Persuasion in Higher Education: Recruitment of High Ability Students

Ann Marie Chilcutt

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Persuasion in Higher Education: Recruitment of High Ability Students

by

Ann Marie Chilcutt

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Abstract

Recruiting high ability students to institutions of higher education varies from university to university and is one of the most important variables for the continuing of successful colleges. This study focused on the variables that were most important to the current cohort of high ability freshmen at the University of Southern Mississippi. The aim of this study was to identify attitudinal and normative communicative components that are most effective for recruiting high ability students to the University of Southern Mississippi. By surveying this cohort of students, and using the Theory of Reasoned Action as a tool in creating questions for the surveys, the researcher was able to identify best practices to adapt persuasive messages to ensure that the goal of recruiting high ability students is reached. The sample population of these high quality students was gathered quantitatively according to the Theory of Reasoned Action and prior research that had already been conducted. As a result, the study contributes to the field of communication by identifying major forms of persuasive communication. Further, it provides insight for the Admissions office so that they can adapt their persuasive communication forms for recruiting students of high ability to USM.

Key Words: The University of Southern Mississippi, The Theory of Reasoned Action, Recruitment, Admissions, Persuasion, Communication, High Ability
Dedication

To my friends, family, and mentors—Mama, Daddy, Alex, Kalen, Michelle, Jessica, Erin, Ronnie, Kyle, Dr. Paul, Kristi, and Dr. Bennett:

Thank you for your unwavering support and persistent encouragement. You all have been the perfect team to keep me going.

To my thesis advisor, Dr. Lawrence Hosman—thank you. Your tireless efforts in helping me complete this study have not gone unnoticed. This piece of work would not have been possible without your guidance and consideration towards the topic of persuasion, recruitment, and communication.
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Chapter 1 - Introduction

The job market in America is an ever changing and unstable area for upcoming generations. In order to succeed in the “real” world, people are realizing that they must pursue and obtain an education. Typically speaking, in order to get a job, one must have some sort of education; however, to truly succeed in a high-paying occupation, or to even have the opportunity to interview for a prominent position, the person must have some kind of degree from an institution of higher education. As students begin to see the necessity of a college education, they are putting more emphasis on the college decision process. Students spend hours researching schools, talking to admissions counselors, and visiting schools all over the country. The high-scoring American College Testing (ACT) students and high-Grade Point Average (GPA) high school students, in particular, are putting extra emphasis on college decision processes. Many students start their college search process within the early years of high school—especially the high ability students.

The recruitment process is defined as the process of persuading students to enroll at a particular school. This process of persuading students to enroll focuses on many different types of students to best benefit the university. In the current study, variables that persuade high ability students to attend a university are studied by using the Theory of Reasoned Action. For the purposes of this study, high ability students are defined as students with an above average GPA (3.25 or higher) and an above average ACT score (25 or higher). With such emphasis being put on college selection processes, institutions of higher education have to alter their recruiting strategies to ensure that the top students will enroll at their school. This is due to the changing nature of communication (i.e., social media) that the current students will respond to. Whether it is interpersonal or
computer-mediated forms of communication, many types of persuasion are progressing with some emerging as more effective than others in recruiting high ability students.

The purpose of this study is to understand which persuasive message tactics are the most influential in recruiting high ability students to college. Furthermore, the study used the Theory of Reasoned Action as a lens to understand how attitude towards the behavior and normative factors influence a student’s enrollment decision. By using the Theory of Reasoned Action, admissions offices are able to identify factors for message adaptation to improve future recruitment. The study concentrated on the process of recruiting students to higher education institutions and focused on implementing the persuasion techniques into the recruitment system.

This study is valuable to the field of communication because persuasion used to recruit high ability students is fairly new and one of the most important aspects to understand for people involved with enrollment management processes. Although persuasive forms of communication in college recruitment processes have been studied before, they have never studied how high ability students react to those persuasive communication techniques. Furthermore, the use of the particular persuasive theory, the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), has never been used to help understand students’ enrollment decisions. TRA attempts to predict a final decision, such as college choice, based on factors like the attitude towards the behavior. It simultaneously looks at influencing factors from important others, which are defined as people or items that have a particular effect on a person’s decision-making process. Because this study produced valuable information, it has the potential to help college recruiters “predict” what will
determine a potential student’s final college decision. It can also allow recruiters to adapt their messages to more strategically targeted high ability students.

The study of specific persuasive tactics used to recruit and to understand high ability students is extremely valuable because it can dramatically improve the inter-university recruitment competitiveness between colleges while bolstering an individual college’s reputation as a whole. Within the past few years, colleges have started putting more focus on students who produce superior scores, excellent GPAs, and more credit for their university, which creates an extremely competitive environment. In addition to understanding processes for recruiting high ability students, this study contributes new research by applying a persuasive theory, the Theory of Reasoned Action, to general recruiting processes. By using the TRA theory as a lens, the researcher is able to recognize how persuasive tactics help to inform and influence college selection processes.

In order to fully understand college decision processes of high ability students, the researcher distributed questionnaires to students at the University of Southern Mississippi. The survey asked specific questions about each student’s experiences in selecting a college. Each question was created using the guides of common college recruitment practices and the foundational components of the Theory of Reasoned Action. The data collected answered and tested the research question for accuracy. The analysis concludes with a discussion of the findings and points to possible revisions that can be made to similar studies performed in the future.
Chapter 2 - Literature Review

A key concern among colleges and universities is the recruiting process. How to get students to apply to, commit to, and attend the school are all issues that arise when vying for students in higher education recruitment processes. This process is an extremely intricate system and varies from school to school. For a college to attract a student body with good academic records, high ability students are preferred because they will produce the results that a university is seeking. When understanding why it is so important to the universities, it is necessary to look at recruitment processes that deal with high ability students. Because those high ability students are preferred, the recruitment process becomes more competitive between schools. This new competitive atmosphere is causing enrollment offices to identify the methods used to help persuasively attract high ability students. As several studies have shown, college recruitment tactics largely involve persuasive communication. This process of persuasion plays a large role in the overall influencing of the college decision (Wiley, 1999).

Research on the college selection process

Many studies have been executed over the past years to understand college selection processes. The recruitment process is different for each institution of higher education, just as the decision-making system varies for each student seeking college enrollment. People study different aspects of what helps a student to make a college decision. One of the best was to identify the factors that influenced a student’s college search is through his or her own personal testimonies. A significant amount of research for college recruitment exists in the form of personal testimonies. For example, Seattle
Pacific University investigated their students’ decision-making processes. One student attributed her decision to her personal relationships with the admissions department, overall campus beauty, and friendliness of the professors (McCracken, 2004). Even though many studies identified what seems to be common sense factors in considering a college, other less common factors have also been discovered. For example, the intercollegiate athletics programs’ influence on a student’s college choice has been researched in detail. Toma and Cross (1998) explored the impact of championship seasons on undergraduate applications. The preliminary findings suggested that during a championship season, success in intercollegiate athletics appears to have a dramatic increase in admissions applications received; however, that success must be in the form of a national championship for a top marquee sport like football or men’s basketball (Toma & Cross, 1998). This study helps us understand the different factors that can be used in making college enrollment decisions while simultaneously identifying tactics that the schools must use to sell the benefits of the institution. Each factor identified as important for college selection is pertinent to recruit the best high ability students.

Several studies have been conducted recently that examine the college selection process and the direct communication that happens between the schools and the prospective students. One study (Barnes & Jacobson 2012) focused on the rise of technological communication, stating that social media is emerging as the top form of communication in higher education. Another study (Simones & Soares, 2010) focused more specifically on what advertising is most persuasive for students. They found that the university website was the most important type of communication for recruiting, closely followed by brochures, leaflets, and finally promotional visits to the school.
Strategic Targets

A significant amount of research has focused on targeting specific groups of students for recruitment, but none has focused on the recruitment of high ability students. Selingo (1999) looked at successful recruiting of minority students in Texas. He found that successful recruiting depends on the strategic tactics used by the admissions offices. A European study focused on the gender issues that exist in the university recruitment environment (Ahearn, Alpay, & Hari 2010). They studied a target group of students (females) at the university by asking each of them about the role and contribution that they made to the academic environment as females. After identifying the roles that the females perceived as priorities in their college experiences, the administration was able to make necessary changes to recruit more females (the strategic targets) to the university on the basis of what was important to the currently enrolled females. If the school wanted more females to enroll, then the university needed to capitalize and recruit on the roles and contributions perceived as important to females. Even though this study does not focus on high ability students, it suggests the benefits of targeting a specific group in recruitment.

Another study that researched targeted audiences for recruitment concluded that practices have to be adapted to the type of student group. Rather than high ability students, the researcher focused on gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) groups (Cegler, 2012). Cegler’s report found that by working with specific groups, like the LGBTQ, and identifying main factors that characterize and flatter those students, they are more likely to enroll because of the personalized attention that they receive. This study is interesting because it shows how to research, how to understand, and how to
target a specific group of students that is desired for a college. The studies in this section all suggest how beneficial it is to target students in the college recruitment process.

**Research on High Ability Students**

High ability students’ experiences in the college selection process are a topic that has been studied to some degree in the past. To determine best practices for college recruitment, the persuasive communication tactics directed at high ability students are important to identify and understand. Moreover, due to the importance of recruiting high ability students, it is more important than ever that enrollment offices know how to adapt their messages to please the high ability students. David Chapman (1981) recognized recruiters’ realizations that “Within this increasingly intense competition for students, many colleges have persisted in the belief that they can affect students’ choice of college merely by modifying their institutional descriptions or the targeting of their recruiting” (p. 32). This shows that by altering one or two factors about the way that he or she markets the institution, a recruiter can affect a student’s final college choice. This one alteration could be the difference in gaining high ability students over average students.

Other studies have looked at the timeline that high ability students focus on when going through the process of choosing a college. “Higher ability students appear to start the formal application process earlier than lower ability students; they tend to decide on which schools to apply to in the fall term…” (Litten, 1982). This not only explains the importance of understanding the timeline for high ability students, but it also points to the importance of knowing which persuasive tactics work best. For example, communication pieces mailed out earlier than other competitive schools may become a decisive factor for
high ability students to select a college. One agricultural school studied high ability students’ perceptions of which recruitment strategies were most effective. The researchers drew the overall conclusion that “high ability urban high school seniors preferred personalized recruitment strategies” (Betts & Newcomb, 1986, p. 54). After understanding some of these main persuasive communication factors, it is important to begin recognizing ways that the recruitment process can be improved to recruit more high ability students. The Theory of Reasoned Action is a theory that combines and identifies effective recruitment strategies at institutions of higher education. This theory can be used as a lens to view and improve the high ability student college recruitment process for institutions of higher education.

**Theory of Reasoned Action**

The Theory of Reasoned Action has been studied extensively in the field of communication and highlights the decision making process, but even more specifically, the persuasion process. It has not, however, been studied or used as a lens to understand and improve the college recruitment process. Martin Fishbein and Isaac Ajzen developed the Theory of Reasoned Action, and it does a “good job of accounting for the role of attitudes and intentions on behavior” (Gass & Seiter, 2011, p. 9). TRA explains how attitudes and normative factors affect human behavior. It attempts to predict a person’s future behavior by looking at past behaviors and intentions. Guo and Feng (2011) claim, “If the assumptions are made that behavior is founded on rationality, then the Theory of Reasoned Action posits a model conceptually applicable to entire human activities.
When developing this theory, the researchers found that most people care about their behavior; therefore, the theory focuses on predicting behavioral intentions because they are the best predictors of behavior. If a person has a positive attitude towards a particular behavior, then they are more likely to intend to perform the behavior. An unfavorable attitude towards a particular behavior creates more negative behavioral intentions. There are two main variables that determine a person’s behavioral intentions—attitude towards the behavior and subjective norms.

The TRA claims that intentions are the results of two components, one of which is the attitude toward the particular behavior. The attitude towards behavior has two elements. The first element is belief. This is a person’s assessment of the likelihood that a behavior will have a particular consequence. For example, students will assess how likely choosing college X will lead to having a good social life or finding good academic programs. The second element to the attitude towards a particular behavior is the evaluation of each of the consequences, whether positive or negative. For example, students will evaluate whether a good social life or good academic programs are important to them. A person’s beliefs about each outcome and the evaluation of each of those outcomes will shape his or her attitude towards that particular behavior.

The second factor that determines a person’s behavioral intention is the subjective norm component. According to Gass and Seiter (2011), “a subjective norm is a person’s perception of what others, especially relevant others, think about the behavior in question” (p. 199). Relevant others are defined as anyone who is close to a person affected, whether they are parents, friends, or close relatives. The component of subjective norms also has two elements. The first element is a person’s normative beliefs.
The normative beliefs are based on “perceived social pressure by relevant others to engage in the behavior in question” (Gass & Seiter, 2011, p. 17). Normative beliefs can include peer pressure or parental pressure towards or against a particular issue. For college recruitment, normative beliefs are what a student perceives that an important other thinks about that student enrolling at a particular college. For example, if a student’s mom thinks that attending college X is a good or bad idea, then it can alter the student’s desire to attend. The second element is his or her motivation to comply. This motivation to comply is based on a person’s willingness to conform to social pressure by “relevant others.” For example, if a student agrees and cares about the mother’s opinion on where he or she enrolls, then the student will be more motivated to comply. In contrast, if a student does not care about the mother’s opinion of wanting him or her to enroll at a particular college, then the student will be unmotivated and not want to apply. Mathematically speaking, Guo and Feng claim that “subjective norms, or the perceived social pressure on behavior, is measured by what an individual thinks to be desirable by the important referent others (n), weighed by the motivation to comply (m)” (2011, p. 26). This element focused on the point that significant others may influence one’s behavior.

A study by Ajzen, Bamber, and Schmidt (2003) further explained the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA). The researchers described what TRA is, discussed how it applies to the communication process, and gave examples of TRA and its significance in everyday communicative actions such as decision-making. This study also highlighted some of the main reasons that students choose particular schools to invest their time, money, and efforts. The researchers compared participants’ past behavior and how it can
be applied to their future behavior (Ajzen, et al., 2003). The authors investigated the effects of an intervention by giving prepaid bus tickets to college students to see if it increased bus usage. By studying travel mode prior to the intervention, the researchers were able “to determine that a choice like travel mode is a reasoned decision that is affected by change in attitudes, subjective norms, and perceptions of behavioral control.” (Ajzen et al., 2003) This study showed how future behaviors can be predicted. It is important because it serves as a link to the behavior of college selection by understanding students’ thinking processes when deciding on future actions. By understanding the attitudes and subjective norms associated with the final choice for the bus ticket, it allowed the researcher to see TRA used as a lens on a topic not directly associated with communication. It also helped in ideas for future researchers to identify which recruitment processes and tactics are more successful than others.

After understanding the basis of the Theory of Reasoned Action, it is clear that it is useful to explain students’ college choice selection processes. The attitude towards the behavior, which can consist of any characteristic about the college, and the motivation to comply, based on normative factors, is essential in understanding how to better recruit and inform the college choice for high ability students. Once each of the attitudes and subjective norms are identified, a college can market those factors when talking to high ability students to better determine the final consequence of both factors as set in the Theory of Reasoned Action.

As seen, several studies have been conducted on the recruitment practices within institutions of higher education and all provide useful information for best practices in effective college recruitment. Through the previous research on college recruitment and
persuasion, patterns emerged that led to the current study—using the Theory of Reasoned Action as a lens to understand and improve persuasive communication tactics used for recruiting high achieving students to a particular university. In order to improve the persuasive communication tactics used for recruitment, recruiters need to understand the attitudinal and normative elements that high ability students use to choose a college. Those key findings helped develop the research question and better inform the recruitment process via the Theory of Reasoned Action.

Based on the research for the college selection process, recruitment practices for higher education, and the Theory of Reasoned Action as used in persuasive communication, the research question for this thesis is as follows:

**Research Question:** What attitudinal and normative elements affect high ability students’ decisions to attend the University of Southern Mississippi?

This thesis will identify the attitudinal and normative elements that are used and most successful at The University of Southern Mississippi to recruit high achieving students to USM.
Chapter 3 - Methodology

Participants

To answer the research question, high quality undergraduate students participated in a digital survey. This study asked 373 high ability students who recently enrolled in the University of Southern Mississippi to participate in a survey about their college selection processes. High ability students at USM are considered students who are members of the Honors College, are Leadership Scholars, or are Luckyday Scholars. To be considered for admission to the Honors College, students must have a minimum core high school GPA of 3.5 and a minimum ACT score of 27. To be a Leadership Scholar, students must have a minimum core high school GPA of 3.25 and a minimum ACT score of 25. The qualifications for receiving a Luckyday scholarship are the same as those for Leadership, except one must be a resident of Mississippi.

After approval by the Institutional Review Board the sample was contacted by distributing a link to the survey over e-mail. The e-mail addresses were obtained through the Office of Admissions at the University of Southern Mississippi. Participants were asked to voluntarily respond to the online survey. Because the sample was obtained by advertising, it was a convenience sample.

The sample was composed of thirty-eight males (26.4%) and one hundred six females (73.6%). The gender breakdown was also very representative of the entire population of high ability students: male = 110 (29.5%), female = 263 (70.5%). The sample size varied in particular analyses for the results because of the SPSS system. If respondents did not answer every question on the survey, then their responses for that analysis were deleted by SPSS.
Measures

The survey questions were measured with Likert scales. All survey questions included variables that students would consider when choosing a college. More specifically, the survey included questions about each student’s college recruitment experience and his or her decision process behind choosing to attend USM. The questions were based on the Theory of Reasoned Action. The questionnaire included 5 sets of questions. The first set included demographic data, the second included questions on the attitude towards behavior, the third set was evaluative questions about the attitude towards behavior, the fourth set was questions on the subjective norm component, and the fifth set was evaluative questions on the subjective norm component or the motivation to comply. Each of the variables used in the questionnaire have been found to be important to university applicants at USM and were gathered from the USM Admissions office on campus. Through previous recruitment research, the office has identified the primary reasons students go to college (behavioral norms) and the important people who can influence a college decision (subjective norms).

The first set of questions included demographic questions on gender, location of high school, and size of high school class (number of students in class). For the purposes of this study, graduating class size will stand for what was asked as “size of high school class” in the survey. Graduating class size was derived from a scale that is commonly used in the Office of Admissions at the University of Southern Mississippi. The participants listed their graduating class size number in the demographic section. The researcher then applied that number and assigned it to the admissions scale: 1 (1 student,
implies homeschooled), 2 (2-50 students), 3 (51-100 students), 4 (101-200 students), 5 (201-300 students), 6 (301-450 students), or 7 (450 or more students).

The second set of eleven questions was concerned with a student’s own process of choosing to attend USM. In the Theory of Reasoned Action, these questions coincide with the attitude towards behavior component. The questions asked participants to rate on a scale of 1-5 how likely it was that they thought USM would have each of the following eleven factors: better selection of academic programs to choose from, proximity to home, variety of on-campus housing options, scholarship offers, greater opportunity for social life, GPA and ACT/SAT scores be accepted as successful, good academic reputation, be able to graduate within 4 years, be able to find a job in their field, attend a campus that is the right size, be able to feel like the campus is my home. Each of the identified factors gave students an opportunity to assign a rating to whether or not each component (graduating within 4 years, good academic reputation, etc.) played a part in their final behavior of enrolling at USM.

The third set included eleven questions that dealt with the evaluative component of the attitude portion of the Theory of Reasoned Action. They asked how strongly each student agreed or disagreed that each factor (i.e., better selection of academic programs to choose from, proximity to home, and the like) played a part in choosing USM. For example, participants indicated on a scale how much they strongly disagreed or strongly agreed that having one of the previously mentioned eleven variables played a part in choosing a college.

The fourth set included eight questions that dealt with the subjective norm component of the Theory of Reasoned Action. The subjective norm component in TRA
is people who are considered influential in the participants’ lives. Each question asked participants to rate their perceptions of how strongly important others in their life agreed or disagreed that their student should attend USM. The eight important others included in the survey were: mother, father, church family/spiritual group, high school friends, friends that are Southern Miss Alumni, significant other, high school teachers, and high school counselor.

The fifth set included questions that dealt with the evaluative component of each of the eight subjective norms/important others. Each question asked how much students agreed or disagreed with what they thought their important others wanted them to do regarding the college decision. In the TRA, this is called the motivation to comply. For example, the survey asked participants to rate from strongly disagree to strongly agree with how much they want to do what an important other like a mother or father wants for his or her student when it comes to the decision about college.

After gathering all of this information, the researcher performed a statistical analysis of the data. The researcher exported the data from Qualtrics into the computer program SPSS.
Chapter 4 – Results

By statistically analyzing the data gathered from The University of Southern Mississippi high ability freshmen, the researcher was able to identify which attitudinal and normative factors influenced students’ decisions. For the attitude and normative questions, percentages were initially computed for each question. The first table reports the percentage of high achieving students who identified each variable as “very likely” or “likely” to exist at USM and ultimately influenced their decision to attend the University of Southern Mississippi.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of students who identified each variable as “Very Likely” or “Likely” to exist at USM and therefore influenced their decision to attend Southern Miss.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Likely</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of Academic Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University is Close to Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Several Scholarship Offers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity for Social Life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Academic Reputation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to Graduate in 4 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able to find a job in field</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus is Right Size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus feels like my home</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1*
Table one shows the percentage of students that selected “Very Likely” or “Likely” in believing that USM had each of the characteristics listed along the horizontal axis. This table reports prospective students’ knowledge of each variable existing at USM—basically characteristics that define the University of Southern Mississippi. It indicated that by choosing a college like the University of Southern Mississippi, each of those factors (i.e., the opportunity for a social life) was “Likely” or “Very Likely” to be present at USM and was considered a main reason for choosing to attend. The white part of each bar is the percentage of students that indicated each factor (better selection of academic programs to choose from, proximity to home, and the like) as “likely” for existing at USM, where the shaded part of each bar is the percentage of students that indicated each factor as “very likely” for existing at USM. While all variables have high percentages of being important to students choosing a college, the highest percentages (any combined total of more than 90%) and therefore the most important belief factors for high ability students were the large selection of academic programs offered at USM (96.3%), the scholarship offers given by USM (91.2%), the good academic reputation at USM (92.6%), and being able to graduate in 4 years at USM (92.6%). 90% was used as the common denominator because all of the variables were over 50%.

The second table reports the percentage of students who “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that each factor played a part in their decision to choose a college and ultimately attend USM. It is different from Table 1 because rather than noting the presence of the variable at USM, this table reflects students’ attitudes towards the variables and how important the variables were in students’ college selection. The white portion of each bar in Table 2 is the “agree” percentage where the shaded portion is the “strongly agree”
percentage. For each variable, at least 50% of the participants either strongly agreed or agreed in their evaluation of each variable that it played a part in choosing a college. While all variables were over 50%, the variables with the highest percentages of agreeing or strongly agreeing that they played a part in choosing a college were: having several scholarship offers from USM (97.7%), having high school ACT/GPA scores accepted as successful (90%), and USM having a good academic reputation (93.1%).
The third table reports the percentage of students who perceived that an important other “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the student’s decision to enroll at USM. The important others are influential individuals in students’ lives. The particular important others selected for this study are listed along the horizontal axis. The white portion of each bar in Table 3 is the “agree” percentage where the shaded portion is the “strongly agree” percentage.
The important others that were ranked highest as having agreed or strongly agreed with a student’s decisions to attend USM and the highest percentages overall (50% or greater) were mother (74.4%), father (68.3%), Southern Miss alumni friends (66.6%), high school teachers (59%), and high school counselors (56.3%).
Table 4 is based on the fifth data set from the questionnaire. It deals with students’ evaluative portion of their subjective norm/important other’s decision about attending USM. It showed the percentages of students who agreed or strongly agreed with what their important others want for them. Again, the white portion of each bar in Table 4 is the “agree” percentage where the shaded portion is the “strongly agree” percentage. The numbers were all below 40%. The highest combined percentages of the
student’s motivation to comply with the particular variables were for the mother (38.5%) and for the father (33.8%).
Chapter 5 – Discussion

In this chapter, interesting findings and possible implications will be addressed and discussed. The major components of the Theory of Reasoned Action and its importance to recruitment will be highlighted. Finally, limitations and weaknesses to the study will be addressed.

The Theory of Reasoned Action is a major communication theory that identifies attitude towards behavior and normative factors that influence the final outcome of a person’s decision process. TRA is important to recruiting because the identification of attitudinal and normative components for college decision helps the Admissions offices predict student decision for college choice. By using the Theory of Reasoned Action, admissions offices are able to identify factors for message adaptation to improve future recruitment. This theory is helpful when looking at a specific institution, like the University of Southern Mississippi, because researchers can identify a cohort of students considered high in ability. The questionnaire was developed from the foundational aspects of the Theory of Reasoned Action and allowed the researcher to answer the research question—what attitudinal and normative elements affect high ability students’ decisions to attend the University of Southern Mississippi?

The data produced several findings that were interesting. First, the results indicated that the attitudinal factors at USM that are the most visible to prospective students are the academic programs offered, the scholarship offers given by USM, the good academic reputation, and the opportunity to graduate within four years. Students indicated their belief that those factors existed at Southern Miss and that each of those factors was a main reason to attend. This is interesting because high ability students that
are interested in USM will be drawn towards those four factors. The admissions office should highlight those four characteristics of USM when trying to recruit more high ability students through campus visits and marketing pieces.

Students also indicated that having several scholarship offers from USM, having their ACT/GPA scores accepted, and USM having a good academic reputation were all the most important factors in their final decision to enroll. Knowing these factors was helpful for future recruiting practices at the University. To recruit students, admissions offices must know the most important factors about a school that will make a student want to enroll. These factors can be the core message used in recruiting when trying to reach the persuasive goals. The correlation between those three factors is also interesting to note. Students will receive more scholarship offers from USM if they have higher ACT/GPA scores. Consequently, if students have high ACT/GPA scores, then historically, they are more likely to be concerned with their academics and the academic reputation of the college they attend.

Survey participants indicated that influential important others that would agree and support a student’s decision to go to USM were students’ mothers, fathers, USM alumni friends, high school teachers, and high school counselors. This is significant because those are the important others in high ability students’ lives that will help encourage the University of Southern Mississippi for final college decision. USM recruiters need to be aware of these important others and ensure that they have proper information to give to these students to help persuade them to go to USM. In contrast, however, the student may not be convinced to act upon what one of those five important
others encourages. According to the results, students are not motivated to comply with all five of those important others.

The normative elements, mother and father, were the two most influential important others to students when deciding on a college. Students were most motivated to comply with what a mother or father wanted for the student. This was noteworthy from the recruitment standpoint because recruiters at USM should focus on getting a student’s mother and father invested in wanting their child to go to USM, where the other important others in the student’s life will not be able to persuade them as much as those two subjective norms can. In several ways, mothers and fathers should be recruited by USM just as much as the high ability student because the parents are the most influential subjective norms and can convince the student to choose the University of Southern Mississippi for college.

All of these findings are important because The University of Southern Mississippi has a need to understand what factors are important to market when persuading high ability students to enroll. If USM wants to move to recruiting more high ability students, then recognizing the most effective persuasive strategies for this cohort of students is pertinent to the overall successes of the University.

There were several limitations to the study with the first being that there was a fairly low response rate from the surveyed population. The sample is a convenience sample, with a modest return rate. Even though 151 students took the survey, only 131 were valid and fully completed. Those numbers were less than half of the entire population of high ability students that received the invitation to complete the survey. Because of these return rates, questions could be raised about participants who did not
respond. Each of those respondents could have had different views of the issue and could potentially change the overall results.

Future research on this topic would be useful if the same survey was sent to students who expressed interest in USM, but ultimately decided to enroll in another school. Comparisons could be made between the differences of variables that were identified as most important for each school. By determining variables that were more appealing at one school over the other, comparisons between the other schools and USM might show USM Admissions what factors should be improved to recruit more high ability students. The comparisons could help to identify shortcomings in USM’s recruitment practices and also highlight strong characteristics that students recognize USM for having. Future research on this topic could improve the competitiveness between University recruitment and put more emphasis on the importance of strategy in the college admissions process.
Chapter 6 - Conclusion

This project set out to identify best practices for recruiting high ability students to the University of Southern Mississippi. To identify the attitudinal and normative elements that affected high ability students’ decisions, the researcher used the Theory of Reasoned Action to generate questions about factors that could influence students’ enrollment decisions. After developing the questions, a survey was sent out to the high ability freshman cohort at the University of Southern Mississippi to collect the data. The survey’s results identified which factors should be highlighted and used when targeting prospective students. The main characteristics that should be made more aware to prospective students are the scholarship offers available from USM, the fact that ACT/GPA scores can be accepted, and the good academic reputation at USM. The results indicated that the mother and father were the most influential people in students’ college decision processes. Students are also the most motivated to comply with what the parents want. Recruiters should utilize a parent’s influence in helping to get students to enroll.

Several improvements could be made to the study. It would be beneficial to get survey information from students who expressed interest in USM but enrolled at other schools. This would allow the researcher to determine what features other schools have that were more appealing to the high ability student and then use that at USM to attract and persuade more high ability students to enroll.
References


Appendix A—Sample Questionnaire

Q2 Informed Consent: The University of Southern Mississippi Authorization to Participate in Research Project Consent is hereby given to participate in the study titled: Persuasion in Higher Education: Recruitment of High Ability Students

Purpose: The purpose of the proposed study is twofold—to understand the persuasive forms of communication that are used in recruiting students to institutions of higher education, and to understand what tactics are best for recruiting the top tier students from high schools around the country. It concentrates on the process of recruiting students to higher education institutions and then focuses on implementing the persuasion techniques into the recruitment system. The Theory of Reasoned action will be used as the theoretical basis for the study to help inform the recruitment process in a more effective manner.

Description of Study: In this study, I will be asked to complete a demographic form and three online surveys. All responses will be combined and exported into a computer database program and appropriately analyzed. This online survey does not incorporate any invasive procedures or ask about personally distressing information. I ensure that I am at least 18 years of age.

Benefits: The subjects will not receive any direct personal benefit from their participation. However, the subjects will be able to contribute to vital research concerning the recruitment process, potentially improving the recruitment strategies for the University of Southern Mississippi.

Risks: No foreseeable risks are associated with this survey. The questionnaire does not ask for significantly personal information, so no major risks are associated with subject completion of this survey. Prior to beginning the survey, subjects will be informed that they can skip any question or discontinue participating in the survey at any time with no consequence. In addition, the subjects will be able to contact the primary investigator at any time throughout the study.

Confidentiality: All survey and demographic information will be completed anonymously. Upon receiving the data, each survey will be given an identification number. The survey will then be separated from the informed consent and demographic form and stored in different areas. No hard files will be kept due to the online nature of the survey. When data are fully collected, survey information will be exported from the Qualtrics software into SPSS and stored on a password-protected computer. Only the primary researcher will have access to these Qualtrics records.

Alternative Procedures: I understand that I can discontinue participation in this study at any time without consequence. Subject’s Assurance: I understand that whereas no assurance can be made concerning results that may be obtained (since results from investigational studies cannot be predicted) the researcher will take every precaution consistent with the best scientific practice. Participation in this project is completely voluntary, and subjects may withdraw from this study at any time without penalty, prejudice, or loss of benefits. Questions concerning the research should be directed to Ann Marie Chilcutt at 662-312-5459 or ann.chilcutt@eagles.usm.edu. This project and this consent form have been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns
about rights as a research subject should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, (601) 266-6820. A copy of this form will be given to the participant.

Q4 Do you consent to participate in this study? (If you agree to participate, you are asserting that you are at least 18 years of age.)
   ☑ Yes (1)
   ☑ No (2)

Q6 Demographic Form-Please provide information that best describes you.

Q8 Sex:
   ☑ Male (1)
   ☑ Female (2)

Q10 Please list your hometown.

Q12 Where did you attend high school?

Q14 How big was your graduating high school class? (Number of students in your class)
Q15 Please select the answer that best applies to you and your process of choosing a college.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very Unlikely (1)</th>
<th>Unlikely (2)</th>
<th>Undecided (3)</th>
<th>Likely (4)</th>
<th>Very Likely (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>By choosing a college like the University of Southern Mississippi, I will be able to have a better selection of Academic programs to choose from. (1)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By choosing a college like the University of Southern Mississippi, I will be close to home. (2)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By choosing a college like Southern Miss, I will be able to have a variety of on-campus housing options. (3)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By choosing a school like Southern Miss, I will be able to have several scholarship offers to offset college tuition. (4)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By choosing a school like the University of Southern Mississippi, I will be able to have better selection of Academic programs to choose from. (5)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By choosing a school like the University of Southern Mississippi, I will have a greater opportunity for a social life. (5)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>By choosing a school like the University of Southern Mississippi, my high school GPA and ACT/SAT scores will be more accepted as successful. (6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By choosing a school like the University of Southern Mississippi, I know that I will be going to a college with a good academic reputation. (7)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By choosing a school like the University of Southern Mississippi, I will be able to graduate within 4 years. (8)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Southern Mississippi, I will be able to find a job in my field after graduation. (9)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>By choosing a school like the University of Southern Mississippi, I will be able to attend a campus that is the right size for me. (10)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By choosing a school like the University of Southern Mississippi, I will be able to feel like the campus is my home. (11)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By choosing a school like the University of Southern Mississippi, I will be able to feel like the campus is my home. (12)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q16 Please select the answer that best applies to you and your process of choosing a college.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree (1)</th>
<th>Disagree (2)</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)</th>
<th>Agree (4)</th>
<th>Strongly Agree (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having a better selection of academic programs played a part in choosing a college. (1)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being close to home played a part in choosing a college. (2)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having on-campus housing played a part in choosing a college. (3)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having several scholarship offers from. (4)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a greater opportunity for a social life played a part in choosing a college. (5)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having my ACT/GPA scores accepted played a part in choosing a college. (6)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A good academic reputation at
a university played a part in choosing a college. (7)
Being able to graduate within 4 years from a university played a part in choosing a college. (8)
Being able to find a job after college played a part in choosing a college. (9)
The size of the campus at the University of Southern Mississippi played a part in choosing a college. (10)
Feeling like campus is my home played a part in choosing a college. (11)
Q17 Please rate the answer that best applies to you and your process of choosing a college.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree (1)</th>
<th>Disagree (2)</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)</th>
<th>Agree (4)</th>
<th>Strongly Agree (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My mother thinks that I should attend Southern Miss for school. (1)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My father thinks that I should attend Southern Miss for school. (2)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My church family/spiritual group thinks that I should attend Southern Miss for school. (3)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My high school friends think that I should attend Southern Miss for school. (4)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends that are Southern Miss alumni think that I should attend Southern Miss for school. (5)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>My boyfriend or girlfriend thinks that I should attend Southern Miss for school. (6)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>My high school teachers think that I should attend Southern Miss for school. (7)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<td>○</td>
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<tr>
<td>My high school counselor thinks that I should attend Southern Miss for school. (8)</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
<td>○</td>
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<td>○</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Q18 Please rate the answer that best applies to you and your process of choosing a college.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Disagree (1)</th>
<th>Disagree (2)</th>
<th>Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)</th>
<th>Agree (4)</th>
<th>Strongly Agree (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When it comes to my decision about college, I want to do what my mother thinks I should do. (1)</td>
<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When it comes to my decision about college, I want to do what my father thinks I should do. (2)</td>
<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
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<td>🟡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When it comes to my decision about college, I want to do what my church family/spiritual group thinks I should do. (3)</td>
<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>When it comes to my decision about college, I want to do what my high school friends think I should do. (4)</td>
<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When it comes to my decision about college, I want to do what my Southern Miss Alumni friends think I should do. (5)</td>
<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
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<tr>
<td>When it comes to my decision about college, I want to do what my boyfriend or girlfriend thinks I should do. (6)</td>
<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
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<tr>
<td>When it comes to my decision about college, I want to do what my high school teachers think I should do. (7)</td>
<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
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<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When it comes to my decision about college, I want to do what my high school counselor thinks I should do. (8)</td>
<td>🟡</td>
<td>🟡</td>
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<td>🟡</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B- IRB Approval

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 21, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the “Adverse Effect Report Form.”
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months. Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 13091201
PROJECT TITLE: Persuasion in Higher Education: Recruitment of High Ability Students
PROJECT TYPE: New Project
RESEARCHER(S): Ann Marie Chilcutt
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Arts and Letters
DEPARTMENT: Communication Studies
FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 09/17/2013 to 09/16/2014

Michael Madson, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board