

**Undergraduate College Choice Survey
Executive Report and Recommendations**

Prepared for the Office of the Dean of Students
New Student Services
Division of Student Affairs
The University of Texas at Austin
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DoS Research Institute
Audrey Sorrells, PhD, Associate Dean of Students for Research
Heather Cole, LLB, MA, M.Ed., Graduate Research Assistant
In Collaboration with
New Student Services
College of Education, Department of Higher Educational Administration

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Initiative: New Students and First Year Experience

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The purpose of this project was to pilot a study examining the college choice process of students currently attending The University of Texas at Austin. As preliminary research, the study is limited but will be used to assist in the development of a more comprehensive report in 2012. For the initial report, the research team included: Audrey Sorrells; Pat Somers, Associate Professor of Educational Administration; Cristi Biggs, Assistant Dean of Students for New Student Services; Gale Stuart, Coordinator, Office of Assessment; and graduate research assistants, Heather Cole (Research Institute), Grace Hamilton (Diversity Mentoring Fellow), and Alyssa Kaye (Office of Assessment).

Background and Significance: Why study college choice here at UT?

When do young people begin to think about going to college? Who encourages their attendance and choice of college? What factors influence which college they attend or whether they attend at all? This study seeks to examine college choice in the new millennium. Most of the research was performed using data from the 1980s with a sample of 18-year-old students. The students largely were traditional, full-time students who immediately attended a four-year college upon graduation from high school.

Much of the research on college student decision-making employs economic and sociological theoretical frameworks to examine the phenomenon of college choice (Hearn, 1984; Jackson, 1978; Tierney, 1983). These frameworks have been used to develop conceptual models of college choice.

There are basically three strands of theoretical approaches: 1) economic models, 2) status-attainment models, and 3) combined models. Each of these models significantly contributes to attempts at developing a theoretical construct explaining the decision-making process that students employ when choosing a college. The economic models center on the econometric assumptions that prospective college students are rational actors and make careful cost-benefit analyses when choosing a college or university (Hossler et al., 1989).

The status attainment models are rooted in sociological theory and assume a utilitarian decision-making process that students go through in choosing a college or university. These

models specify a variety of social and individual factors leading to occupational and educational aspirations. Educational attainment (which includes college entry) results from the interaction between these aspirations and real-world effects (Jackson, 1982). Since the effect of constraints on college attendance is of less interest to sociologists than the aspiration-building process, studies based on the status attainment model usually focus on aspirations themselves.

The combined models share the rational assumptions suggested in the economic models but incorporate components of the status-attainment models. As Litten (1982) observed, college choice is a complex process involving many factors and variables. Most combined models divide the student decision-making process into three phases. First, students' aspirations develop as sociologists suggest they do; these, along with an assessment of resources, combine to yield criteria for evaluating alternatives. Next, students consider their options, excluding some as unfeasible and obtaining information about others. Finally, students evaluate the remaining options and select according to their judgments (Jackson, 1982).

More recently, Somers and her associates (Bauer, 2004; Somers, et al., 2005; Stokes & Somers, 2009) studied the choice process of two-year college students using a hybrid model and national data. The results were very different from previous studies, with the factors price and location featuring most prominently in the decision.

For this study, a hybrid-combined model was utilized. The factors most commonly associated with a comprehensive college choice model include student background characteristics (Hanson & Litten, 1982; Jackson, 1982), aspirations (Chapman, 1984; Hossler et al., 1989; Jackson, 1982), educational achievement (Hanson & Litten, 1982; Jackson, 1982), social environment (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), financial variables (St. John, 1990; 1991), net cost (Chapman, 1984; St. John & Starkey, 1995), institutional climate (Chapman, 1984; Hanson & Litten, 1982), institutional characteristics (Hanson & Litten, 1982; Hossler et al., 1989). Using a small sample of entering students attending the annual orientation session at the University of Texas, data was collected to address the commonly associated with a comprehensive college choice model.

The following data is the compiled results of the approximately 200 surveys administered over the summer of 2010 at 6 different orientation sessions. As noted, this data gives a preliminary breakdown of some factors influencing students' college choice. In the fall semester, a focus group was conducted using a sampling of the same subjects to explore in greater detail elements of college choice. The data from the focus groups is currently being coded and analyzed.

Summary of Preliminary Findings

The data from the completed survey was compiled into descriptive representations to help illuminate some of the possible areas of future study as well as provide preliminary insight about undergraduate students' reasons for attending The University of Texas at Austin. These are discussed in the following sections. The compiled data are charted and provided at the end of this report.

The 220 participants were male (42.5%) and female (57.5%); nearly all of them reported their age as 22 years or younger. Seventy-five percent of the respondents were students of color. A breakdown revealed African American (19.7%), Hispanic/Latino (29.4%), Asian (18.8%), or

Multi-ethnic/Other (9.1%). Less than a quarter of the respondents self identified as Caucasian/White. All of the participants reported being single with no children; only one participant identified as a veteran student. Of the respondents answering the question about disability status, 46.4% (13/28) said they had a learning disability. Finally, ninety-six percent (n=191) of the participants in the study had enrolled in 12 hours or more of coursework.

Interesting but not surprising, were findings that a majority (nearly 90%) of the respondents were entering postsecondary education for the first time, and only one student indicated transferring from another state. Also, a full two-thirds of the respondents reported that they had at least one parent who had attended a postsecondary institution (67.3% of mothers and 68.6% of fathers). Notably, when surveyed about their financial support in college, more than 30% received a Pell Grant. Fifty-one percent indicated receipt of a student loan, while 61% of the respondents reported receiving another type of financial aid from the university.

Why do these students attend college?

Based on the participants' ratings of importance, the majority indicated that college attendance is somewhat or very important for the following reasons: career preparation (97%); job advancement (91.8%); obtain a bachelor's degree (98.7%); financial wellness (94.5%); better opportunity for children (77.3%); and career success (99.5%).

Why do students choose UT Austin?

The survey respondents indicated the level of importance to 39 items in their choice to attend UT Austin. We coded and categorized their responses of importance on six factors: academics and services, costs of college attendance, faculty, campus climate and safety, and university reputation and career readiness.

Academics, Academic Support and Student Services

Ninety-eight percent of the survey participants reported that academic services provided at UT Austin were either somewhat important (12.6%) or very important (85.4%) in their choice to attend this university. Also somewhat or very important in their decision were accessible facilities (84.4%), academic programs offered (98%), materials provided by the university (77%), and good facilities and equipment (91.4%). We found it interesting that over 88% of the respondents rated the availability of student services as somewhat important or very important, while slightly more than one-third of these respondents indicated that the availability of remedial courses were somewhat or very important in their college choice of UT Austin.

The Cost of Attending UT Austin

Concerning the costs of college attendance and financial aid available to them at UT Austin, nearly 80% of respondents reported that the overall cost of attendance and tuition costs at UT Austin was either somewhat important or very important to them, as well as the financial aid

offered (66%). While students indicated concern about the costs of attendance and tuition at UT Austin, only about 31% of them said that a shorter time to finish college requirements was either somewhat or very important to them. Respondents reported that class scheduling (70%) and class size (65%) was also somewhat or very important to their decision to attend UT Austin.

UT Faculty

It is essential to highlight that respondents rated as somewhat important or very important UT Austin faculty as well as faculty role/reputation and contact with faculty, in their college choice. To illustrate, 85% indicated that the reputation of faculty at UT Austin was either somewhat important or very important. In addition, 75% of the respondents reported that frequent contact with faculty is either somewhat important or very important for them while at UT Austin; in fact, 80% of them revealed that a chance to meet with faculty outside of the class was either somewhat important or very important to them. Finally, 61% of the survey respondents thought that the kind of information provided by a staff or faculty member to them was also either somewhat or very important.

Climate and Safety

In this survey, the respondents also reported that campus safety (77.4%), campus climate (63%) and campus location (85%) were either somewhat important or very important to them.

University Reputation and Career Readiness

Although only preliminary, it was clear that the reputation of UT Austin was either somewhat important or very important to nearly 95% of the respondents in this survey. This is significant for the University. Eighty-four percent reported that factors such as job placement rates and improved job skills are very important in their decision to enroll in and graduate from UT Austin.

Lessons Learned

As noted, this is a report of our findings on college choice of slightly more than 200 new student orientation participants collected over 6 orientation sessions in the Summer of 2010. We deem this as very preliminary, but promising, both with respect to the results and interpretations of the findings in light of informing current and future programs and services. Despite limitations of the study, we believe that the study was important for two reasons: first, it provided insights and understandings about the new and diverse, incoming college freshman at UT Austin; and second, it informed us of some serious gaps in what we know about this population at UT Austin. As a pilot, it provided us with a unique opportunity to rethink research design, data collection methods and tools, as well as survey administration and analysis, so that we might better design and deliver our new student orientation program. This study has influenced the orientation program for students as well as parents.

We are currently developing ways to improve the college parent engagement orientation based in part on what we learned from students. We will use the data to refine a program on parent engagement and adjustment to transitioning children from home to college. What we have learned to date is that we have quite a bit more we can learn about new, incoming students and their parents, but this study was a necessary first step to a more systematic and comprehensive examination college choice.

Recommendations for Future Study

This is a pilot study that yielded only preliminary results for improving policy and program decisions for new students at UT. It provided some markers of potential issues and concerns for both students and parents during their first college year. It is our hope that further research into these factors might yield findings to improve student choice, persistence and retention as well as increase achievement and graduation rates of a growing and increasingly diverse population of college students. Our next step is to design a more comprehensive study on college choice using a streamlined questionnaire followed by more extensive focus groups that include not just student but parent participants.

Use Electronic Surveying. The data collected was limited in part because the collection of the surveys through direct recruitment of participants yielded limited results. There are too many other providers competing with new students' time during the orientation session. An electronic survey would likely yield far greater response numbers, and with greater diverse representation among participants in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, international status, high school attended, generation status, college major, financial support, family role related to college choice, etc.

Modify the survey format for easier use and reword/delete confusing items. The format of the survey was not user friendly with a Likert preference scale confusing many of the participants. This necessitates reformatting the questions. In addition, now that the survey has been piloted, there are questions that are confusing and need to be either abandoned or reworded altogether.

Add a parent college choice component to the existing research design. As indicated, the overlap between student and parental college choice is fascinating. It would be helpful and informative to produce a parallel survey for parents that could inform another study concerning how parent choice and student choice intersect. We also conducted parent orientation sessions at each of the 6 orientation sessions. The response and turnout for each session was high with standing-room only attendance. Clearly, tapping into parental influences and concerns could yield very interesting data particularly if that was compared to the student data.

Develop a user-friendly comprehensive questionnaire for both parent and student survey participants to increase response rate and decrease survey costs. For the next round of data collection, the researchers would like to work in cooperation with the Assessment team headed by Dr. Gale Stewart to develop a workable and comprehensive questionnaire(s) concerning student and parent college choice. This questionnaire could be publicized during Orientation but also be made available electronically so that costs could be decreased and response rates increased. This will make tabulating the data exceedingly more simple and less subject to error.

Provide a designated time and space for survey administration. For the next round of data collection, it is recommended that (1) greater attention is given to ensuring that all new student orientation participants are provided with explicit details of the survey purpose, format, reporting and use; (2) new students who agree to participate in the survey are identified during the orientation sessions and encouraged to sign a Letter of Consent during one of the planned sessions; (3) when feasible designated time slots and space with computers can be identified to allow consenting students to participate in the online survey during the orientation week; and (4)

a request to complete the survey is sent out at least on two other occasions following the new student orientation week to encourage increased response rates.

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Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents

| Gender | Freq | Percent |
|------------------------------|------|---------|
| Male | 94 | 42.5% |
| Female | 127 | 57.5% |
| Age | | |
| 22 or younger | 218 | 99.1% |
| 22-30 | 2 | 0.9% |
| Ethnicity | | |
| Caucasian | 49 | 22.5% |
| African American | 43 | 19.7% |
| Latino | 64 | 29.4% |
| Native American | 1 | 0.5% |
| Multi-ethnic | 11 | 5.0% |
| Asian | 41 | 18.8% |
| Other | 9 | 4.1% |
| Are you enrolled for: | | |
| 1-3 hours | 0 | 0.0% |
| 4-9 hours | 3 | 1.5% |
| 9-11 hours | 5 | 2.5% |
| 12 hours or more | 191 | 96.0% |

| <i>Respondents who said Yes</i> | Freq | Percent | Total N |
|--|------|---------|---------|
| Learning disability | 13 | 46.4% | 28 |
| Other disability | 1 | 12.5% | 8 |
| First postsecondary institution attended | 189 | 87.5% | 216 |
| Transferred from junior/community college | 12 | 5.6% | 215 |
| Transferred from another college in TX | 7 | 3.2% | 219 |
| Transferred from another college outside of TX | 1 | 0.5% | 219 |
| Transferred from another college outside of US | 0 | 0.0% | 218 |
| Mother attended any postsecondary institution | 148 | 67.3% | 220 |
| Father attended any postsecondary institution | 151 | 68.6% | 220 |
| Receiving a Pell Grant | 67 | 30.5% | 220 |
| Receiving a student loan | 113 | 51.8% | 218 |
| A veteran | 1 | 0.5% | 219 |
| Receiving VA benefits | 6 | 2.8% | 216 |
| Receiving another type of financial aid | 131 | 60.9% | 215 |
| Taken online courses | 43 | 19.6% | 219 |
| Have children | 0 | 0.0% | 216 |
| Single | 217 | 100.0% | 217 |

Table 2: Factors and Their Importance in Choice to Attend College

| <i>Why are you attending college?</i> | Not important | Somewhat important | Very important | N |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|--------------------|----------------|-----|
| Preparation for a career | 3.0% | 5.0% | 92.0% | 200 |
| Job advancement | 8.2% | 21.4% | 70.4% | 196 |
| Receive a: Certificate | 47.3% | 20.0% | 32.7% | 55 |
| Receive a: Associate's | 36.6% | 34.1% | 29.3% | 41 |
| Receive a: Bachelor's | 1.3% | 11.0% | 87.7% | 154 |
| Get away from home | 47.7% | 42.1% | 10.3% | 195 |
| Be well off financially | 5.1% | 28.6% | 66.3% | 196 |
| Better opportunity for children | 22.6% | 26.8% | 50.5% | 190 |
| Succeed in career | 0.5% | 7.6% | 91.9% | 197 |

Table 3: Factors and Their Importance in Choice to Attend UT Austin

| <i>Why are you attending this college?</i> | Not important | Somewhat important | Very important | N |
|---|---------------|--------------------|----------------|-----|
| Academic services provided | 1.9% | 12.6% | 85.4% | 206 |
| Accessible facilities | 13.2% | 30.3% | 54.1% | 205 |
| Campus safety | 22.4% | 45.4% | 32.2% | 205 |
| Child care options | 92.4% | 5.6% | 2.0% | 197 |
| Class scheduling | 30.2% | 45.7% | 24.1% | 199 |
| Financial aid offered | 34.0% | 28.0% | 38.0% | 200 |
| Overall cost of attendance | 19.1% | 35.2% | 45.7% | 199 |
| Job placement rate | 17.1% | 29.6% | 53.3% | 199 |
| Academic programs offered | 2.0% | 12.5% | 85.5% | 200 |
| Campus climate | 37.0% | 32.5% | 30.5% | 200 |
| Campus location | 14.7% | 27.9% | 57.4% | 204 |
| Class size | 44.3% | 35.8% | 19.9% | 201 |
| Availability of student services | 11.9% | 36.6% | 51.5% | 202 |
| Availability of remedial courses | 56.8% | 27.6% | 15.6% | 199 |
| Reputation of institution | 7.0% | 18.4% | 74.6% | 201 |
| Opportunity to participate in athletics and sports | 55.6% | 21.7% | 22.7% | 198 |
| Price of tuition | 20.9% | 35.8% | 43.3% | 201 |
| Availability of online courses | 70.6% | 19.9% | 9.5% | 201 |
| Reputation of faculty | 15.8% | 35.6% | 48.5% | 202 |
| Frequent contact with faculty | 24.4% | 40.3% | 35.3% | 201 |
| Chance to meet with faculty outside of class | 20.5% | 40.0% | 39.5% | 200 |
| Recommendation from friend | 40.4% | 27.8% | 31.8% | 198 |
| Recommendation from neighbor | 67.2% | 18.7% | 14.1% | 198 |
| Recommendation from teacher or counselor | 42.9% | 26.8% | 30.3% | 198 |
| Recommendation from church | 78.8% | 12.6% | 8.6% | 198 |
| Recommendation from spouse | 87.4% | 5.3% | 7.4% | 190 |
| Recommendation from workplace | 84.4% | 5.7% | 9.9% | 192 |
| Other recommendation | 68.1% | 9.7% | 22.2% | 72 |
| Materials provided by college | 22.4% | 41.7% | 35.9% | 192 |
| Information provided by a staff or faculty member at this college | 38.2% | 30.9% | 30.9% | 191 |
| College is close to home | 42.7% | 32.7% | 24.6% | 199 |
| College is close to job | 80.9% | 9.3% | 9.8% | 194 |
| College has good facilities/equipment | 8.6% | 25.9% | 65.5% | 197 |
| I can live at home | 91.0% | 4.3% | 4.8% | 188 |
| Parents/family want me to attend this college | 51.0% | 25.5% | 23.5% | 200 |
| Shorter time to finish | 68.8% | 22.1% | 9.0% | 199 |
| Improve job skills | 16.7% | 24.2% | 59.1% | 198 |
| Required by job | 64.2% | 14.5% | 21.2% | 193 |
| So I can transfer to a 4-year college | 84.0% | 7.0% | 9.1% | 187 |

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