

# Perceptions of New College Students: A Study of One University

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## ABSTRACT

*Numerous environmental issues have made higher education very important in today's world. Additionally, with changes in the economic environment, many of today's youth are seeking a higher education. The market for higher education in a down economy increases. Because of that we are faced with a more competitive industry than in the past. Universities are not only institutions of higher learning, but they are also "marketers". In order to acquire the best and brightest students for their institutions, universities must understand and execute effective marketing. One of the keys to marketing higher education is the development of a strong brand image. In order to create a "brand" for a university, marketing personnel must have quality research that indicates how a university's market perceives the university. This study explores the perceptions that freshman students have prior to attending a university, and their perceptions after having been on the campus for at least one semester. The data analysis from this study indicated a downward shift in perceptions after University attendance. In particular, students had perceptual issues with their financial obligations, social activities and other "geographic" offerings. Additionally, this study showed a strong, positive correlation between involvement in campus clubs, organizations and other student groups and engagement on campus (versus traveling home on weekends).*

## INTRODUCTION

In order to assess changes in perceptions among new college students, a state-owned, Pennsylvania university was chosen for the research. The university chosen is a rural campus approximately 20 miles between larger cities. The university has approximately 11,000 students. Colleges at the university include the College of Visual and Performing Arts, the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, the College of Education, the College of Business and the College of Graduate Studies. There are numerous graduate programs on the campus. The university houses some 4,400 students on campus. Student life includes 170 student organizations ranging from advisory councils, fraternities/sororities to cultural events.

All students who apply to the university have a pre-application perception of the school. The topic of research under study relates to the question: "does that student perception change

while attending the university?" If a change occurs, does the change occur in a positive or negative direction?

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The main objective of this body of research is to answer the question: "Is there a shift in students' perceptions of a university after attending and does this shift go in a negative or positive direction"? In addition, recommendations have been generated concerning the university's response to the change. In other words, should the university create additional or more effective campus activities, including, but not limited to, academics, athletics, financial services, cultural offerings or social offerings? Do these impact image and perceptions?

Thus, this study focuses on the development and perception of university "products", and the inter-relationship of these products to create a consumer perception of the university. Specifically, the researchers tested attitudes and perceptions of students toward campus resources including: diversity, maintenance, quality of housing and quantity of housing. Also tested were attitudes and perceptions of students toward academics including: majors offered, faculty helpfulness, classroom size and the overall quality of the education. In terms of attitudes and perceptions of financial issues, the research looked at: affordability of tuition, quality of the overall investment, financial aid, affordability of housing, quality of the housing investment, dining options and food quality. In regard to athletics, measures included: attending events, joining sports teams and/or clubs and finally attending and/or joining intramural sports/activities. For social activities, attending college parties, attending concerts or events and involvement in clubs or groups were also tested.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Millions of high school students begin to search for a college or university that provides some measure of awareness or need satisfaction for them. Depending on geographical location, college students usually have an evoked set of options created by local institutions of higher learning. According to a 2001 study (Donehower 2001), most high school counselors notice that their advisees send their college applications to the same group of colleges and universities within their state, province or basic geographical area. This may be due to the "word-of-mouth" (WOM) aspect of communications for this segment of consumers (think social media). Student's perceptions of colleges and universities appear to stem from these two communication sources. One outcome is that numerous universities have a unique selling point based upon geographic location alone (Donehower 2001).

Institutions of higher education must pay attention to their overall marketing strategies and marketing plan. Typically, colleges and universities have had some issues in regard to their marketing programs. Marketing strategies have been "fuzzy" at best. Thus, colleges and universities need to change their strategies to create and promote positive perceptions and awareness of the university and what it has to offer in terms of products. In 2008, during an interview between Ms. Blumenstyk, a reporter for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and Ms. Stagaman, a higher education marketing specialist, Ms. Blumenstyk asked Ms. Stagaman what are the most effective marketing tactics that can be utilized by a college or university. The response, "...start with research to determine how your institution is perceived in key audiences you want to attract" (Blumenstyk 2008).

In addition, college and university recreational facilities and intramural sports are important areas for understanding student perception. According to the *National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association*, over one-third (1/3) of the nation's colleges and universities are currently building, or planning to build, new or renovated recreation facilities for campuses. The campus' appearance, with the inclusion of recreational facilities, is needed to attract and retain students (Barista 2008).

Accelerating college costs impact a students' choice in regard to staying on campus or commuting from home. If the student selects commuting, only colleges and universities in the student's geographic "commuting zone" will be selected as potential institutions for study (Moogan 1999). Thus, this study looks also looks at "location" as a variable helping the student select a college or university.

"Successful athletic programs often form the framework for an institution's brand identification and can cultivate distinct perceptions in the minds of the public" (Lee et al 2008). Because of this, the researchers want to study students to find if they have a positive or negative perception of the university's athletic program, and if that perception had an impact on choosing the institution of higher learning.

Finally, price and economical concerns need to be addressed. The recession impacts college decision-making. Students often turn to schools they (or their parents) can afford, thus omitting many options. Many state universities receive capital funds to ease that burden (Barista 2008). Can these funds help to create a university "product" which allows the university to create quality facilities, yet still keep the price reasonable? The relationship between perceptions of cost and quality are being tested in this research. Students and families want more "...bang for their buck..." (Nelson 2009) so colleges and universities must understand the relationship between affordability and quality perceptions.

In order to assess differences in perceptions, a research study was developed and executed. The following sections provide information on the research design, methodology and sample development.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

The researchers developed a study that would provide descriptive data. In addition, the researchers wanted to find out if there was a change in perception among the sample, so a casual study was utilized, with the first months of the new freshman's college experience used as the experimental variable. Thus it was possible to create a "before/after" study design. A review of relevant literature and three focus groups were used to develop questions used for the research instrument (in this case a questionnaire). The questionnaire was pre-tested, corrected and pre-tested a second time.

Since the universe under study encompassed freshman college students, a list of all freshmen at a state university in Pennsylvania was acquired. All freshmen were assigned a number and a randomized sample was taken from that sampling frame. Emails were utilized to send the questionnaire to the sample. The instrument consisted of two demographic questions, one geographic question and an additional 56 questions dealing with the freshman experience, pre-enrollment perceptions and post-enrollment perceptions. All data collected were confidential.

The total freshman population at the university was 1,986. From that a sample of 189 freshmen was used. The sample was drawn, as stated above, as a simple random sample.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The data were collected from the sample and uploaded into an Excel Spreadsheet. SPSS was then used to calculate various statistical analyses. Sample independence, equal variance and a normal distribution were assumed. The data were subjected to tests for description, frequency, correlation and variance (ANOVA).

When assessing the affordability variable, 84.1 percent of the respondents felt the tuition was affordable prior to their attending the university. After being exposed to the university, the perceptions of affordability changed with 55 percent of the sample indicating a neutral or negative association of the affordability. In order to explain the change, the researchers looked at the quality of education variable in relation to the tuition. When asked about the quality of education, the respondents' perceptions before attending were higher than after attending. The mean of the "quality of education" variable was 3.36 (on a five point scale with 5 being high quality of education and 1 being a low quality of education) prior to attending, but that mean was reduced to 2.85 after the students attended the university. The data indicate a downward shift in perception, so these data were subjected to further testing. Additionally, the researchers found that dining options, quality of food along with the quality of education had significant levels of variance (alpha was less than .05 percent for all).

In terms of the student body as a whole, the students perceived themselves as being "more socially" active prior to university attendance than after. In order to quantify this perception, the subjects were asked to respond to a series of questions about their social activities based on a scale that used four categories: 1. never; 2. occasionally 3. often and 4. very often. The questions referred to the students' social life prior to, and after attending the university. The first question asked about the frequency of attendance at college parties and concerts. The students' perceptions prior to attending showed a mean of 2.92 for parties and a mean of 2.5 for concerts. When asked how frequently they "currently" attend parties and concerts, the means dropped to 2.78 and 2.21 respectively. Again, students attend less parties and concerts than they perceived they would prior to attendance at the university. There were also decreases in perceptions of attendance at club meetings, involvement with organizations and student governance groups. While these variables were decreasing, the variable of traveling home was increasing. Thus, the researchers subjected the data to further statistical tests to see if there was a correlation between campus involvement and leaving campus (going home). The researchers found a significant relationship between traveling home and school-related, social activities. It was interesting to note that the respondents felt they would travel home significantly less than they actually do (a mean comparison of 2.35 to 2.75). Another surprising finding was that students were traveling outside of the university area for recreational opportunities. Because of that finding the researchers ran a correlation test and found that traveling home and recreational activities outside the university area were highly correlated.

Finally, when all responses (both before and after) were correlated, the before measurements of the respondents had a combined mean of 2.98. After attending, positive perceptions of the university experience dropped to 2.62. There is a drop in positive perceptions among the respondents (students) after being exposed to the university. After noting this, another question developed. Is there a difference in gender perceptions? When this query was looked at, the researchers found that the mean for male perceptions dropped from 2.83 to 2.68.

For females, the drop was from 3.09 to 2.57. Apparently females had higher expectations for the campus experience and were more disappointed than their male counterparts.

The research indicates a downward (negative) shift in perceptions before and after attendance at a university. This research does not answer why this occurs, it only points out that this perceptual difference does occur. More tests and investigation should be generated to help and explain this difference. Additionally, researchers at universities and colleges must try and find ways to mitigate these decreases in perceptions.

One interesting finding from the data is that there is no shift in perception in regard to athletic activities. It may be concluded, when looking at some of the data, that this university's freshmen class had little interest in the quality of the athletic team. Perhaps this stems from the fact that the university maintained NCAA Division II status. More research would be required in this area, however it is obvious that for this school, the students did not choose to attend based upon the quality of athletics.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The study indicated a negative shift in subjects' perceptions of their higher educational experience. This negative shift occurs in all students, both male and female, although the shift was more substantial among the female subjects. It is intuitively obvious from the findings that universities must find ways to keep their students on campus if they want to increase, or maintain, freshmen student perceptions. Extracurricular activities, parties, cultural events and other programming are important to the university's perception. Marketing to students to make sure they take advantage of all campus activities is also recommended. Based upon the findings in the "athletic quality" variable, the university may want to try and engage students with their athletic program. The costs of providing these programs need to be leveraged for the university.

The subjects appeared to be satisfied with the "campus" variables prior to, and after attending. In particular, there was a positive shift in the perception of campus diversity. This was followed with a negative shift in the perceptions of food and housing based on quality and price. This was somewhat surprising given the fact that the university has developed and maintained some of the best housing in their market area.

The data collected are important to colleges and universities. By ascertaining consumer perceptions, university marketing officers are better equipped to create a positive brand image for their campuses. Additionally, continuous improvement can occur by attending to those areas where there are significant shifts in student perception about university programs, the university itself, the quality of education, etc.

## **LIMITATIONS**

As is always the case in research, this study was limited by a number of factors. First, negative (or positive) word-of-mouth from peers, counselors, parents, the media, etc. may have an undue influence on subjects' responses. Visitation may also impact a subject's perception due to the weather, enthusiastic or unenthusiastic tour guides with a lot, or limited knowledge of the university. There may have been some problem with the maturation effect. The research instrument was quite long in that it had to generate data from pre- and post- situations.

Overall, the researchers feel that the data accurately and fairly represent those perceptions of the university prior to, and after attendance.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study was based at one, Eastern state university. In order to validate the findings and have the ability to generalize to other institutions of higher learning, more studies and research need to be undertaken. Private, public, two-year, four-year and other types of institutions of higher education need to be queried. An expansion of the sample size and subjects will create more valuable data and information.

Research that delves deeper into the subject's perceptions should also be undertaken. This study indicates that there are some issues with perception, additional studies should be undertaken that help to explain why these are occurring.

Finally, marketing officers at all colleges and universities must be aware of the findings. These findings will help the marketers create more effective marketing and branding plans for their institutions. Student activities offices must undertake MEANINGFUL, perceptual research that gets to the heart of a student's perception about their school. Programs that help "reach" the respondent's perceptions should be put into place; a comprehensive marketing plan (yearly and semester-based) should be developed and executed based upon research, not personnel's personal feelings about campus activities.

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