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A Comparison of For-profit and Community Colleges’ Admissions Practices

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College choice has been an area of inquiry in higher education research for decades. While this scholarship has evolved, it has yet to incorporate the fastest-growing sector of higher education: for-profit colleges and universities. The authors investigate the admissions and recruitment conditions that would lead students—particularly those from low-income backgrounds—to consider a for-profit college over a community college. Specifically, the paper considers information provided to prospective students by several for-profit and community colleges in an urban city. On the basis of this research, conclusions and future directions for college choice theory and organizational practice are developed.
recent proliferation and politicization of for-profit colleges has prompted important scholarly exploration (Kinser 2006; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen and Person 2009; Ruch 2001; Tierney and Hentschke 2007). Of current concern is the growing number of students—particularly low-income students of color—enrolling at for-profit institutions that could place them at considerable risk for debt (Chung 2012; Garrity, Garrison and Fiedler 2010; Hing 2012; Ruch 2001). Comparable degrees typically could be acquired at a community college for significantly less money. One possible interpretation is that for-profit colleges trick customers into buying a poor product. The purpose of this paper is to investigate this notion and to suggest that such an interpretation may be simplistic. We called upon the student choice literature to focus on one particular part of the decision to attend an institution: the entry point. Over the course of three months, we called five community colleges and five for-profit institutions to gauge how they responded to a prospective student. Rather than suggest that one institution is good and another bad, we suggest instead that how institutions engage with prospective students is in part a reflection of the culture and ideology of the institution and may affect prospective students’ choice of which college to attend.

Accordingly, we review the literature on college choice, focusing on students’ initial engagement and how they construct going to college. Our intent is to explore commonalities and differences between for-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs) and public community colleges as they pertain to admissions practices. We begin by providing a brief background of the college student choice literature. In the second part of this paper, we explore the missions and admissions practices of FPCUs and community colleges. We then present results from a case study that investigates information presented to a prospective student by several FPCUs and community colleges. We conclude with new considerations relevant to the future direction of college choice and admissions research on for-profit and community colleges.

**STUDENT COLLEGE CHOICE**

Whether to attend an institution of postsecondary education and which institution to attend are two of the most important decisions prospective students make (Johnson and Chapman 1979). These decisions are guided by the quality of information prospective students gather. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) define college choice as a process or stage(s) students go through to determine which college to attend. Models of college decision making generally examine the stages that lead to a choice. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) identify three critical stages: (1) predisposition, in which the person makes a decision to attend college, (2) search, wherein a person begins to seek information about colleges and narrows his alternatives, and (3) choice, during which the student considers alternatives and decides which college to attend. This particular
model emphasizes the role of the student rather than the institution in the decision-making process.

Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) updated this model to include information-gathering, information-processing, and decision-making activity. While the three initial stages of college choice remain, the new model emphasizes the information students gather and the social capital they access. A greater focus on information processing helps us understand the least explored part of the college-choice process: the search. This paper focuses on the search, when prospective students gather and construct information about institutional admissions practices. The importance of obtaining accurate information about college extends well beyond enrollment decisions (Cabrera and LaNasa 2000). Satisfaction with college and the achievement of educational and career goals appears to be contingent in large part on the quality of information secured during the search stage (Cabrera and LaNasa 2000).

The college choice process often is likened to a funnel in which prospective students consider attending higher education and finally determine where they will attend (Hossler and Gallagher 1987; Litten 1982). As students develop firm aspirations to attend college, they begin to focus on where they would like to attend. Cabrera and LaNasa (2000) identify four primary factors that influence enrollment at a specific institution: institutional quality, availability of academic majors, the student’s ability to finance her enrollment, and campus life. We engaged admissions counselors particularly on the topics of enrollment and finance.

**COLLEGE CHOICE: THE SEARCH PHASE**

The search phase refers to the examination of colleges’ attributes and characteristics. According to Chapman (1986), relevant college attributes include cost, academic quality, post-graduation career prospects and opportunities, quality of student life, and related considerations. The search phase concludes with the application decision—i.e., when a student decides to which colleges she will submit formal applications for admission (Chapman 1986). Students utilize a variety of strategies to obtain information during the search phase. The phase is not uniform for all prospective students and tends to vary in intensity over time (Cabrera and LaNasa 2000; Hossler, Schmit and Vesper 1999). Prospective students may transition among three different approaches to searching: attentive, active, and interactive (National Postsecondary Education Cooperative [NPEC] 2007). For example, many students may be receptive or attentive to pertinent information even though they may not actively seek it—particularly during the early phases of the search process (NPEC 2007).

The search phase involves the accumulation and assimilation of information necessary to develop the list of institutions to which the prospective student may apply (Cabrera and LaNasa 2000). This list is largely dependent on the thoroughness of the prospective student’s search process, which itself is largely determined by socioeconomic factors (McDonough 1997). In general, compared to their less affluent peers, more affluent students rely on several sources of information (including private counselors), are more knowledgeable about college costs, are more likely to broaden the search to include a wider geographical range, tend to consider higher-quality institutions, and have parents who planned and saved for college (Flint 1992; Hossler, Schmit and Bouse. 1991; Hossler, Schmit and Vesper 1999; McDonough 1997; Tierney 1986).

**NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS AND COLLEGE CHOICE**

College choice literature tends not to focus on community colleges and the growing percentage of for-profit college students. It often describes for-profit and community college students as ‘nontraditional’ and, more specifically, as more than 23 years old (Tumblin 2002). Bers and Smith (1987) found that nontraditional students often decide to attend college because of a significant personal event or dramatic change at work. College characteristics that influence their choice include convenience and affordability (Bers and Smith 1987; Tumblin 2002). In general, nontraditional students prefer colleges that are close to their homes and are reluctant to enroll at more distant colleges because of the inconvenience, time, cost of parking, and concerns about safety. Affordability is of high interest to students trying to finance their own education (as well as their children’s) and to single parents responsible for financially supporting their families (Bers and Smith 1987).

**COLLEGE CHOICE AND FOR-PROFIT COLLEGES**

In one of the few studies regarding for-profit college choice, Chung (2008) found that students self-select into for-profit colleges and that for-profit college choice...
is affected by community college tuition. Chung (2008) asserts that the probability of a prospective student choosing a for-profit college is heavily influenced by his socioeconomic background and parental involvement in his schooling. Chung reports further that students with higher secondary school absenteeism are more likely to enroll at for-profit colleges and that the number of for-profit colleges in a prospective student’s area is important in his decision making. Chung asserts that a primary difficulty in defining choice outcomes derives from the fact that students—particularly those attending for-profit colleges—historically have been “very mobile” across the set of available institutional choices. Upon completing high school, they are more likely to delay college; after enrolling, they are more likely to drop out of college, transfer, and re-enter a different college.

Research documents these enrollment patterns among for-profit college students and focuses particularly on the patterns of students of color (National Center for Education Statistics 2012). (See Figure 1). Black students are among those who increasingly are opting to pursue postsecondary education at for-profit colleges. As of 2011, the nation’s top awarder of baccalaureate degrees to black students was the University of Phoenix, the largest for-profit college in the United States (Hing 2012). From the 2004–05 to the 2008–09 school year, enrollment of black students at four-year for-profit schools increased 218 percent but only 2.4 percent and 27 percent at public four-year and two-year institutions, respectively (Hing 2012). For-profit institutions clearly are changing the choice patterns of prospective students in general and of prospective students of color in particular. (See Figure 2.)

**COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND FOR-PROFIT COLLEGES: PURPOSES AND PRACTICES**

In addition to their commitment to meeting their local communities’ educational needs, community colleges seek to serve all who have the need and desire to participate in postsecondary education (Gleazer 1980; Mullin 2010). Community colleges offer a variety of services, including academic and career counseling, tutoring, and developmental education, as part of their effort to respond to a wide range of student readiness. In part because of their rapid expansion and wide-ranging missions, community colleges are sometimes poorly understood, and policy makers often struggle to determine how to utilize them to meet labor and market goals (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amern and Person 2009).

Community college students usually are accepted on a first-come, first-served basis, up to the capacity of the institution (Bailey, Badway and Gumport 2001). Community colleges’ open admissions policies have contributed to their burgeoning enrollments as well as to concern about their funding and capacity constraints. These institutions are particularly important because they are the primary source of postsecondary education opportunity for ethnic minority and low-income students as well as for those who
attended poor high schools and/or performed poorly in high school (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen and Person 2009).

At its simplest level, the for-profit postsecondary education sector comprises a group of institutions that awards post–high school degrees or credentials and that is exempt from some of the requirements that constrain private, non-profit postsecondary schools (Deming, Goldin and Katz 2012). Although it often is discussed as a recent phenomenon, the for-profit sector has been a component of the educational enterprise since the 1800s (Kinser 2006). However, only recently have for-profit institutions begun to have a profound impact on the postsecondary education landscape. Enrollment at the country’s nearly 3,000 for-profit colleges has increased an average of 9 percent per year over the past 30 years—a far greater rate than non-profit public and private institutions’ 1.5 percent annual enrollment increase during the same period (Wilson 2010). During the 2008–09 academic year, nearly 1.8 million students were enrolled at FPCUs in the United States (Bennett, Lucchesi and Vedder 2010). For-profit colleges have contributed to an increase in the nation’s overall college attainment: The share of degrees produced in the United States by FPCUs has increased from less than 1 percent 40 years ago to nearly 10 percent in 2007 (Tierney and Hentschke 2007). FPCUs’ ability to efficiently and quickly meet new demand (and to discontinue programs which no longer yield a profit) is often cited as crucial to their growth, as is their reliance on part-time faculty, corporate governance structures, standardized and nonteaching faculty–generated curriculum, minimal investment in buildings and/or campuses, and little or no support for research (Garrity, Garrison and Fiedler 2010; Morey 2004; Tierney and Hentschke 2007).

Overall, FPCUs enroll a much more diverse group of students than do traditional public and private non-profit universities (Bennett, Lucchesi and Vedder 2010). Studies have long observed that FPCUs tend to cater to and are chosen by those students defined as disadvantaged in that they tend to have or to come from families with modest or low incomes and minimal education and who are racial minorities or otherwise underrepresented in higher education (Ruch 2001). (This may be an artifact of their frequent location in urban centers typified by diverse and economically disadvantaged populations.) Unfortunately, for-profit institutions bestow the least certain educational and economic advantages upon their students and graduates (Bound, Lovenheim and Turner 2010; Institute for Higher Education Policy 2002).

Key criticisms of the for-profit higher education industry cite its aggressive marketing and lack of admissions criteria (Seiden 2009). Some for-profit institutions have been sanctioned for their overly forceful marketing and enrollment tactics. They also have been criticized for marketing to any and all potential students, regardless of their ability to perform college-level work (Seiden 2009). Most recently, for-profit colleges were the target of a bruising federal investigation led by Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) (Lee 2012). Of note is the overall scarcity of literature on FPCUs. The influence and ethics of for-profit colleges have been debated in newspaper articles (Lewin 2012; Wilson 2010), but empirical research of the sector is scarce.

METHODS

We undertook a comparative case study of the institutional admissions practices of for-profit and community colleges. The goal was to gain a better understanding of admissions practices at for-profit colleges, particularly in comparison to those at community colleges. After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board, one member of the research team posed as a prospective student interested in earning a certificate or associate’s degree in business. The “prospective student” called each institution’s admissions officer in order to ask questions related to the admissions and enrollment process. Specifically, the “prospective student” sought information about the program, how she would be supported as a student, financial aid, and employment outcomes.

SAMPLE

The sample included five community colleges and five for-profit colleges in a city with a population of more than 3 million people. To ensure that the institutions were similar and accredited, IPEDS 2011 data were examined. (See Table 1, on page 7.) The goal was to survey a pool of institutions a prospective student in the search phase might realistically consider attending. Beyond this, choice of institutional participants was random.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

“Mystery shopping” is an investigation in which a person assumes the role of a client or prospective customer in
order to assess the quality of a service or obtain specific information for research purposes (Walker and George 2010). Mystery shopping has long been a valuable tool for evaluating service provision in the business world, particularly in retail services (Walker and George 2010). Given that mystery shopping relies on an element of deception in that the “shopper” has to ensure that those serving her are unaware of her real purpose, questions have been raised relative to its ethics. In addition to gaining the approval of our institution’s IRB, we collected no revealing or identifying information about any admissions counselor in order to ensure that institutions and practitioners remained anonymous at all stages of the investigation. An African-American female in her mid 20s served as the “mystery shopper” and used a pseudonym.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Semi-structured interviews (i.e., conversations with admissions counselors) provided data for this study. The researcher utilized the same script in soliciting information about each institution but was flexible in conversing with each admissions counselor. No specific amount of time was allotted for the interviews because their length was contingent upon how much information each admissions counselor was willing to provide. No interview lasted longer than 30 minutes. Data initially derived from two sources: transcriptions of phone calls with each institution’s admissions counselor as well as the mystery shopper’s documentation of her thoughts as a customer throughout the information-gathering process.

TRUSTWORTHINESS AND VALIDITY

Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that qualitative data and qualitative evidence are not always synonymous, so it was important to highlight the qualitative evidence in the study in order to build trustworthiness and validity. The trustworthiness of the research relates to the researcher’s ability to conduct and present a fair and unbiased investigatory study in the best interest of the participants (Creswell 1998). Lincoln and Guba (1985) rely on credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability to af-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community College</th>
<th>For-Profit College</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Profile</td>
<td>Public 2-year institution that offers certificates and associates degrees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Total Population</td>
<td>20,000 - 30,000 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Tuition Cost</td>
<td>$2,500 - $3,500&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation Status</td>
<td>Accredited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Student-to-Faculty Ratio</td>
<td>35 to 1</td>
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<sup>1</sup> In-state
<sup>2</sup> In-state and out-of-state same price

Table 1.
Sample Characteristics, by College Type

firm the trustworthiness of a naturalistic approach. To ensure credibility, the researcher compiled field and observation notes immediately after each of the interviews and called each institution multiple times to ensure that responses were similar across representatives. Transferability has to do with the degree to which the findings can be applied to other settings (Lincoln and Guba 1985). We developed thorough descriptions of the mystery shopper’s experiences on the basis of the memos and notes she took during her conversations. For dependability, we used a code/recode procedure (i.e., we coded the data and then waited for a period of time before re-coding it). Conformability has to do with the degree to which the findings are based on the condition of the research (Lincoln and Guba 1985). We developed an electronic audit trail of all research documents, including: interview journals, audiotapes, and transcripts.

LIMITATIONS

The ten colleges in our study represent only a small number of community colleges and for-profit colleges in the United States. Our sample does not account for the het-
heterogeneity in these institutional types, particularly in the for-profit sector. Also, only telephone conversations were used to collect admissions information (though of course we are aware that students obtain institutional information through numerous other sources, to include brochures, social media, Web sites, campus tours, personal contacts, etc. Another limitation is researcher bias. Future quantitative and qualitative research involving larger samples of colleges will enhance the data set.

RESULTS
Two areas that emerged as shaping the admissions profile of each institution were customer service and breadth of information provided. Customer service was rated according to how each institution treated the mystery shopper and the ease with which she was able to access information. Breadth of information was evaluated on the basis of what information was provided by admissions representatives.

Customer Service
Community Colleges
The mystery shopper had to make numerous attempts to contact admissions representatives at the community colleges. When she finally reached one representative and asked about the school’s business program, she was told, “What do you mean ‘our business program?’ Any general information about a program is located on the school Web site.” All but one community college representative referred the researcher to the institution’s Web site; none provided a web address.

No community college representative asked for the mystery shopper’s name or contact information. When she asked if she could speak with a current student, one community college representative replied, “No, we don’t just have students you can talk to. You should come in for an orientation after you enroll.” Another representative said, “You really might want to call the specific department that will answer all these questions.” The researcher called the department to follow up but again was referred to a Web site. A representative at another community college responded to every question by restating the question. For example, when the mystery shopper asked, “What would be required for applying?” the representative replied, “What do you mean ‘what would be required for applying?’” When the mystery shopper explained that this would be her first time to enroll, the representative replied, “It really would be a good idea for you to go to the Web site and see what it says regarding new students.”

Because of the frequency with which community college representatives referred the mystery shopper to the institutions’ Web sites, the researchers did consult the Web sites. Each included sections designated for prospective students. Information—particularly that pertaining to financial aid, enrollment, and fees—was well-organized and far more detailed than what was provided by phone. For example, four community college Web sites had major topics (e.g., enrollment, fees, financial aid, and program information) with clearly labeled links. Many Web sites also had a FAQs section that included some of the questions the mystery shopper had asked on the phone. One community college Web site detailed in clear and readable understandable language the exact steps required to apply for financial aid. Each of the Web sites provided information about how to apply, receive aid, and begin taking courses within the business program, even though far less information had been provided via phone.

For-Profit Colleges
For-profit institutions’ customer service was very different. The first several minutes of each conversation were redirected toward the mystery shopper—e.g., what was her name, where did she live, what did she wish to study, and how could the institution meet her needs. One representative asked, “What are your passions and goals?” Another inquired, “What are your dreams and aspirations, and ultimately, what would you like to do?” Both of these questions were asked after the researcher asked for a description of the school’s business program. Four of five for-profit institutions’ representatives asked, “What made you call us today?”

At four of five for-profit institution, the mystery shopper spoke with the same representative for the duration of the call. Four for-profit institutions’ representatives answered the call on the first ring. Of particular interest was the way in which most questions were directed back to the mystery shopper’s reason for furthering her education. Representatives of three of five for-profit institutions asked the researcher more questions than she asked them. At several points, all for-profit college representatives
tried to steer the conversation. One respondent stated, “We know why students call us, and they have good reasons for doing so. Let me tell you about what we have to offer.” The representatives who encouraged the mystery shopper to visit the campus were adamant about her doing so quickly. One said, “It would be great if you could come and meet with us tomorrow.” Two suggested a time to visit the campus the next day.

We examined for-profit colleges’ Web sites in order to compare them to those of the community colleges we had examined but found that information—particularly that regarding cost and financial aid—was not readily visible. It took considerably more time to find basic institutional information on the for-profit colleges’ Web sites than it had on the community colleges’ Web sites. Most of the main pages were simple, featuring images of students and a section where a prospective student could provide contact information for follow-up by telephone. Whereas community colleges’ Web sites included specific links to information about financial aid, many for-profit colleges’ Web sites instructed students to call for more information about financial aid. When the researcher clicked the link on one for-profit college’s Web site to access more information about financial aid, a “see if you qualify for financial aid” cartoon advertisement popped up. The most readily available information on each for-profit college’s Web site was the institution’s main telephone number. Aspirational images and urgent messages were prominently displayed on the Web sites. For example, four Web sites featured pictures of smiling students of color in classrooms or at various job settings. Many of the Web sites urged students to “call right away and make their goals a reality.” The Web sites did not seem to be geared toward current students but rather toward prospective students.

**Breadth of Information**

**Community Colleges**

Although one of the five community colleges provided a flat rate for the cost of education, the community college admissions counselors knew very little about any particular degree or concentration. When discussing financial aid, four of the five community college representatives did not answer the question but instead told the mystery shopper, “The rate can be found on our Web site.” Only one community college representative provided a specific cost per credit. She also said, “At this time, we don’t have any scholarships, but maybe you should still go to the Web site and see.” By way of follow-up, she said, “Scholarships are determined once you apply.” This particular representative was the most forthcoming about overall admissions and provided some specific information—for example, “If you are just eighteen and over, you can apply for our next available term, which is the fall semester.” Another community college representative told the mystery shopper, “At this time, we are not sure if we will have space for students to enroll. The sooner you apply, the better, because we fill up quickly, and it’s possible you won’t have a space.” When answering questions about post-graduation job prospects, the one community college representative who stayed on the phone long enough to answer this question said, “It’s kind of a difficult question. It kind of just depends on the person.” When the mystery shopper asked if numbers on job placement were available, the representative responded, “Well, if you want, I can forward you to our office of institutional effectiveness; however, I do not personally know this information.”

**For-Profit Institutions**

For-profit institutions’ representatives were eager to share that numerous academic counselors were available to help the mystery shopper transition to their school and also find a job. Some for-profit college representatives compared their institutions’ capabilities to those of community colleges, citing their own capabilities as superior. One representative said, “Most students are happy with what we have to offer and feel we’re their best choice.” Another said, “Well, with community colleges, you are going to find that they are hard to get into because they don’t have enough space. I am sure we would be a better fit for you.” Again, some for-profit college representatives invited the mystery shopper to visit the campus and speak with a representative in person the next day. In one case, the provision of information depended on whether the researcher was willing to visit campus: “If you come in to the school we will be able to talk to you more about your financial aid,” one representative said.

When queried about employment opportunities after graduation, the for-profit college representatives replied not by citing statistics (as the researchers had hoped they
would) but with affirmations such as “Sure, we know for most of our students, getting a job is really important.” Another said, “Yes, we really want to make sure you are ready for the workforce.” Still another said, “It sounds like kick-starting your career is really important to you.” The representatives thus acknowledged the caller’s job concerns but did not provide institutional data about real employment outcomes. One representative said the mystery shopper might be provided with employment data if she visited campus.

**DISCUSSION**

The results of our study expand existing conceptions of college choice and of the search process, in particular. Our results highlight the necessity of a greater emphasis on how institutions communicate with prospective students. Two themes are that for-profit college representatives seem friendlier and more engaging but in fact may be less forthcoming about pertinent institutional information. Community college representatives provide limited information via telephone, but ample information is available on the institutions’ Web sites.

**Breadth of Information**

Insofar as cost is a key component of any college choice model, one wonders why the institutions in the sample do not provide more extensive information about their attendance costs. On the one hand, for-profit colleges are eager to influence students to enroll quickly. This might be explained by these institutions’ strong sales orientation. On the other hand, community college admissions counselors are reluctant to provide much information and seem uncertain as to how best to direct the prospective student to the appropriate information source. Because the institutions’ admissions culture and practices influence how information is disseminated, financial information may be less readily available, depending on how much it is valued in the admissions culture. One concern that this theme raises is consumer protection: How transparent about financial aid and post-graduation employment should institutions be, independent of whether a prospective student inquires specifically about either? Neither the community college nor the for-profit institutions’ representatives volunteered financial or employment information unless prompted by a question to do so; even in response to specific inquiries, some provided no information.

Most college choice models presuppose that students gather information and then make their enrollment decisions; however, our study suggests a loophole: A prospective student may choose to enroll at a particular institution on the basis either of which seems the most receptive or of which provides the clearest information during the search process. In either case, a student’s decision may say more about what information the institution provides and how it provides it than about specific personal factors and preferences that influence choice.

**Customer Service**

Customer service in part reflects institutional culture. For-profit colleges cater to prospective students’ needs for information in large part because they need to be profitable. This is confirmed by the number of times representatives discussed the needs of students and how the institution could be of service. In contrast, data indicate that community college representatives were inflexible in responding to all of the questions the mystery shopper asked and typically referred her to another source of information. So which information does a prospective student use in her decision-making process? Whether prospective students call institutions or only utilize their Web sites to collect information may dramatically shape their enrollment decisions. Ideally, an institution should provide clear and helpful answers to all student inquiries, regardless of whether they are made by telephone or via online search.

Both types of institutions present unique strengths and obstacles to the search stage of the college choice process. The mystery shopper had great difficulty eliciting informative responses from community college admissions counselors. Overall, community college representatives provided brief verbal responses whereas the information provided on their institutions’ Web sites was much more detailed. In contrast, the mystery shopper had extensive conversations with for-profit colleges’ representatives—as long as the conversations pertained to “hopes and dreams.” It is unclear whether community colleges and for-profit institutions do not want to provide detailed information or whether their communication protocols simply fail to incorporate it. This study is not intended to
impute institutional motives or intentions; nevertheless, its results raise useful questions, to include “how do Web sites change the nature of accessibility to information?” Particular benefits conveyed by Web sites as they are utilized during prospective students’ search stage are the vast quantity of information they provide and the ease with which information can be gathered from them. However, a potential pitfall relates to some prospective students’ lack of access to Internet resources. For-profit college Web sites proved difficult to navigate, with financial information particularly difficult to find.

CONCLUSION

For-profit and community colleges’ distinctive admissions cultures are changing the nature of college access. It will be important for researchers to further investigate these institutions’ practices in order to better document and understand these changes. Although our initial intent was to engage admissions counselors via telephone, we found that community and for-profit colleges’ Web sites are significant additional pieces of the college-search puzzle. It is important to understand the specific college-search behaviors of prospective for-profit and community college students, particularly as those behaviors (and their results) affect their ultimate enrollment decisions. Finally, we would note that the present study focuses on institutions—not prospective students—as the unit of analysis. Our hope is that our findings regarding these institutions’ admissions practices will inform future scholarship about the enrollment choices of prospective for-profit and community college students.

REFERENCES


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