

THE INFLUENCE OF FACEBOOK AND OTHER FACTORS ON FAST-TRACK
EVENING MBA ENROLLMENT DECISIONS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

by

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(Under the Direction of James C. Hearn)

ABSTRACT

This research examined the influence of Facebook and other factors on fast-track evening MBA enrollment decisions. The enrollment choices of undergraduate students have been studied extensively, and there are some parallels between the undergraduate student enrollment process and enrollment processes for graduate students. But less research has been conducted on graduate enrollment, and there has been virtually no research on the influences of Facebook on graduate enrollment decisions.

Addressing those gaps, the research focused on a fast-track 23-month, year-round evening MBA program at a public research university. The study employed qualitative methods to examine two main research questions: 1) What impacts does Facebook have on enrollment decisions among students considering fast-track evening MBA programs? 2) What other factors are influential in those decisions?

The analysis, rooted in semi-structured interviews with 18 respondents, suggests that Facebook did not have a significant role in determining students' enrollment choices. Instead, students' decisions were influenced more significantly by the program website, their perceived overall fit with the institution, the timing of the program delivery and

anticipated time to degree completion, and by the costs of pursuing the degree. In addition, students reported that their families were noteworthy influences in determining their choice of program. Participants in this research also suggested that institutions update their program websites often, as those sites were consistently used by all of the interviewees in making their choices.

The research had limitations, notably the small sample size and the examination of only one program in one institution. Future research in more and different institutions is needed to support further generalization. Future work might also address more intensively the specific ways websites influence students' perceptions of the institution and their subsequent enrollment decisions.

From a practical perspective, the absence of Facebook influences in this research suggests that applicants are not receiving personalized attention from institutions through that channel. Institutions may therefore wish to use other means to facilitate enrollment decision making by students and make it more personal. Similarly, admissions officers may need to devote substantial attention to ensuring adequate flexibility and individual responsiveness in admissions processes.

INDEX WORDS: Facebook, Fast-track MBA, Graduate enrollment, Website, Fit, Timing, Tuition and finance, Evening MBA, Full-time MBA, Social Media

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Innovations that have resulted from entities such as Facebook and other social media outlets create opportunities for colleges and universities to communicate with prospective students in unique ways that were not available until recent years. This study aims to explore the influence of Facebook and other factors on enrollment decisions of students pursuing evening MBAs in a fast-track program. To better serve the institution, admissions officers and college leaders should understand whether an interactive online presence will transform their admissions processes (Reuben, 2008). As a result, I will explore two main research questions:

- 1) What impact does Facebook have on enrollment decisions among students considering fast-track evening MBA programs?
- 2) What other factors are influential in those decisions?

This study is unique in its efforts to capture the phenomenon that social media is having on our society and on the admissions decisions for MBAs. Definitions of key terms used throughout this research are found in Appendix A: Evening MBA, Facebook, fast-track MBA, full-time MBA, and social media. This listing defines how I use these terms for the purposes of this paper. For a thorough understanding, it is important to level set for these terms and their use.

Research is consistent regarding the unique needs of older students. These will be explored in the following chapter (Poock & Love, 2001). A further study in this area is important for understanding how best to communicate with students who are not of traditional college age. Finally, this research explores the needs of the students in this

fast-track evening program to understand what is most important to them and how best to connect with them throughout the admissions process and beyond. Fast-track programs are similar to traditional evening MBAs; however they have an accelerated, rigorous academic curriculum that allows students to earn an MBA as a part-time student in two years. As research in this area grows, there will be more discoveries on how to best marry the recent technological explosion to the needs of MBAs who are pursuing unique educational experiences such as fast-track programs.

The notion of connectivity between fast-track students and the institution is integral as this research strives to understand how to best market the program to prospective students. Research tells us that the generation of students who are now pursuing MBAs, regardless of the type of program, has a need for deeper levels of personal engagement and connection than previous generations (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Throughout this research, I want to understand, from the student perspective, more about what it means for an institution to be connected to an individual group of people. Can a connection be formed between the prospective student and the institution through tours and in person information sessions? Is connectivity defined by follow-up calls and letters detailing yield events sponsored by the institution? Does being connected mean that there is a presence of alumni and current students on Facebook where university affiliates are connected with each other? What does it mean for an institution to be connected to an individual group of people who are potential fast-track students? What opportunities are afforded to an individual through connectivity with an institution? Are colleges and universities who are less connected with individuals more likely to be dismissed than those who are perceived as connected? What are the benefits during the admissions

process of being connected? By not being connected are institutions not impacting students? These questions will be explored throughout this qualitative study.

Understanding how the students in this program interact with Facebook and the web during the admissions process will build understanding on these issues of connectivity.

In the context of meeting this generational need, colleges and universities are connected more through a virtual presence than ever before. Colleges and universities have begun exploring space on the World Wide Web inclusive of web pages and on social media sites. This entails web pages produced by the college or larger institution; blogs by current students, alumni, and even prospective students on what the admissions process entails; perceptions of an institution; what it is like to be a student and alumni of an institution; and an active presence within social media through pages, event updates, status updates, and videos displaying information about the school and the experience that a student will have at that particular institution. In these examples, it is clear that colleges and universities are being marketed in this web space either by their own efforts or from the eyes of another.

These varying forms of marketing impact prospective students as they initially engage with institutions online. This raises a question of how the potential student interprets what is being displayed online by colleges and universities. Whether or not the actions of the institution are positively or negatively influencing the students' choice remains to be seen. This engagement by students causes the institution to become actively engaged not only with the potential student in this space, but also within the realm of social media. As a result, an additional challenge faces higher education as it creates in-roads within both the social media and web document space.

Interactivity within web documents has vastly grown in the last decade. Web pages not only are a medium for information to be received by the audience, but now these spaces offer much more to their publics. Institutional web sites provide a forum for engagement with people who are directly associated with the community as well as for external constituents of the community. Video streaming, virtual tours, and links to social media sites of the institutions are all within the content of institutional web pages. To better understand these trends, there needs to be an analysis of the interactivity, which remains two-fold; not only is an overall understanding needed of social media interaction, but there is also a need for understanding the same of web documents. Each of these works hand-in-hand in determining its effect on potential students. Institutional marketers must be sure that the messages being reflected from the institutions perspective are consistent, timely, and reflective of the overall university brand.

Higher education is a dynamic field of endeavor for an exploration of the influence of Facebook. Thus, institutions have responded to meet the needs of the current generation by establishing a presence in the virtual community (Howe & Strauss, 2000). However, the influence of the university presence in this web space is unknown with regards to students and their admission decisions. This is especially true for students pursuing graduate education, such as the students in a fast-track evening MBA program. During the admissions process, graduate schools can connect with these students and have an impact on their enrollment decisions.

Purpose

This study aims to explore the influence of Facebook and other factors on enrollment decisions of students pursuing evening MBAs in a fast-track program. The

research determines what causes various factors that create an overall experience between a prospective student and an institution. What is the connection? Holistically, these are the factors that shape the institutional brand-perceptions, images of the institution, current students, alumni, etc. (Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2002). Little research exists today about whether or not Facebook impacts prospective students' enrollment choices.

Ultimately, the marketing efforts of an institution influence the enrollment choice as institutions have a presence within the media – primary and secondary documents, World Wide Web, and other outlets. With regard to social media, this study will focus entirely on Facebook. Very little is known about what affects enrollment choices for this population. I do not know for sure, but I think that a presence in a virtual space by the institution must have some impact which helps students choose one institution over another, but specifically, we do not know as much about the graduate student choice process as we do about the undergraduate student choices (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

It can be argued that both Facebook and a fast-track program's website simply serve as an information source. This being said, one could make a point that these media are used as a prestige marker (Brewer et al, 2002): our peer and aspirational institutions have such sites so 'we' (any university) must also compete within this realm. Equally so, it could be said that institutional websites serve as a function for the current body of constituents inclusive of faculty, staff, students, alumnus, and friends. This argument could be supported by the notion that those who are viewing Facebook and the web page are going there because they can obtain information about notable events and accomplishments of the schools. In this vein, social media sites and web pages are used simply for information. A similar argument can be made of prospective students or

random spammers; they too could be categorized as people who are simply interested in the happenings of the particular institution so they engage within the online communities via Facebook or the institutions website. There may also be prospective students who are viewing web sites of fast-track MBA programs as a means of research for their own educational pursuits. For this subset of the population, colleges and universities may have some real opportunities through virtual communication to impact and influence students' enrollment decisions. The initial connection to the program or institution may begin in these spaces.

Next Steps

There are several elements that will be discussed as this research seeks to understand the influence of Facebook and other factors on prospective fast-track MBA students' enrollment decisions. Foremost, it is important to understand the background of social media and the evolution of Facebook. History of social media and web information, users of Facebook, and implications of Facebook from a literary perspective must be discussed. Critical too is an in-depth understanding of graduate students and what is important for them as they consider going back to school. Also, from an overall university perspective, it is vital to understand marketing within higher education. Marketing strategies shape how a program is portrayed on Facebook and throughout web pages; therefore it is important to understand how marketing impacts the social media revolution within graduate education for prospective students. Academic literature is not plentiful with regard to graduate student choice. However, a thorough literary analysis will allow an understanding of how social media and the web impact marketing strategies, which ultimately influence enrollment choice.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Marketing in Higher Education

Institutions consistently market their goods and services to the public (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). As this study addresses how to build understanding of the influence of Facebook and other factors on enrollment decisions of students pursuing evening MBAs in a fast-track program, it is important to consider the role of marketing and how it molds prospective students. Admissions materials tell the story of a college or university, recognized symbols such as an 'H' of Harvard, and individuals who represent the institution as faculty or staff members in some way market the colleges and universities they represent (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). From what we know regarding the graduate student choice, the clear areas that are most defined are related to marketing and are consistent for either an undergraduate or graduate student (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). Yet, we do not know how marketing in terms of web sites or Facebook impacts the enrollment process. Even though marketing within higher education is not new, institutions have not traditionally thought of themselves as marketers until recently. There are now external relations departments whose job is to market the university as whole, different colleges within the institution, as well as particular aspects of a program. For example, a university with a business school will often have external relations for the overall university who markets both internally and externally for the good of the institution (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). This department will market all of the offerings of the university as well as additional alliances and partnerships that the institution has within the community. The business school may well have its own external relations department

that markets all of its programs: bachelor, master's programs, and doctoral programs. Finally, within each of those areas there may be marketers whose job is to market the particular program through traditional mailings and visits, as well as with social media, depending on the population and their respective needs.

Higher education marketing is complex and has grown to impact the institution, the external and internal constituents, as well as the social networks that have formed as a result of sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002).

Marketing plays a pivotal role in student choice in the selection of higher education institutions (Kallio, 1995). As such, marketing will continue to affect institutional strategy and outcomes as effective marketing can be a driver of prestige at different institutions (Toma, 2010).

Marketing in higher education differs from other types of marketing because in marketing higher education the outcomes are visible to all audiences, just as any other product for purchase differs (Litten, 1980). However, with marketing in higher education, there are people who want the product and are willing to purchase the product at your cost, but will be denied the product (Litten, 1980). Education at research institutions, especially in metropolitan areas, serve as prime examples as they are much sought after by prospective students for undergraduate and graduate study. One could categorize all of them as prestigious institutions comprised of a diverse offering of colleges, schools, and majors from which to choose (Brewer et al, 2002). As a rule, most have been branded by academic rigor, stellar faculty and research opportunities, and premier athletic programs. To add to the allure, these institutions can serve various roles within their state: as a flagship institution; a premier specialty institution focusing on technology, for

example; or as a hub for research and urban educational experience. These taglines bring un-intended marketing that happens as a result of these schools being leaders within their state and country (Litten, Sullivan, & Brodigan, 1983). However, many prospective students that apply to these schools are denied – yet these students are willing to pay the cost of attendance without any tuition discounting. Because higher education is a product that denies consumers, marketing for higher education is unique (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002).

As institutions market, they must be aware that there are benefits and responsibilities that are associated with marketing higher education (Litten, 1980). With marketing in the admissions process, institutional marketers must be aware that they have a responsibility of marketing the institution with integrity. Students not only attend an institution for their immediate needs, but also because the student grows and matures cognitively, socially, and morally while he or she matriculates there (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). As such, the marketer is selling a product that will sustain the student not only for the current time being, but also for his or her life beyond initial matriculation as an undergraduate or a graduate student. Students ultimately become alumni; therefore, the marketer also sells the alumni benefits of attending the institution to the prospect simultaneously.

Marketing sells an experience and because of this, marketers should spend the time to do their market research to understand exactly who their institution is and what it can offer a student (Litten et al, 1983). One of the main failures with marketing is that there is disconnect within the market research in understanding who the purchasers of higher education are for that particular institution (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). Once the marketing departments understand this, they can be sure that their product is aligned with

the institutional mission and strategy to market their product to the appropriate audience (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). When market strategies are effectively executed, populations can be segmented accordingly (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002).

Segmentation

Market segmentation allows external relations teams to understand who their clients are and what their clients need (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). An institution or a particular program within the institution cannot necessarily target everyone; therefore, they must determine, through market research, who is best suited for their product and sell primarily to them. This further complicates the marketing strategy and makes marketing unique in higher education because through this process the marketing departments are weeding out potential purchasers of their product. However, this is necessary for an institution, the particular program, as well as for the student because they all will benefit from the determination of who is best suited at a particular place. For example, market segmentation is useful for a junior college as their prime candidates are typically not students with near perfect SAT scores or 4.0 grade point averages. Admissions officers at these institutions will waste their time on this population; if effective market research is done, then they will understand who their primary clients are and target them accordingly (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). As a result, there is a process of market segmentation that categorizes how students are targeted and on what basis (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). Creating additional space within the web and social media can be beneficial as business schools begin to segment their populations. Here, universities can understand more about their targets based on who ‘friends’ them or becomes ‘fans’ of

them on Facebook. This is valuable information that is not considered without a presence in this space.

Markets are segmented in a variety of ways based on the needs of the institution as well as the needs of the clients for the product of higher education. Segments can be created by demographics (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). This form of market segmentation will allow an institution to target particular audiences based on their socio-economic status, location, or by any other differentiating factor (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). These students have a different experience resulting from their social class and previous experiences. Especially for international students, demographic segmentation is important as they have different needs than domestic students and will need to understand that the institution is a place that is supportive of their culture (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Segmentation by industry or previous work experience is especially important for marketers as this group has a different need from others and will continue to as they matriculate. For example, students who are interested in a fast-track MBA program may have different needs than those in a regular evening or full-time program. Fast-track MBA students typically work full-time jobs, while balancing their work, family, and education responsibilities (Terry, 2011). For marketing, presenting the institution and program as a place that fits into their lifestyle is important. Other marketing segmentation tactics will include the program fit, anticipated potential of the student, and the academic continuation probability of the prospective student (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). These too are important, as institutions will need to understand their needs as an institution and the student needs from the institution. This will allow further diversification in the school environment.

As with each of these types of market segmentation, an institution can determine how it aligns with the student and can best market to that population based on his or her needs and what resonates most within that population. Additionally, the institution gains credibility as it becomes a place that seems tailored to the needs of that student. Through segmentation, the institution can be successful as they personalize the experience of that particular student. Often times, this is especially so as a result of social media outlets which impact the admissions process regardless of whether the institution has a presence in online communities (Mashable Online Site, 2010). Market research is critical for prospective students to fully understand the opportunities afforded to them by different institutional types (Litten, 1980). As a result of proper segmentation, marketers can position the institution accordingly.

Positioning

Marketers in higher education have an opportunity to advance the mission of the institution to the public in a variety of ways. Through positioning, external relations can display the institutional missions and strategy while allowing the public to know who the institution is, what it stands for, and its competitive strength in the marketplace (Toma, 2010). As marketers position, they work to impact the admissions process by influencing what is seen in print and also through social media. Institutional images, videos, and postings on Facebook work together to tell the story of the student experience and can be impactful in communicating the marketing strategy. This plays a role in positioning the institution in the marketplace against other institutions that may or may not be doing the same thing (Scott, 2004). Positioning allows the institution to say who it is and what it provides to higher education. Institution theory tells us that there are norms by which

organizations come into being (Scott, 2004). This is ever so true with organizations that are participating in Facebook and other forms of social media. With this form of positioning, companies and higher education alike advance their strategies in the market based on what others are doing (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Marketing and Social Media

Marketing within higher education has taken on a new phase in the 21st Century. Social media networks have become commonplace within the world as well as between different constituents of higher education: current students, faculty and staff, alumnus, and prospective students. It is important to note that social media networking is being used for recruiting and for alumni tracking as many of them are now, more than ever before, using social media as a way to stay in touch with their institutions and their classmates (Reuben, 2008). Many within higher education are using social media as a way of marketing their institution. Within social media is an avenue for advertisement about the institution, the services offered, and potential students at that particular institution (Pattison, 2009). Additionally, social media sites such as Facebook provide a place for discussion between individuals to share events and activities along with a whole new virtual world (Cavazza, 2008). However, as institutions more readily explore and embrace social media sites, it is important for them to understand how they can be used as tools for marketing and recruiting.

To understand the full interplay between marketing and social media, it is important to understand marketing theoretically and practically for our use. Marketing within the social media arena allows for a free exchange between individual groups or individuals for their common good (Bagozzi, 1975). Marketing literature suggests that

the concepts of marketing deal with understanding relationships and why we, both people and organizations, participate in exchange relationships and how exchanges happen in regard to their beginnings, resolutions, and why they are not formed between differing entities (Kotler, 1972; Levy, 1981). Finally, from this, with regard to social media, the exchange that occurs between the entities is critical to understanding how marketing happens in social media and how social media is used as a tool for marketing from the institutional perspective. As such, the marketing efforts may in fact impact how prospective students interpret and respond to social media, once they are engaged within the exchange of information from the institution. The strength of online marketing from both web pages as well as through Facebook may impact how the prospective student will continue to use this instrument to gather information during the admissions process. Thus, the efficient marketing of the educational product is vitally important as a tool for the institution.

Exchanges can be varied. Complex exchanges within marketing can be defined as exchanges that occur resulting from relationships by no fewer than three participants (Bagozzi, 1975). For this research, these three parties can be identified as the hosting network: Facebook, the sponsoring fast-track MBA program, and the prospective student. Either a web page or Facebook page allows a space for each of the entities to converse and exchange with each other. Additionally, institutional web pages and Facebook pages allow for more than a simple exchange between those entities: these allow for other media interactions such as Facebook 'likes' from friends, links to other news sources, live video feeds, and gaming between users. Therefore, the medium of

Facebook alone provides several of the characteristics for interaction that Bagozzi (1975) describes.

Exchange within the marketing space allows opportunities for prospective students to respond to social media marketing efforts in real time via the host website. The Facebook page allows for marketing by the school and provides a forum for the prospective student to interact with students who are currently enrolled at the institution as well as with others who are searching online for a positive interpretation of the institution through their web site or Facebook page. Effective marketing within this arena will ultimately shape the prospective student's impression with the institution and whether or not it will be a fit for his or her educational experience (Bagozzi, 1975).

Impact of the World Wide Web

Toward the end of the 20th Century the World Wide Web evolved from its original purpose as a means of scientific research by the government on behalf of the US Department of Defense (Cheung & Huang, 2005) to a corporate and collegiate area as a source for communication, marketing, and retrieval of information; in essence the technological explosion influenced how we began to communicate on a daily basis (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). This flourished and as a result became a channel for marketing information about goods and services. As a result, social media markets grew and became a natural outlet for marketing higher education.

The consumer mentality was the driver for marketing on the web. It provided an automatic means by which business could be done, services could be spotlighted, and transactions made (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). Over time, the web became a natural place for those seeking to market not only tangible goods, but also for those who wanted to

market and sell their product of higher education. Marketing on the web allowed for companies and institutions to spotlight their new products and services instantaneously and brand them accordingly (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). Not only did the introduction of the web in mainstream society allow for new services to be seen, but they also allowed public and private entities to have a presence within a virtual space (Hoffman & Novak, 1996). As a result, the interpretation and response to the images seen on the web would be crucial for future business on the web, both from a corporate and higher educational perspective. History tells us that the marketing of the web and opportunities provided by the web were successful so much so that there are virtual worlds that exist, such as Facebook, because of the successes and early strides of the internet (Hoffman & Novak, 1996).

Facebook

Created in 2004 by Harvard students, Facebook has revolutionized how people exchange with each other personally and socially (Reuben, 2008). Facebook expanded first to other Ivy League students, then to all college students, then to high school students, and now to anyone or any organization/business that has an email account (Facebook, 2010). With over 250 million users logging on at least once a day, it is fair to say that Facebook has taken the world by storm. Its approach to relationship maintenance between individuals and organizations, opportunities to easily connect with people from all across the globe, and its ease of presence in a virtual digital society have allowed Facebook to become the dominant figure in the world of social media. Facebook can be accessed via a computer and also through smart phones, by organizational web sites that

link to Facebook, and with advertisements from organizations that appear throughout the internet (Facebook, 2007).

Because of its design, individuals have an opportunity to document their life, in real time, on Facebook. With over 900 million opportunities for people to interact through pages, groups, links, and organizational pages, Facebook provides a venue and a forum that connects people unlike any other website of its kind (Facebook, 2010). In addition, Facebook has met the global communication need and has over 70 different translations available (Facebook, 2010). Not only is Facebook applicable for people, but it is also useful for institutions and organizations. In this regard, specific Facebook pages are designed for organizations and institutions alike. Here, groups can identify themselves, their missions, and their constituents (Campbell, 2008). Because of this, organizations and institutions have the ability to virtually “be” in the space where their consumers are (Campbell, 2008). For the purposes of this study, consumers are purchasers of goods and services as well as purchasers of higher education.

Organizations and institutions strategically place themselves in environments where they are easily accessible to their consumers. By doing this, the proprietor is in an arena where the consumer is familiar and accustomed to navigating; reminiscent of a Wal-Mart theme of ‘one stop shopping’. On Facebook, consumers can live virtually with their friends and acquaintances as well as be engaged with an organization that is important to them. By being on Facebook, a university is afforded the opportunity for prospective students to browse the different school options to ultimately find a match based on a student’s needs. Secondly, it becomes easier to market to students by being where they are. Facebook provides an opportunity to engage with a segmented

population and market specifically to that group (Pattison, 2009); proprietors have the ability to understand their audiences and give their consumers exactly what they need (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). Organizational presence on Facebook may provide a competitive edge if they are active in this arena while their peer organizations/institutions are not (Brewer et al, 2002). As this study seeks to understand the influence of Facebook and other factors on prospective students, the competitive edge of one fast-track MBA program over another is important to understand. Especially within higher educational arenas, institutions are constantly seeking to be more prestigious than their competitors and more prestigious than their current standings. This is evident with rankings by such groups as *BusinessWeek*, *Financial Times*, and *US News and World Report*. From these mediums, people gauge the prestige associated with attending one institution over another. A myriad of methodologies are associated with creating these surveys. However, the naked, untrained eye only sees what is presented by these surveys as the *best* in a particular area. Because of this, it becomes increasingly important for organizations and institutions to send accurate messages to all individuals who may consume their product. In addition, it is the institutions responsibility to make the information easily attainable on their websites and within social media (Brewer et al, 2002).

Facebook and Privacy

Statistics show that those students who are most active on Facebook share the most information on their pages (Jones & Soltren, 2005). Depending on the environment and culture of the institution, students' habits on Facebook and their disclosures are different (Jones & Soltren, 2005). For example, a student in high school may reveal

intimate details about their personal lives and their exact whereabouts; a student pursuing their MBA may use Facebook for networking and as an instrument to explore institutions that may have an online presence there. In addition, it is found that undergraduate students share the most information on Facebook; a large majority of students have Facebook profiles before they attend college and graduate school (Jones & Soltren, 2005). These students may track information from several social media networks all on Facebook (Govani & Pashley, 2007). This pattern is a potential concern when there is little censor over what it is being posted on students pages.

There is growing anxiety within higher education about what students post on their Facebook page for the whole world to see. Illegal activity, issues that question morality, and in depth personal information are all brought into question (Bugeja, 2006). In addition, student in-discretion on Facebook impacts how future employers and graduate admissions committees view a student, depending on what has been posted on his or her online profile (Whelan, 2005). Despite the positives that can be attributed to Facebook and how it feeds the needs of this generation for connectivity, it is important for students to be aware that through social media sites such as Facebook, there may be unintended consequences that could follow the student for years to come as internet pages live in a virtual space and are accessible by anyone with the technological savvy to access these archived documents.

Undergraduate Student Choice

Unknown is the overall influence of the undergraduate experience on how students select graduate institutions and whether or not they pursue graduate education. Psychosocial theorists would argue that the development that students have during their

undergraduate years may affect the decisions made from then on (Chickering & Reisser, 1993); therefore, this notion would suggest that an undergraduate experience may well have a role in determining the graduate school choice. The selection of graduate institution can be pursued in a variety of ways that include selection by type of institution including private, public, international; resources available to students; and academic reputation (Rock, Centra, & Linn, 1970). Additionally, the size of the undergraduate institution may guide how the student chooses his or her graduate school. If a student attended a large public institution for his or her undergraduate education, then he or she may be more apt to choose a smaller, more specialized institution for his or her graduate education. However, some research does show that older undergraduate student's choice is swayed by the external environments of the colleges and universities he or she attends (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

There are several factors that impact how undergraduate students choose their college: academic reputation of the institution, distance from home, cost of attendance, and overall fit of the student and the institution (Kinzie et al., 2004). Additionally, some research shows that students select majors based on similar guidelines, but also based on the expected return on investment and anticipated salaries of majors in a field (Koch, 1972). These findings by Koch (1972) are supported by Astin's (1993) research that suggests that overall satisfaction is important to undergraduate students – academically, personally, and with their involvement in college.

For undergraduates, parents remain one of the most influential factors in their decision for college (Scott & Daniel, 2001). McDonough (1997) argues that student choice will not only makes sense in context of their family and friends, but also by

“cultural capital” (p.8) and by a sense of his or her “bounded rationality” (p. 8).

McDonough and others’ claims are further supported by Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper (1999) as they found that parental advice, parental encouragement, parental income, and parental education influenced the student decision of which college to attend.

Graduate Student Choice

Academic literature regarding graduate student choice is not as readily available as it is for undergraduate student choice (Kallio, 1995). Graduate student enrollment choice has been a less studied area, although it is critical for marketers of higher education (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). For higher education to market effectively and sell their product to all students, information regarding factors that influence choice is critical. From what we do know, there are several key factors that impact graduate student choice: work and financial obligations, family influence and responsibilities, academic rigor including faculty engagement, and flexibility of program (Poock & Love, 2001).

Work and financial obligations are consistently a concern for those seeking graduate education (Poock & Love, 2001). Many graduate students work full-time jobs either immediately before matriculation in graduate programs or during matriculation in graduate school. Often times, graduate students will have graduate assistantships that help subsidize the cost of graduate education. Many of the same financial concerns that undergraduates have are consistent with the graduate population (McDonough, 1997). As such, when students begin searching for graduate schools, a large consideration is given to the overall cost of the degree and whether or not this will influence them to attend school full or part time (Poock & Love, 2001). If a student works full-time, then he or she must figure a way to balance both their work obligations and their academic

pursuits (Kallio, 1995). This can be challenging for many reasons depending on the work environment and the student's personal situation. Factors influencing a prospective student's choice to go back to school include: whether a student commutes to/from school; political climate at the work site; financial commitments. Work and financing graduate education is of particular concern for minority candidates (Kallio, 1995). Also, minority students have been found to be more concerned with degree completion timetables than majority populations (Poock & Love, 2001). In addition, most graduate students have obligations that a typical undergraduate does not have, such as having a family. MBA programs have an opportunity to discuss these concerns; fast-track MBA programs have an opportunity to create dialog on both institutional websites and on social media sites between current and prospective students. Technology can connect both populations and alleviate concerns of perspective students. Social media sites such as Facebook, if used effectively, can also be used as these concerns are addressed.

The influence of family is different for undergraduates and graduate students. While undergraduates' family influence helps them get into college and may sway their opinion one way or another (Hossler et al, 1999), the effect of family on graduate students comes more from their spouse and their happiness and readiness for graduate education (Kallio, 1995). The spouses' influence on a students' graduate education is consistently a factor. This includes whether the spouse will work, the location of the institution, and how the students' enrollment will weigh on their family (Kallio, 1995). Of note too is whether or not the student is a male or female (Kallio, 1995). Female students often are more engaged with the day-to-day logistics of their family. Female graduate students who are married, and especially those with children, face a more

difficult task in enrollment choices than their male counterparts (Kallio, 1995). Another factor to consider is the age of the student and the associated concerns and responsibilities of older students (Kallio, 1995). For graduate students, the choice of attendance includes not only their personal happiness and comfort with the particular institution, but also that of their spouse and family (Kallio, 1995). In some regards, admissions officers and marketers are also selling the institution to the spouse as well as to the potential student as they too are being affected (Poock & Love, 2001). With this being said, social media can provide a support network for a spouse even before their partner matriculates. Research in this area could be critical in student yield for fast-track MBA programs if there was more information about how social media can fill this space.

More research will need to be conducted to understand the bias of family (not spouse) on graduate education. As has been stated, society influences students in a variety of ways including their enrollment choices (Hossler et al, 1999). With this in mind, research shows that the millennial generation, those born after 1982, is much more connected with their parents (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Higher education research is not consistent with how ‘helicopter parents’ will influence or have influenced their children for graduate education (Howe & Strauss, 2000). There is a void that merits understanding to determine how higher education connects with the Millennials as they pursue graduate education.

The faculty plays a major role in the enrollment choice of graduate students (Poock & Love, 2001). As a potential graduate student begins the search process, he or she wants to be able to engage with the faculty to get a better sense of the curriculum, research, and academic opportunities that are available for him or her as a student (Kallio,

1995). Graduate education can be an even greater investment than undergraduate education because of work obligations and family commitments; therefore, potential graduate students want to know as much about their academic environment as possible before enrolling in a particular program. Also, the student wants to engage more with the faculty because of future opportunities that may come as a result of their graduate education and their faculty recommendations. Graduate students want to understand the research as well as the commitment from the faculty members before they invest in a particular institution for their graduate education (Poock & Love, 2001).

As a result, students need to understand the flexibility that the faculty and administration will have during matriculation at that particular institution (Kallio, 1995). Of concern is the commitment of the faculty to meet the student needs. Student needs include: course offerings in either the evenings or weekends; demands from faculty in the classroom; similar opportunities to graduate students as full-time or part-time students with regard to academic and co-curricular opportunities (Poock & Love, 2001). Graduate students want as much for their investment as possible. As such, during their selection process for enrollment at a particular institution, they need to understand the particulars of their program and how it will impact their academic, professional, and personal life. Faculty can affect this in the social media space. It would be helpful to understand how faculty interaction on Facebook, before matriculation, influences enrollment choice.

Of particular concern are international students (Poock & Love, 2001). Many international students come to the United States to earn graduate degrees and have particular trepidation while they are making their decisions. Questions and concerns include their acclimation to the particular institution, the accessibility of faculty and

research opportunities, and issues with governmental documents and an institutions' commitment to their status (Poock & Love, 2001). Some would argue that ethically speaking, higher education in the United States owes it to this population to be sure they can be successful. Savvy institutions will be aware of these concerns for these types of students and how it influences their enrollment choices. As such, graduate programs can use the web and Facebook to capitalize on this opportunity to display their programs in a way that is representative of the institution. This too could positively affect enrollment simply based on social media presence.

Finally, we do not know how alumni connections persuade the enrollment choices of graduate students as a whole. In undergraduate school and in business education, alumni are often used for interviews, networking opportunities, and internships that can lead to jobs. For others in higher education, alumni have not necessarily been used in the same capacity. Not only could alumni influence the potential student, but also they could provide information that is important for the spouse and other family who may help shape the graduate student choice decision. As the Millennials grow in the graduate population, so too is the millennial alumni population. These are the types of individuals that engage in social media. Universities overlook this population if they do not participate in social media in a meaningful way and provide best practices for other institutions to engage with this population of their community.

Next Steps

This literature tells us little about the effect of social media on enrollment in graduate school for students in fast-track evening MBA programs. As has been mentioned, this is a void within the field of higher education. There is little to no

scholarly research on this topic within this specific area. Therefore, a study of this type may be influential to higher education in many ways. First, it can add to the body of scholarly research by providing concrete data around enrollment choices for graduate students and how they are formed. This study may build an understanding on the influence of social media amongst higher educational marketers and enrollment managers. It will add to what is known about graduate students' choice, especially those students who are pursuing unique graduate school experiences such as the fast-track program. Finally, a study of this type may allow parallels to be drawn between the factors that impact undergraduate student choice in selecting college and graduate student choice; are there similarities between the two decision making processes?

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study sought to understand how Facebook and other factors influenced enrollment choices of students pursuing a fast-track evening MBA. As such, my research questions were 1) What impact Facebook had on admissions decisions among students considering fast-track MBA programs and 2) What other factors are influential in those decisions. Research participants were students from the University of Georgia's Terry College of Business located in Atlanta, Georgia at the Buckhead campus. There were 18 semi-structured interviews which allowed for additional questions and discussion, depending on the flow of the interview. All participants were enrolled for the spring 2011 semester. The study was not limited to a particular class year as the goal of this study was to understand how Facebook and other factors influenced these students' decisions to enroll in the fast-track evening MBA program.

Sample Selection, Site, and Ethical Concerns

Purposeful sampling was used throughout the research. As such, I selected both the people and the location for the interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Based on my research, I determined the questions, the value added by participants, and the amount of time given for the study. Specifically, this study employed elements of "snowballing" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). For my purposes, snowballing was defined as a way to generate more interest in this research from a few individuals. I used my personal and professional networks to locate individuals who were current students of the program. Additionally, my professional networks and associations were utilized to contact students, faculty, and administrators for identifying student participants. Thus the

snowballing technique was the approach for the initial interviews of students attending this MBA Program. Included in this group were individuals who received undergraduate degrees from UGA and individuals who were currently working for the Terry College of Business.

Alumni of the fast-track program were omitted from this study as participants because this study sought to understand the things that have happened within the last few years with regard to social media and its impact on the admissions process. Also, alumni were helpful with identifying course and meeting points of students who were currently enrolled. Their connection to the community was imperative for this study. However, they were not specifically targeted as participants within the study.

Initially, all current students were eligible to be included in this study. The Terry College offers different programs in Athens, Gwinnett, as well as at the Buckhead campus. These may have strengthened the findings as different students who live in different places, and are in different levels of their career interface with social media in different ways. However, students in the fast-track program were ultimately selected.

Current students were targeted for participation because there are experiencing the academic curriculum in real time. They can recount their experience more easily than alumni who are no longer connected with the school or program on a daily basis. Current students were more familiar with the school's marketing tactics as displayed online. They added validity and interesting insight, especially based on what was offered to them during their admissions process versus what was currently available for prospective students. The marketing efforts were important to all students in the program. It was noted on several occasions that social media outlets such as Facebook allow students an

opportunity to continue to be engaged with their business school communities. The sample was inclusive of individuals from different races and genders, those who have families, and people from a variety of ages, therefore maximizing variation.

Snowballing was a successful tactic for me as I prepared for research. I spoke with BBA alumni, MBA alumni, as well as faculty and staff members of the Terry College of Business. Many of these individuals were familiar with my research interests in MBA students from personal and professional connections. As I continued to talk with people I realized that I should look on OASIS, the registration system for UGA, to find MBA classes that were taught at the Buckhead campus. This was logical for a few reasons. First, I knew that students using this system would be seeking an MBA. These students would be part time which meant that they would typically have full-time jobs, live in or near the Atlanta area, and may have a family. Secondly, these would be graduate students. I was interested in studying the graduate student populations. Finally, I was familiar enough with the programs at the Buckhead campus and evening degree programs to know that there was a schedule for the students and a constant rotation of classes and class meetings. This would be beneficial for me as I scheduled interviews and meeting times with the students.

On OASIS, I found the Legal Environments Class (EMBA 7710) which was taught to the students pursuing the fast-track program. After our initial meeting to discuss the demographics of the class with the professor of that class, he suggested that I speak with the director of the program. After a series of meetings and discussions with the director, she agreed to allow me to speak with students in his classes. The students in the EMBA

7710 course were all students pursuing a fast-track MBA. These were the students in my sample.

It was important for the interviews to be conducted at a site convenient for the participants. In this type of research, the participant should feel comfortable and know that their privacy will be respected. I met with students in a myriad of locations: back corner tables at Starbucks around the city of Atlanta, study rooms in the Buckhead center, and even in rooms and locations at public places, such as the YMCA. These places worked well for the participants as they tried to fit my research into their schedule. I remained flexible and humbled by their willingness to participate and to address this research through their experience. For validity and confidentiality, I did not want all participants congregating at the same location. I wanted each interview to have its own personality; as a result of this, I met at the convenience of the participants before they headed to work at 7am, after classes at 10pm, during lunch breaks, over coffee, and even while a participant's child was at a little-league practice at the YMCA.

Regardless of the location, when participants arrived, I discussed issues of confidentiality and outlined the interview protocol. This was a semi-structured interview, so the questions that the participants were asked served as an outline for the conversation; per research, I wanted to be sure to capture as much information as possible to strengthen the study. Questions were not limited only to those listed. If there were natural questions that arose during the conversation, I followed-up accordingly. This proved to be a helpful tactic and allowed me to explore other related areas that were not necessarily outlined in the beginning of my research. Finally, participants signed consent forms to keep for their personal record, and also for me to keep on file (see Appendix B). The

consent form outlined the study and what would take place during the session. Researcher/interview confidentiality was stressed again in detail on the form. Additionally, there was information that told the participant how to contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) if he or she felt that there had been any violation or if they had additional related questions or concerns.

Ethical considerations are ever present with any research project (Creswell, 2007). Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval was the first step, as this analysis can benefit the field of higher education and be useful to business schools in the recruiting and retention process. Confidentiality of the participants was also a concern in regards to ethics (Creswell, 2007). As the researcher, it was my responsibility to ensure a clean study that protected the participants: I am charged with representing their experiences in a sound way. Purposeful sampling could raise ethical concerns (Creswell, 2007). To avoid this, I was open and welcoming to all participants, regardless of any previous relationships. To address other ethical concerns including data collection and participants, I utilized two recorders (digital and a tape recorder). I wanted to be sure that if one failed that the other would serve as a backup. Additionally, I took notes throughout the interviews.

As Huberman and Miles (1994) suggest, I took notes regarding the interview respondents' comments, tone, and body language. This was especially helpful as I analyzed the data and assigned an alias for the participants. In communication with the participants before the interview and even afterward, I worked hard to earn their trust and support of the project by being timely with email communication, being punctual to the interview, not talking with them longer than their anticipated time, and by following-up

with them accordingly after the interview. These qualities were important as word of mouth spread amongst the group. I wanted to be sure that I upheld my commitment to them throughout the process. I realized that their time was valuable. I worked hard to respect them in that manner.

Data Collection

Of the approximately 20-30 fast-track MBA students selected target for this study, only 18 actually participated. Voluntary participation impacted this number. My first formal communication with the students to solicit participation came during one of their class meetings. I was allowed a few minutes during their EMBA 7710 course to introduce myself and explain to them my study. Students in the class had an opportunity to ask questions of me regarding the research. After which, students signed up to indicate their interest in participating. Some students were unsure about whether or not they wanted to sign up at that time; these students took my card which detailed my contact information. None of the students who took my card followed-up with me to participate. Immediately after I left the class session, I emailed the students to begin setting up times that were convenient to meet. I followed this procedure for two class meetings – one on a Monday and the other on a Tuesday, as the same course had two different sections.

After a participant received the email and responded, I met with him or her at the agreed upon time. Participants were interviewed in a one-on-one setting where they were asked a series of questions to better understand how Facebook and other factors influenced their enrollment choice of the fast-track MBA program. These sessions were recorded in their entirety to ensure accuracy only if the participant agreed. All participants agreed to have their session recorded. Notes were also taken throughout the

interviewing process. Recordings were transcribed verbatim. During the interview process, I told the participants that if I needed clarity regarding their interview then I would conduct follow-up sessions depending on their responses and whether or not there was something else to further discuss based on the original interview. Initial interviews were slated for 45-60 minutes. I explained to them that follow-ups, if necessary, would last approximately 15-30 minutes. At this point, I have been in communication with one participant since the initial interviews began. Data collection began in February 2011 and the detailed interview questions can be found in Appendix C.

Participants were then asked to navigate me through the fast-track MBA program website. I provided a laptop during the session for their use. I observed and noted the things that drew the attention of each participant, the series of links or associated pages where the participant clicked, and their reaction to these particular pages. After this process I followed a similar procedure by asking the participant to navigate the school's Facebook page. Some of the participants naturally went to Facebook while some of them only went to that page once asked to do so. Discussion followed and was guided by questions listed in Appendix D.

Document Review

I familiarized myself with the MBA program's website as it was the primary source that was used for the research study. Additionally, I had previously reviewed view books and other marketing materials from the Terry College of Business to prepare for the interview sessions. These were obtained from the admissions office during the fall of 2010 and were similar to the material available on the website. It was important for me to be able to speak the language of the program with the students. In building

their trust, it was also important for them to see me as a person who understood their program, its structure, and their student experience. Additionally, these documents provided a lens to view the secondary materials provided to prospective part-time MBA candidates. This strategy helped me observe the marketing materials and formulate an idea about what the participants had seen in regard to the program. The information collected was also used for additional insight into the admissions process. This form of triangulation adds validity to the study because it allows me to view similar information from the view books and websites while interviewing students about their experience in the admissions process (Cohen & Manion, 2000).

I analyzed web sites – the UGA web page, the Terry College of Business web page, pages specific to the fast-track program – and other social media sites in addition to Facebook and blogs. These sources have an impact on how the public views the brand of the institution (Kantanen, 2007). Understanding what is available from the web remains important as it is the one place where everyone in the world can get the exact same information about the business school, regardless of its accuracy (Denzin, 2006).

Data Analysis

With regards to data analysis, Stake (1995) employs a method often used in case study analysis that allows the researcher to find patterns between several categories. For this research, the case method will work well because of the different types of data collection methods. When analyzing the interviews, patterns will likely emerge between participants regarding their experiences throughout the enrollment process and with what they share about websites, social media engagement, and the impact of the web site on

their experience. Additionally, with this type of study it is possible that new data will emerge that I cannot foresee. These will be addressed accordingly (Stake, 1995).

Discerning themes from the research was based on the Huberman and Miles (1994) model. As a result, there were several processes that followed: writing notes throughout each interview, reflecting on the interview afterward during write-ups as well as while reading transcriptions and comparing the two, summarizing interviews, listening for consistencies throughout the interviews, and noting patterns of conversations based on the questions and responses by participants. After these things took place, I began to see frequencies within the transcriptions and began to discern themes and their frequencies, often based on the questions that I asked that were the guides (Huberman & Miles, 1994). These allowed for codes to emerge and analysis to be drawn. Contrasts and comparisons were made both between interviews and within the observations of the fast-track program web site and the Facebook page for the MBA program (Huberman & Miles, 1994).

Throughout the analysis of the research, I repeatedly read the transcriptions of the interviews and compared notes in search of themes to emerge from the research (Stake, 1995). The more I reflected on the interviews and read both the transcriptions and my notes, five themes began to emerge from the data. Also, as I conducted each interview, I began writing down key words that were then created into themes across the interviews. Based on the guiding questions, there was consistency within each of the interviews, which allowed for validity within an individual interview as well as among the collective groups of interviews.

Trustworthiness

Issues of internal validity, external validity, and reliability were of primary concern throughout the course of this research (Yin, 1993). I wanted to be sure that it was ethically sound. Internal validity asks the question of whether or not there is a causal relationship among the things being studied (Creswell, 2007). External validity relies on internal validity for use in other studies; in short, the results of this research can be applied to similar cases (Creswell, 2007). Reliability refers to whether there is consistency between what has been found with the research study (Creswell, 2007).

I worked hard to ensure internal validity. I wanted sound research and worked diligently to be sure that the research participants were comfortable and in an environment conducive for their needs. As it has been previously noted, I met the participants in locations convenient for them. Additionally, I was striving for each interview to occur in similar environments. This helped control the conditions across each interview and avoid inconsistencies with the data (Maxwell, 1996). Secondly, causal questions were asked in regards to the web sites and social media tools. I was especially concerned about external validity with the participant sample as participation was voluntary. However, because the research study was within the EMBA 7710 class, which made me feel more comfortable in this regard. In controlling for reliability, the same questions were asked of all participants. This also is valid for issues of credibility; throughout each interview, consistency in interviewing was critical (Toma, 2006). Any additional data points including websites and other secondary documents were evaluated similarly.

Potential Researcher Biases and Assumptions

As the researcher, it was important for me to disclose the fact that I am an employee of the Goizueta Business School at Emory University. Additionally, it could be argued that the Goizueta Business School is a direct competitor with the evening program at UGA. These schools compete within the Atlanta market as they offer a similar experience, much in part due to their location in Atlanta and due to the fact that both are major research institutions (Emory, 2010). As we know from other literature, location is an important factor for this population (Kallio, 1995). To this point, I disclosed to the EMBA 7710 class that I was an employee of Emory University. Each student who signed up as a participant received one of my business cards, which further disclosed my status as an Emory employee. It was important for the participants to know and understand where I work, and the fact that I am researching this as a graduate student of UGA, not as a competitor within the academic market.

I am a graduate of UGA. Not only have I earned all of my degrees from UGA, but I have also remained active within the university community in Athens and Atlanta. Along with this continued activity come the associations through personal and professional relationships that have evolved over time. Because of my involvement, I have stronger ties to UGA. I was conscious of these associations, and I worked hard to remain unbiased throughout this research study through a consistent approach and by following the questions as outlined (Appendix C, Appendix D) as well as by portraying the experience of the research participants as it was shared by them to me (Toma, 2006).

Next Steps

Understanding the enrollment choices of students pursuing fast-track MBA programs is helpful in higher education for many reasons. It is important to understand the varying factors which create an overall experience between a prospective student and an institution. What is the connection? Holistically, these are the factors that impact the institutional brand-perceptions, images of the institution, current students, alumni, etc. (Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2002). Finally, the marketing efforts of an institution impact the enrollment choice as institutions have a presence within the media-primary and secondary documents, World Wide Web, and other outlets. With regard to social media, this study focused on Facebook as opposed to YouTube, Twitter, or any other social media tool. We know very little regarding the primary contributors for students pursuing graduate education. Research may suggest that these efforts have some impact on student enrollments which help them choose one institution over another one; but specifically, we do not know as much about the graduate student choice process as we do about the undergraduate choices.

The next chapters will be devoted to exploring these issues through a series of in-depth interviews with students from the fast-track MBA program at the Buckhead Campus of the Terry College of Business. These participants devoted their time and efforts for research to further explore their experiences as a prospective student. Their candid responses shed new light on the experience of a fast-track student in the Atlanta market for an MBA program.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings of the original qualitative research, which sought to build understanding of the influence of Facebook and web pages on enrollment decisions of students pursuing MBAs in a fast-track program. As such, my research questions were 1) What impact Facebook had on admissions decisions among students considering fast-track MBA programs and 2) What other factors are influential in those decisions.

Five themes emerged in the findings – one was related to the first core research question about the impact of Facebook on the students' admission decisions, while four were in response to the second question regarding other factors that were influential to admissions decisions. These themes focused on whether or not Facebook played a role; the use of websites in the admissions process; fit within the program; timing for the program; and tuition and financing the degree. To understand these five themes in a logical way, I will first explain the program, then the class, and finally the research. This process will provide context for the research findings. Throughout each section, an alias has been assigned to research participants whose comments are represented throughout this chapter.

The Program

The 18 participants in this study were in their final semester of the fast-track program at the University of Georgia's Terry College of Business located in Atlanta, Georgia. All participants live in Atlanta and take classes either at the Buckhead campus or the satellite campus located in Gwinnett County. Classes are also available for these

students on the main campus in Athens, Georgia. However, students can apply for the fast-track program either at the Buckhead campus or at the Gwinnett Campus. Both campuses offer this program. For this study, all participants were based in the Buckhead campus. In addition, the program has a blended approach in that classes are offered both inside the classroom and online. Classes meet every other week inside the classroom allowing for further flexibility for the students. The fast-track program is not a traditional evening MBA program; it is accelerated and intended for students who wish to complete their MBA in a timely manner.

The fast-track program boasts its completion time as 23 months and has a cohort model, which makes it especially attractive to this demographic of students. Students are an average of 30 years old with five years of work experience (Terry, 2011). The average GMAT of the students in this program is 550 and their undergraduate GPA is 3.16 (Terry, 2011). Of these students, 38% of them are female (Terry, 2011). There was no consistent information available on how many of the students are married or have children. While the fast-track program is designed for students with traditional business backgrounds, there are a number of liberal arts and other majors. Students in the program have work experience from a diverse set of industries – business, education, non-profit, entrepreneurial, etc. There is a myriad of students who are admitted into this program, which allows for a richer learning environment. However, the website suggests that students without a traditional business background should be aware that they may need to work harder in the more traditional business core classes because of their lack of experience (Terry, 2011).

Students within this program represent a variety of undergraduate degree institutions. Not only did I find this out from the website, but by also interviewing participants. Most of the participants in this study disclosed that they had attended regional institutions for their undergraduate degree, with a number of them having attended UGA both for their undergraduate degree as well as for this fast-track program. One student mentioned having attended a historically black college.

The Class

As outlined in their curriculum, the Legal Environments Class (EMBA 7710) is offered during the students' final semester of classes at either the Buckhead or Gwinnett Campus. These students were at the Buckhead campus for this class which was either on Monday or Tuesday night every other week, depending on which day they signed up for as two classes were offered. The class ran from the second week in January until the third week in March with a final exam 'if necessary'. Of approximately 80 students in either of the EMBA 7710 classes, 28 agreed to participate in this research after my brief presentation about the study. During my talk with them, I outlined that the interview would be kept confidential and that they reserved the right to whether or not to answer any question or series of questions during the interview. Additionally, I asked for participants to immediately sign up or to give me their contact information so that I could follow up accordingly after the class. I also provided my contact information by distributing business cards displaying my contact information for those students who expressed interest in participating in the study. As promised, I immediately emailed each of the students who signed up for participation on the night that I attended their class. One student offered an interview immediately after the class to which I accepted and

interviewed him that night. After being contacted, only 18 of the initial 28 actually participated in the study. These students were both married and single and were comprised of 10 men and 8 women. There was one African-American, a female. All others were white domestic males and females.

Also of note was that these participants were in the first class to participate in the fast-track program at Terry. Throughout the series of interviews, the participants mentioned how the program and the website had changed since their initial interest in the program. Several students referenced themselves as ‘guinea pigs’ to the program. Other participants recognized that they were not exactly sure that they understood what they were getting involved with, but that they felt that the time commitment was critically important and met their needs for an MBA at a reputable institution at a cost that they could afford. These students also had a sense of pride by being the first graduates of the fast-track program and recognized its unique structure and approach to earning an MBA.

The Findings Overview

From the initial list of guiding questions presented in the previous chapter five themes emerged. In determining those themes, I sifted through the conversation that sometimes got off track from the research questions identified in Appendix C and Appendix D. Of course there were similarities, but based on experiences and the path to the fast-track MBA program, there were variations of motivation for the program, means to gather information, and ways in which the information was used. Many of the participants openly admitted that they could not remember exactly how they approached the enrollment process as it related to the web. However, all students recognized that they used the webpage as their primary source of information. More information about

each participant can be found in Table 1. My findings suggest that the largest impact that the university can have on this population of students is through its website. Hence, we come to the first theme, that neither Facebook nor any other social media outlet plays a role in the admissions decision of the students who participated in this research.

Table 1

Name	Married/Partner	Other Details (All students sited the web important)
Peter	Yes	Used FB during admission UGA undergrad Liked flexibility of fast track program
Sarah	Yes	Institutional fit and rankings were important Used FB during admission UGA Employee
Andrew	No	Considered EU, GT, GSU Tuition, rankings, and flexibility were factors Used FB during admission
James	No	Considered EU, GSU Fit and rankings were important Was unaware of a Terry FB Page
Rachel	Yes	From Miami and Emory Undergrad Considered EU, GT, Mercer Fit, rankings, tuition were factors
John	Yes	Considered EU, GT, and Mercer Staff/personal connection was important Father of 2 small children
Esther	Yes	Considered KSU, EU Tuition, rankings, and flexibility were factors Mother of small child
Philip	Yes	Considered GSU, GT, EU Tuition, rankings, and flexibility were factors Father /Family considerations/unemployed wife
Mary	Yes	Considered GT because her husband is an alumnus Tuition, rankings, and flexibility were factors Mother of 14 year old Only African American in the study
Bartholomew	No	Considered GT, EU, GSU Fit and accessibility were important New to Atlanta during time of admissions

		decision
Leah	Yes	Considered GT, EU, GSU Tuition, rankings, and flexibility were factors Partner played huge role
Thomas	No	Considered EU, GT Felt connection with community Very leery of Facebook in general
Matthew	Yes	Considered GT Tuition, rankings, and flexibility were factors UGA employee
Rebecca	Yes	Considered EU, GT, and GSU Tuition, rankings, and flexibility were factors Community and staff were positive forces
Simon	Yes	Considered GT, GSU, KSU Rankings, and flexibility were factors Website was very useful
Naomi	No	Considered GT and EU Flexibility was important Time commitment/time to degree both important
Thaddeus	Yes	Married to Judith Considered EU, GSU, GT Fit, rankings, tuition were factors Relied on Judith for guidance with decision process
Judith	Yes	Married to Thaddeus Considered EU, GSU, GT Fit, rankings, tuition were factors Decided first to apply and website was important

Key for Table 1

EU= Emory University

GSU= Georgia State University

GT= Georgia Institute of Technology

KSU= Kennesaw State University

Finding One: Facebook

The interviews suggested that neither Facebook nor any other social media outlet played a role in the school choices or enrollment decisions of these students while they were searching for fast-track evening MBA programs. Only 3 (16%) of students who were interviewed used Facebook at all during their admissions process. When asked whether they used Facebook in their admissions process Peter's response was representative of the sentiments expressed by many of the research participants. He states:

I used Facebook somewhat to see if any of my friends had started an evening MBA program at the time. At the time, I had some friends who were exploring it, so I can't remember who started a program first, so I had been contacted because I list Terry College of Business MBA on my Facebook profile. I have been contacted by friends who explored themselves. It didn't have a big impact, because I didn't have a lot of friends at the time who were doing it. Information I'd been given at the time about this program was pretty useful to them. People that I work with don't even know that I am in this program, not because they ask me but they may see it on my Facebook profile or LinkedIn. Didn't play any role in my decision.

Even though Peter used Facebook some during the actual admissions process, he went on to say that ultimately, it did not play a role in his admissions decisions for the MBA program. When asked whether or not she used Facebook in her admissions process, Sarah stated:

I didn't engage with people, but I looked at what was being posted, the FT program, their activities, what their makeup for the class was and that interested me. I also saw the latest press releases, rankings, all of that certainly was for the FT program, but still affects all of the school's quality. More reading the information, but didn't really ask anyone any questions.

These statements from Sarah alluded to the information sharing that happens on Facebook, which is not indicative of regular web pages. Although Facebook did not influence which program she would attend, it did inform her admissions process because

she had additional information about programs that were of interest to her. Sarah speaks to the value of Facebook being a news source provider for users to receive information that may be critical to them in their careers or personal lives. Web documents like press releases and rankings are displayed for the online community to share on sites such as Facebook. Sarah represents a segment of the population who uses Facebook personally and finds it to be a useful tool for other areas of her lives. Andrew briefly mentions Facebook when he answered this question, making it clear that Facebook for was a social tool and that he did not have any intention of using it for anything besides a social medium:

I used Facebook for social purposes, did not use it at all to facilitate my decision on where I was going to school. I didn't look through people's experiences who were friends of mine on Facebook. I went to enlighten myself on who of my friends were in an MBA program at the time. I didn't do any research though on any of my peers.

Though Peter, Sarah, and Andrew mentioned their Facebook pages and groups as a place where they engaged during the admissions process, there were 15 others who did not mention using it all during the admissions process. Several participants mentioned that they did not even have a Facebook page prior to entering the fast-track MBA program, noting that they were sometimes coerced into creating a Facebook page by their peers in the program. Other participants mentioned that they were not aware that the school had a Facebook page, even though they (participant) had a Facebook account and had been active on their Facebook account. As James mentioned: "I didn't go to the Terry Facebook page, didn't know anything about it. I'd be surprised if I talked to somebody, but wasn't anything substantial or any messages. Wasn't much."

His sentiment represents consistent information from the broad spectrum of students when responding to this question, especially of those who had any usage of Facebook at all. This statement further supports the finding that Facebook does not play a role in the enrollment decision of fast-track students in this program. Furthermore, it implies that this population does not rely on Facebook or other means of social media as actively as other groups of people (Reuben, 2008). These notions suggest that Facebook is being used by this population completely in a social context, which is how it was created to be used.

The findings suggest that Facebook is a place where this population is social, but also is a place used as a tool to help in other areas of their life. The marketing opportunities with Facebook are still important to recognize as users of Facebook, related to this study, are also consumers of higher education (Kotler, 1972). This is seen by the comments of Sarah when she mentions press releases and rankings in her question about her usage of Facebook. Entities such as *Newsweek* and *US News and World Report* have a presence on social media sites and rightly so; their product gains momentum by being active in the social media landscape. Consequently, it does feed the market for higher education and in this case, the market for those who are seeking business education. The combination of factors is what eventually drives a consumer to one product or another. In this case, the product is a fast-track evening MBA. The marketing used by the press about rankings helps to propel information out to the consumer and ultimately impacts which product is consumed. In Sarah's case, she was using Facebook to be social and coincidentally saw an advertisement for rankings. By happenstance, she was shopping for information about MBA programs. While Facebook did not impact her admission

decisions, Facebook was a conduit for her to gain more information about the school that she would ultimately attend.

As it was discussed several times throughout the data collection phase, the full-time program varies greatly from a traditional evening program, which is also different from the fast-track evening program. This research suggests that the school should do a better job to highlight the experience of its students per program as they evoke different experiences. When reviewing the Facebook page, Rachel begged the question, “Are there pictures of our photos on here?” This is consistent with the messaging of the other participants within this study about how the page does not show their experience. Rachel stated:

This is more of a Facebook thing I think but I only care about the people in my class. You want it to be people who are in the class. I am friends with all my friends already in my class. That is something I would want to see on Facebook. More of a connection to the main. Some of this is very advertisey. If I was in Athens, everyone would know. I don't get any of that here. I want UGA news. Just because it's Terry, it's still Georgia. This is what I would think for a business page, this is what I would think I would see. I would like it to be more genuine. GMAT Test Prep, see that is something I would not want to see on this page. They need to have an Admissions page, that would be there. I would want to see more events happening, than something admissions related.

From these comments, it can be assumed that even if prospective students used this page at all during admissions procedures, then they would not receive an accurate view of what their experience would be if they were not applying as full time students. To address the research question, this may create a false perception of student life of a fast-track MBA student within this program. Also, the events that are listed on the page are targeted toward the full-time student. My findings suggest that students would enjoy a page that chronicled their life as a fast-track student – pictures of them, their schedules, their events. A prospective student interested in this program would get a different

perception of the program if they had a conversation with a student and contrasted it with what was seen on Facebook. Also, the participants mentioned on more than one occasion that the Facebook page should be relevant and updated regularly and populated by someone other than the owner. If the page is not updated frequently, it may send a message that there is not much activity and may send a negative connotation to the prospective student who is using the page. In addition, social media was created as a place for dialog (Facebook, 2011). With the owner as the sole author on the page, it may send a message that there may not be a sense of engagement with the entire community throughout the page and possibly in the program.

As the website is compared to Facebook, these findings suggest that students engage within the community of their peers once they are students within the class. One can see from the previous mention that Facebook was not used specifically as a tool that influenced the participants' choice in program. However, after students are in the program, Facebook takes on a new meaning as they begin to engage with each other in this space. In fact, all participants in this study at least have been a part of social media because it was required by a class that they all at least sign in to these accounts. Sarah recalled that the usage of Facebook is growing and having an impact on people from many different perspectives as she said,

I think it is definitely a growing medium to where you have to adopt it. With our own class experience, we have had classes where we are required to do an assignment via twitter. This was my first experience where we were forced to make an account and that opened that door for the entire class. Everyone in my cohort had to do that. That was a challenge with the characters. We used twitter for that, same class where we would have to use a blog and FB for one of those assignments. This was in an IT class. A certain group in the class was responsible for setting up the account, or creating the hashtag and get that going for people who understand it. We have been more forced to do it with technology and the

ipad and apps. UGA's career center has an app, they have one for their admissions.

These comments help us to understand even more that students are being encouraged by the faculty to explore the different avenues that are provided by social media and to have knowledge of them. This is important as it allows the students to explore social media whether or not they have had previous experience with it. For the students to remain competitive both in their roles as students as well as professionally, it is good for them to have some sort of interaction within this social media realm. While this research suggests that their Facebook and other social media have no influence on being admitted, once students matriculate, the institution has a responsibility to help educate them on a variety of levels to create a more learned student who is representative of their program and the business community at large.

Finding Two: Website

The Terry College website was the only resource used by each participant. Their reasons for using the website ranged from "I use it for everything" to "It's my go-to place". The participants found that the use of the website was the most consistent link between them and the institution. Based on the findings of this research, it is fair to say that the website had the largest impact on these students's enrollment process aside from any institutional marketing or pre-existing factors including undergraduate institution, social media, or any other reputational factors.

When asked whether or not they used the web during their admissions, all participants responded that they had in fact used the web during their process. Different students used the web to different degrees, even early on. John said,

Yeah. From what I recall everything, all the interaction at least early on was facilitated in an online mechanism. From the moment I gained at least interest in Terry I had an account setup for me at Terry's site which allowed for me to put my information in about me online and my entire application was handled in an online format.

John's experience on the web shows interactivity as he discusses his initial relationship with the program based on what he found online. Here, he was able to set up a personal profile with the institution and begin to backfill his information.

An advantage of virtual communication is the ability to create relationships from anywhere in the world. This is true of the program website as Rachel discussed her initial use of the web in the search for programs as she was out of town while beginning to apply for admission. When asked if she used the web during the admissions process for the fast-track program, she responded as follows:

I did. In fact I exclusively used the web. I didn't want anyone to send me any paper books, I downloaded all the PDFs. When I decided to go to grad school, it was March and I was in Vegas. It was a matter of necessity. I was out there for work, my brother met me out there. He said, it's time for you to go to school. I was at the Bellagio in Vegas, literally listed out the schools that I thought were best in Atlanta.

From this we see that not only did she use the web as a place for information, but also it was the place where she could get everything she needed without having a traditional brochure or mailings for the program. For her, it was a one-stop shop even when she was out of town. Peter also chimed in with a similar testament of the convenience of using the website for the initial admissions process as he stated:

You start going to the Georgia Terry site to gain and explore information on where the school is, what the structure of the program is, the class profile, how long it takes, what is the schedule like. . . Admission process is done through the website, so it forces you to go the site. (I) Used it to compare the MBA programs in Atlanta area. (I) Looked at Georgia, Georgia State, Emory, Tech. Factors I was

considering was a program in Atlanta that did evening MBA, the schedule was a big factor in that.

In addition to the web being the place where students go for information, it also serves as a place whereby students begin to feel connected to the institution. The relationship that is built with the institution and also with contacts that result from their experience can be the differentiator between schools. Esther recounted her experience with the web and how she felt both by the web and once she began to meet people who represented the different evening MBA programs in the region:

The web is the first place to go to figure out what you're doing. Don't want to make the face to face interaction unless they're somewhat sure this is a possibility for them. The personal interactions and keeping them connected to the admission process. I had a lot of emails for admissions folks say come to this event or that event and it all started to blend together. The personal interaction is what is key. One of the reasons I chose to not apply with Emory is I was at the Emory booth and asked the lady a question, the woman was really off-putting. The tone, etc. If I'm going to write that check the least you can do is answer that question.

Esther's comments speak to the personal attention that may be felt by some applicants as well as the personal interactions that one has when he or she is looking at different programs. Esther spoke of the connectedness that can be felt as an applicant. Important to realize is the sense of connectedness that students feel to the institution and the program both by what is experienced online through the web as well as what is experienced in person when a prospective student meets a representative from the institution. These two work hand-in-hand to create an experience for applicants. Each of these impact and influence the students' choice independently from a web page or from social media. In this research, it was important not to discount the power of the human touch once prospective students expressed interest in a program. Human touch has a further span than any internet based sector. Especially true in the admissions process,

prospective students remember how they felt as a result of their interaction with the school community. This research suggests that higher education professionals should be aware of their impact in any interaction with a prospective student.

From the stories of the participants regarding the ease of use and flexibility of the website, this research supports the notion of the website weighing more heavily than Facebook as an influence on the admission decisions of fast-track MBA students. In addition, the web is an interactive source that allows students to compare different programs, interact with the school administration throughout the application process, and see video streaming from current students and alumni, and view pictures of current students. This research suggests that these things together help prospective students to be able to envision themselves as students in the school environment. This research also suggests that these and other qualities makes the website a central place whereby prospective students get the most information about an institution and a program, and thus has the greatest impact on their enrollment decisions for school.

Although this research suggests that the web was the most used place to gather information related to the enrollment process, participants generally agreed that the information was informative on the site, but they also shared concerns related to the ease of use of the website, the ability to locate information specific to the fast-track program, as well as an executive summary identifying everything that a prospective student needs to know for their successful admission into the program. These conversations relate to the type of student who pursues an accelerated MBA program. Of note, this issue was not unique to the website of the fast-track program at the Buckhead campus. Participants cited this as an issue for all of the schools that they were considering during their

enrollment process. These individuals want as much information as they can get to be easily accessible and clearly defined for them. In addition to a page specific to the program, students also expressed a need to have a more clearly defined page that compares programs across the spectrum of Atlanta that includes public and private institutions as well as associated expenses, programs, and opportunities for growth and leadership. When asked about the things that he was looking for most, Philip discussed these things at length regarding his search for the right program for him. He said,

Going back to the comparison page where it actually winds up in a spreadsheet in what to expect, I'd love to see a similar comparison to state schools or local schools for people who are trying to consider Emory or Georgia State. How does Emory and Georgia State's fast-track program stack up to the University of Georgia. Don't make me build a spreadsheet on my own. I don't know if that would be in their best interest or not... I think there are aspects of how they compare to Emory that they win – a two-year program instead of a three year program, it's \$20,000 less expensive, your network is a whole lot bigger – there's a lot of different things they can sell. Conversely with Georgia State, it's more expensive [and] a little longer but, frankly, I think it's a better program. It fits in the middle of the two. Georgia Tech is this kind of outside program that I think everyone thinks specializes in technical degrees even though it's a business school but having that comparison would be great. The financial information was a big one and I remember looking at that and being a little disappointed in what I was able to figure out in terms of total costs and trying to figure out what exactly the program was going to cost me. There were fees and other things that were going to be on there so now it's \$48,000 for Georgia residents and I was trying to figure out how much of that I was going to be reimbursed for but a lot of that is my own reimbursement issues, too.

Philip discussed many factors here that are of concern to prospective students that can be addressed on the website. Mary also addressed her concerns with the website and its ease of use as she explained,

I would say both the schools could do a little better job with their websites. The information is there but you have to search, and search, and search and go back remember where you were. Even once I went to UGA because I went through the

application process – I think it was myterryba – It was easy and straight forward but once you submitted your stuff you almost lost control of the process. As far as getting people to send their recommendations in. I felt like I lost control versus if I could go and say ‘Corey, where is my recommendation.’ I’m waiting for Corey to go to this website and push buttons. I couldn’t stand right there.

The concerns with the website are a great importance because the findings suggest that the web was the most important influence for these students as they considered MBA programs. As such, the research suggests that it would be favorable for institutions to improve the web presence for several reasons. First, it gives the program an opportunity to tell its story about how the program is better than others in the area. Secondly, it may be a unique document for the fast-track program that distinguishes it from similar programs both at UGA and within the region. And finally, it may allow the reader to see that the fast-track program is preferable in regard to efficiency, cost, and time – all issues of concern for this demographic. In her comments, Mary also mentions frustrations that result from having to go back and forth with those writing her recommendations to be sure that they had received her application information and that it was received by the program. To the point of the fast-track program telling its story and standing alone within the Atlanta community and within the institution, Philip also suggested the following:

In terms of the actual links on the page, again, I’m interested in the fast-track program and not too many others although at one point I was comparing the others. As soon as I can drill into what I’m interested in as opposed to looking at the school... I don’t think it was obvious at the very beginning of the search process but it very quickly became obvious the fast-track is a standalone and what applies to the fast-track does not apply to anything else and frankly what applies to the University of Georgia is not the fast-track; they’re two very different things... Frankly, if I were marketing it I would probably have a landing page dedicated specifically to the fast-track program. Again, I’m not interested in the University of Georgia rankings, I’m interested in the fast-track program...But, at

the end of the day, what does my education ranked compared to someone from Emory, someone from Georgia State? I compared the full-time programs but how accurately does that translate to the fast-track.

As one can see, Philip raised concerns with the program and how it compared amongst other programs in the region and within evening and fast-track programs in general.

Regardless, the resounding suggestion from this is that students want as much information as possible that is applicable to the fast-track program and how it compares to other fast-track and evening MBA programs in the Atlanta area.

Throughout the interviews concerns were expressed regarding the website and its functionality; however, there were many compliments of the website and many participants found the information valuable and quite useful as a prospective student. Participants were asked specifically about the usefulness of the website and they responded positively in a variety of ways. Simply put, Bartholomew said that what he found most useful on the web was “The class profile – average GMAT score, average age, average work experience”. Bartholomew added that he was simply searching for the facts on the web pages, which further support the notion that this population needs the information quickly, and at their fingertips. When asked the same question, other participants elaborated more, like Leah who said,

(I) Gained a lot of the information that helped me build the pro/con list. For me it came down to Tech or UGA. I was trying to find things to make one go up or down. The proximity, the time classes started were the same, the prices were similar. The other information that could have helped, a lot of that went off line.

Leah also talked a lot about the comparisons that she could make by using the website. During the interview she added,

I could compare tuition, schedule, and class program. Was more information fact finding, I signed up for information sessions throughout the web. What was most useful for me was looking at the schedule. For some of the schools it was tough to find out the actual schools and what was needed. When I needed a tie breaker, with the electives and things like that were actually hard to find, but that's if I was looking for it.

This research suggests that the website helped these students gain not only a sense of connectedness as Esther mentioned, but it also was the place that helped them feel more at ease than anywhere else. The participants needed to hear from the institution about what the experience would be like from the enrollment process to matriculation. The sense was that the students felt confident that they could make it work so long as the schedule worked in their favor. Their commitment to their jobs and family also played a major role in being sure that the fast-track program was best program. As Leah alluded, the schedule was critically important to the participants. This research finds that scheduling and timing played a critical role in the decision factor for an overwhelming majority of these participants. Timing will be further discussed later in this chapter. However, the concerns regarding scheduling allude to other issues that proved important throughout the interviews, fit – these two work hand in hand to influence prospective student perception about a program.

Interestingly, none of the participants in this study mentioned the role of view books or the use of any other secondary document in their enrollment decisions. Before the interviews, I reviewed these documents published by the Terry College of Business in efforts to be aware of these materials, because prospective students also have access to them. The absence of attention to such documents further supports the inference that the website is the main “go-to” resource for prospective students.

Finding Three: Fit

One of the most consistent messages from the research process was that these students wanted to be in a program where they could see themselves fitting in with the school and students, program, and culture. This was expressed in a variety of ways from the different participants – students who attended higher ranking undergraduate institutions, those who were married or married with children, or even from those who had been out of school and working for quite some time before they returned to school. All participants wanted the sense of connectedness that allowed them the ease of fitting into the program. Esther recalled fit in the following way,

First you see there's a couple different MBA programs. First go to see if there's any sort of – what is going to be the best fit for me. I think first the admissions requirements, there's a certain amount of work experience. I have to see which I qualify for first. Then I will see the scheduling with the FT MBA program which is more of a commitment than I can make. What is the difference between this fast track program and anything else.

Here we see that she was concerned with the different types of programs and the fit that she will have with the program regardless of the type. She obviously found a fit with the fast-track program.

This study found that institutional fit, especially with regard to rankings, made a difference in how the students resonated with the institution. Some participants expressed concern because they struggled to find an exact counterpart for the fast-track program in order to rate it among similar programs throughout the region and the country. Most frequently, students resolved to view the rankings of more traditional evening MBA programs that did not have the more accelerated, aggressive nature of the 23 month fast track program. Rankings were both motivators and concerns for students

who applied to the fast-track evening MBA program. Rankings also proved important as the participants viewed rankings as a measure to the outside world about the quality of the programs at the Buckhead Campus. James said,

I think the connections to what the outside world is saying should be there. UGA ranked among top 10 corporate MBAs or something should be there. Would give it a little bit of credibility. Or have it be the actual headline right there.

James' comments addressed the issue of validity of the program. The program used these rankings to tout itself on the website which would be of note to the UGA community as well as to the outside world.

Mary approached the rankings as a way to compare between programs in the Atlanta area. She mentions online programs and was the only participant to do so throughout the interviews. Mary said that she used the web during her admissions process for a number of things, in this regard she said,

I looked at not just the school websites but just Googled and looked at *U.S. News and World Report* and *The Economist* because I was limited to Atlanta, but I wasn't interested in Phoenix or Strayer. I crossed them off the list and Emory is kind of [expensive]. I only had two choices. I don't know why I didn't do Georgia State... Yes, [rankings were important] because I didn't want to go to school that I felt was reputable because I did not want to invest two years, \$45,000 and just people say 'oh.' Being able to go in a classroom was important also. I did not want an online experience because, with my schedule, I'd still be on my second class. It made me go. It forced me to stay (I couldn't say 'I'm going to only take one class this time or take a semester off because I'm so busy'). It forced me to stay on track.

Not only did Mary discuss how the rankings were important to her, but she discusses schools ranging from Emory to online institutions. Here, she also mentions the cost associated with attending different MBA programs. It can be gathered from this and other comments from Mary that she was in search of the best program that would propel

her forward and allow her the prestige that should accompany a professional who has gone through the rigor of an MBA program.

In addition to rankings, there were other ways in which participants could see themselves fitting into the fast-track program and connecting with the institutional brand of UGA. For some students, fit was more than assimilating with the fast-track program, but beyond that there was a fit with the overall institution. Rachel discussed this at length when asked about her sense of connectedness to the program. When asked, I realized that she had a connection with UGA more because of her environment – her friends that had attended UGA and shared their pride with her. Rachel self-identified as an out-of-state resident who had attended Emory University as an undergraduate. Rachel discussed her fit with the institution below when asked if she connected with the program,

I did because I had so many friends that went to Georgia. You almost want to have some type of affiliation and so many of your friends and word of mouth that go to Georgia. I am from Miami, FL not Atlanta. I'm not even like this is a campus and I feel more connected to Georgia than I ever did Emory. My first football game for orientation, I felt very very connected. I graduated highest honors at Emory at the business school, but have no Emory pride. I thought Dooley week was the dumbest thing ever. It was terrible.

The connection to the UGA brand was also mentioned by Peter. Although he did not have a personal connection point with the program itself, he noted his comfort level when discussing that Facebook and social media played no role in his decision to attend the fast-track program. Peter said in regard to UGA,

[Facebook] Didn't play any role in my decision. When I was going through the application process, I'm a UGA undergraduate, so I was comfortable with the university, didn't find any close enough friends to reach out and talk them.

Not only is there a fit from the sense of connectedness with the program, but once students decide to pursue an MBA from the fast-track program and begin to express their interest online, there is still a courtship between the student and the university. Faculty, staff, or others in administrative roles work to create a personality of the program with the students. Administrators have a pivotal role with the program and allow opportunities for the students to further see how they fit into the equation at that particular institution, according to the findings of this research.

When participants discussed how they fit into the Fast-Track program they often mentioned a person who will be known as Eve. Eve is the director of the fast-track program whose job it is to oversee the admissions to matriculation process. Once matriculated, Eve works with the students and their faculty in the role of student /faculty support. As participants reflected on their interest in the program and as they began to reach out to the institution after all paperwork from the website was complete, Eve was their next point of contact. As was mentioned by Esther about individuals in these roles, "...the least you can do is answer that question." Especially during these early stages of the process, individuals who take on these roles within colleges and universities set the tone of what the experience will be. Eve is mentioned by many of the participants in various ways. It is fair to say that they could see how service would be provided to them fits into their idea of how they will be treated as a student in the program. When asked about the interactions with faculty or staff and how the interaction went, John said,

Yes. All of the above. When you say faculty, do you mean teaching faculty or anybody? My primary content was with Eve and her staff. I actually had several conversations with Eve. It's primarily because of the structure of this. That was one thing where UGA was incredibly different from the other two I was looking

at. I needed to get more information where this distance, learning thing worked and give me some examples of how this worked. I used both email communications with Eve, telephone communications. I had the opportunity to come to a finance class here about four months before I started. That was very enlightening... Most of my communications was via email.

Similarly to John's experience, Thomas' sense of connectedness came more from the faculty and staff than the website. Thomas responded to the question regarding connectedness to the institution,

It came from going to the open houses and speaking with the faculty and staff when they would have current MBA students help answer some questions – give you an idea of what's going to be there. Honestly for me it was talking to my network of people: friends, colleagues, acquaintances and people who have gone through MBA programs or been at other schools and certain programs. I met with people outside of MBA programs that were attending grad school... I felt like I got a good sense of how the school was. As much as a business school is an entity of itself, how is the school's community and how do they treat their people? What are these people gaining? That was definitely a way I did a lot of my comparison as well.

Here, Thomas talked about the community connection that he felt from the faculty and staff members like Eve. He also talked about how he met current students and his interactions with them helped him to further know that the program had a culture where he could see himself thriving and doing well. Finally, Leah echoed the same sentiments as her peers when she stated,

I exchanged some emails with some of the administrators; they made me feel like they actually cared I was applying. I mean I'm sure it's smoke and mirrors, but it worked. It was more of a lot of the stuff online that let me go to a real live something or an in person info session.

This research suggests that there are a multitude of factors that impact students and help them fit into the business school environment. Each plays a role and is important to the admissions process of prospective students.

Finding Four: Timing

As was previously mentioned throughout the interviews, the students suggested that an allure of the fast-track program is the 23 month schedule and the cohort format for classes. This schedule allows many students to continue their lives as normal. The participants in this study spoke to this time and time again throughout the interviews. Their schedule and their “precious” time cannot be reiterated enough. This is especially true for students who have partners and children. Mary discussed the constraints on her time and her family throughout the interview. She first alluded to her situation through her son and his schedule. She said,

I have a Facebook page because my 14 year old has a Facebook page and I have to monitor him. My son is so funny because he said ‘Mom you have 800 friends?’ I don’t know... I guess through life and jobs and undergraduate [Prairie View A&M]. I have Twitter but I don’t tweet as much.

Then, Mary discussed how she compared programs in regard to cost and time commitment from the beginning of the program to the end. She also talked at length about her husband and the discussions they had as a couple when deciding on a program. Finally, Mary expressed concern based on the ‘exhaustion’ that she felt as a student in the program in her last year of classes:

My husband went to Georgia Tech. Of course he was like Tech, Tech, Tech. When I chose Georgia he said ‘I can’t believe you chose Georgia; you just want the easy route.’ I said we could spend \$80,000 and I could go to Georgia Tech and the executive program or we could spend \$42,000... And I’d go to school six months longer. I made an economic decision at that point because I’m not going to school for three years... When they explain the Fast Track. They told you two years but they don’t tell you that you go two years but you go two full years without a break... They neglected to tell you that part... It’s kind of exhausting a little bit. I think they should revamp it a little bit but our class is kind of the Guinea pigs.

This is a classic display of the concerns that part-time students experience while making the decision regarding their MBA. This study suggests that timing is crucial to their pursuit and their approach to finding the best school and program to meet their needs. In addition to the actual time and cost associated with completion of the program, the participants expressed relief in knowing that they had a cohort format for their classes.

With the cohort model, students took classes as a group. This provided consistency within the program as well as an opportunity for students to meet with the same people for every class. Especially for an MBA program, this format can be especially useful as a person balances their personal life, their work life, and their academic life (Kallio, 1995). Interviews suggested that a cohort model allows the student to get to know their classmates better than would be if they were in a more traditional place with classes that met at random during different days and times. Additionally, the cohort model can be especially useful within teams and groups. As is the case with most business schools, this research found that these students worked closely together on teams throughout their time in the fast-track program. By having a cohort, students suggested that it was easier for them to find common time with their classmates to study and to work on group/team projects because they all had the same schedule.

This research suggested that a cohort model works well for students whose time is limited and need flexibility within the class schedule. The research found that the student recruitment and enrollment manager should consider the benefits of cohort models for fast-track students. Participants in this study discussed the cohort model in a variety of ways. In addition, the flexibility of the program was recognized by the participants as an asset to the students. The two work concurrently, especially since classes only met in-

person every other week. When asked what was most useful to him on the website, Philip shared the following,

The big one for me that I was looking for was the program structure. I really was interested in how long was each class, how flexible it is. For work I travel quite a bit. One of the big things that turned me off about Emory was in the very first event and it said so in the program was missing one class was acceptable, missing two classes and it starts tracking to your grade. It was very prominently displayed if you had any sort of absentees it was negatively going to impact your grade. It just didn't seem like the flexibility I was going to need. When I saw Georgia it was much more geared toward the working professional, much more flexible... Much less cost, which is a big one, too.

Philip's comments addressed the needs of fast-track MBA students who work full time. In addition, he recognized the understanding that faculty members have to his needs as both a professional and as a student. Esther had a similar experience when considering programs; however, she is married and was expecting a baby during the time of her admission. Not only did she have the challenge that all of the other students had, but she was also an expectant mother. During her interview, after she searched the website, we discussed the significance of the links on the web page in the order that she displayed them. Her responses centered on the timing of the program and the influence of the cohort model within the Fast-Track program at Terry. Esther said,

What is the difference between this fast track program and anything else. I'd start with the Fast-Track to get the information, see what the program is about. Program overview. I think the first message is very important. I think the Dean's message needs to be there, to show that he is committed to the program and the vision. I care more about the other information. It's nice to see it's there, I may not necessarily read it, but – When reading through this the 23 months portion was what attracted me. Just under 2 years. Was very quick. The Cohort, interesting leadership focus.

In addition to the cohort model, Esther also discussed the specialization in leadership that the program provided. The time commitment from the students as well as the areas of specialization for the program provide unique opportunities for the students to take advantage of a program that spoke to their need as students with other commitments in addition to school. Leadership training skills are essential for today's business leaders (Poock & Love, 2001). The leadership emphasis was discussed at length with Matthew. For him, leadership was something that he wanted to see on the website and learn more about as an applicant for the fast-track program. Matthew explained his perspective in the following passage:

I think all schools are going to have an element of professionalism so I think that's kind of a given. But I think you can get an idea about what the school is about by what their focus is. We tout leadership so we have lots to do with leadership on our site. I think that's good because we want to focus on those. We want applicants to know that right away because that's what they're going to get from the Terry MBA. I think it should give you an idea of the environment of the school and of the program. On the working side what you hear more than anything else is yes, there's all these MBA programs in Atlanta but all of them are a little bit different as far as the environment. I hope our [the collective our, referring to the Terry site] website gives that off and that other people's website [gives you] a sense of what the experience itself is going to be like – If they're like you, if they're not like you, to find out if you're going to fit. As a student I believe that and on the administrative side I believe that, too.

Matthew perfectly summarized the qualities that these students expected in addition to the format, schedule, and cohort option that Terry provides. Other participants also expressed this type of quality that Matthew discussed. The Terry brand is expected to meet all of the varying needs of the student both through its presence in the social media space as well as within the programs and from the faculty who teach these students in the classroom. This research found that the quality that Matthew alluded to is especially

important for a prospective student to feel from the beginning of their relationship with Terry as both the web, social media, and personal interactions provide.

Finding Five: Tuition and Finance

As with any educational experience, students expect and desire to understand how they will finance their degree (Hossler et al., 1999). With those pursuing graduate education, there are options which allow for financing in different ways than from an undergraduate experience. Company sponsorships, fellowships, financial aid, and family support tend to be amongst the most consistent ways of financing the degree (Hossler et al., 1999). Each of these things play a role in whether or not students will go back for graduate degrees as well as when the student will go back for their graduate degree. (Hossler et al., 1999) These issues were also true for the participants of this research. Another important note was the role that the partners played in determining the financial situation for the family as a real consideration for the return to pursue the MBA.

Sarah was self-identified as having a company sponsorship to attend the fast-track program. At the time of the interview, she worked for the University of Georgia and as a result, has sponsorship to all schools within the University Systems of Georgia. As a result, she could have attended Georgia State University, Georgia Tech, or Kennesaw State University. Sarah had options as she considered her MBA. However, she chose to pursue a degree at the Terry College. Her dilemma was determining which program as she discussed below when asked about her search:

Being that I work for the University, I did explore the program prior to making the decision. Being able to get my degree, so I definitely explored the site, looked at the different options. The Fast Track Program I am currently in was brand new,

so it was the new program rolling out, so my class was the first class going through it. So there was a lot of questions as to what was involved, what the program would look like, going from 3 to 2 years. There was finding out as much as I could. As for Social Media, a year and a half or two years ago and applying, there wasn't very much out there, it was mainly the Full-Time Program for UGA had a FB page and the EMBA had a LinkedIn group which was closed membership for just students and Alumnus, but that was about it.

For Sarah, the dilemma was the program. Once she discovered the fast-track program she still had doubts, especially because it was a new program. Additionally, she addressed how little information was available for her to consider at that time, even on Facebook. Her comments further support the research findings that social media sites have little to no bearing on a student's admissions decisions.

Rebecca was not company sponsored and took out loans for her education. She is married and discussed the decision with her husband; they came to the decision together. She wanted to return to school by any means and student loans seemed to be the way that allowed her to attend school at that time. Rebecca told me,

He had a decision in rather I was going to go back. I had been wanting to go back for five years and then it was like 'I'm going to study for the GMAT' and he said 'OK, well, just study and take the GMAT and we'll go from there.' I took the GMAT and scored fairly well and I said 'I think I'm going to do this.' He said 'Well, how much is it going to be?' So we talked about how we're going to finance and decided together I was going to do student loans. From there it was a non-event. I was going to go to school. He didn't care where I went. It was up to me... He also wanted to know if I thought I would recoup my money. He said 'If it's something you want to do, I want you to tell me how we're going to get this money back.' That was one of his big things.

Similar to many of the other participants, Rebecca discussed whether or not they (she and her husband) would be able to re-coup the funds used for school. Their return on investment was a priority for many students, not just Rebecca (Kallio, 1995). Regardless,

her husband was supportive of her decision to return to pursue her MBA. She had waited for ‘five years’ for the right time and opportunity to pursue the degree and it had presented itself through the fast-track program.

Esther spoke candidly about having a child and husband to consider, in addition to the commute. These responsibilities made it the decision easier for her to attend the fast-track program as opposed to a full-time program or even other types of evening MBA programs. When asked, Esther said,

We weren’t looking to move and I had just found out I was pregnant, so that really skewed the time commitment, the distance. He was finishing Undergraduate I was working in recruiting. They had offered me full ride, but I would have to do an assistantship to do it. I live in Midtown, that’s a commute and then figuring out what we were going to do with the baby and other stuff. The program was just so much more flexible. Two nights a week. There were some that you could take during the day and then some that would not fit. My husband definitely had a role. It was a joint decision, commitment for him too. . . Group meetings, things come up, things need to be done, and it’s the time away that you still have projects to have to do. So concentrating finishing school requires a commitment from him to manage other stuff.

Esther was not alone in her considerations about the program, time to completion, and the associated costs of attendance. Philip dialoged for a while when asked whether or not his partner played a role in his decision to return to school. Philip explained,

I’ve wanted to get an MBA for a long time. Never did, partially because of finances, partially because of time constraints of my job and I was traveling quite a bit. Timing was a big one. Beyond that, the decision to go with the fast-track or part-time program as opposed to full time, my wife stays at home, so we have to have the income. I couldn’t take time off to go to school full time which was probably a decision I was leaning more toward going full time if my wife was working but that obviously didn’t become an option.

My wife manages our budget so she played a huge role. So, \$40,000 for an MBA is a lot of money but we think it will pay off. She was a driving force in doing a

cost-benefit analysis on salary and what kind of impact will it have once I finish. Will it lead to a new job with my company versus with a different company? Will my current company pay for any of it? She was asking all those hard questions where I was looking at the benefit, the group structure, what kind of students will be in class with, those type of things.

Here, Philip highlights many issues. First, he discusses his desire to obtain an MBA and the associated costs that hindered him from the pursuit. In addition, he mentioned the constraints that his job had on him that kept him from being able to attend school. Secondly, Philip addresses the concern that he had for his family as a result of the associated costs of attending school – his wife who does not work, children, and the schedule of the courses. Finally, he weighed his options between attending the program at the Buckhead Campus and attending the program at Emory which is substantially more in tuition dollars than the fast-track program.

Philip and others expressed concerns of the tuition price between Emory and the fast-track program at the Buckhead Campus. Several of the participants discussed this concern throughout the interviews. Leah also discussed the differences of tuition between the fast-track program at the Buckhead Campus and what the cost of attendance at Emory would be. She added,

First the finances, having Emory experience, it was easy to discount them for that. The experience at Emory would probably not have been twice as much worth it. Admissions was my next piece, I would love to see what the average GMAT scores were. Also important to me that I'm not in a competitive environment based on a curve. Did want to be in a place where people are really smart and could challenge me. Make sure I could get all my stuff in time.

Leah, like many other students, did not consider an education at Emory simply because of the price difference. She even felt that the educational experience at Emory would not have been worth the cost of program, thus dismissing them altogether.

Philip and Leah were not the only students who felt this way about Emory in regard to the cost of attendance. It became clear through this study that a vast majority of the participants mentioned Emory as a place that they considered during their admissions process. However, the fast-track program obviously won them over for one reason or another. The financial implications could be the reason that so many of the students chose not to attend Emory or pursue it much further than simply considering it during their admissions process.

Finally, it became clear that the participants wanted to know exactly what was expected of them both academically and financially. This study suggests that prospective students need as much information as possible to make an informed decision about their graduate education. Tuition cost is important for these potential students. As Rebecca said, it's 'huge,'

I basically went to different colleges websites and I learned a little bit about their program. I was looking at Emory, UGA, Georgia Tech and Georgia State. My first step was go to their website, get some general information, make sure I was still interested – tuition was a big thing. From there I found out about their [information sessions] and went to a couple of those. From there I had my top two or three and had the top 50 list and went out to *BusinessWeek* and looked there. That was pretty much the extent of my web research.

Rebecca, like so many students, looked anywhere imaginable to find information about the MBA experience. Not only is information about tuition important, but Rebecca also mentions rankings in the same breath (Kallio, 1995). She goes on to say that,

[Rankings] It was something I wanted to look at. It wasn't really that important to me because I wanted to be in the part-time program and all the rankings are based on full-time. It was somewhat important but not the top priority. It probably would have been more important to me had I been full time.

This research found that rankings were also a main concern for these students as they weighed the pros and cons of attending business school. They wanted to be associated with a place that was reputable and was a good investment of their time, money, and sacrifices. Rankings were an easy way for a prospective student to see the institution and program's worth as determined by sources such as *US News and World Report* and *BusinessWeek*. The rankings from these sources speak volumes to students who are pursuing a graduate degree (Poock & Love, 2001).

CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Findings

Fast-track MBA programs are designed for professionals who earn the MBA while working in their full-time jobs. The findings of this analysis suggest that Facebook did not play a significant role in the enrollment decisions of the fast-track MBA students studied here. Instead, admissions-related websites were the primary source of information for these students. Also, fit within the program was important in student choices, as was program timing. Finally, tuition charges and alternatives for financing the degree were very important in students' decisions. These findings support the earlier work of Kallio (1995) regarding distinctive demands facing part-time graduate students who are also working full time. Notably, research participants expressed concerns regarding balancing their work, family, and school lives; regarding tuition costs; and regarding program structure.

This research suggests that institutional websites provide the most valued source of information for prospective students, not Facebook. Websites influenced the admissions decisions of fast-track students by providing a place where they could access most of what they needed to learn about the program. While participants praised the website of the institution studied here, they also indicated that during their decision-making process, a readily available document providing an overview of the fast-track experience would have been helpful.

Even though Facebook has grown in popularity (Whelan, 2005), this research suggests that Facebook played little to no role within the graduate enrollment process for

the fast-track evening MBA students studied here. Instead, this online resource was merely an afterthought for the majority of students interviewed. For these respondents, Facebook has remained primarily social, rather than a resource for professional/academic use.

Despite the evidence suggesting that Facebook does not play a major role in fast-track evening MBA decisions, this research suggests that the Terry College of Business should consider delineating its various MBA programs – full-time, evening, fast-track, executive – with separate Facebook pages specific to the needs of the students in each program. When a person accesses the website for the fast-track program, there is a screen shot identifying different social media tools – Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube (Terry, 2011). When the Facebook tab is clicked, it automatically takes the user to a page for Terry MBA Program (Terry, 2011). This page is not specific to one experience and portrays a very different message from what the participants of this study have as a day-to-day experience. As with any Facebook group or page, pictures are posted, events are listed, and dialog happens between the members of the group and the audience (Facebook, 2011). Absent from this is specificity for the different programs. Perhaps greater Facebook specificity to the particulars of the fast-track program would have yielded greater Facebook use and effectiveness in the students' decision making.

This research suggests that there are parallels between the factors that influence undergraduates and graduates regarding which school they should attend. Similar factors between undergraduates and graduates include family influences on the decision, the importance of tuition and associated cost of the program, attention to institutional fit inclusive of ranking and academic rigor, and the perceived return on investment

(McDonough, 1997; Kallio, 1995). Overall, both undergraduates and graduate students want to be sure to fit in their institution in every way possible, as noted in the previous chapter.

Of note in relation to institutional fit is the concern with distance that was mentioned in the previous chapter. The results here suggest that, while distance is an important consideration for both undergraduate and professional graduate students, its influence is quite distinct for the two populations. The major distance-related concern for graduate students in this study involved the distance of the program site from their family and job. That is, distance related to their commute, to the availability of public transportation, and to whether they had an automobile. In contrast, for undergraduates, research has shown that distance is more related to their distance from their parents – how far the college is from their home town (Palmer et al, 2004). In the latter case, greater distances can be a negative or a positive, whereas for the students in this study, greater distances were clearly a negative.

Kallio (1995) suggested that the consideration of the family was also important to graduate students during their pursuits to go back to school and earn the degree. This too was very true in my research. For those students who were married, this was definitely of concern for their family. Philip discussed at length the obligations that he had as a husband with a child and a wife who did not work. The stress that this caused his family even before he returned to school was something that he discussed at length. Philip was not the only participant with this concern. One participant even talked about how she had put off school for five years, for a variety of reasons, but that her husband finally said that he would be supportive of her decision to go back to school regardless of how they paid

for it. Consistent too in my research was the need for participants and their spouses to understand the return on investment for the cost of the education. On more than one occasion the participants discussed how the money would be earned back over time. This speaks to the sacrifice that the family would make as a whole and how the degree would positively impact their family structure once it was earned. Also, for people who were not married and either seriously dating or not in a relationship, my findings show that they would consider their relational partner, if they had one, when making choices to return to school or not.

Additionally, these findings support the need for more scholarly research about graduate-student choice processes (Hossler et al, 1999). Much is known about the enrollment decision making of students pursuing undergraduate degrees (Astin, 1993), but little is known about the enrollment decisions of students pursuing graduate degrees (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), especially those wanting to attend part-time. We do know that part-time students have different needs from those of full-time students and as a result have different experiences within graduate programs, regardless of program area (Poock & Love, 2001; Kallio, 1995).

Implications for Practice

Even though social media websites such as Facebook enjoy popularity, this research suggests that less emphasis should be placed on social media as a focal recruiting tool for prospective students and more should be placed on institutional websites. Surely, some students will go to the program Facebook page if there is one for them to visit, but this research suggests that it is not the main place where prospective students obtain their information. Instead, the main target for information-seeking

prospective students is the website. Therefore, I urge enrollment managers to have clear, concise websites that details the MBA experience to prospective students. In addition, enrollment managers should consider more personal approaches to recruiting such as a presence during national and international recruiting fairs, professional conferences that cater to students based on industry (finance, consulting, marketing, etc.) or special interests (National Black MBA Association, National Society of Hispanic MBA Association, Reaching Out MBA Conference, etc.), and through traditional campus tours and information sessions on campus.

As a part of the research, participants clicked on different links associated with the page. Only three participants clicked on the Facebook icon without being prompted to do so. Some of the other students mentioned that they “didn’t see” the icon, or did not pay it any attention, or even that they expected it to be on the page but they had no interest in viewing it without me asking them. This makes it even clearer that participants wanted unadulterated information directly from the program. Also, this may suggest that while the page is important, these participants view Facebook as social and not as a recruiting tool. This finding from my research supports Cheung and Huang’s (2005) theory regarding the usage of the internet and website of this generation (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Even though the findings suggest that Facebook does not have a significant impact on enrollment decisions, I would argue that a social-media presence is still necessary for institutions. As Brewer et al. (2002) have discussed, these are prestige markers for institutions and regardless of how useful or not the media tools are; there has to be a presence in the space. This is true in regard to the links for Facebook and other

social media outlets. Undoubtedly, the peer and aspirational institutions have links to social media on their fast-track MBA sites, therefore the Terry Buckhead Campus must follow suit. However, the lesson from this research is that the information on Facebook can purely be a place for prospective students to engage with the current students and learn more about opportunities afforded them by the program.

Because of the possibility of the potential students looming on either Facebook or the web page, there is an opportunity for the institution to learn the engagement pattern of prospective students with the online tools available to them. Institutions can be creative within their approach as they market themselves to a wide audience either via the website or with Facebook. For example, my findings suggest that they should remain conscious of 1) the overall institutional brand and how it is reflected within the program's website; 2) the fact that the program site is not a place for one particular type of person, as it serves many purposes; and 3) the fact that the web is a place where a potential students' interest may be first realized – all of these observations were made by the participants in this study. Within the Facebook page, there is an opportunity for the program to engage with the student on multiple levels including the main Facebook page for the general public, opportunities to see pictures and dialog from current students who are experiencing the program in real time, availability for the prospective student to “like” the page or a comment that is posted on the page (thus allowing a stronger sense of connectivity and a feeling of being a part of the experience), as well as availability for the student to expand their personal and professional network with others who have similar interests and goals. To most effectively execute this, I would suggest that institutional marketers work to integrate their efforts with those of program administrators, admissions

officers, and the institution at large. Information from the institution on Facebook and the website should be consistent, timely, up-to-date, and well integrated.

As higher education administrators work to meet the needs of the students, it is important to recognize that prospective students need clarity and ease in understanding what is expected of them as students in the program. It was mentioned throughout the last chapter that students want a place or a page on the website that clearly identifies everything they need to know about the program: associated costs, information about time and personal constraints, clarity in understanding that the classes meet for 23 consistent months with very few breaks. Participants noted that this would be important in their research and helpful for them as they compare programs. This also parallels with the generational needs of undergraduates and their satisfaction with the programs as Astin (1993) previously found.

The role of faculty in the admissions process is important to the success of any graduate student. Research has shown that faculty involvement is one of the critical elements that graduate students look for in determining their choice of school for graduate studies (Poock & Love, 2001). I was surprised that students in this survey did not talk about their faculty involvement overwhelmingly throughout the interviews. Interestingly, the participants in this research did not discuss learning outcomes and specifically what they expected to gain as a result of earning their MBA. Many participants spoke at length about the MBA, but not particularly about their concentrations and areas of academic focus. The participants did discuss the role that administrators had once they had submitted information online and even when they attended recruiting events at the school. The close contact with faculty who attended the

admissions events was critical for the students who mentioned their involvement; my concern is that fewer of them mentioned it than I would have imagined. This could be for several reasons. This research was focused on the enrollment process from the social media and other factors. If there was not a strong faculty presence easily accessible to the participants during this phase in their enrollment process, they would not have a reason to mention them during the interviews. To this point, there is not a tab on the website labeled “faculty” which would indeed make it difficult for students to learn about the faculty who teach in this program. There is a tab labeled “research” which then directs you to a page for the Terry College that discusses faculty members who are doing research at the Terry College. This is not specific to the needs of the students in the fast-track program. The lack of identifiable faculty members for this program is consistent with what students mention as a lack of things specific to their program.

For practitioners of higher education it is important to understand the associated needs of students both from the academic side with faculty engagement as well as understanding the needs of students from the programmatic, administrative side (Astin, 1993). As students are searching for the right program that meets their needs, the faculty engagement is critical for yield of the best candidates in the program. Specialized research interests, former positions held before returning to the classroom, and access to networks that may help with job placement are all of concern with prospective students (Kallio, 1995). The interviews for this project suggest that faculty contact and engagement throughout the recruiting process is an area that can be improved; I would argue that increasing connections with faculty could make a substantial difference in the recruiting process and in the ultimately enrolling class.

Practitioners should not underestimate the influence of alumni and access to recruiters for this population. Alumni are critical to the recruiting process as they have experienced the process that the current students are exploring and have generally been successful in their pursuits with jobs, areas of expertise, and professional networks. Information about recruiters is also of importance for this population to have a grasp on even before they are students in the program. Several participants mentioned that it would have been good to feel that there was a strong connection between the fast track program and alumni of the school during the recruiting process. Additionally, participants noted that they wanted to hear more about job opportunities and career management from the beginning. In fairness to the school, it is important to mention that this program was new and these participants were the first to enter it. However, there are hundreds of Terry College alumni from all programs including the full-time and evening MBA programs. The lesson for practitioners here is to provide potential students a spectrum of the full program from start to finish by using all networks during the recruiting phase. My interviews suggest that prospective students want ample information about the program and about how their portfolios can match others who had a similar experience early in the process, a conclusion supporting the argument of Kantanen (2007) that students need for a consistent brand from beginning to end of their enrollment process. As the enrollment choice literature evolves, researchers should attempt to learn more about how alumni shape the student choice of graduate and professional students.

The feeling of connectedness to the institution is created early on in the admissions phase. As noted in the previous chapter, there are multitudes of ways that help shape the student impression. One of these is the interaction with the faculty and

staff after the prospect has completed the initial online information. The roles of the people who are in correspondence leave lasting impressions on the prospective student, especially when they are negative. Esther's account in the last chapter about how she felt when leaving a table during a recruiting event is a lesson reminding practitioners that first impressions are lasting. Despite anything else that may be happening, we cannot underestimate the power and magnitude of the human touch (Kallio, 1995). Recruiters are ambassadors of their school and begin to form relationships and create a face for the school from their first interaction with a prospective student. More salient than any website or social media tool is the human that interfaces with the student. Participants in the fast-track program talk about Eve on several accounts. Had there been negative interactions with her, chances are that the participants would have noted it accordingly. The lesson here for higher education practitioners is to be aware that you are creating lasting impressions about your school and program to prospective students.

Future Research

Future studies could examine how this research applies to students at different schools in metropolitan areas. Do the findings hold true for varying populations? All of the participants in my study considered schools in the Atlanta area. Of the participants who mentioned other schools, all of the participants noted either Emory or Georgia Tech; in addition several mentioned Georgia State University. Very few students mentioned Kennesaw State and only one mentioned Mercer or online programs. These schools are different in many ways. Emory and Mercer were the only private schools mentioned. The evening program at Emory has consistently been ranked as a top program. The tuition is much more expensive than the other schools and it is located in a less central

environment. Mercer's program is an extension to the main campus in Macon, Georgia. Georgia Tech, Georgia State, and Kennesaw state are all a part of the University Systems of Georgia schools and are uniquely different. Georgia Tech is known for its engineering; Georgia State is the old guard in Atlanta for EMBA's; Kennesaw is an up and coming institution in comparison to the others mentioned. Georgia Tech and Georgia State are both located downtown and Kennesaw is in the northern suburbs of the city. These programs are all different and thus attract different prospects. Although the listed schools all vary from each other, there are similar institutional types and even more in other metropolitan areas around the country. Future research could compare and contrast the information from my study with schools and students in different metropolitan areas and how perceived prestige may influence enrollment decisions (Brewer et al, 2002).

Student bodies at these institutions are very different from the student body at the Buckhead campus. The Terry College campus is in Buckhead, which is located more centrally in Atlanta. Terry College is associated with the University of Georgia, which is the state flag-ship institution. In addition, the reputation of UGA and Georgia Tech in the region is especially strong, relative to the other public institutions in the state. If this study were conducted among all of the schools, the research findings could be drastically different or considerably the same.

A cross section of all students over the last three class years could provide data that would either imitate or completely change the conclusions drawn that social media has minimal impact on admissions decisions. Each of these class years is different and the school administration has probably reacted differently per year. For example, the class that I interviewed was the first fast-track class. In some regards, as the students

mentioned, they were the “guinea pigs.” They were the class that had to be sold on the program; ideas around curriculum and implementation were tested on them; and they were marketed to in a different way than a class that had been in the school program for any length of time. The class that began after this group was different in that the administration learned things from the previous class about what would work better for that year of students. The third class, which started this program in August 2010, may be different in the eyes of the administration because they have had two opportunities to make things better for the overall program. With each different class year, there have been areas of improvement from the school as a whole. Throughout my interviews, participants commented on the website and how different it is now from when they were in the application process. Subsequently, one would believe the initiatives in regard to social media have improved from when the participants were prospective students. Our world has also changed making social media more prevalent in all walks of life. If this study were conducted on students who entered the program this past fall, the outcomes and implications for the future could in fact be quite different.

This study contributes to the knowledge that we have from undergraduates and the things we have learned from graduate students in effort to add academic research in this area. There are opportunities to learn more about graduate student choice from what we know of undergraduates and the factors that are important to them during their decision making process. Only two factors of the ones mentioned in Chapter 2 about undergraduates were inconsistent with graduates: the concern with the distance from home to the school and the rewards and satisfaction that a student receives by their involvement at their college (Astin, 1993). Even though not explicit, a few participants

in my study alluded to their concern with distance of the fast-track program to their home and whether or not they would be content in a part-time program with a curricular design such as the fast-track program.

Further research about Facebook must confront the reality that Facebook may not be as dominant in the social media space five to 10 years from now. Facebook and other forms of social media are currently very popular as a communication tool, but Facebook users declined in Canada and the United States from May to June of 2011 (Eldon, 2011). This decline marked the first month-to-month drop in Facebook usage in North America ever. In keeping with this pattern, examination of the setting for the present thesis research suggests that Facebook was not as popular with the second class of fast-track MBA students as it was with the inaugural class. Clearly, technological change proceeds rapidly, and the dominance of Facebook is by no means assured.

Facebook was the major focus for this study, but the results have implications for other influences on graduate enrollment choices: how work influences a student's enrollment choice, the impact of having a family on graduate student enrollment decisions, and the financial obligations of being a graduate student and its impact on MBA enrollment choices. Each of these constitutes an area for further research on this topic. In addition, further research could be conducted about the similarities and differences between what undergraduates and graduates consider when making their enrollment decisions. As the research evolves, these findings suggest that this population will continue to have unique needs that may be addressed by their institution and program.

Limitations of the Study

As the last section mentioned, interviewing only a small sample of students within one cohort of one fast-track program is a limitation of the study. Had other students been included, the results might have been different. In addition, the demographic information for the students in the Buckhead Campus and the students attending classes in the Gwinnett Campus is about the same, but the students from the Gwinnett Campus were not used for this research, and some differences may not be immediately apparent. Also, not using regular evening students or any full-time students at all limits the generalizability of the analysis. These students would have different experiences than their peers in the fast-track program.

Relatedly, the 18 participants in the study were highly self-selected. Of the approximately 80 students with whom I originally spoke regarding the study, only 28 expressed interest in regard to learning more or being interviewed. And among those who agreed to the interview, three students simply did not come. The results based on this pool of participants may shed only limited light on how social media and web documents influence the admissions process for fast-track students. Had there been a more robust sample of participants, results could have differed.

The timing of the research project can also be considered a limitation of the research. I asked for volunteers at the beginning of their semester. However, with students in this program, their time together is even more precious as they meet for classes only every other week. As a result, their time availability to meet for a researcher's project was less than students who are on campus each week. Additionally, the time in the semester for interviewing them came roughly halfway through their

semester. The research window was short for people who wanted to participate – the research was collected during a two-week period beginning in the second week of February. This was decided after speaking with the professor of the class and after examining my own timetable. The professor’s advice was to create a short, defined window of time for the students to participate. This proved best for their schedule, too. It was not something that lingered for a while. Students immediately knew whether or not they could participate in the next two weeks. Additionally, their curriculum only had a few more class weeks, plus spring break, and the possibility of a final during the last week in March.

Despite these limitations, the study does provide insights into the type of information published on these institutional sites and how that information tends to be perceived by prospective students. In doing so, the analysis suggest the importance for administrators of maintaining an active online presence that is updated regularly. .

Conclusions

This research provides intriguing hints on the nature of the factors relating to decision making among students interested in professional preparation in business. Notably, the factors influencing part-time enrollment in a fast-track graduate professional program are similar to, but not always the same as, those influencing full-time undergraduate enrollment in an undergraduate bachelors program. And, despite students’ increasing participation in new social media, the use of Facebook in enrollment decision making was limited in this analysis. In addition to the institutional website, traditional marketing efforts, recruiting, and networking still have major impacts on prospective students’ enrollment decisions. Clearly, however, there is much more to learn.

Continuing analysis of student decision making is essential for increasing not only the effectiveness of institutional practices but also the ultimate success of students' educational endeavors.

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APPENDIX A

DEFINITIONS

Evening MBA: This is in reference to a Master of Business Administration program where students earn their degree by taking courses during the evening hours. Students in this program are often working during normal business hours and are generally older than a traditional college student. These students may or may not have partners and children. The average Evening MBA program is three years.

Facebook: The social networking site that was launched in 2004 where individuals can chronicle their life through pictures, messages, and a host of other ways. Facebook is now being used by individuals, businesses, colleges and universities, etc. For more information visit www.facebook.com

Fast Track MBA: This is in reference to a Master of Business Administration program where students earn their degree by taking courses during the evening hours. Students in this program are often working during normal business hours and are generally older than a traditional college student. These students may or may not have partners and children. The Fast-Track MBA program is 23 months at the University of Georgia. Students take courses in a cohort and meet every other week in class. The week in between is spent with teams and virtually. Students attend class for a solid 23 months without summer breaks.

Full-Time MBA: This is in reference to a Master of Business Administration program where students earn their degree by taking courses as a traditional student. This program is approximately two years. These students are encouraged not to work while in school and often have an internship during the summer between their two years to gain further industry experience.

Social Media: This term refers to a host of web based sites that allow users to communicate, network, and share their lives. Examples include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube. Many businesses are now using these sites for the same purposes as individual users.

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN INTERVIEW RESEARCH

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Dr. [Name of the Principle Investigator] from the University of Georgia. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about how prospective Evening MBA students interpret and respond to social media and web documents during their admissions decisions for post-baccalaureate programs. I will be one of approximately 30 people being interviewed for this research.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.
2. I understand that most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.
3. Participation involves being interviewed for approximately 60 minutes. Notes will be taken during the interview. An audio tape of the interview and subsequent dialogue will be made. If I do not want to be taped, I will let the researcher know prior to the interview.
4. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.
5. Faculty and administrators from my campus will neither be present at the interview nor have access to raw notes or transcripts. This precaution will prevent my individual comments from having any negative repercussions.
6. I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Studies Involving Human Subjects: Behavioral Sciences Committee at University of Georgia. For research problems or questions regarding subjects, the Institutional Review Board may be contacted through [information of the contact person at IRB office of the University of Georgia].
7. I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
8. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

Signature

My Printed Name

Date

Signature of the Investigator

APPENDIX C
GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Did you use the web during your admissions process (application, website, general information)?
2. Did you use Facebook in your admissions process BEFORE beginning your MBA Program (viewing or participating with university sponsored Facebook page or reaching out to students who were currently enrolled in the program via Facebook)?
3. Did you review any blog posts about your institution before your enrollment?
4. What prompted you to use the World Wide Web or social media in your admissions process?
5. How did you use the World Wide Web when you were comparing MBA programs?
6. What did you find particularly useful on the websites from the different institutions?
7. What is your perception of what was gained by using the World Wide Web?
8. What role did social media sites play in your decision?
9. What was the sense of connectedness that you felt to the institution from social media sites? How would you describe it?
10. What is your perception of what was gained by using social media sites?
11. If you engaged with faculty on social media sites, how was the interaction? What was it like?

12. How engaged were you with the online community for your school's MBA program as an applicant?
13. What are the advantages or disadvantages of using social media during the admissions process?
14. If you have a spouse/partner, was he or she engaged with any social media or web documents associated with your school? If so, how did it affect your ultimate decision?
15. Tell me what anything else I need to know regarding how social media sites and web pages work to influence student enrollment choice for prospective students.

APPENDIX D

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Explain to me why you chose the particular links in the order that you did? Of what significance was your order?
2. What were you looking for most as you navigated through the pages?
3. What would you have liked to see that was not on the webpage, the Facebook page, or either?
4. What is most helpful when navigating through an institution's web page?
5. What should be added to the webpage, the Facebook page, or both?