higher levels of achievement demonstrated an earlier interest in the process (Litten, 1982).

Chapman's 1986 Five-Stage Model of College Choice

Chapman (1986) also described a five-stage pattern of how a student moves through the college discernment process. The phases of this model are pre-search behavior, search behavior, application decision, choice decision, and matriculation decision. Pre-search behavior includes the recognition by middle school and high school students that a college education is desirable and attainable. This process begins at different points in each person's life and is influenced by a whole host of socioeconomic variables. Chapman (1986) also denoted the difference between search and choice in the college selection process. He stated that:

Search refers to searching for the attribute values which characterize colleges. Relevant college attributes might include cost, academic quality, future career prospects and opportunities (upon graduation), quality of life while a student at the college, and related considerations that might be of interest to students in the ultimate college choice decision. (Chapman, 1986, p. 246)

Chapman (1986) further stated that "choice refers to choosing among the colleges which have admitted a student" (p.246). Chapman (1986) noted that there is some overlap between the search and the choice phase. He suggested the search phase concludes when a student has selected the colleges and universities to send applications for admission.

The Three-Phase Hossler and Gallagher 1987 Model

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) expanded upon Chapman (1981), Jackson (1982), Hanson and Litten (1982), and Chapman (1986) to propose a simplified three-stage developmental model. The first phase of their college choice model is the predisposition period when students begin to discern whether or not they desire to pursue college attendance. The second phase is the

search phase as students begin to consider individual colleges and universities. The third and final phase in this period is the choice stage as students make the ultimate decision of where they will attend college.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) also highlighted the background characteristics that indicate some students are more predisposed to attend college than others. Socioeconomic status, student achievement and ability, attitudes of parents, and peer influence all show positive connections to a student's decision to attend college. Early information about college costs and financial assistance and positive attitudes about higher education increase a student's predisposition toward college attendance. Like Chapman (1981), Hossler and Gallagher (1987) noted that other factors, such as pre-college experiences and engagement in extracurricular activities in high school, are also credited with impacting student college choice. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) also introduced the idea that federal and state policymakers influence each phase of the college search process. Investments in high-quality secondary schools, additional funding for state and federal student financial aid to attend college, and providing access to information about colleges are ways state and federal policymakers can encourage more students to attend college and impact the college choice process.

Cabrera and La Nasa's 2000 Model of College Choice

Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) built off of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) three-stage model of college choice and proposed a new model which links the three stages together. In particular, they note the importance of parental involvement and financial considerations as a cognitive influence throughout the entire college choice process. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) recognized that parental influence on predisposition is multi-faceted. Parents who have high expectations for the academic achievement of their children motivate them toward a college

education. Parents also predispose students to attend college by proactively saving for their child's college education and discussing college preparation with them (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Research also suggests that the level of parental involvement in a student's high school career directly correlates with whether or not a student will matriculate to a four-year college (Flint, 1992). Financial considerations are embedded in the Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) model, as well, as students and their families consider college savings, financial aid, and their perceived ability to pay for college throughout the college choice process.

Perna's 2006 Four-Layer College Choice Model

Perna (2006) offered a four-layer model which assumes that college choice and enrollment decisions are based on a student's "situational context" (p. 116). The first layer in her model highlights a student's habitus toward the college choice process (Bourdieu, 1977).

Bergerson (2009) stated that "habitus acts as an unconscious lens through which individuals view their options and make decisions based on what feels comfortable for them, given their background characteristics" (p. 37). This includes the student's demographic characteristics, and the types and amounts of cultural capital and social capital the student possesses. All of these unique personal factors influence a student's demand for higher education, their supply of resources, expected benefits of a college education, and their understanding of the expected costs of attendance (Perna, 2006).

The second layer of Perna's (2006) model is the school and community context. This recognizes the availability of resources, types of resources, and social structures that can assist or diminish a student's college choice. A wealthy student attending a private collegiate preparatory academy is likely to have more resources and social support in the college choice process than a low-income minority student in a struggling inner-city high school.

A third layer of Perna's (2006) college choice model is the higher education context. This acknowledges that higher education institutions affect the college choice process in several ways. Colleges and universities are a source of information about college to students in their surrounding area and to students identified as a good fit for the institution. Additionally, unique traits about colleges and universities influence a student's decision to attend institutions that have those characteristics. This may include specific academic programs, extracurricular opportunities, or a campus social culture that is compatible with the student's interests. Higher education institutions further influence college choice by limiting those who can enroll. Through application processes which consider high school grade point averages and standardized test scores, colleges and universities can limit the college choice of some students interested in attending by denying admission to them.

The fourth and final layer of Perna's (2006) model is the social, economic and policy context. This takes into account the external factors which influence college choice such as demographic changes, economic conditions, and public policy initiatives of the state and federal government such as new educational aid programs. When all four layers are examined together, it becomes clear that each individual student has a variety of contexts through which college choice decisions are made.

Southerland's 2006 College Choice Equation

Southerland (2006) introduced persistence into the college choice equation with his three-phase model. His model established "essential decision points" (p. 14) that occur throughout the entire college choice process. Three primary decisions of students are articulated in his model – the decision of whether or not to go to college, the decision of which college to attend and when to attend, and the ongoing evaluation of whether or not to continue to attend. The author noted a

wide variety of key influences which impact each decision including predisposition characteristics, personal goals, perceptions of self, compelling circumstances, cost and financial means, enabling circumstances, institutional fit, and academic and social experiences (Southerland, 2006).

Toutkoushian and Paulsen's 2016 Five-Stage Model of College Choice

Toutkoushian and Paulsen (2016) articulated a five-stage model which includes predisposition, the initial search, application, admission, and enrollment. Their model recognized that decisions made throughout the college choice process are dependent on decisions made in earlier phases. They further noted that decision makers vary in their five-stage model. Students and their families control the decisions in stages one, two, three and five. Colleges and universities determine the admissibility of students in stage four (Perna, 2006; Toutkoushian & Paulsen, 2016).

Consideration of Variables in the College Choice Process

Numerous researchers have used the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) three-stage model as the basis for their exploration of factors which influence the college choice process (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Flint, 1992; Harding et al., 2017; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Myers & Myers, 2012; Pitre, 2006; Plank & Jordan, 2001; Shaw, Kobrin, Packman, & Schmidt, 2009; Smith & Fleming, 2006). Although it is widely-acclaimed and user-friendly, some researchers have noted that it is too simple for describing the complexity of today's college choice process (Bergerson, 2009; Myers & Myers, 2012). Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) model has also been the target of criticism for looking at the college choice process primarily through the lens of white students (Smith & Fleming, 2006). The Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model does, however, provide a framework for further discovery of factors related to predisposition, search,

and choice. I have chosen this college choice model to explore the decision-making process of students attending United Methodist colleges and universities because of its usability and applicability to my study. It presents a logical progression of stages a student journeys through on the path to college attendance. This outline and structure for discernment is useful regardless of the type of institution a student chooses to attend or their personal life situation and characteristics.

College Aspiration / Predisposition

There is no set moment when students are predisposed to college and it varies for each student (Harding et al., 2017). Thornton (2017) claimed that predisposition can take place anytime between kindergarten and eighth grade, while Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) noted that the college choice process can begin as early as the seventh grade. Hossler et al. (1999) discovered that a majority of students discern their plans to pursue postsecondary education, or to not continue their education after high school by the end of their ninth grade year. While the predisposition stage is not the time when a student actually enrolls in college, Messer (2016) noted that it is a ‘critical first step’ (p. 16). Harding et al. (2017) highlighted the timing of predisposition is important to allow students to properly plan. Predisposition to college enables students to take necessary college-track courses in middle school and high school (McDonough, 1997) and plan for standardized testing (Plank & Jordan, 2001).

There are many personal characteristics which factor into a student’s predisposition to attend or not to attend college. Gender (Cho, Hudley, Lee, Barry, & Kelly, 2008; Mau & Bikos, 2000; Smith & Fleming, 2006; Stage & Hossler, 1989), race and ethnicity (Carter, 1999; Cho et al., 2008; Freeman, 1997; Gonzalez, 2012; Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee, 1997; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Kim & Gassman, 2011; Manski & Wise, 1983; Mau & Bikos, 2000; Perna &

Titus, 2005; Pitre, 2006; Smith & Fleming, 2006), socioeconomic status (Bergerson, 2009; Hossler et al., 1999; Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Weis, Cipollone, & Stich, 2015), academic achievement (Hossler & Stage, 1992; Manski & Wise, 1983; Nora, 2004), extracurricular activities (Carpenter & Fleishman, 1987) and high school characteristics (McDonough, 1997; Weis et al., 2015) have all been identified as influencers of predisposition. Student desire for financial achievement and career attainment are also qualities which predispose students to consider college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Parents are a key influencer in molding the postsecondary plans of students (Finnie, Childs, & Wismer, 2011; Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler et al., 1999; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Paulsen, 1990). Students are predisposed to college because of actions of their parents including intentional conversations with the student about college (Myers & Myers, 2012), parental saving for college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Flint, 1992; Stage & Hossler, 1989), parental involvement in school (Perna & Titus, 2005) and parental educational attainment (Carpenter & Fleishman, 1987). Parental perceptions of college affordability also influence a student's decision whether or not to attend college, the type of college to attend, and the specific college selected (Flint, 1992). Parents can further lay the groundwork for a student's eventual college attendance by purchasing homes in good school districts, steer their children toward accelerated and gifted programs, and help cultivate skills and talents of their children at an early age (Weis et al., 2015).

Finnie et al. (2011) observed that students and their families engage in educational decisions that put them on a track toward or away from college well before a student enters high school. They also noted that students from non-college educated families are more likely to make the decision to attend or not attend college later in a student's secondary education (Finnie et al., 2011). Siblings who have attended or are currently attending college are also a key

influencer in predisposing students to attend college (Hossler et al.,1999). Further, Hossler et al. (1999) discovered that ninth-grade students with friends who plan to pursue a postsecondary education are more likely to also have college aspirations.

Teachers and counselors also help predispose students to attend college by placing them in college preparatory courses in middle school and high school and by presenting postsecondary options to students (Belasco, 2012; Bryan, Moore-Thomas, Day-Vines, & Holcomb-McCoy, 2011; Engberg & Gilbert, 2014; Freeman, 1997; Knox, Pratto, & Callahan, 1974; McDonough, 1997; Muhammed, 2008). Engberg and Gilbert (2014) noted that high school counselors “provide education and resources that illuminate financial aid possibilities, connect students to academic assistance programs, and reinforce the necessary steps to ensure students are prepared for college opportunities” (p. 220). School counselors are further recognized as a source of social capital (Belasco, 2012; Bryan et al., 2011; Muhammed, 2008). Bryan et al. (2011) found that the number of school counselors in a school and a student’s contact with them have a positive impact on college application rates. Belasco (2012) observed that visiting a counselor for information about college entrance has an influence on students’ likelihood of attending college. He further noted that the greatest impact of student counseling is found in students from low-income homes (Belasco, 2012). Muhammed (2008) noted that strong school counselors can positively impact African-American student predisposition to college, particularly among male students, and compared its importance to “fatherly support” (p. 81).

High school students receive varying levels of college counseling across the states and local school districts (Perna, Rowan-Kenyon, Thomas, Bell, Anderson, & Li, 2008; Weis et al., 2015). Students attending low-income schools or high-minority schools are likely to have less access to college counseling services than students attending schools in more affluent areas

(McDonough, 1997). Pitre (2006) found that students with a negative perception of the collegiate preparation they were receiving in high school were less likely to aspire attend college. Colleges and universities are also engaged in predisposing students to college by partnering with elementary, middle and high schools to make college information available to students and to give tours of campus as early as first grade (Nora, 2004).

Search

The search phase of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model has also been dissected by various researchers. Hossler et al. (1999) found that most sophomores in their study were able to articulate at least one college they were considering attending. Juniors in the Hossler et al. (1999) study demonstrated more active engagement in collecting information about specific colleges and their attributes. At this point, students also began to seek information from people beyond their parents, siblings and friends including their teachers, guidance professionals, and admission personnel at colleges and universities (Hossler et al., 1999). Visiting colleges, securing college marketing materials, and scouring college websites and social media sites are useful tools in gathering information about colleges (Hossler et al., 1989; Johnston, 2010; Mentz & Whiteside, 2003). Hossler et al. (1999) noted that the junior year is the time of greatest information gathering and uncertainty about specific college characteristics of interest as the reality of the closeness of high school graduation hits home. Hamrick and Hossler (1996) observed that socioeconomic status, parental support and early consideration of post-high school plans had a high correlation with students engaging in diverse information-gathering methods. By the time a student is a senior, most have narrowed their search and have an understanding of the characteristics they are seeking in a college in order to make the college choice and have developed strong preferences toward the institutions they have considered (Cabrera & La Nasa,

2000; Hossler et al., 1999). Smith and Fleming (2006) noted, however, that the college search phase may last well into the senior year for black students. Johnson, Stewart, and Eberly (1991) also found that black students were more likely than white students to engage the high school counselor in conversations about the college search and postsecondary plans.

Socioeconomic factors also influence student behavior in the search phase. Affluent students have access to more resources including private counselors to assist in searching for the right school (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Additionally, these students can afford to broaden their college search by visiting schools beyond their current location and consider more expensive postsecondary institutions (Flint, 1992; Hamrick & Hossler, 1996; Hossler et al., 1999; McDonough, 1997). Students from wealthier households are also able to bring a greater level of sophistication to their search (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; McDonough, 1997).

Choice

According to Hossler et al. (1989), the phrase *college choice* can include a student's decision to attend or not to attend a college or university, attend a four-year institution or a two-year college, attend a selective or non-selective institution, or select a specific college or university over others in consideration. Choice is when "psychosocial, institutional and personal preference factors converge to produce a student's decision to apply and actually matriculate at a given institution" (Cho et al., 2008, p.97). Nora (2004) noted this final stage of the college search is when the decision moves "from the head to the heart as students realize that the college they choose will become a major part of their personal and social lives" (p. 202). While most of the college choice models describe the process as a student decision, Huntington-Klein (2018) stated that parents have influence in the decision but not exclusive oversight. Broekemier and Seshardi (1999) noted that both students and parents take on the roles of "initiators, influencers, and

deciders” (p. 11) and must be cultivated together. Mothers, in particular, have been deemed to be key influencers colleges and universities should target in their messaging (Johnston, 2010).

Some scholars have categorized college choice factors into two subgroups – student characteristics and institutional characteristics (DesJardins, Dundar, & Hendel, 1997; Han, 2014; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Messer, 2016; Thornton, 2017). Student characteristics include gender, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, marital status, family income, age, parental influence, qualifications, academic achievement, career goals, educational interests, location of residence, and high school background (Bacila, 2008; DesJardins et al., 1997; Han, 2014; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Shaw et al., 2009; Thornton, 2017). Institutional characteristics include college or university reputation, image, cost, financial aid assistance, location, academic programs, quality of faculty, extracurricular activities, athletic programs, social life, experiential benefits, post-degree employability, campus aesthetics and facilities, campus safety, residential living options, size, type of institution, campus friendliness and fit (Arpan, Raney, & Zivnuska, 2003; Bacila, 2008; Canale, Dunlap, Britt, & Donahue, 1996; DesJardins, Ahlburg, & McCall, 2006; DesJardins et al., 1997; Han, 2014; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Hossler et al., 1989; Johnson et al., 1991; Joseph, Mullen, & Spake, 2012; Terkla & Wright, 1986).

Males and females have articulated differences in rating the importance of college choice criteria (Broekemier & Seshardi, 1999; Cho et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 1991; Shaw et al., 2009). Broekemier and Seshardi (1999) noted that female high school students weighed academic and education-related factors higher than male students. Psychosocial characteristics such as safety, positive social climate and the presence of friends on campus were more important to female students than male students in the study conducted by Cho et al. (2008). Safety was also a factor

of greater importance for females than males in the research conducted by Broekemier and Seshardi (1999). Male students rated social life and athletic programs as more important factors than their female counterparts (Broekemier & Seshardi, 1999). Bielby, Posselt, Jaquette, and Bastedo (2014) examined the underrepresentation of women in elite colleges and universities and found the issue was not one of student choice but rather admission criteria which favor male applicants.

Differences in the rating of college choice factors by white students and students from other ethnic groups have also been considered (Carter, 1999; Gonzalez, 2012; Johnson et al., 1991). Black students were more concerned with distance from home, costs, and academic reputation of the institution than white students (Johnson et al., 1991). Kim (2004) observed that financial aid availability factored differently between racial groups. He found that white students and Asian-American students were more likely to attend their college of first choice if they were the recipients of various forms of financial aid. On the other hand, African-American and Latino students were not influenced by the availability of financial aid (Carter, 1999; Kim, 2004). Gonzalez (2012) also highlighted the higher percentage of Latino students choosing to attend a two-year community college over a four-year university. Kim and Gassman (2011) observed that Asian-American students identified institutional reputation and pedigree as characteristics of importance. However, their study has the limitation of only exploring interviews with 14 Asian-American students attending an elite university.

Church-Related College Choice

Much of the college choice literature has examined factors which influence the college selection of a number of demographic variables. First-generation students (Messer, 2016; Rood, 2009), racial and ethnic groups (Confer & Mamiseishvili, 2012; Hurtado et al., 1997; Perna &

Titus, 2005); sociocultural variables (Roberson, 1997); high-achieving students (Bradshaw, Espinoza, & Hausman, 2001), low-income students (Hoxby & Avery, 2013), student-athletes and non-athletes (Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, & Palmer, 2003), males and females (Broekemier & Seshardi, 1999; Johnson et al., 1991), urban and rural students (Hodges & Barbuto, 2002), and students from single-parent families (Kennedy & Bateman, 1999) have all been considered by previous scholars.

While much research has been conducted on college choice, the body of literature is narrow on the intersection of college choice and church-related colleges. The existing literature on factors influencing a student's choice of a church-related college identifies parental and adult influence (Messer, 2016; Moss & Cockriel, 1990), the spiritual nature of the college (Benne, 2001; Budde & Wright, 2004; Noel-Levitz, 2010; Rood, 2009; Schipull, 2009; Seibert, 1994), cultural orientation (Davignon et al., 2013; Davignon, 2016; Sauder, 2008; Wiese & Townsend, 1991; Wood, 2010), location (Schipull, 2009; Terkla & Wright, 1986), academic programs and reputation (Carlson, 1992; Davignon, 2016; Noel-Levitz, 2010; Schipull, 2009; Wood, 2010), size (Carlson, 1992; Easter, 2012; Schipull, 2009), the recruiting experience (Messer, 2016; Pampaloni, 2010; Seibert, 1994) and cost and financial assistance (Carlson, 1992; Davignon, 2016; Perna & Titus, 2004) as a few of the primary influences which factor into the student decision.

Studies that address the topic have analyzed single church-related institutions (Messer, 2016; Rood, 2009; Seibert, 1994; Wiese & Townsend, 1991), multiple religious-affiliated colleges (Confer & Mamiseishvili, 2012; Davignon et al., 2013; Davignon, 2016; Noel-Levitz, 2010; Sauder, 2008; Schipull, 2009; Wood, 2010), mostly church-related colleges (Carlson, 1992), and multiple types of higher education options (Easter, 2012; Moss & Cockriel, 1990).

While single-institution studies can be helpful to administrators at the institution examined, it is difficult to draw conclusions about the reasons students attend all church-related colleges based on these studies because of the unique nature of each individual institution. The following sections will explore previous literature on the choice factors of students attending church-related colleges.

Parental and Adult Influences

Students are aided in the college search process by adult influences beyond their parents. Messer (2016) observed that support from family, teachers and other adult figures was a prominent theme in the college choice process for first-generation students at faith-based Shorter University. Moss and Cockriel (1990) used 77,361 responses included in the ACT Alumni Survey which collected opinions of alumni from 172 colleges and universities in 42 states between 1980 and 1988. Their analysis suggests there are significant differences in the reasons the alumni attended a religious college over a public or private nonreligious. Parental involvement in the college decision-making process and the social environment of the institution were factors of greater influence for alumni of religious colleges than the other cohorts. Since the data set from the Moss and Cockriel (1990) study was compiled from graduates of institutions after they have already been oriented to the college and entered the post-graduate working world, their opinions about why they chose the colleges they attended may have been altered since their senior year of high school when the decision was actually made. Alumni have a perspective about their institution which can be vastly different than the image of the university from their lens as a prospective student.

Spiritual Nature of the College

Not surprisingly, the intentional spiritual nature of church-related colleges is a factor in many students' choice of a faith-based institution. Schipull (2009) found in a qualitative study of twenty students at two Midwestern institutions affiliated with the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) that all but one of the surveyed students indicated the spiritual environment was important to them. Not every church-related college or university has the high number of mandatory attendance requirements at religious ceremonies or spiritual events which are part of the campus ethos of the two institutions examined in the Schipull (2009) study. The strong and fervent religious preference of the students in this research is evident in that fifteen of the twenty students exclusively looked for a Christian institution in their college search process.

Attendees at CCCU institutions indicated a stronger preference for mandatory chapel attendance and the signing of faith statements than non-matriculants according to research provided by Noel-Levitz (2010). Parents of CCCU alumni expressed in the Noel-Levitz (2010) report an expectation that their student's faith foundation from home would be reinforced in a Christian learning environment. Many church-related colleges subscribe to the philosophy of *in loco parentis* and parents of students who attend these institutions are comforted by the campus social restrictions that are often found in this sector of higher education (Budde & Wright, 2004; Benne, 2001).

Seibert (1994) tested 37 college choice factors using a quantitative survey of 317 full-time freshmen at Southwest Baptist University, a CCCU institution. The top three factors indicated in his study were God's leadership, the Christian emphasis of the university and Christian fellowship. Rood (2009) examined college selection and persistence of twelve first-generation juniors and seniors at Roberts Wesleyan College, another institution affiliated with

the CCCU. Although he had a limited sample size, he found a mixed bag of results related to the faith factor of the college. Some of the interviewed students were drawn to the college because of the religious affiliation. For others it was either not a factor or a negative factor overcome by the strength of an academic program of interest.

Schipull (2009) also noted a difference in student descriptions of campus atmosphere and a Christ-centered community in her research, both of which were important factors in student decisions to attend their respective institution. Half of the respondents in her study indicated that the warm and friendly environment and campus aesthetics were important in their matriculation decision. Friendly people also ranked fourth of 37 college choice factors in the research conducted by Seibert (1994). Eight of the twenty students in the Schipull (2009) study were drawn to their college of choice because of the quality of the campus worship experience and opportunities for prayer and biblical fellowship. Based on a quantitative review of 74,372 respondents to the 2008 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey, Easter (2012) also observed that the nature of the college was particularly important for freshman survey participants attending religious institutions.

Cultural Orientation

In consideration of the college choice process and a student's decision to attend a church-related college, a student's affiliation with a local congregation or identification with a religious denomination may influence their decision to attend a religiously-affiliated institution (Wiese & Townsend, 1991). Linton (1945) described cultural orientation as the way in which an individual sees the world. Merton (1957) developed the local-cosmopolitan concept in order to categorize an individual's cultural orientation on a localism-cosmopolitan scale. Individuals with a local cultural orientation have "an attachment to the immediate locale or group as the focal point for

behavioral expectations and reflects a desire to comply to those norms” (Wiese & Townsend, 1991, p. 109). A person with a cosmopolitan worldview has a greater openness to engage in interaction with those outside of their background. Using the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, a student with a local cultural orientation and a strong connection to their faith community is more likely to be predisposed to attend a church-related college and specifically one associated with their denomination. The student’s college search is also more likely to include research on church-related colleges than a student without a strong ecclesiological cultural orientation.

Wiese and Townsend (1991) looked at congregational connection and influence as an impact on the college choice of students attending a church-related institution. Their study focused on one religiously-owned university in the Midwest and the 840 churches of the denomination affiliated with the college and sought to determine the level of support the college received from the local churches. Their research indicates that the stronger the cultural orientation of the church leadership, the more supportive the church is of the denominational university. This has the potential effect of influencing students from the congregation to attend the congregational college. The research of Wiese and Townsend (1991) has the limitation of only looking at one denominational college and one denominational church.

Similarly, Sauder (2008) concluded that spiritual environment was an important reason Seventh-Day Adventist students matriculated to Adventist colleges based upon a national telephone survey of this population. Wood (2010) surveyed 442 first-time students at four colleges affiliated with the Church of Christ and found students from Church of Christ backgrounds place a much greater emphasis on the religious affiliation of the institution than non-Church of Christ students. Combs and Pederson (2010) examined data from 71 United

Methodist-related institutions to discern the religious affiliation of students in 2009.

Interestingly, of those students who provided a response, the largest number of responses were Catholic (19,313), followed by no religious affiliation (14,551), Baptist (13,468) and United Methodists (11,969) were fourth. Davignon et al. (2013) surveyed 3,160 students at 16 CCCU institutions and found more students identified as a nondenominational Christian than any other Christian denomination. Their results further indicated that students are more likely to base their selection of a college on the Christian identity of an institution and not necessarily on the denominational connection. Davignon (2016) examined research on over 6,000 students attending 31 institutions affiliated with the CCCU and found the Christian identity of the institution to be the second highest rated influence on the college choice decision. Recent research suggests that young adults are the least religious segment of our population and increasingly less likely to identify with a denominational label (Smith & Snell, 2009).

Location

Location is a factor in choosing one college over others but each student has a different definition of what location means to them (Schipull, 2009). For some students, location is defined as close to home or relatively close to home. Other students are more adventurous and seek a college or university in a distant location or one in a city with a number of unique attractions to the student. Using a quantitative survey of freshman matriculants and non-matriculants to Tufts University, Terkla and Wright (1986) found location to be the most frequently cited reason for attendance for both those who chose Tufts and those who chose competitor institutions, including religiously-affiliated institutions. Moss and Cockriel (1990) observed, however, that location of the institution was less of a factor for graduates of religious colleges than their public and private nonreligious counterparts.

Academic Programs / Career Preparation

Academic programs and degree offerings are a consideration of many students in the college search journey. In addition to the availability of a student's desired program of study, students are also choosing church-related institutions based on the perceived quality of an institution's academic programs (Davignon, 2016; Schipull, 2009). The research conducted by Noel-Levitz (2010) on behalf of the CCCU indicated that the quality of academic programs is the most important factor in attendance for both those who matriculated to a CCCU institution and to those who did not. The Noel-Levitz (2010) report also noted that the quality of faculty and their teaching abilities was more important for students and their parents than the faith commitment of the faculty. Davignon (2016) found that students with literal interpretations of the Bible who attend CCCU institutions are more likely to claim that academic reputation influenced their decision. He also found that women and students attending institutions with higher SAT profiles were more likely to indicate academic reputation as a contributing factor to a student's college decision.

Wood (2010) found that academic reputation was an important factor of attendance for both Church of Christ students and non-Church of Christ matriculants. Carlson (1992) quantitatively examined factors influencing college choice by 772 first-year college students at eight private colleges and universities in Illinois. Notably, seven of the eight institutions in this study were described as religiously-affiliated. The strong academic profile of the institutions was important to the students. They indicated academic reputation, faculty access, low student to faculty ratio, and graduate school / job placement opportunities as primary reasons for attendance. Noel-Levitz (2010) found that students attending CCCU institutions indicate a desire to study in the context of the Christian faith and to have their personal faith connected to

their learning experience. Vocational discernment and career development are also noted by Noel-Levitz (2010) as reasons for attending a Christian college. Parents of students in the inquiry stage demonstrated a strong interest in their child getting a good job upon completion of college as a primary motivator of choosing one college over another (Noel-Levitz, 2010). Wood (2010) also found that acquiring good jobs and admission to top graduate schools was a factor of attendance for students attending colleges in his survey.

Small Size

The smaller size of most church-related colleges compared to behemoth state universities is appealing for many students (Carlson, 1992; Easter, 2012; Schipull, 2009). Student interviews in the Schipull (2009) study described a variety of unique reasons why a small school was preferred. A student's self-described relational personality, a desire to transition from a small high school to the familiarity of a small environment, and the interest in obtaining a more personal educational experience than some students receive in large public high schools were all cited as influences in selecting a small college. Carlson (1992) found size to be the fourth most important factor in her study with 82 percent of survey respondents indicating it was an influence in their decision to attend their institution.

Recruiting Experience

Chapman (1981) noted that efforts by colleges and universities to recruit the student are an important part of the college decision process. There is something appealing to a high school senior that a person or a group of people from a college or university express a genuine desire for that student to be part of their collegiate family. Relationships prospective students and their parents form with admissions personnel, faculty, coaches, and other staff members matter. Messer (2016) highlighted a student who chose Shorter University who had previously been

unaware of the university's existence and never visited the school, but enrolled because of a relationship established with an athletic recruiter.

Relationships students form with college staff can be initiated at college fairs, visits to high schools by college personnel, and by students and their families visiting college campuses. Seibert (1994) identified the campus visit as the ninth most important college choice factor of the 37 influences he tested. Interestingly, friendly people ranked fourth and caring faculty ranked sixth in this study. One could conclude that without a campus visit, a student would have a hard time evaluating the friendliness of people on campus or the level of care faculty members demonstrate. Using a mixed-methods study of New Jersey high school students and their parents who attended open houses, Pampaloni (2010) suggested that college visits are highly influential in the college decision-making process. Her study failed to note, however, that students and families who attend open houses in high school are probably more prone to visit colleges as part of the college choice process than students and families who do not participate in high school open houses.

Cost / Financial Aid Availability

As Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) noted, cost of attendance, financial aid availability, and scholarship awards also influence the decision of most students who attend college, including those who choose an institution in the religiously-affiliated sector. Davignon (2016) found financial assistance to be the number one reason students chose to attend their college with 71.9 percent of respondents ranking it as 'very important' in their decision-making process. Carlson (1992) found that 70 percent of the participants in her study identified a scholarship as an influence in their college decision while 74 percent reported financial aid availability as important. Carlson (1992) urged institutions to make information about financial aid accessible

to prospective students. The author did not differentiate whether it was the information about financial aid that was available to the students or the actual financial aid received by the student that was important in the student's decision to attend the school they ultimately selected.

Concerned that college choices are declining for students in the lowest income brackets, Perna and Titus (2004) tested the idea that state public policies impact the college choice decision of high school students. The researchers used data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study to examine 10,148 high school graduates in all fifty states, as well as state-level metrics from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System. Student-level as well as state-level variables were considered and the results suggest that multiple public policies influence the type of college or university high school students attend. These policies include direct appropriations, tuition structures, financial aid availability, and the k-12 education system in the state. Their research also indicates that high school students from the lowest socioeconomic levels are less likely to enroll in any type of college or university.

The research of Perna and Titus (2004) is incredibly useful to policymakers at both the state and institutional level. The finding that a private-public tuition gap increasingly places private four-year colleges at a competitive disadvantage is an alarm bell for the private higher education sector, including religiously-affiliated colleges. The Perna and Titus (2004) research also shows the positive relationship between large state need-based aid programs and enrollment in private four-year schools in the state.

Trends in College Choice Research

Bergerson (2009) noted that much of the recent college choice research has shifted away from the college choice models identified in the 1980s. She recognized that today's population of students making the college choice is more diverse than ever before. This includes a record-

number of non-traditional adults, students working full-time and part-time jobs, students with dependents, and a changing racial and ethnic makeup of student populations (Southerland, 2006). Bergerson (2009) further argued that more emphasis in research is placed on preparation of students for college and access to information about college. This includes both the need for programs to assist high school students as they engage in the college choice process and programs to academically prepare high school students for collegiate studies. Additionally, much of the original college choice research was geared toward an audience of enrollment managers to assist in the formation of marketing strategies to attract prospective students. In recent years, there has been more of a shift toward providing research for state and federal policymakers to increase awareness and understanding about underserved populations in higher education (Bergerson, 2009).

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

The purpose of my research was to discover the factors which influence students' decisions to attend a United Methodist college. Every student's college search journey is unique which made interpretive qualitative research appealing to me (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using a basic qualitative research methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I collected data using open-ended, semi-structured interview questions which allowed students to tell their individual stories of how they made their decision to attend a United Methodist college. I brought a social constructivist worldview to this process which allowed me to discern patterns and themes which were common throughout the student interviews and to know more about the phenomenon of college choice from a student perspective (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The overarching research question of my study was "how do students attending a United Methodist college describe the college choice process?" This question speaks directly to my purpose of exploring why students make the decision to attend a United Methodist college. A secondary question I investigated was "to what extent the Christian identity of a United Methodist college impacts students' decisions to attend the institution?" The United Methodist Church affiliation makes United Methodist colleges distinct from other church-related colleges as well as from non-faith based private colleges. Through these questions, I was able to collect and compare qualitative data to existing literature on factors which influence a students' decision to attend a church-related college. I identified factors which are common across both institutions.

Methodological Approach

For my study, I conducted basic qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I chose this methodological approach because engaging students in their social world allowed me to construct meaning by blending together information gathered about why they chose to attend a United Methodist college (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Conducting basic qualitative research enabled me to interpret “the meaning a phenomenon has for those involved” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24) and understand how these students make sense of their college choice experience.

Methods for Data Collection

To collect data that would best allow me to answer my research questions, I interviewed 33 first-year students currently enrolled at two United Methodist colleges. These interviews allowed me to collect enough data to reach the point of “saturation” or redundancy in my research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Saturation is the point when no new information is being produced and the same information is being shared repeatedly (Bowen, 2008; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This volume of individual conversations produced several common themes associated with the reasons why students chose to attend a United Methodist college or university. Interviews with first-year college students were critical to my study because it is impossible to observe the behavior or feelings associated with the college choice decision (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This means of data collection allowed me to understand the thought process that led these students to attend their institution.

Prior to conducting interviews, I developed an interview protocol that served as a guide for the questions I asked in each interview (Creswell, 2014). The protocol also included instructions for me to follow to make sure the same procedures were used during each interview (Creswell, 2014). The interview protocol followed a semi-structured interview approach

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I chose this style of interview because while I came to each interview with a list of questions, the semi-structured approach gave me a better opportunity to engage in a conversation with the participant. While there was a predetermined order of my questioning, I had great flexibility and leeway as the interviews progressed to veer from the guided questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I began each interview by asking the open-ended question “tell me about you.” Allowing the students to begin the conversation by introducing themselves often revealed information I would not have learned otherwise through my questions related to college choice. The semi-structured interview approach allowed me to explore particular questions further when appropriate (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For example, when a participant told me that their pastor or youth minister was influential in their decision to attend the college they selected, I asked follow-up questions about the student’s faith background and denominational influence on selecting their college.

Interviews lasted roughly one hour and took place in person on campus rather than off-campus or over the telephone in order to be in the natural setting of the interview participants (Creswell, 2014). Face to face interviews allowed me to establish a rapport with interview participants and observe facial expressions, body language, and mannerisms as opposed to telephone interviews (Seidman, 2013). Based upon recommendations from institutional administrators, I reserved what I believed to be optimal locations to conduct student interviews, which included a conference room or small meeting space on each campus where my interview participants could have privacy, feel most comfortable and be free from external distractions.

Participants

I exclusively interviewed first-year students because they are the individuals on each campus who most recently participated in the college choice process and have the freshest

recollection of the experience. I sought to obtain a “purposeful sample” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 96) of students so that the most information that can be learned was discovered. Half of the students I invited to participate in the study self-identified in institutional data as members of a United Methodist Church. The other half of the students either identified with another faith denomination or indicated no religious affiliation. This purposeful selection allowed me to best discern differences in college choice factors between these two groups of students (Creswell, 2014).

Participant Recruitment

In my role as a senior administrator at a United Methodist college, I have a network of relationships with several United Methodist college presidents in the southeastern jurisdiction of the United Methodist Church. I contacted two of them via e-mail to introduce my research and request their partnership and confidential access to their student bodies. I asked both college presidents to identify an expert informant on their respective campus to assist me in obtaining names, faith affiliations and contact information of 30 first-year, full-time students who were 18 years of age or older. After I scheduled dates to be on each respective campus to conduct one-on-one interviews with students and reserved the physical space on campus to conduct the interviews, I e-mailed the 30 students at both campuses to introduce myself and formally invited the students to participate in the research project.

The students were informed in the introductory email that their participation was voluntary and confidential. The names of all participants as well as the names of their institutions remain confidential in my report of findings. For my study, I assigned each student a pseudonym which was used in attributing to them any quotes used from the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In a few instances, I modified their quotes to ensure the integrity of their

confidentiality. To further protect the identity of participants, fictitious names were assigned to both institutions, as well. I have named the schools that participated in the research Southern and Northern to maintain the confidentiality of the institutions.

In my initial e-mail to the students, I requested a one hour block of time to meet with them on their campus to collect information about their college choice process. My first contact with each student included a copy of the participation consent form which must have been completed in order to participate in the study. I also attached a one-page biographical sheet to obtain demographic information about the participants. I informed the students that they could complete both of these forms in advance of our interview or I would provide time for them to read and sign them at the beginning of our formal interview. Students were also informed in the initial email to them that they would be compensated for participating in this study by receiving \$10 at the beginning of the interview.

In advance of arriving on each campus, I confirmed a specific time and place to meet with students on each campus participating in my research project and sent each student an e-mail reminder the day before my scheduled appointment with them. While I scheduled each interview for one hour, I allotted an hour and thirty minutes on my calendar in the event interviews went over the time allotment. The thirty minute buffer also provided me time in between interviews to make notes following each interview.

My invitation to participate in the research netted 33 participants. Seventeen of the participants came from Southern and 16 interviews were collected at Northern. Nineteen participants in the study are female and 14 students are male. The survey included 22 white students, seven black students, three students of mixed race, and one Hispanic student. Seventeen students in the survey self-identified as members of a United Methodist Church while

16 students expressed affiliation with another denomination or no denominational affiliation. Twenty-six of the students are residents of the state of their institution while seven claim an out-of-state residence. Additionally, 27 other students were invited to participate in the research. Four of those responded declining the opportunity to be interviewed. The other 23 students did not respond to the invitation.

Table 3.1 shows the pseudonym, gender, race, religious affiliation, and the residence of each of the 16 participants at Northern.

Table 3.1: Northern Interview Participants				
Name	Gender	Race	Religion	Residence
Andrew	Male	White	Catholic	Out-of-State
Brandon	Male	Black	Baptist	In-State
Daniel	Male	White	Baptist	In-State
Eliza	Female	White	Non-Denominational	In-State
Henry	Male	White	United Methodist	In-State
Jacob	Male	White	United Methodist	In-State
Janayee	Female	Black	Baptist	In-State
Jenna	Female	White	United Methodist	In-State
Josie	Female	White	United Methodist	In-State
Kaitlin	Female	White	Presbyterian	In-State
Kayla	Female	White	Adventist	In-State
Meredith	Female	White	Presbyterian	In-State
Ron	Male	White	United Methodist	In-State
Samantha	Female	Mixed	United Methodist	Out-of-State
Sonya	Female	Mixed	Baptist	In-State
Will	Male	White	United Methodist	In-State

Table 3.2 shows the pseudonym, race, religious affiliation, and the residence of each of the 17 participants at Southern.

Aaron	Male	Black	Non-Denominational	In-State
Alexis	Female	Black	Non-Denominational	Out-of-State
Angelica	Female	Black	Baptist	In-State
Anna	Female	White	United Methodist	Out-of-State
Ashley	Female	White	United Methodist	In-State
Audri	Female	Black	United Methodist	In-State
Chase	Male	Mixed	United Methodist	In-State
David	Male	White	Lutheran	In-State
John	Male	Hispanic	Catholic	In-State
Kenneth	Male	White	United Methodist	Out-of-State
Kyle	Male	White	United Methodist	In-State
Lindsay	Female	White	United Methodist	Out-of-State
Mackenzie	Female	White	United Methodist	In-State
Mark	Male	White	United Methodist	In-State
Megan	Female	White	Catholic	In-State
Mia	Female	Black	Non-Denominational	In-State
Sarah	Female	White	United Methodist	Out-of-State

The students self-reported their high school grade point averages and SAT and ACT scores to me. That data is included in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3: Academic Profile of Participants Ranked by GPA	
Self-Reported High School GPA	Self-Reported Highest ACT or SAT Score
5.02	1340 SAT
4.75	1500 SAT
4.6	22 ACT / 1120 SAT
4.5	26 ACT / 1180 SAT
4.48	24 ACT / 1190 SAT
4.34	22 ACT
4.3	25 ACT / 1120 SAT
4.3	21 ACT
4.27	23 ACT / 1190 SAT
4.2	18 ACT
4	No response
3.9	15 ACT
3.9	1200 SAT
3.9	No response
3.7	No response
3.6	1050 SAT
3.6	1310 SAT
3.5	22 ACT / 1110 SAT
3.5	1050 SAT
3.45	1020 SAT
3.4	1200 SAT
3.3	No response
3.25	No response
3.25	1000 SAT
3.2	No response
3.2	27 ACT
3	1000 SAT
2.7	No response
2.7	990 SAT
2.4	27 ACT
No response	22 ACT
"3 something"	No response
"3 something"	No response

Research Sites

I chose two specific United Methodist institutions because of my existing relationship with the presidents and because neither of the institutions directly compete for students in the higher education marketplace with my institution of employment. Both schools are private, not-for-profit institutions with enrollments of less than 2,000 students (U.S. News and World Report, 2018). The recent U.S. News and World Report best colleges rankings (2018) listed one of the institutions in the Regional College-South category and the other in the Regional University-South class. I included two schools in my research to guard against a highly unusual factor which may have influenced a large cohort of students to matriculate to one of the institutions in the previous year. Unlike the single-institution focused studies of Messer (2016) and Rood (2009), the approach of interviewing students at two institutions allowed me to identify themes that are consistent at more than just one church-related college or university. This produces greater confidence in one's ability to apply the research to other United Methodist colleges and universities.

Data Management and Analysis

Prior to beginning the interviews, participants were asked for consent to allow their interview to be audio recorded to ensure accuracy. Recording was done using an iPhone. I also took notes during the interviews to create a backup (Creswell, 2014). The conference room or small meeting space selected on each campus helped create a quiet space to enable an audible recording.

In order to organize the data collected in student interviews, I imported the qualitative data into the computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDA) software, NVivo (Creswell, 2014). Prior to coding the data, I reviewed the notes I had taken following each interview and

created a list of themes that emerged from the interviews. I started with deductive codes for data that fell into the framework of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) three-phase college choice model of predisposition, search, and choice. As noted earlier, each student had a unique story and journey which led them to select their institution of choice. The factors which influence a student's decision to attend a church-related college that have previously been identified in the literature were a natural starting point for populating the software with deductive codes (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Prior scholars have found parental and adult influence (Messer, 2016; Moss & Cockriel, 1990) cultural orientation (Davignon et al., 2013; Davignon, 2016; Sauder, 2008; Wiese & Townsend, 1991; Wood, 2010), location (Schipull, 2009), the spiritual nature of the college (Benne, 2001; Budde & Wright, 2004; Noel-Levitz, 2010; Rood, 2009; Schipull, 2009; Seibert, 1994), academic programs and reputation (Carlson, 1992; Davignon, 2016; Noel-Levitz, 2010; Schipull, 2009; Wood, 2010), size (Carlson, 1992; Easter, 2012; Schipull, 2009), the recruiting experience (Messer, 2016; Pampaloni, 2010; Seibert, 1994) and cost and financial assistance (Carlson, 1992; Davignon, 2016) as a few of the primary influences which factor into the student decision to attend a church-related college. I was intentional in looking for these factors in the data collected from students attending United Methodist colleges. After I poured through the data line by line and assigned codes to the data, I engaged in axial coding to group codes together that had similar meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The computer software then assisted me in efficiently organizing the data and extrapolating information as needed (Creswell, 2014).

Trustworthiness

Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017) observed that to enhance trustworthiness “qualitative researchers must demonstrate that data analysis has been conducted in a precise,

consistent, and exhaustive manner through recording, systematizing, and disclosing the methods of analysis with enough detail to determine whether the process is credible” (p. 1). All interviews were manually transcribed verbatim by me in order to have a written record of the data (Creswell, 2014). In order to create an accurate transcription, I uploaded each interview from my iPhone to the TranscribeMe app to create a written record of each interview. I then listened to each interview while following the written transcript to ensure the text is a verbatim representation of each interview. To further verify the accuracy of the transcription, a peer reviewer was utilized to analyze the raw transcripts and the codes assigned to the data to check for validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Research Considerations

As I considered obstacles and potential barriers in conducting this research, I recognized that to assist me I was relying on busy individuals with limited personal ownership in my study. The United Methodist college presidents could have viewed this research being conducted at their institution as helpful in discerning marketing strategies for their college or university and an advancement of their sector of the church-related college industry, but they could also have viewed me with skepticism as a competitor trying to gain an advantage over them in recruiting students. The expert informants I identified had very little stake in this effort and could have seen their engagement in this partnership as a burden of time and energy. Beyond the opportunity to participate in a graduate-level research project and receive a token gift for being interviewed, the students received no tangible benefit for participating. It was important for me to inspire desire to participate in the study and demonstrate sincere gratitude to those who did.

Limitations of Study

I further recognize that a limitation of this research design was the exclusive examination of students attending a United Methodist college or university. Exploring the college choice process of this specific cohort of students limited my ability to compare the data to students attending other denomination-affiliated church-related colleges, students at other private schools, or state-sponsored institutions.

Researcher Positionality

During my interviews, I was careful in my discussion of the church-related nature of the institutions to prevent introducing bias into the research. If student participants in my research knew that I was interested in discerning whether or not the church relationship was a primary influence in their decision to attend their institution, I was concerned that they might provide answers to questions that they think I wanted to hear rather than their honest, personal perspective. In order to protect against this, I saved questions about the church-related character of the colleges until the end of the interview unless students brought it up first. I also understood some students would be uncomfortable with conversations about their faith background.

I further recognized that in order to collect credible data from the student participants, I was relying on their honesty and transparency. This required me to treat each of them with respect and with a tone and spirit that gave them confidence in confiding in me. To aid in this, I believed it was more helpful for these students to know that I am a doctoral student at the University of Georgia rather than promoting myself as the Senior Vice President of Huntingdon College. While I expected the overwhelming majority of what students tell me to be positive about the institution they attend because we were talking about the institution they selected, I

needed to create a trusting environment so that they did not fear that I would report anything negative they might say to their college president who happens to be a colleague.

My current position as the Senior Vice President at Huntingdon College, an institution of the United Methodist Church, shapes my reflexivity and world view as a researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I have the unique opportunity to work with a team of colleagues to recruit prospective students to our institution. I have a desire to discern key attributes of United Methodist colleges from a student perspective to assist in giving my institution a competitive advantage in recruiting students in the higher education marketplace.

I received a transformational experience as a student at a college of the United Methodist Church, Wofford College, from 1995 to 1999. This educational adventure opened my eyes to new opportunities, provided me with three international travel experiences, afforded me to test my leadership skills with a soft safety net below, and allowed me to develop a network of friends and contacts for a lifetime. I understand that not every student at Wofford College, or every student at a United Methodist college, or even every student at any college or university in the United States shares the same pride and affinity for their alma mater as I do.

My personal undergraduate college choice was informed based on an exhaustive study of over 400 colleges and universities. During my high school career, I collected literature, brochures, promotional videos and catalogs of schools around the country. I also visited a dozen campuses as part of my college search. Additionally, I completed my college search process prior to the advent of the Internet, a useful tool in today's college search process which was unavailable to me. I recognize that not every prospective college student puts as much effort into the college search process as I did.

I was predisposed to attend college at an early age by my parents. My parents both obtained a four-year bachelor's degree, and are loyal supporters of their shared alma mater. My father and I spent many hours of my youth traveling to University of Alabama football games, and we hardly ever missed a home basketball game of the University of North Alabama. These on-campus experiences fueled my desire in elementary school to have my own college experience. I recognize that many students do not come from homes which peak their interest in attending college at such an early age.

My socioeconomic status as a child of a white, upper-middle class income family also had a positive impact on my predisposition to college. I was privileged to attend good public schools. I was placed on a college preparatory academic track in the sixth grade, and I attended a high school which had a culture of celebrating a student's successful matriculation to college. My guidance counselor was universally-acclaimed for his role assisting students navigate the college search process. I recognize that many students do not attend high schools with the attention and resources devoted to assisting students in their college search journey.

My perfect high school grade point average and high standardized test scores also opened doors of opportunity for me to consider highly selective institutions. I received an offer of admission from every school to which I applied. I understand that not every student has the opportunity to attend their school of first choice based on college admission standards. Further, I have parents who believe in the value of education and were willing to invest in my future. Since I received generous scholarships to attend college, cost of education and financial aid availability were less of a factor in my college search process. I recognize that college costs are a primary consideration for students and their families in the college search process.

I also understand that location of a college close to home is of critical importance to some prospective students based on a personal life situation. There were no situations or circumstances in my life during my college search process which inhibited my ability to consider institutions across the United States, or to select Wofford which was a seven-hour drive from home.

Additionally, I was raised in a Christian home. While my college search was not intentional in seeking a United Methodist college, or even a faith-based college, the church-related nature of an institution positively influenced my view of the institution. Today, my deep commitment to a United Methodist Church and lay leadership role in the church gives me a much more positive worldview of Christian higher education and especially, United Methodist higher education. I recognize, though, that the spiritual nature of an institution can be a positive, negative, or an irrelevant factor in a prospective student's view of a college or university.

Finally, I also have a professional background as a higher education policy analyst for a United States Senator, and previously served as the Deputy State Treasurer of Alabama with a portfolio of higher education responsibilities. These experiences influence my understanding of a number of higher education issues, and have helped me see the important role two-year and four-year public institutions play in the delivery of higher education. With this knowledge, I am able to see beyond my bias toward favoring the church-related sector of the industry in looking at the college choice process.

CHAPTER 4

Research Findings

How do students attending a United Methodist college describe the college choice process? To discern the answer to this question, I conducted 33 face to face interviews with first-year students at two United Methodist colleges in March and April of 2019. Using the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model of college choice, I explored students' initial aspiration and predisposition to attend college, the process of searching for which college to attend, and the choice factors which ultimately influenced their decision to matriculate to their institution. Various themes emerged from interviews related to each of these stages in the decision-making process which are fully described in this chapter.

I also interviewed the students to determine the influence of the United Methodist Church affiliation of the institutions on their decision to attend, as well as the general church-related nature of their college. That section of this chapter is divided into responses given by United Methodist students and those who identify with a denomination other than Methodist or claim no faith affiliation.

Finally, a recurring theme shared by students in this research was the influence of others on their decision to attend their institution. The personal influencers identified by research participants will be described in the final section of this chapter.

College Aspiration

Twenty-five of the students interviewed in this study indicated a desire to attend college prior to reaching high school age. Five of the students made the decision to attend college in

their freshman or sophomore year of high school, while three students were uncertain until their senior year of high school as to whether or not they would attend a post-graduate institution.

For many of the students who decided they were planning to attend college before they reached high school age, they expressed they had always known they were college bound. Kaitlin stated, “college was just always the next step.” Sarah echoed this sentiment saying “I think I’ve always known that I wanted to go to college, I just never knew where.” Meredith noted, “that’s all I ever knew was yeah, after high school, you go to college.” Josie could not recall a specific point in time in her life when she realized she wanted to go to college. She stated, “I always kind of just thought it was the thing you do.” Lindsay stated, “that was always what’s expected of me, and then I figured out what I wanted to do with my life, and I was like well, got to go to college for that.”

Career Ambition

As Lindsay noted, many of the students tied college aspiration with career ambition. In response to when he knew that he wanted to go to college, Aaron stated, “I knew that before high school. I wanted to have a career where I could actually help people, like nursing or becoming a doctor. That’s what I planned on doing later in life.” Daniel observed, “I suppose it was around sixth grade when I decided I wanted to become a teacher because I knew to be a teacher you had to go to college.” Ron stated, “College is how you get a job, and one that you want to have.”

Will articulated,

I didn’t know whether or not I wanted to attend college. I knew I would need to. I had an understanding of how the careers I would have gone into, I knew I needed a certain level of training. I know my mom went back to school. My dad never went to college, and my brother did go to college. I had this appreciation like I know what it’s holding me back if I don’t. So it wasn’t I wanted to. I just understand this is something I’m going to have to do.

Three of the students expressed fear of working in a fast food restaurant as motivation for attending college. Sonya stated, “I’ve always wanted to go to college because I knew that I wanted to do something bigger than working at a fast-food restaurant or working at a store the rest of my life.” Kayla decided in her freshman year of high school that she wanted to attend college. She replied, “I just knew that I wanted to do something and wanted to be something in a career. I didn’t want to work at fast food all my life.” Ron recalled this story from when he was in sixth grade,

It’s a little harsh and I think my opinion on this has changed a little, but my dad and I went to go get some fast food and we saw this 40-year old woman working at McDonald’s and he said ‘that’s what happens to you if you don’t go to college.’ And I mean, it was scare tactics and I don’t think that. I don’t think that that’s very fair. Obviously, things happen, but that is one of the first things that was like oh, okay, I need to go to college.

Family Encouragement

Parental expectation and motivation was a recurring theme of students as they discussed their predisposition to college. Anna stated,

I knew I really wanted to go to college just because my parents always said if you want a better future, you need to get that higher education. And so they influenced from a young age like you’re going to go to college.

David avowed, “From the beginning, my parents expected me to go to college. My mom is a teacher, and my dad did some community college. They always pushed me that it was something that I definitely needed to do.” Audri gave her mother credit for motivating her college attendance.

I’ve always wanted to go to college ever since I could say college because my mom always told me ‘books or boots.’ And she was like, ‘as soon as you graduate high school, it’s your choice, books or boots.’ So she said, ‘you’re not staying in my house’ (laughter).

Family beyond parents helped encourage college attendance for several of these students. Angelica stated, “I have family members who went to college and I see their life is a little better with the knowledge.” Megan stated, “I knew I had to go to college. All of my other siblings went and I knew it was kind of a major thing.” Andrew commented, “My parents, obviously, always wanted me to go to college, and my older siblings wanted to go to college, and all of my aunts and uncles did, so I knew in the back of my mind that I was going to go.”

Athletic Motivation

The aspiration to play collegiate athletics drove several of the students to decide to attend college. Brandon remembered, “I was young, probably in elementary school, and wanted to go to college to play college [sport].” Jenna commented, “My dad played [sport] in college. I’ve always been interested in [sport] and wanted to play that in college, too.” Jacob shared how parental motivation and personal drive to compete led him on a path to college.

My dad, he [played sport] in high school and he didn't get to go to college because he ruptured his ACL, so he didn't get to [play sport] because he could barely walk. So he really just had this plan for me to go to college through [sport], so probably my freshman year is when I really was like, I want to [play sport] in college. That's the goal. Because when I was younger in middle school, I was doing it kind of for fun, and then, it got really serious. My freshman year, I was like, I want to do it.

High School Experiences

Students interviewed for this study expressed a variety of ways their high school experience helped them aspire to attend college. Eleven of the 33 indicated they had taken Advanced Placement courses, were enrolled in a college preparatory curriculum, or took dual enrollment courses through local community colleges and four-year institutions as a high school student. Angelica noted, “When I came here, I forgot how many, but I had credits to transfer so I’ve been in the college setting before.” Mia shared Angelica’s point stating, “I’ve been taking college courses since I was in high school at one community college back home so that actually

helped me get a big start.” Jenna attended a college preparatory school and recalled, “they would connect everything in classes to this is how it’s going to be in college or that sort of thing and they were always aiming toward that.”

Six of the students shared appreciation for teachers, coaches, and guidance counselors for encouraging them and motivating them toward college attendance. Aaron stated, “my instructors told me that wherever I go, they had an amazing amount of support for me. They said wherever I go, they know I would do fine.” Sarah declared, “I was close with a lot of my teachers and they encouraged me to spread out and go further away, I guess, and not just settle for anything back home.” Eliza shared,

My teachers in high school just being supportive and saying that I can do it because I have dyslexia so I knew school was always going to be hard. And I never really even knew if I was going to graduate high school. And so just having the support of my teachers in high school in saying that like I can go to college and that I would be able to. I had an IEP and had dyslexia but still be able to graduate with my class, and not have a hard time if I really worked hard. So just the support really helped me build the confidence in being able to come to college.

Five students spoke of attending rigorous and challenging high schools which they felt prepared them for college. The same number described graduating from high schools that left them feeling ill-prepared for college. Kenneth told me about his college preparation at boarding school. “The academic curriculum was kind of pretty intense. So that really helped me coming into here. So I knew I was ready. It wasn’t anything I was going to not be ready for.” Andrew stated, “I mean, to be honest, I think sports-wise and academically my high school was harder.” On the opposite end of the spectrum, Audri noted, “I just wish my school would’ve prepared me more for just how the classes work because the classes are tougher than in high school and I didn’t study at all in high school.” David expressed similar frustration with his high school preparation.

I learned more in my math class my first semester here than I did, probably in two or three years in high school. And as far as English goes, I think during our whole high school career we wrote maybe three papers. So it was not – it didn't prepare us at all. Now, I write three papers a week as opposed to over the course of four years.

Aspiration Findings

My research findings related to aspiration and predisposition to attend college are consistent with prior research on the subject. A majority of the students were wired to pursue a college education prior to reaching high school (Hossler et al., 1999; Thornton, 2017). Parents and other family members were credited with triggering an expectation and desire to attend college (Finnie, Childs, & Wismer, 2011; Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler et al., 1999; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Paulsen, 1990). Specific jobs and career success were also common motivations for college attendance (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). No evidence was found that a student's initial aspiration to attend college was tied to a church-related college. However, all of the students in my research professed some faith background which would have predisposed them to familiarity with a church-related environment.

The Search Phase

Once students make the decision to pursue a college experience, each student engages in a search process to discern the institution they perceive to be the best fit for them. Some students conduct their search independently while others solicit the aid of family, friends, and high school mentors. Several recurring themes emerged from interviews with my research participants as they described their college search process to gather information about various institutions they considered. Visits to college campuses and gathering of information about specific colleges and universities on the Internet were the primary methods students engaged in the search stage. Conversations with athletic coaches and high school mentors were also

recurring points of emphasis. Students also described the process for applying for admission to colleges as part of the search process.

Before a student can learn about an institution of higher education, they first have to hear about it. Students described a variety of ways they were first introduced to their respective institution. Outreach from college athletic coaches was an important part of the recruiting process for a number of student-athletes and eight of them expressed that they first heard of the institution because of communication from a coach. Six participants knew of their college because of a friend attending the institution. Three students have family who are graduates of their college, along with three students who first learned of the school at a college fair. Two participants, both who identify as United Methodists, first heard of their institution through their local church, and two students received general mail or email from their college as their introduction to it. Other responses included a student's own Internet research, a father's research of colleges for his daughter, a high school teacher, previous athletic success of the institution, attendance at an event on campus, a cousin attending another local college, and the listing of the college on schools participating in Free Application Week. Most uniquely, Ron learned of his college from a professor at another institution who encouraged him to look into it during his campus visit to the professor's institution. "It's just weird," he said.

College visits

College visits are a time-honored way prospective students experience campus life and learn about all that colleges and universities have to offer. For the 33 students in this survey, college visits were critical in making the decision to attend their respective institution. Twenty-nine of the 33 students made at least one visit to their campus prior to making the decision to attend the institution. Two students, Aaron and Ron, decided to attend their school of choice in

the spring semester of their senior year of high school and made visits to campus a month later. Two other students, Daniel and Brandon, made their first visit to Northern's campus during summer orientation.

When did students first visit the campus as a prospective student? Four students made an initial visit during their sophomore year of high school, and four additional students visited during their junior year. Five students visited the summer prior to the start of their senior year. Nine students made their initial visit in the fall semester of their senior year and nine additional students made their first visit in the spring semester of their senior year. Again, Daniel and Brandon came in the summer following graduation from high school.

Individual visits arranged by the students and their families with the Office of Admission at the respective institutions were the way 15 of the 33 students first visited campus. Audri was one of these students and Southern was love at first sight for her. "When I got on campus, I felt like home as soon as I got here because everybody's so welcoming, so warming, and caring." Angelica remembers her first visit to campus. She stated, "I was kind of nervous. I was shy. But at the end, I was like I can get used to this. I wanted to be involved. There was a basketball game or something. I don't even like sports but I just felt like I needed to be a part of the game so I went." Here is how Mackenzie recalled her first visit to campus.

My very first visit, to be honest, I didn't want to tour that day. We had toured [another institution] and [Southern] in the same day, and I really didn't want to go here. I was like I love [another institution] and I want to go. My mom was like, oh, it's just like 30 minutes. Let's just tour it. I already booked you a tour. So we came and we walked around campus. The guy that gave us the tour was actually from overseas and he played [sport]. And just walking through campus, every single person I passed whether they were a student or a professor they all spoke. They introduced themselves. And that really stuck out to me. I was like okay, I think I could really go here.

As noted previously, outreach by coaches was an initial introduction to their institution for several students. Seven student-athletes arranged their first visits through their college coaches. Andrew described his athletic visit as follows.

Came down here in October, spent a night with a few of the guys, got a tour, watched the scrimmage, watched the practice. It was just a family environment from the team's perspective. I met some professors just walking around. They all seemed very inviting and very welcoming.

Anna's athletic recruiting trip was similar.

I saw the athletic facilities with the coach. And she gave me a tour and a rundown of how everything would work. And then I was given a tour by an ambassador here and just walked around campus, talked with people.

Kyle's first visit to his school of choice was in October of his senior year.

The very first one was my official visit for [sport] here. And we met at the gym and they gave me a tour of the campus. And we met up with admissions also so that I could submit an application to see if I would be eligible to get in here.

Three students made their initial visit to campus during an accepted student event in the spring of their senior year. David attended accepted student day.

I had been accepted but I hadn't visited yet. So we decided to come here and see that. I really enjoyed it. The people were super welcoming. Everyone I met was more than happy to talk to me, answer any questions I had or direct me to someone who could find those answers for me. So it was a really positive experience.

Alexis was also one of those students. She stated, "This wasn't the only school I was looking at, but I still wanted to know what was going on out there."

A fine arts event was the cause for three other students to first step foot on campus. An open house or preview day sponsored by the Office of Admission attracted two students to campus for the first time as prospective students. Sarah was one of them.

I only visited one time and it was my junior year in the fall. And I came to a preview day and it was a really nice day and I knew that I wanted to go here. I still visited schools afterwards just to make sure but I really liked it here.

As noted previously, Daniel and Brandon attended summer orientation as their first visit, and one student, Megan, made an unofficial visit to see a friend who was a student at the campus as her first visit to campus. She recalls,

And without anybody knowing who I was, they were still the most opening people I'd ever met. I mean the administrative people and the welcome center and they didn't even know who I was. I was someone here as a guest and they were just pure nice.

For many of the students, one visit to their selected campus was enough as part of their college search process. Others came a few times. Angelica made two visits in the spring of her senior year. Alexis made three visits to campus before making her college decision. Chase recalled nine visits to campus before he matriculated as a Southern student. "I came to two official tours, and then I did [summer academy] and I'd made lots of friends so the rest of them weren't like official tours but it was just me visiting friends."

Thirty-one of the 33 students visited more colleges and universities as prospective students than just the one they ended up selecting. The average number of schools visited by this group of students was 3.9. Table 4.1 shows the breakdown of the number of campus visits made by the students in this study.

Number of Schools Visited	Number of Responses
1	2
2	6
3	6
4	5
5	4
6	6
7	2
8	1

Both of the students who only visited Southern for a formal campus visit shared that they had been on other campuses previously. Mark stated,

I actually didn't visit any schools. This was the only school that I formally visited. So I mean, my family's big on traveling. I've been to 45 states all in a car, so we kind of stopped at different schools whenever we had the chance. I've been to Athens. I've been to Alabama, Auburn, UCLA. I've been all over the place but not really on formal visits, so this was the only school I formally visited and did all the things that prospective students would do.

Megan had a similar experience and noted, "My brother went to Tennessee so I know the big school atmosphere. I went through Chapel Hill and I just didn't like the little fish in a big pond feel." Sarah was the pacesetter with eight campus visits ranging from large state institutions in her home state to small private colleges in-state and out-of-state. Even though she had decided as a high school junior to attend Southern she still made campus visits to large schools because as she noted,

I was looking into them because I have credits through both of them, and [other institution] is pretty big, too, and they don't carry my specific major, but I could go into something roundabout and take the classes that I needed off of campus, but still be at that school. But it's a big school, so I didn't know what I wanted yet, so I just visited them just to make my sister and grandparents happy.

In total, these 33 students made formal visits to 61 different colleges and universities as part of their search process. The schools included 33 private colleges with varying church relationships and 28 large and small state and regional universities. It also included three historically black colleges and universities. Of the 33 private colleges visited by students, ten of them are affiliated with the United Methodist Church. Students who identified as United Methodist were more likely to have visited other United Methodist institutions. Ten of the 17 United Methodist students who participated in the research visited multiple United Methodist colleges, while only three of the 16 non-Methodist students visited a United Methodist college other than their own.

Beyond the schools the participants selected and are currently attending, nine colleges and universities were specifically visited by three or more students. A state university was visited by six students followed by a state university and a private college with five students apiece. Nine of the students exclusively visited small, private colleges. Besides the two students who only visited Southern as part of their process, two other students only visited colleges of the United Methodist Church. Five of the seven black students in the survey visited a historically black college or university as part of their process.

Internet Research

In addition to making campus visits, the other near universal tool used by students in this study to search for information about colleges was the Internet. Twenty-nine of the 33 participants shared that Internet research was a tool they used in their collection of information about various colleges and universities. A student from North Carolina spoke highly of the College Foundation of North Carolina website, www.cfnc.org, which he used to compile information about in-state schools. He described the CFNC site as follows:

You'd have a search bar, and it would give you a bunch of tabs, which you could do what you want, two-year or four-year university, where you want to go, how much money do you want to look for for tuition, what kind of major are you looking for. And once you do that, it narrows it down to actual colleges, and you can put them in your little bracket plan that they allow you to have on your own profile, and you can compare the schools. And that's kind of what drove it down to the colleges I was looking for.

Four students simply used google.com to search for colleges of interest. Three student-athletes found the NCSA college recruiting site, ncsasports.org, to be helpful. CaptainU.com, cappex.com, and collegeboard.org were also specific sites mentioned by students to assist in their college search. Mark explained why he utilized the collegeboard.org site.

If you google a school, there'd be their website and then the College Board information about it. And it'd give you the acceptance rate, graduation rate, different demographics about the school, location of the school, student life. It just kind of gave you a big, broad

overview of it, so I mainly relied on that just knowing it was a good source. And it wasn't a dot com; it was a dot org.

These websites were the starting point which then led students to individual homepages of colleges and universities. Sarah used a number of college comparing websites. She commented, "If I found a school that I thought I liked and wanted to visit, then I would look on their website." David stated, "I knew I wanted somewhere in [state] and so I knew a bunch of the schools here. So I mainly just googled them and got the information straight from their websites." John relayed a similar approach. "I would go and look up a school and then obviously, first, that school comes up. Then I'll keep scrolling down and look at reviews." Mark, the fan of the College Board site, offered a different opinion of looking at institutional sites. "Yeah, I looked at the [Southern] site, but I kind of took it with a grain of salt because I know that they really kind of have their own marketing team, so they made the school look good."

Students shared the types of information they were looking for as they researched various colleges and universities on the Internet. Twenty students commented that academic offerings, majors, and minors were a source of interest about the schools they researched. A number of students had specific majors in mind as they explored different colleges. Ashley commented,

I just started googling colleges that offer this degree. If I heard a college name that I wanted to look at, I'd look up and see if it had any of the degrees. I started getting pamphlets in the mail from different colleges like from Virginia and some of them offered degrees I wanted, some didn't. And eventually, I narrowed it down to the ones that were not really big, smaller schools that had this degree.

Tuition, total cost of attendance, scholarships and financial aid programs were of interest to 12 students. 12 students also spoke of awareness of enrollment sizes and faculty-student ratios as they reviewed information about colleges. Mia responded to a question about specific things she was looking for by stating, "sizes of the teacher to student ratio, and of course, the tuition."

Eliza expressed, “The size of the classes was my big concern.” Sarah noted, “I was looking for tuition and I was looking for how big the school was because I preferred a smaller school; and that they had my major that was also pretty important.”

Eight students shared that location of the school and its surrounding area was of interest in their research. Additionally, eight student-athletes noted that athletic programs were central to their examination of colleges and universities. Anna acknowledged, “It was all [sport]-related, really. So it was like how many members of the [sport] team they had, who was graduating, who plays my position, the required GPA, where the location was, how big of a school it was, what majors they offered. I think that was pretty much the gist.” Lindsay stated, “If the school had my major. I really looked at the campus and all of the programs that they had. And then, mainly, looked at [sport] teams, so how many girls were on the roster, what positions.” Seven students were also attuned to college and university acceptance rates and minimum admission standards. Angelica was one of those students.

I was looking at the acceptance rate, the amount of people, the scores that they took in, GPA, stuff like that. And seeing if [degree program] was a part – because I got accepted into this one school and [degree program] wasn’t one of their big things.

Other items mentioned by more than one participant of interest during their research of colleges and universities were campus environment, campus involvement, graduation rates, student reviews, student population demographics, residence halls, food services, and Advanced Placement credit acceptance policies.

Only nine students admitted to using social media platforms to learn more about colleges of interest. Kenneth said he looked at Facebook, Instagram and Twitter “to get a feel for what the campus is like.” Meredith also used Instagram and Twitter as source of information. She stated, “Obviously, I researched all the schools that had social media pages and that kind of stuff

and made sure I kind of saw like what kind of students were attending.” Jacob stated “social media definitely helped out a lot” as he followed athletic programs on Instagram. Mark was not one of the nine who admitted using social media to learn about colleges but he shared that his mother did.

My mom really did that. As soon as I visited she followed admissions, residence life, student life, all that on Facebook and Instagram and everything. I really didn't do that. I don't really know why but I just kind of didn't.

Ron shared this interesting reflection about social media.

I looked at the official Instagram, not very in-depth, because I know it's run by the school. I mean, it's as much propaganda as it isn't. So it's not a resource that I trust, but I mean, it is interesting knowing what they're advertising and marketing.

Athletic Recruitment

A number of the students who participated in this study were student-athletes and ten of them shared that outreach by coaches of collegiate athletic teams was an important part of their college search process. Students expressed initial interest in their institution when a coach from the campus showed interest in them. Henry stated, “a lot of my search came from contact with coaches.” Josie echoed, “Honestly, it was from coaches reaching out to me.” John described his college search by stating,

It was mainly through the coach. He saw me at a game and he was like ‘I like you and I want you to come here.’ That's pretty much it and then I started researching more into the school after he had contacted me.

Students described meeting coaches at tournaments, ID camps, and summer showcases which led to subsequent outreach to them by coaches.

High School Assistance

Nine students spoke of assistance from their high school guidance counselor or a trusted high school teacher during their college search process. Samantha stated, “I talked to my

counselor at school on what he thought would be the best fit for me.” Ron told me “I kind of used teachers at my high school to let me know about what schools they had heard were good for my major.” Andrew admitted that he didn’t research too many colleges but when he became interested in a school he noted that “I would just go with my guidance counselor and he would pull up whatever programs or research methods he had.” Mackenzie affirmed,

My counselors worked very hard making sure that I got into the place I needed to be at. So they were always checking my grades. And they would say ‘you need to do this and do that and we recommend you do this’. So they made sure that I was looking at all the right stuff when choosing a college.

Applications for Admission

An important part of a prospective college student’s search phase is the process of applying for admission to schools of interest. The 33 students in this research study completed 118 applications to 59 different colleges and universities. Of the 59 colleges, 34 of them are private colleges, 23 are four-year public institutions, and two are two-year community colleges. Of the 34 private colleges applied to, eight of them are connected to the United Methodist Church. The following table shows the breakdown of the number of applications submitted by the students.

Number of Applications	Number of Responses
1	8
2	5
3	3
4	4
5	7
6	2
7	2
8	1

The eight students who only applied to the school they currently attend are equally split between the two institutions. Anna stated, “I only applied to [Southern] because I had committed as a junior.” Jenna had a similar response. “I committed here at the end of my junior year and then I pretty much knew that I was set to come here.” Sarah, the champion of most college visits during her search with eight different schools on her map, was also the prize-winner for most applications submitted. She applied to all eight schools that she visited. Eighteen of the students applied to a school they did not make a formal visit to as a prospective student.

I also explored the timing of when applications for admission were made to the schools the students ultimately selected. Five students submitted the application in the summer before their senior year of high school. Fourteen students completed their applications during the fall semester of their senior year, and 14 students presented their applications for admission during the spring semester of their senior year. As for the timing of when students made the decision to attend their respective institution, four testified that they committed to the institution during their junior year of high school. Eight students declared their intent to enroll in the institution during the fall semester of their senior year. A majority of the students, 21 of them, made the decision to attend during the spring semester of their senior year or following graduation. Eight of these students articulated their decision came in the month of April. Six students confirmed that they had made their decision to attend the institution prior to submitting the application for admission.

Search Findings

The process by which students described their college search is similar to search processes that have previously been articulated (Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler et al., 1999; Johnston, 2010; Mentz & Whiteside, 2003). Research on the Internet allowed students to

immediately exclude some schools from consideration that did not offer their specific academic program of interest or opportunity for co-curricular participation in athletics or an arts program. It also enabled them to discern the schools they would like to visit which provided them with the opportunities they were seeking in a college.

Students considered and visited schools large and small, public and private, and two-year and four-year. However, the overwhelming interest of these students in attending a small school and their collective visits to more private schools than public schools led them in the direction of selecting a church-related college. Descriptors such as welcoming, intimate, community, family, friendly, and inviting were all initial impressions students articulated about their first visit to campus. This is the ethos that one would expect to find at a church-related college, and it requires students to make a visit to the campus in order to feel the welcoming spirit which students described.

Choice

Early in each interview, all students were asked to share the primary factors that influenced their decision to attend their respective institution. Table 4.3 shows the complete summary of responses.

Primary Attributes in Selecting Their College	Total Number of Responses
Small size of the institution	19
Location	16
Co-curricular participation	16
Academic major / program	11
Financial Aid / Scholarship	10
Family atmosphere	7
Beautiful campus	4
Church relatedness	4
Affinity for faculty	3
Residential environment	2
Friend attending	2
Enjoyed visit	2
Family connection	1
Diversity	1
Received admission acceptance	1

Small size of the institution

Students described their affinity for the small size of their institution in several different ways. Twelve students expressed preference for small, intimate classroom settings. Samantha articulated,

What made me pick here other than other schools that I was looking at for [sport] is I just really liked the small environment. It's got a real family feel. They have small classrooms which I really think help me excel.

Mackenzie stated,

It has not a lot of people, which I like. I can be very one on one with the professor, and I don't have a huge class that I'm having to sit in. So it's easier for me to focus.

Like Mackenzie, seven other students tied their appreciation for small class sizes to a relationship with a faculty member. Sarah stated, "I liked that it was a small campus and that

you could have an intimate relationship with your professors.” Aaron was impressed by “how small the classes were so I would have a greater connection with my instructors than bigger colleges. So that kind of intrigued me.” Daniel noted the “personalized attention” that he would get in a small classroom environment.

Other students highlighted the community feeling that they believe stems from the small school atmosphere. Anna stated, “And the community feeling, the family feeling, the close-knit because it’s such a small campus. You really get that here. So that was one of my main things.” Chase liked “the fact that it’s really small.” He elaborated, “I’m a very social person, so I feel like going to a small school was very good for me so I can know everyone and my professors and stuff like that.” A few students expressed confidence that a smaller school environment was a better fit for them. Kyle noted, “I really liked the campus and how it was smaller. It wasn’t a huge school and I wasn’t sure if I was ready for a huge school-like atmosphere.” Meredith noted, “I knew I wanted to go to a private school and a small school just because big scares me.” Finally, some students expressed their attraction to a small environment because they come from one while others were seeking the opposite of their high school experience. Angelica told me, “my school was small, so I was used to it. I haven’t been in a big class since middle school.” Lindsay stated, “I wanted a change. So, I thought a small community would be a nice change from [big city hometown].”

Location

While 16 students offered the location of their institution as a primary attribute of their decision to attend their college, all students were asked to comment on the influence of the location of the college on their decision. Twenty of the 33 students like the proximity to home of their institution. Audri said the location had a good impact on her decision “because I’m only an

hour and a half away so if my mom needs to get to me she can.” Brandon noted, “It’s like an hour, hour and 15 away from home. So it’s a good distance away from home. I can go back home whenever I needed to.” Chase stated, “I liked that it was pretty close to home because I only live about an hour away. So if anything were to happen, my parents are an hour away.” Mark had a similar response. “And it being close to home was a big thing because my grandparents live a mile from my house. So if anything happens, I can be back quick. Three turns from my house.” Josie stated, “The fact that I can go home and come back the same day is great, and the fact that my family can come up whenever is pretty big.” Three students noted the propinquity of the campus was a determining factor because of their ability to commute to campus daily. Ashley stated, “It’s very close to home. So I’m a day student. I just drive back and forth.” John chose Southern because of the “small campus and it was pretty close to where I live. So I commute. So I drive here every day.” Two hours was deemed to be the optimal distance away from home for Will. “It’s close enough that my parents can come, and I can go back home. It’s also far enough that – my mom’s a bit of a helicopter parent – so it’s far enough that I have some breathing room.” Alexis described her four hour distance from home as “not too close to home, not so far away.”

Eight students expressed fondness for the community where their institution is located. Andrew stated, “I mean, I love the city. So seeing the city on my first visit, that definitely influenced it.” Meredith stated, “I liked the area, how there’s things to do surrounding.” Ron noted, “It’s in a city where I don’t have to drive to get things.” Sonya stated, “[the location] had a pretty good impact. It was not too far from home and the location was great, there’s so much to do around here, so many opportunities for internships.” Five of the seven out-of-state students noted that going to school in their specific state was a positive influence in their decision-

making. One out-of-state resident stated, “I really just think [state] is really beautiful and a nice place to be.” Another student from out-of-state did express that the institution “is far away from home so that was kind of tough.”

Co-curricular Participation

Co-curricular participation in athletics or fine arts programs was identified as a primary attribute for 16 of the students in the study. Some of the most definitive statements I heard about college choice came from student-athletes. Anna stated, “I love [Southern], but if they didn’t offer me anything for [sport] or a possible opportunity to play, then I probably would have gone someplace else.” Jenna stated, “I play [sport] here so that was a huge reason why I chose this school. I knew I needed to like my teammates, the program, the coach, and so that’s a huge portion of what I do here.” For Brandon, playing a sport “was probably the main factor in my decision.” Mark, too, is a student-athlete and proclaimed “knowing that I had an opportunity to play here was massive for me.” Meredith stated that playing her sport “was top of my list when it came to school. I had the opportunity to play [sport] here and I’ve been playing since I was really young, and I knew that’s what I wanted to do.” Sonya described her college choice decision by stating “It was either I came here and played [sport] or I just went to a bigger university and didn’t play [sport]. I didn’t want to give it up yet, so that was a big factor.” Audri even parlayed her interest in sports into a prearranged opportunity to serve as a manager for an athletic team at her institution. “I played [sport] all through middle school and high school, but when I got to college I didn’t want to play anymore, but I still wanted to kind of be involved with it.”

Participants in fine arts programs were equally definitive about their campus involvement being a primary factor in their college decision. Will stated, “Mainly, I came here for the [arts]

program.” For Janayee, Northern was close to home “and I heard they had a wonderful [arts] program and I was just like let me take that chance and let me prove myself.” Ron made his college selection based upon “small campus, the small class sizes, and it’s specifically tailored for what I wanted in a [arts] program.” Kayla stated her decision was “mainly [arts], and that’s what I wanted to do with my career and I love their [arts] department and everything they’ve done with it.”

Academic Programs

The fourth highest response to the question regarding primary attributes that influenced students’ decisions to attend their college came from 11 students who indicated it was the opportunity to major in a specific academic program. Aaron told me “They had my major that I was going for. That was my top priority, I want to say, because that’s definitely what I want to do.” Daniel stated, “I remember applying to [other college] but they did not have a [academic] program, and that’s one reason why I didn’t go there and chose here.” Jenna said that her academic program was “very influential” in her decision because “I knew that I wanted to go to a program that was kind of well-known.” Mia shared that her major was a “huge part” of her decision to attend Southern.

While only 11 students indicated an academic program was a primary influence in their decision, 20 students, as previously noted, defined academic offerings of colleges and universities as the most mentioned piece of information they were looking for when researching schools during their college search process. Each student was asked to comment on the influence of their academic major on their decision to attend their school. Andrew was not one of the students who indicated an academic program as a primary attribute in his decision but he stated, “well, I was not going to go anywhere without this type of major.” Anna had a similar

reaction. “I was going to major in [academic program]. It was only the matter of fact if they had the major.” Angelica was also not one to indicate an academic program as a key factor but stated,

Everybody told me [Southern] had a good [academic] program, and I don’t remember exactly what was said, but I forgot the amount of people they accept but whenever I heard the amount compared to other colleges and universities it definitely made me want to come here.

Sarah has an academic major and a minor. She stated, “I actually didn’t know a whole lot about the programs. I just knew that they had those programs.” Of note related to academic majors, five of these 33 students in their second semester of college have already changed their major from what they initially declared as entering students.

Financial Aid / Scholarship

Rounding out the top five factors identified by students as primary factors in their college choice decision is scholarship assistance. Ten students stated this was a key factor in their college determination. Megan stated, “The first main reason is the scholarship opportunities. They had really good ones for certain GPAs.” Sarah stated, “The money was really good, the scholarships.” Sonya indicated, “[Sport] and scholarship money, I’d say, were the two big things for me.” Three students noted that their institution of choice was the “best offer” or “lowest cost” of the schools they were considering. Ashley stated, “Right now I’m coming here on a full ride. So I didn’t get that offer in any other place, but it’s definitely the best offer I got.” Audri stated, “I got accepted into three schools. Out of the three, I’m going to be honest, [Southern] offered me more money.” Samantha stated, “Well, actually it was between here and [other college]. Those are my final choices and here offered me more money so that’s where I ended up coming.” Five students highlighted the scholarship aid they receive because they are members of a United Methodist Church.

I explored questions with each student about the cost of attending their institution and the impact it had on their decision. Eleven students expressed concern about the cost of higher education, particularly the sticker price of private colleges. Aaron told me, “See, my family doesn’t exactly have a lot of money, so especially the high prices of university intimidated us greatly, so that was a major concern on my part and my family.” Anna stated,

It’s a really high cost to actually attend here. So that was a kind of conversation I had to have with my parents about whether they were willing to help me out here or what deal I can make with them, like having to pay back in the future. And so that was definitely a conversation I had to have.

A student from South Carolina shared this story.

I got my financial aid and it’s so different from going to school in-state, out-of-state, because in-state I had a full ride, I had a HOPE scholarship for South Carolina and that’s a full ride. And then I found out that they don’t take HOPE scholarships out-of-state, so I was like okay, how much is my school really going to cost? And it was a fortune. It’s a fortune.

Students shared other observations about obtaining scholarships and other aid from their institutions. Brandon stated, “It was high at first, of course, and then once my mom found out that tuition cuts, that’s when she started liking [Northern] even more.” Kyle received a large merit scholarship to attend Southern. He stated,

The buffer between us getting offered from the school to come here and choosing to go was if we would be able to get the scholarships to go here. The scholarship made it affordable. It’s basically like a four-year state school price. So it wasn’t any cheaper than any other school, but it was right at or above the regular cost of the state schools here in North Carolina.

Daniel also noted the reduction of the cost to state institution level. He commented,

The scholarship they gave me definitely helped with the cost. Cost was definitely something that I was looking at, but after the scholarship the cost came down to where it was around state level, and I decided that that was acceptable for me because I had given up on some opportunities with some other schools where I would’ve had a full ride, but I wanted a smaller school, not a large school.

When asked about tuition, Will stated,

At first it was a turn-off, just because the initial numbers of private colleges versus anywhere else, but when I learned more about scholarship and academic options, it seemed more feasible. It became pretty obvious. Private schools do give out more scholarships anyway. It was an affordability thing.

Eight students indicated that costs were not a factor in their decision primarily due to family support. Jenna observed,

Well, I'm very fortunate, so my parents kind of don't really let that be a factor. They kind of let me just if it feels right, if it's a good fit, then they'll sort of figure it out. So they don't really put that pressure on me, which I'm very lucky for that.

Lindsay stated, "It wasn't a big deal. I just knew that if I was going to come here, I definitely needed scholarship money, but my parents said they'd help me and we'd make it work if this is what I wanted." Mackenzie echoed this sentiment.

They gave me a lot of scholarship money. They really did. So that was one thing that definitely pulled me closer to it. But the money never really mattered – it was obviously a big deal for my parents, but they always told me whatever college you want to go to we'll find some way to pay for it, just whichever one feels like home to you.

Mark had this to say about the influence of tuition costs.

It wasn't that big. Knowing it was a private school, I knew it was going to be pricier than [state university] so that kind of thing. But it wasn't really that big of an influence. My grandparents started a 529 plan the week I was born so we had a good bit of money backing me. So it wasn't really that big of an influence for me.

Two students receive significant tuition discounts because they have a parent who works for a private college. One in-state student whose mother works for a private college stated,

It didn't really play a big factor because I am on tuition exchange. So my tuition is free so I really only have to pay the room and board meal plan and that kind of stuff. So the money wasn't really a problem.

Choice Findings

Identifying where a student feels the best fit for themselves is the ultimate goal of the college choice decision. This definition of 'fit' varies based on the unique personal characteristics of each student and their individual desires for their college experience. It's safe

to say that multiple economic, sociological, and psychological factors about a student and the qualities of the college they select impact the student's ultimate decision to attend. For each student, the choice factors blend together to produce the college decision. A student may weigh some factors with a greater value than others. For example, a student may prioritize their desire to attend a low cost of attendance school in proximity to their home over participation in co-curricular programs or small class sizes.

While students across both institutions highlighted the small size of their college, the proximity to home, and the opportunity to participate in athletics or arts programs as the top three overall choice factors, there was a difference in the ranking by institution. At Southern, both males and females, as well as the Methodist subgroup and the non-Methodist subgroup, rated the small size of the institution as the number one choice factor, followed by location. At Northern, both males and females, as well as both categories of religious affiliation, identified co-curricular participation as the top choice factor.

Previous research by Hearn, Suggs, and May-Trifiletti (2018) revealed that many independent colleges have used athletics to grow enrollment. They noted that most schools associated with the Council of Independent Colleges have increased the number of varsity athletic teams since 1990 and that the number of teams for women has grown at a faster rate than male sport opportunities. Both Northern and Southern participate in NCAA Division III intercollegiate athletics and have a much higher percentage of student-athletes than most state and regional universities. Seventeen of the 39 United Methodist colleges in the southeastern jurisdiction of the United States have NCAA Division III membership. It is not surprising that co-curricular participation was a strong choice factor in this study since participation in athletics was a common theme in the aspiration and search stage.

Church-Related Influence

The second research question of my study is to what extent the United Methodist Church affiliation or Christian identity of the institution impacts students' decisions to attend those schools. As reflected in Table 4.3, only four of the 33 total participants in my study indicated that the church-related nature of their institution was a primary factor in their decision to attend. I intentionally solicited an equal number of students who self-identify as a member of a United Methodist Church as well as a group of students who claim no religious affiliation or belong to another denominational church in order to compare responses. It should be noted, however, that a majority of the students who attend both institutions are affiliated with a faith denomination other than United Methodist.

United Methodist Students

During the course of interviewing the participants, 13 of the 17 United Methodist students indicated that the United Methodist Church affiliation was at least minimally a more positive than negative factor in their decision to attend Southern and Northern even if it wasn't a selling point. The other four of the 17 United Methodist students stated that it was an irrelevant factor. No student claimed that it was a negative factor overcome by other positive attributes.

Five of the 13 United Methodist students in the positive category expressed a stronger influence on their decision because their faith denomination connects with the denominational identity of their college. Samantha proclaimed, "My family is Methodist so that was definitely a pull for me." Kyle stated,

It made me more comfortable to go here because it's kind of like the same community type from my church. A lot of people are very friendly. And so it wasn't too big of a step from me, and I was a lot more comfortable going into it.

Southern's affiliation with the church was a "secondary thing" for Sarah. "I think it was really nice that it was Methodist, but I think I would look at it a little bit more just because it was Methodist affiliated." Mark stated,

So I've kind of liked this place ever since I came here probably my sophomore year. And I just loved it here. And being a United Methodist kind of led me to this decision because my church was really pushing me. You know, hey, this is a Methodist school. We endorse this school. Go for it. So that's just kind of what made it happen.

Four of the United Methodist students tied their positivity toward the United Methodist Church affiliation with the church-related scholarship they received. Ashley noted, "Being a Methodist did give me a little bit more of a scholarship with them, which helps a little bit, but it wasn't that big of an impact on my choice." Chase said of the United Methodist Church affiliation, "I wouldn't say it played a huge part in my decision, but it helped because I got a Methodist scholarship as well." Josie said the church relationship was "not honestly too big of an impact on the decision, but I thought it was really nice because I was going to be able to maybe make some extra money for it as well."

For a few students, the United Methodist affiliation was nice to know but it had no impact on their decision. Henry stated, "No, I mean, it's just nice to know that it is, it has some religious, but nothing crazy." Jenna stated, "It didn't play too much of a role for me. I mean, it's a plus because I support that and everything, but yeah, it didn't play too much of a role for me." Lindsay stated the United Methodist relationship didn't affect her decision. "I just thought it was nice to come to a school that was of my own denomination and religion and stuff, instead of going somewhere different."

Beyond the United Methodist Church affiliation, students were asked if the Christian identify or general church-related nature of the college had any influence on their decision.

Again, 13 of the 17 United Methodist students expressed that it had some positive influence on their decision. Ron stated,

I think it was a benefit. I've never shied away from religious affiliation. I think I would have been more hesitant if it was just a small campus that focused on more arts degrees that doesn't have a religious affiliation. I think there's a connotation with, kind of, association to old organizations, especially ones like the church that leaves a marketable impression. I mean, I am more Methodist than I think any other, but I really would have been okay if it was like Presbyterian.

Mackenzie, who admitted not knowing Southern is a United Methodist college until she came for a visit, stated that the Methodist affiliation had more of an impact on her mom. She stated,

We honestly didn't know that [Southern] was Methodist until we came and saw the flag that said that they were Methodist and my mom was like 'oh my gosh, they are Methodist. You can join the church and interact in the church.'

She noted the Christian identity of the college meant more to her. "It definitely positively influenced my decision. It's probably stereotypical, but when I think of a Christian school I think of more like a welcoming community."

For Mark, Southern's Christian identity "was big knowing that they have good ideals and good morals behind them." Ashley stated,

For some reason when I hear like private college, Christian college, religious college, I feel a little bit safer on campus, just because you know it's going to be a bit more expensive to go to that school, so the students there actually want to be there. They're not just going because their parents asked them to.

Josie stated, "I like the fact that I was going to be in a Christian environment." Anna stated, "I preferred a church-related environment. It's nice to know that they have that." Samantha said, "I grew up going to church every Sunday. So it was familiar, and I liked that aspect of it."

Will, however, expressed more support for the Methodist affiliation than the church-related nature of [Northern].

It ultimately didn't really matter to me too much whether it was a Christian school or not, but knowing that it was, I'm comfortable with Methodist. I grew up Methodist. I still am

Methodist. So it's better than starting up and finding out I'm going to a Catholic school. That'd be a big paradigm shift.

Students were asked to share their perceptions of religious life on campus while they were perspective students. At the time of the interviews, students had been members of the campus community for a semester and a half and some of their responses to questions about religious life as a prospective student may have been influenced by actual experience of religious life on their campus. Five of the 17 United Methodist students noted that religious life appeared to be an option but not something that is mandated. Anna stated,

I knew on certain days, they set aside time for kids to attend church if they want to. It's an option. I like how it's not real strict, but they do have the option to be able to go there.

Lindsay offered this assessment of her perception of religious life.

It was like I knew it was here and you could make a big deal out of it if you wanted to, but I like that they didn't push it and that it was like you can go, but it's on your own terms. Like, if you want to go to church, go ahead and go to church. If you want to be in the small group, you can join that but we're not going to force you to do anything.

Ashley stated, "I didn't think it was bad. It was really not like they're trying to shove anything on you. Like, you're not required to attend chapel." Will shared this assessment:

Most of the people I talked to, they weren't very heavy on it. They didn't talk about it too much, which is about accurate to how things are. If you choose to look for it, you'll find it. But if you are just trying to get through, then you can go through without running into much of it. So it wasn't featured too heavily unless I asked.

Four United Methodist students saw religious life as a way to be involved on campus.

Josie mentioned,

I noticed that they have different things you could do and get involved in, so that was nice. And then they had FCA because I was involved in that in high school. I think it was also just a nice extra touch to find out that they were Methodist as well.

Jenna stated,

I thought it was great having chapel on campus, and just kind of the classes – you’re supposed to take one religion course here, and I thought that was great to incorporate it in the curriculum, so it was all good things.

Ron stated, “It was important. I could tell that it was for the students who embraced it, and active part of their life.” Sarah shared, “I thought it was really awesome because I knew there was a chapel service, so I really like that. And I also liked they were talking about having mission trips and that kind of thing, so I really liked that.”

Two of the 17 United Methodist students stated that religious life is not as strong at their campus as they had thought as a prospective student. Chase raised this point. “I thought everyone kind of went to chapel, and I thought everyone did Bible study and stuff like that. And it’s not the case, actually.” Audri stated, “I thought it was going to be a lot more religious based, but it’s really just like a normal college.”

Finally, I explored with the United Methodist students whether anyone from their home church had influenced their decision to attend their institution. Four of the 17 indicated there was a connection to their college in their home church. Kyle shared this story of his introduction to Southern.

The very first time I heard of [Southern] was in my youth group, and we had one of the girls that goes here now, she’s I think two years older than me, she had come back from college and she was part of one of the leadership groups here at [Southern]. And they kind of passed out some t-shirts, and answered questions, and gave information about [Southern]. And I had gotten one of the t-shirts. I wore a [Southern] t-shirt around before I even knew I was going to go here. I didn’t even think I was going to go here at first.

Mark was able to name a lady on his college’s board of trustees as a member of his church who influenced him. Chase stated, “I actually had a lot of alumni at my church that went here.”

Sarah had two Southern graduates as her church youth leaders.

Non-United Methodist Students

The other half of the data on the influence of the United Methodist Church affiliation and the church related nature of the institution on college choice came from interviews with 16 students who self-identify as a member of a different faith denomination from United Methodist or claim no faith affiliation. Only two of these 16 students indicated that the United Methodist Church affiliation was a positive influence on their decision. The other 14 described the attribute as irrelevant to them. This varies greatly from the 13 out of 17 United Methodist students who identified it as a positive characteristic of their institution.

Eliza was one of the two non-United Methodists to voice a positive connection to the United Methodist affiliation.

It actually made me feel a little more comfortable coming here because I am a religious person. And I do want to keep up my faith. And just to know that I feel like kind of having a religious college, for me, makes me feel like people care more. And that they're more open and loving, in a way, I guess.

Janayee expressed a similar view. "As a person of religion, knowing that it was affiliated with the United Methodist Church that just made it more easier in making my decision." The overwhelming response from the non-United Methodist students can be summed up by Mia. "It didn't impact my decision at all." While stating the United Methodist relationship didn't have any impact on her decision, it did cause Megan to question it. She stated, "Not that I'd be discriminated against, but I was like is everybody there a Methodist?"

While the impact of the denominational affiliation varied between United Methodists and non-United Methodist students, both demographics gave a consistent response to the impact of the church-related nature of the institution. Twelve of the 16 non-United Methodist indicated the faith-based attribute of their college was positive. This mirrors the same response from 13 of the 17 United Methodists. The other four non-United Methodist students identified the church

relationship as irrelevant. Sonya is one that likes the Christian identify of her college. “It’s more of a religious school rather than going to a public university. I feel I have more of my values and morals, I guess, implemented.” Aaron stated, “It was positive knowing that there would be other fellow Christians here.” David expressed this view,

I thought it was more of a positive – it wasn’t something I necessarily worried about. I thought if anything it would be positive because usually when religion is involved, there’s a stronger sense of morals, I guess. So I wanted to come to a place that had the same morals and principles that I agree with in terms of right and wrong.

The non-United Methodists shared a similar perception of religious life on campus to the United Methodist students. Some acknowledged the open and welcoming spirit of the community. Mia stated, “When I first heard about [Southern], I didn’t know they were like religious and everything but when I actually toured it, they were welcoming of all religions. They don’t kind of force it down your throat.” Angelica noted, “That didn’t really affect me. [Southern] seems to love everyone. And they don’t make one faith thing better than the other, they kind of respect you and your views.” Kayla shared this observation,

My Nana’s a Methodist and my Grandma so it didn’t do anything to me, but I knew it was a religious campus, and some colleges can be against it or something like that, or not for your religion. But this campus is like if that’s what you believe, you do you.

Andrew, a Catholic student, told me that he didn’t have any impressions of religious life as a prospective student.

I just felt as if I was going to let my religion kind of take place at wherever I was going to go. But I just knew that if I came here, there was going to be some sort of church or some sort of group around here that would fulfill those needs.

Church-Related College Choice Findings

Although only four of the 33 students mentioned the church-related nature of the institution as a primary choice factor, and the majority of students deemed both the United Methodist affiliation and the general church-related nature of the school to be irrelevant in their

decision, it could be argued that the faith-based nature of the colleges still impacted choice. Students consistently discussed the warm, inclusive, community climate fostered on campus which can be traced to the church-related values of the institutions. Students also described the caring and loving spirit on their campus, as well as the ideals and morals found on their campus which are absolutely connected to the church-related nature of the college. The overwhelming satisfaction by which students described the religious life culture suggests that it, too, helped students achieve a sense of assurance that their personal values fit the faith-based virtues of their institution. Female students also tied security and safety to the religious nature of their school which was a very positive characteristic for them. A male student positively tied the faith connection of his college to tradition. While students may not have voiced that the United Methodist affiliation or general church-related nature of their college was a primary choice factor, it did positively contribute to the feeling of belonging and fit that led many of them to their college home.

Personal Choice Influencers

As part of discussing with students their college choice process, students described a number of specific individuals who had been influential in their decisions to attend their institutions. Institutional representatives and parents were commonly mentioned by students across both institutions.

Institutional Representatives

Thirty-one of the 33 students were able to name at least one specific individual associated with their college as a person who helped influence their decision. Ten students named an admission counselor as a person of influence. Aaron told me,

I received an email from [admission counselor] of [Southern] and well, we automatically made a connection. And he told me he was originally from [city], and that was where I

was living at the time so I was like okay, okay. And all the stuff he told me about [Southern], well, it captivated me.

Audri was effusive in her praise of an admission counselor.

[Name] was my admissions counselor here. She was a lot of help with the process of getting into the school. She called probably every week to make sure I was up-to-date on my papers. And if I missed anything, she made sure she got it to me and my mom to make sure we got everything. We were on top of things so we didn't have to worry about, on move-in-date, trying to get everything together.

Daniel echoed Audri's appreciation for the work of the admissions team at his institution.

Definitely the admissions staff helped because they always answered all of my questions that I had, and I had a lot of questions because I was transferring into credits, and they made sure to explain that to me fully and tell me which credits would come and which classes I still lacked from the community college. So they really helped.

Kayla stated, "[Name] over in the admissions building, she really wanted me to come, and the way she talked about [Northern], it just made it seem like I wanted to be here and this was where

I wanted to be." Sonya replied,

[Name], my admission counselor, was very informative. She reached out to me several times asking if I had questions during the application process, asking if I had questions when I was visiting, asked what she could do to help me through the process.

Nine students were also able to name a student at the institution who influenced them to come. Four of the nine named a student-athlete they had met when visiting on an athletic recruiting trip. Three students named students from their high school who had encouraged them to attend and influenced their decision. Two students named their campus tour guide who made such a positive impression that they swayed them to attend. Jacob stated, "[Name] was a good friend of mine. I've known him since fifth grade, I think, so it's been a journey with him."

Samantha stated,

Well, I was on a recruitment trip, so I really liked [name] that I stayed with. She was super nice and she told me about the team, showed me around the school, and just really made me feel welcomed and I know she really represented the school well and the team well.

Anna said of her student tour guide, “When I came to visit, we had [name] give us a tour. And he really made me feel comfortable about coming here and safe and because I’m so far away from home and everything.”

Just as athletic coaches provided the first connection to their institution for ten students, nine students in the study named their athletic coach as an influencer in their choice decision. In addition to her admissions counselor, Sonya named her head coach. “[Name] gave me several tours multiple times, invited me out to practices, invited me to games. He made me feel like I was welcomed here and made we want to go here.” Meredith said of her coach, “He came to see me play over the summer and came to see me play at my high school. He was willing to make the trip to come see me.” Kenneth stated,

I would say probably the main people were my [sport] coaches because they’re really encouraging about me coming here and really told me it would be a good place for me and they weren’t wrong when they said that. Definitely say that they were kind of like biggest factors for me coming here because it kind of gave me an incentive because I love playing [sport].

Faculty members and non-athletic staff members were identified by six students as a key influencer in their decision to attend. A total of 11 students indicated that they had engagement with faculty members at their selected institution as part of their search process. Jenna noted her influencers were the head coach, her admissions counselor, and stated, “I met [name], a professor of [academic program] and they were great and said great things about the school, so they were influential.” Sarah met the campus pastor at the preview day she attended and stated, “The pastor who was here was really cool. And was super encouraging and was talking about the mission trips that they’d take and that kind of stuff. So, that was a big impact on me.” Anna shared with me her meeting as a prospective student with her academic advisor,

My academic advisor, I had met with [Name] when I had toured here. And he really helped me with kind of helping me see the academic side of things too, not just the social and the athletic side. So he influenced how beneficial this can be in the future for graduate school, how they really help you in the future to get internships, and later on jobs.

Eliza told me about the professors in her academic department who she met during her campus visit.

The professors here were just really kind and open and they remind me a lot of my teachers back in high school, and so I felt like the transition between teachers would have been real smooth, and it ended up being really nice.

Megan offered her encounter with the head of her academic department as a prospective student.

Yeah, [Name] definitely did because [academic program] was the major I was looking at and I'd have to be with him for the next three to four years. And he basically allowed me to see the type of learning I'd be getting when I came here. And that's what I like because he gave me the one on one experience.

Finally, three students specifically named a member of their college's alumni community as having been a primary influence in their decision to attend. For Kaitlin, attending Northern is a family tradition. "My mom, my dad, both of my uncles actually went here too so lots of family influenced me." Will responded to the question of people who influenced his decision to attend his institution by stating, "[Name] was one of my teachers in high school. She went here."

Parental Influences

Beyond faculty, staff, and those connected to the institution of choice, 28 of the 33 students stated that their parents played some role in their college decision. Sixteen of those 28 students referred to their parents collectively, while nine students mentioned their mother only and three students mentioned their father exclusively. Eleven of the students described their parents' role as supportive but allowed the student to make their own decision. John stated, "They said it was up to me wherever I wanted to go." Daniel stated, "I would say they were very

supportive, but other than that, they did not really tell me where to go. It was always up to me.”

Audri mentioned her mother’s role in her decision.

My mom, at first she didn’t really want me to come here. But she saw the school for herself, and she saw that they care about our education here, and they’re just a really good school here. So she said it’s really up to – it’s my choice on where I want to go. But she supported my decision when I came here.

Kyle articulated his parents support for his decision.

Well, the issue was that this school is more expensive than a lot of the other ones. And so it was a big fact about me and my parents finding scholarships that I was eligible for and that I could apply for so that I could eventually come here. And then, after visits, they backed me. They were basically saying, ‘it’s your decision, we want you to do what you want to do, and where you want to go and pursue your dreams.’ And so, they kind of just like were very supporting of what I wanted to choose at the end.

Andrew commented, “They let me go where I wanted really. I mean they obviously didn’t want me to be hours away but if I was happy then they’d be happy with me here.”

Like Andrew, five students expressed their parents’ desire for the student to be happy and comfortable in their college choice. Janayee told me, “It was actually my father. He helped me through my college process. And when we were visiting schools, he saw that I was most comfortable here.” Eliza noted,

My parents wanted me to go somewhere where I would be comfortable and happy. I’m really close to my parents, so they kind of wanted me to go out there and not really go somewhere so close to home. So I wanted to be at a place where I could easily go home but also have time to grow and become an adult.

Jacob offered this recollection of his parents’ position. “They said ‘pick where you want to go.

Whatever your route is, just make sure that’s what you want and you’re going to be happy.’

They just wanted me to be happy and make the right decision.”

Five students noted the role their parents play in paying for college costs as they commented on the influence of their parents on their decision. Brandon laughed as he talked about his parents’ role. “We had to talk about the costs, the funding, and everything. They’re the

people that got to pay for it!” Ron agreed stating, “They played the financial role.” Angelia stated, “Well at first I wasn’t going to be able to go to [Southern] because of the expenses or whatever, but my momma knew this is where I wanted to be so she made it happen.”

Influencer Findings

My research revealed the near universal ability of the 33 students to specifically name at least one person at their institution of choice who was influential in their decision to attend their college. People recruit people. Relationships matter. This is especially important since the small size of the institution was the number one factor attributed to students’ decisions to attend Northern and Southern. The students defined their affinity for a small sized institution due to the perceived personal attention they would get from faculty and staff compared to students attending large institutions. These students wanted an intimate, familial college experience with personal connections to their professors. It makes sense that the people on campus they interfaced with as a prospective student influenced their decision to attend.

Students also revealed that one or both parents were influential in their college decision. Since all of these students came from some type of faith background, certainly the church-related nature of Northern and Southern would have been attractive to their parents. As colleges serve in loco parentis, the Christian environment with opportunities for religious life would give most parents a greater sense of comfort that the institution would take care of their son or daughter. While there is evidence from interviews with Methodist students of parental excitement about the Methodist affiliation of their institution, I believe non-Methodist parents would find the general church-related nature of their child’s institution to be as positive as the students were about this aspect of their college.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

College choice occurs when a student's life situation and personal interests match with the institutional characteristics of a college or university. Every student brings to the college search process a unique set of traits which causes them to consider some colleges while eliminating others. No two prospective students have an identical slate of personal characteristics which factor into their college choice decision.

Just as every college is distinctive in its cost, location, and the academic programs and extracurricular opportunities it offers, there is also great diversity in the delivery of church-related higher education. Church-related colleges and universities partner with varying denominations, have different requirements related to attendance at church and chapel services, incorporate religion into the curriculum in distinctive ways, and have diverse campus cultures that integrate spiritual values and the faith-based mission of the institution. Recognizing that much of the existing literature on factors influencing students' decisions to attend church-related colleges omits consideration of colleges affiliated with the United Methodist Church, my research focused exclusively on this sector of church-related colleges.

Summary of Findings

The 33 students interviewed for my study came from a broad spectrum of socioeconomic backgrounds, large and small hometowns, and articulated divergent high school experiences. They were intentionally selected as first-year students with half of them identifying as United Methodists and the other half indicating an affiliation with a different faith denomination or no

affiliation at all. Their parents, families, high school teachers, coaches and guidance counselors played an assortment of roles in assisting them in their college search and helping them make their college choice. Additionally, these students possessed a wide range of test scores and academic abilities, and indicated an extensive variety of talents, interests, and values which mattered to them in their college search.

The participants in my research discerned at different points in their youth the decision to attend college. The aspiration to attend college stemmed from career ambition, parental motivation, socio-economic status attainment, and extracurricular activity participation. The college search process conducted by each student started at varying points in their high school career. Two methods of searching for colleges were nearly universally used by students in this study. Researching colleges on the Internet and making visits to college campuses were critical to the college search process for this cohort of students.

Students used multiple Web-based tools to aid in their college search and often used these sites to narrow their college choice set. Internet research was also a precursor to helping students identify which schools they wanted to visit. College visits included personal visits arranged through the admissions office or athletic coaches, as well as attendance at events for large numbers of prospective students. Students in my research visited an average of 3.9 colleges during their search process. Their campus visits were not limited to United Methodist colleges, church-related colleges, or even private colleges. Students visited institutions of all sizes, public and private, two-year and four-year, as well as single-gender and historically black colleges and universities.

These students applied to an average of 3.5 colleges. Just like their college visits, their applications for admission went to a wide range of institutions. The timing of their applications

to their institution of choice varied throughout the students' senior year of high school, as did the timing of their decision to attend their college.

These students collectively identified the small size of their institution, location, co-curricular participation, academic programs and financial assistance as the top five reasons why they selected their United Methodist college of choice. These findings were consistent with the research previous scholars have produced which examined factors influencing students' decisions to attend church-related colleges (Carlson, 1992; Easter, 2012; Noel-Levitz, 2010; Schipull, 2009).

Where my research differs from previous literature on reasons why students attend church-related colleges is the small number of respondents who indicated the spiritual nature or faith-based identity of the college was a primary factor in their college choice decision. Unlike the research of previous scholars (Benne, 2001; Budde & Wright, 2004; Noel-Levitz, 2010; Rood, 2009; Schipull, 2009; Seibert, 1994), only 12 percent of the students named the church affiliation or Christian identity as a principal reason in their choice decision. I also failed to discover as strong of a sense of cultural orientation among the United Methodist students as was described in previous studies related to college choice and church-related higher education (Davignon et al., 2013; Sauder, 2008; Wiese & Townsend, 1991). While a majority of the United Methodist students saw their college's United Methodist affiliation as more positive than negative, it was primarily irrelevant as a factor in their decision to attend their institution. The majority of my conversations with United Methodist students did not generate an overwhelming connection between the United Methodist affiliation of their college and their personal membership in a United Methodist church. However, students across religious affiliations

described virtues and values of their institution consistent with faith-based institutions which positively influenced their decision-making.

Implications and Recommendations for Colleges

Thirty-one students specifically named at least one person at their institution of choice who was influential in their decision to attend their college. It is important to note that these personal influencers on their respective campuses ran the gamut of people connected to the institution. Certainly admission counselors who are on the front line recruiting students to the institution influence college choice. Athletic coaches and other program staff are key to the recruitment of students who find added value in co-curricular participation opportunities on campus. Since academic programs are a factor in students' college choice, faculty members also have a special role to play in the recruitment of students by sharing information about majors, minors, internships, externships, graduate school opportunities, and careers beyond college. Especially for students who are more academic-minded than others and focused on a specific career path, engagement with faculty in the recruiting process has the potential to positively impact students' college choice. Hossler, Bontrager & Associates (2015) noted all employees at tuition-driven institutions should know that their job description includes the recruiting and retention of students.

Current students are also key influencers on prospective students' college choice decisions. High school juniors and seniors are often aware of the college choices of students who recently graduated from their high school. First and second-year college students also have many connections to high school students. Their experience, positive or negative, can influence whether or not students from their high school or younger family members consider their institution. Current students were credited with giving tours of campus and hosting prospective

students in campus residence halls overnight during my conversations with students at Northern and Southern. Small church-related colleges should develop and employ numerous strategies for utilizing current students in the recruitment of new students.

Beyond on-campus influencers, small church-related colleges must engage alumni of the college, parents and former parents to be intentional ambassadors for the institution in their communities in order to raise awareness of the college. Unlike Duke University, a United Methodist institution in North Carolina, the institutions represented by Northern and Southern are not household names. They do not participate in NCAA Division I intercollegiate athletics and they do not generate statewide media attention like flagship public institutions. Colleges like Northern and Southern also have limited marketing budgets to create the name identification enjoyed by state institutions. The positive word of mouth advertising by alumni, parents and former parents in their respective communities may be the only opportunity a prospective student will have to hear about a small church-related college. Creating intentional networks for these advocates for the college to engage in recruiting students will widen the pool of names of prospective students to the institution.

My research also revealed that students describe multiple factors which impact their college choice decision. A student may choose their institution because it is close to home but they also know that they can pursue their academic interests there. Another student may find value in the small size of the institution and the ability to play intercollegiate athletics. Colleges and universities would be wise to find multiple ways to connect their characteristics with the interests of students. When possible, prospective students should be surveyed prior to coming to campus for a visit in order to tailor their on-campus experience to multiple personal interests.

While interest in academic programs was a top five choice factor among the students in my study, it was the most identified characteristic students were seeking information about during their college search. Many students expressed that they continued considering or eliminated colleges based upon whether or not they could study their desired field at the institution. Therefore, the listing of academic programs offered at the institution is a critical link on each college's website. Small, church-related colleges without the ability to offer every academic major large state institutions can deliver should consider ways to promote recent graduates who have gone on to pursue careers in fields outside of their academic discipline. This would give colleges an opportunity to showcase to prospective students the ability to obtain jobs with their degree even if the college did not offer an academic program specific to that career field.

Additionally, United Methodist colleges and universities have historically been much more open to students of all faiths than many other church-affiliated colleges. Students at both institutions in my study expressed comfort in the voluntary nature of religious life on their campuses and the "it's there if you want it" mentality associated with religious programming. Students of all religious backgrounds at both institutions expressed a greater affinity for the general church-related nature of their college rather than the specific affiliation with the United Methodist Church.

My research indicates several opportunities exist for United Methodist colleges to more intentionally partner with the churches of the denomination to recruit students. Since only four of the 17 United Methodists in my study could pinpoint a connection to their home church with their college, more work needs to be done by United Methodist colleges to find ways to introduce United Methodist higher education in local churches. The story Kyle shared of the

Southern student who visited his United Methodist youth group and provided information about her institution with the youth group should be the template for utilizing current United Methodist students in recruiting others. Deploying faculty and staff to visit United Methodist churches, creating promotional videos to send to United Methodist youth groups, and hosting United Methodist youth groups on campus are intentional ways United Methodist colleges can better connect to the youth of the denomination.

Beyond utilizing the relationship with the United Methodist Church to recruit United Methodist students, the general church-related nature of these colleges was deemed to be more positive than negative by non-United Methodist students in my study. Since United Methodist colleges are more open to students of all faiths, these institutions should explore ways to partner with non-United Methodist local churches to provide a connection point for non-United Methodist students. A Baptist prospective student may not feel an affinity for the United Methodist Church affiliation of a college, but he or she may find value in an on-campus group for Baptist students or a college partnership with a local Baptist church which encourages his or her participation in Sunday worship services.

Recommendations for the United Methodist Church

The University Senate of the United Methodist Church's General Board of Higher Education and Ministry currently lists 96 colleges and universities as accredited United Methodist colleges. Just as United Methodist colleges vary in their delivery of Christian higher education, United Methodist churches differ in their worship styles, church sizes, and mission and ministry priorities. Despite their variances, United Methodist churches and United Methodist colleges are bound together through a global connectional system.

The United Methodist students interviewed in my research did not unanimously express a deep-rooted connection to the denomination. Some saw value in the scholarship aid they received as a United Methodist while others offered no evidence of a strong United Methodist cultural orientation. Only five of the 17 United Methodist students expressed a clear tie between their faith and the denominational identity of their college. United Methodist churches can do much more to engage members in the global work of the Church, to instill in youth a greater identity in the denominational connection, and to educate members about denominational higher education partners. Certainly, United Methodist colleges can be more intentional in developing partnerships with United Methodist churches for the benefit of recruiting students. United Methodist churches can also be more deliberate in seeking ways to advance the work of United Methodist higher education institutions.

Opportunities for Future Research

A limitation of this research design was the exclusive examination of students attending a United Methodist college or university. Exploring the college choice process of this specific cohort of students limited my ability to compare the data to students attending other denomination-affiliated church-related colleges, students at other private schools, or state-sponsored institutions.

My research was limited to exploring the college search process of 33 students at two institutions. Future scholars could replicate this study with more participants at a larger number of United Methodist colleges or institutions affiliated with other faith denominations. The research could also be narrowed to focus on the college choice process of a single gender or race. Individual institutions should also consider conducting a formal assessment of the college choice factors identified by their entire entering class during orientation.

Absent from my research was consideration of why students who applied to Northern and Southern and were accepted chose not to matriculate to the institution. Despite applying to these institutions, it would be interesting to know whether their college choice factors differed greatly from the students who did enroll at Northern and Southern. All colleges and universities would be wise to collect and analyze this data, as well.

Conclusion

Northern and Southern are representative of the tuition-driven, small enrollment sector of United Methodist colleges and universities. Despite their connection to the church, students at these institutions identify factors of greater importance to them than the faith-based nature of their college. The desire for a small sized institution indicates students want a personal connection to faculty, staff and peers. The interest in attending a college with proximity to home indicates students have positive family relationships or life situations that cause them to commute to campus or stay relatively close to home. Students have career and socio-economic status ambitions, along with aspirations to participate in specific activities in college, which lead them to consider schools with their academic programs and co-curricular opportunities. Scholarships and financial aid programs also impact students' decisions as they compare the bottom line cost of attendance at various schools and consider the value propositions at each institution in their choice set. United Methodist colleges and universities should actively work to match multiple choice factors of their institution with the personal characteristics, values and interests of prospective students.

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