UNDERSTANDING COLLEGE CHOICE: AN EXAMINATION OF THE COLLEGE
CHOICE OF BLACK STUDENTS AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTION WHO
CONSIDERED ATTENDING A HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY

by

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(Under the Direction of Michelle M. Espino)

ABSTRACT

Utilizing a qualitative approach, this study sought to examine the factors that influenced
Black students’ decisions to attend a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) as opposed to a
Historically Black College or University (HBCU).

Eleven first-year, Black undergraduate students attending the same PWI in the Southeast
participated in this study by completing in-depth, semi-structured interviews. After careful
narrative analysis of the data, six themes emerged: Influences on the initial attraction to the
HBCU experience, Yearning for a change in environment, The perceived lack of prestige at
HBCUs, Financial considerations that impact college choice, The role of admission website
design in the college search process and The impact of admissions marketing and
communication on prospective students.

Although some of the findings from this study were consistent with the existing literature
on college choice, questions for consideration were raised regarding the way HBCUs develop
promotional and marketing strategies to increase enrollments. These findings presented four
implications for professional practice: Utilization of alumni in recruitment efforts, improvement in technology, a more personalized recruitment approach, and timely distribution of admission marketing materials.

INDEX WORDS: Black Undergraduate Students, College Admissions, College Choice, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Marketing of Higher Education, Narrative Analysis
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DEDICATION

With my deepest gratitude and in recognition of their unwavering love and support, I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Dr. Jeffrey J. Wallace, Sr. and Mrs. Patricia A. Wallace. Without their love, encouragement, and assistance, I recognize that this study would not have been possible. I do not know two individuals more selfless, genuine, caring, and loving. Thank you for setting the bar so high and for being extraordinary role models that I can only wish to one day emulate. I love you more than words can ever express.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

No other institutional type in American higher education has achieved the level of success in educating Black Americans than that of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Of the 300,000 students enrolled at HBCUs, approximately 80% are Black. In preparing Blacks for leadership roles in society, HBCUs are credited with awarding the largest number of bachelor’s degrees to Blacks and serve as the main source of Black student candidates for graduate and professional school programs (Perna, 2001).

Created after the Civil War to educate the newly-freed Black population, HBCUs were the only educational option for Blacks in the South until the 1954 Supreme Court ruling of Brown v. Board of Education (Gasman, 2010). This landmark decision put an end to the legal segregation of schools and placed HBCUs in direct competition with predominantly White institutions (PWIs) when recruiting Black students (Gasman, 2008). Without the restrictions of segregation, Blacks began to pursue institutions that were once inaccessible (Wilson, 1994). In the years following the Brown decision, enrollment patterns at Historically Black Colleges and Universities began to shift dramatically and the number of Black students enrolled at HBCUs dropped overall from 90% to as low as 12.2% (U.S. Department of Education IPEDS Database, 2009).

In addition, over the past 60 years, 26 of 87 HBCUs profiled by the U.S. Department of Education recorded enrollment declines between 1995 and 2008. Talladega College in Alabama tops the list, losing more than 54% of their enrollment since 1995 (U.S. Department of Education
IPEDS Database, 2009). This shift in enrollment suggests that Black students are choosing to attend PWIs much more frequently. Studies point towards an expanding Black middle class and the continuing effort of PWIs to diversify their enrollments as reasons for this change. Black students are choosing PWIs despite the fact that students at HBCUs are more likely than their PWI counterparts to pursue postgraduate degrees and become professionals in their respective fields (Drewry & Doerman, 2001; Wenglinsky, 1996). According to two separate studies, HBCU graduates account for 80% of Black officers in the United States military, 80% of Black federal judges, 65% of Black physicians, 60% of Black attorneys, and 50% of Black teachers and engineers (Bailey, 2003; Henderson, 2001).

Since their inception, HBCUs have been plagued with issues that threaten their survival and purpose. Years of chronic underfunding have placed some HBCUs in dire financial straits and pose serious challenges. With a lack of financial resources, facilities and instructional aids suffer. Additionally, problems with recruiting and retaining top faculty members are fairly common (Hale, 2006). Despite these challenges, several researchers have noted that HBCU environments tend to be supportive, nurturing, and conducive to academic success (Allen, 1992; Bohr, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1995; Fleming, 1984). DeSousa and Kuh (1996) note that Black students attending HBCUs exhibit a greater level of academic involvement and demonstrate higher levels of educational achievement. These students also appear to have more substantial levels of interaction with faculty, peers, and mentors compared to their PWI counterparts (Freeman & Cohen, 2001).

With the successful accomplishments of HBCU graduates, the dramatic drops in enrollment are surprising and have caused considerable concern for proponents of HBCUs. Traditional factors to which shifting enrollment is often attributed at HBCUs have included:
inadequate facilities, lack of resources, and low-profile faculty (Fleming, 1984; Hale, 2006). However, very little attention has been given to other possible factors that may influence the enrollment patterns of prospective undergraduate students for HBCUs. Specifically, within their marketing efforts, what messages are HBCUs sending to attract and recruit prospective Black students? Given the distinctive niche HBCUs hold in the higher education sector, it is critical to understand prospective Black students’ decision-making processes and the features and benefits they look for in a college or university. The perspectives and experiences of Black students who considered attending HBCUs offers a distinctive opportunity to explore and understand the impact of HBCU marketing and recruitment messages on the college choice of Black students who ultimately choose to attend a PWI. Focusing on Black students that attend a PWI will allow for a clearer understanding of the factors that dissuaded them from choosing to attend an HBCU and what role, if any, marketing played in their decisions.

**Overview of the Literature**

In order to fully contextualize the premise of this study, a thorough review of the literature on college choice and the marketing of higher education is necessary. This section will focus on college choice and the marketing of higher education, while offering what is known about the two topics as it relates to HBCUs. Chapter two will discuss much of this literature in greater detail.

**College Choice**

The challenges faced by today’s student when searching for a college or university are daunting. McDonough (1997) noted that students going through the college search process, “often are influenced by their geographical location, social network, and high school stimuli, as well as by their anticipated college goals and consequences” (p. 156). More specifically,
McDonough determined that friends, a boyfriend or girlfriend, parents, siblings, financial constraints, high school counselors, private college counselors, and resources provided by the colleges were all part of the complex college choice equation. As it relates to HBCUs, Freeman (1999) identified three factors that contributed to the consideration of HBCUs during the college search process: personal affiliation, appreciation of the HBCU legacy, and interest in the HBCU majority-Black environment.

**Marketing in Higher Education**

One way in which colleges and universities attract prospective students is through their marketing initiatives. In fact, marketing has become commonplace in higher education and serves as a key way for institutions to attract prospective students. According to Ruch (1999), “virtually every college and university is deeply engaged in marketing, including, but not limited to, advertising, from direct mail and billboards to cable television and the Internet” (p. 69).

Evolving technology and the digital revolution have increased the amount of business conducted on the Internet, and are certainly no exception for institutions of higher education (Kotler & Keller, 2006).

In an already competitive environment, technology has not only changed how admission offices market, attract, and recruit prospective students, but how prospective students encounter that marketing. Many of today’s students have never experienced life without the Internet and rely heavily on its technology when navigating the college search process (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). The Internet allows prospective students to address their questions about a college or university in a matter of seconds whereas students previously had to rely on printed materials or direct contact with institutions. Because prospective students often choose a college in much the same way that customers shop for products that are of value to them, research suggests that
colleges and universities must develop targeted marketing plans to better position themselves in the educational marketplace (Kotler & Fox, 1995). In their work on the marketing of higher education, Kotler and Fox (1995) offered six essential communication objectives for educational institutions that have remained pertinent over the years. One of the six objectives that relates most closely with this study is “to attract prospective students and encourage applicant enrollment” (Kotler & Fox, 1995, p. 350). In order to accomplish this objective, institutions must identify key concerns of their applicants. One strategy used to target these applicants is the use of direct mail pieces such as brochures, catalogs, campus visit invitations, applications, and flyers. Institutions conduct local and out-of-town presentations, host receptions, and visit a variety of high schools throughout the recruitment season. Articulation of the institution’s features and benefits should be evident and consistent throughout these communication mechanisms (Kotler & Fox, 1995). Through direct marketing, institutions have the ability to highlight their institution to a wide array of people.

Today, the Internet has become the main platform through which prospective college students gain access to information about colleges and universities. As a result, college and university websites have become the main resource prospective students utilize to inform their first impressions of the institution (Mechitov, Moshkovich, Underwood, & Taylor, 2000). Since several studies indicate that prospective students are using college websites as a primary information gathering tool for enrollment information, one could assume prospective student attitudes about the university could be affected by the messages presented on the sites (Art and Science Group, 2001; Harrington, 2000; Jo & Kim, 2003; Martin, 2004; Meshitov et al, 2000). With the click of a button, a student can either be persuaded or dissuaded to apply to a particular institution.
Literature on the marketing of HBCUs is scarce. After an extensive search, the few resources that were found on the marketing of HBCUs were strictly anecdotal in nature. As an HBCU alumnus and former president at three different HBCUs, past president of the National Association For Educational Opportunity (NAFEO) Henry Ponder notes that marketing focused on the institutions and their academic programs may be the key to the future success of HBCUs, rather than focusing only on lauding their illustrious alumni (Grimes, 2000). Additionally, William Gray, who served as president of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), asserts that HBCUs need to analyze their institutions and clearly articulate their strengths in order to market themselves effectively. Gray states, “Mediums such as radio, television, and magazines must be used to get the word out” (as stated in Grimes, 2000, p. 3). The assessments offered by Ponder and Gray regarding the marketing of HBCUs serve as a basis for this research study.

**Theoretical Framework**

Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-phase model of college choice and McCarthy’s (1960) Marketing Mix Framework (also known as the Four Ps of Marketing) provide the theoretical framework for this study. These perspectives and concepts provide context and perspective to understanding the perceptions of undergraduate students regarding the way HBCUs market themselves through their undergraduate admission offices.

Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) research suggests that the college search process occurs in three phases and is influenced by a variety of factors. In the first (predisposition) phase, the selection process is influenced by the student’s attitudes and values related to higher education. This phase is influenced by socioeconomic status, personal beliefs, and parental level of education. During the second (search) phase, the student actively identifies potential institutions that are the most desirable options. In the final (choice) phase, the student finalizes a list of
college choices, weighs the options available, and selects an institution. For this study, specific emphasis will be placed on the second and third phases because it is during these phases that institutional attributes and characteristics are taken into consideration by the student.

McCarthy’s (1960) Marketing Mix Framework (the Four Ps of marketing) provides an additional theoretical foundation for this study. In order to understand student perspectives in a marketing context, the Four Ps of marketing will be used to situate college choice. The Four Ps will be considered when analyzing data obtained from participant interviews. The Four Ps are: *price, product, promotion, and place*. Price consists of the cost of higher education, product considers the services offered at the institution, promotion considers recruitment and communication to student markets, and place considers where courses and services are offered and how they are distributed. The Four Ps fit well with Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model because each of the Four Ps represent items considered in a student’s college search and selection process. For example, during the second and third phase of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model, factors such as prestige, cost, location, and personal connections or communications have an influence on a prospective student’s ultimate college choice. Each of these attributes and characteristics can be translated to a component of the marketing mix. It is through this marketing mix that a student’s institutional choice can be heavily influenced. Depending on an institution’s balance of the marketing mix, college choice can be greatly impacted.

**Purpose and Significance of the Study**

In seeking to attract prospective students, marketing strategies employed by an institution can play a significant role in a student’s decision to attend that college or university (Sevier,
1996). While research clearly demonstrates the successes of HBCUs, the reality is that enrollments are still declining.

The lack of scholarly research surrounding the marketing of HBCUs is a significant premise for this study. The purpose of this study is to examine the college choice of Black students who attend a PWI, but also considered attending an HBCU. These participants can provide insight into the possible reasons students are choosing not to attend HBCUs. Particular attention will be paid to the reasons they ultimately chose a PWI and the role that marketing may have had in their decision-making processes. Perspectives of these students can provide current and future admission professionals at HBCUs insight into developing marketing materials that appeal to today’s college student and ultimately aid in increasing enrollments.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions will guide this study:

1. What factors influenced Black undergraduate students to choose a PWI instead of an HBCU?
2. To what extent does the admission marketing of an HBCU influence students’ college choice processes?

**Summary of Methodology**

This study was conducted using a narrative analysis methodology. To accomplish the purpose of this study, I interviewed 11 Black undergraduate students at a large southeastern PWI. The interviews were designed to uncover students’ perspectives regarding their college choice and the marketing strategies employed by HBCUs. Review of institutional admission websites was also a component of the interviews. Participants had to identify as currently enrolled, first-year, undergraduate Black students at the large research PWI in the Southeast where the research
took place, and must have applied to and considered attending an HBCU. First-year students were chosen because they experienced the process within the last two years and therefore could contribute the most insight on the college choice process. Additionally, in interviewing first-year students, it was my assumption that the admission marketing materials of the schools to which the participants applied would be less likely to have significantly changed over the course of one year. A qualitative approach using a narrative analysis was used. Using the stories and first-person accounts of experiences as data, the unit of study in narrative analysis is some form of a story (Merriam, 2002). Narrative analysis considers stories about a particular experience and “captures the experiential particularity of human action and intentionality, and it involves reasons, intentions, beliefs, and goals” (Baumeister & Newman, 1994, p. 677). This study looks at the experiences of Black undergraduate students who considered attending an HBCU, but chose to attend a PWI.

Six main themes were revealed in this study:  
- Influences on the initial attraction to the HBCU experience, 
- Yearning for a change in environment, 
- The perceived lack of prestige at HBCUs, 
- Financial considerations that impact college choice, 
- The role of admission website design in the college search process and 
- The impact of admissions marketing and communication on prospective students. These findings provide implications for those with a vested interest in increasing enrollments at HBCUs, particularly administrators working in undergraduate admissions. The findings contribute to the higher education literature by providing a student perspective on recruiting and marketing practices of HBCUs. Implications from this study provide HBCUs with future recommendations on enhancing recruitment practices and marketing materials in the face of declining enrollments.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I provide a synthesis of published research regarding the history of HBCUs, marketing in college admissions, today’s college student, college choice models, and the Marketing Mix framework. It should be noted that the lack of research specifically related to the marketing of HBCUs points to the relevance and importance of this particular study. As mentioned in Chapter One, Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-phase college choice model and McCarthy’s Marketing Mix (1960) will serve as the theoretical framework used to guide this study. This chapter will provide a thorough description of these theories.

An Overview of Historically Black Colleges and Universities

From their humble beginnings in the early 1800s, these institutions have grown to make significant contributions to American society and to provide educational opportunities for low-income and academically disadvantaged students who would have otherwise been denied a higher education. HBCUs have achieved this success despite discrimination from state and federal governments, severely inadequate funding, economic and enrollment downturns, and lack of support from most political leaders and the general public (Redd, 1998, p. 33).

Between the 16th and the 19th centuries, approximately 12 million Africans were shipped to the Americas to serve as slaves. Of these, nearly 645,000 were brought to what is now known as the United States, to provide free labor and stimulate an agrarian economy. The education of Blacks in the United States can also be traced back to this time period. Although many White
slave owners believed an educated slave posed a threat to society, there were occasions when sympathetic slave owners or their family members taught slaves basic reading and writing skills because they felt it was their Christian duty. Due to the strict laws in place to deny Blacks an education, this practice often took place in secret (Brady, 2000; Roebuck & Murty, 1993). Slaves who were caught attempting to read, or even carrying books, were subject to severe physical mutilations, beatings, and other forms of intimidation (Myrdal, 1944/1996).

Despite the lack of formal instruction and strict laws in the South, Blacks were afforded educational opportunities in more tolerant regions. Religious groups, such as the Puritans and the Quakers, believed that all human beings should be able to read the Bible in order to achieve salvation. As a result, Black education became somewhat more important and unrestricted in the northern states as opposed to the South. In fact, during the early part of the 19th century, 28 Blacks were awarded baccalaureate degrees from progressive White institutions such as Bowdoin College in Maine and Berea College in Kentucky (DuBois, 1903/1990; Roebuck & Murty, 1993). One of the first White institutions to admit Black students was Oberlin College in 1835 (DuBois, 1903/1990).

The first HBCUs in the North were established between 1837-1856 by White philanthropists with the goal of providing freed Blacks with religious education and fundamental skills (Redd, 1998). Blacks in the North attended one of three HBCUs during this period: The Institute for Colored Youth (later named Cheney State University) in Pennsylvania, Ashmun Institute (known today as Lincoln University) in Pennsylvania, and Wilberforce University in Ohio (Brady, 2000; Bullock, 1967; Gasman, 2010). These first HBCUs were private and were established and funded without any aid or support from the federal government (Evans, Evans, & Evans, 2002).
The American Missionary Association (AMA), the Freedman’s Bureau, and several church missionaries began creating private institutions aimed at providing primary and secondary education for Blacks (Gasman, 2010). This initial emphasis on primary and secondary education increased the demand for higher education. Between 1861 and 1870, the AMA established 3 HBCUs and 13 “normal” schools that focused solely on teacher preparation for Black students (Gasman, 2007).

Following the Civil War, the abolition of slavery, and Reconstruction, the higher education landscape in the South began to change dramatically. In 1864, U.S. Senator Justin Morrill led a movement to improve the state of public higher education in the United States. Morrill believed that a greater emphasis on training Americans in the areas of agriculture, engineering, and applied sciences was necessary to meet the needs of society (Abelman & Dalessandro, 2009). Through the Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1864, federal lands were distributed to states in an effort to open public colleges and universities and educate teachers, farmers, and scientists. Although more land-grant institutions began to open, very few permitted Blacks to attend, especially in the South (Gasman, 2010). In fact, Alcorn State University in Mississippi was the only institution in the South created specifically for the education of Blacks during this time period (Anderson, 1988).

Through the Freedman’s Bureau, a key federal agency during Reconstruction, funding was allocated to support the educational endeavors of ex-slaves. In operation from 1865-1872, the Freedmen’s Bureau worked collaboratively with missionary and educational organizations and supported several private HBCUs including Hampton Institute, Howard University, Fisk School, and Atlanta University (Du Bois 1903/1990; Logan, 1969; Roebuck & Murty, 1993).
Other institutions created solely for Blacks would not be established until almost 30 years later with the passage of the second Morrill Land-Grant Act of 1890, which required states receiving land-grant funds to either allow Blacks to attend the same schools as Whites or allocate funds for the establishment of segregated Black colleges (Gasman, 2007). In an effort to comply with the second Morrill Act, southern states created a higher education system divided by racial lines. As a result, 16 Black colleges were established mainly by converting several of the private Black industrial schools (Ramsey, 1973). Despite the provisions in the second Morrill Act, many of these institutions established between 1870 and 1910 received low, unequal funds in contrast to White land-grant institutions (Allen & Jewell, 2002). According to Roebuck and Murty (1993):

Public HBCUs were created by southern state governments for three reasons: to get millions of dollars in federal funds for the development of White land-grant universities, to limit Black education to vocational training, and to prevent Blacks from attending White land-grant institutions (p. 27).

This disproportionate funding would be one of the major factors contributing to the disparity between the resources of predominantly Black and White public institutions in the South (Hines, 1991).

In addition to White benevolent groups and the federal government, Blacks also played an integral role in the establishment of Black schools in the South during the latter half of the 1800s. Blacks formed societies, raised money, purchased land, and built schoolhouses. Black religious denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church were also instrumental in the founding of many Black schools
(Franklin, 2004). It is estimated that nearly six million dollars was spent on educating Blacks in the South and of that, approximately $750,000 came from Blacks (DuBois, 1903/1990).

It is important to note that the HBCUs of the 19th century were markedly different from the predominantly White institutions of higher education in America. Many began as elementary and secondary schools and focused on basic literacy skills and industrial education (Gasman, 2007; Roebuck & Murty, 1993). Hampton University, founded in 1868, was still a high school in 1903, and Fisk University did not offer collegiate level courses until five years after it was established (Du Bois, 1903/1990).

HBCUs and Black educators knew that Whites would be more supportive of educational programs that prepared Blacks for manual labor jobs as opposed to professional administrative positions (Ramsey, 1973). The focus on an industrial education curriculum was the result of the belief that Blacks were intellectually inferior to Whites (Gasman, 2002). Many HBCUs understood that embracing an industrial education would garner much-needed support of the local White community and attract philanthropists (Gasman, 2002). By embracing this industrial education, Blacks were able to pursue an education, while not posing a threat to Whites.

The early 1900s brought significant changes to HBCUs. The number of HBCUs continued to grow, and many of the institutions that once focused on teacher education and training began to offer courses in liberal arts, sciences, and other subject areas. By 1915, two institutions, Howard University and Meharry Medical College, had established schools for professional degrees in medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy. Additionally, Howard established the first Black law school, while Fisk University ventured into the graduate studies arena (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).
Even with the economic depression of the 1930s, enrollment steadily increased (Williams, 1993). The end of World War II brought many African American veterans to HBCUs, making them account for one third of all HBCU enrollments (Anderson, 1998). Additionally, several philanthropic organizations gave contributions to support HBCUs. Organizations such as the United Negro College Fund, the Peabody Education Fund, and the Julius Rosenwald Fund aided in the establishment of new HBCUs and increased their overall enrollment (Gasman, 2007).

By the mid-20th century, there were over 75 HBCUs with a collective enrollment of more than 13,000 (Redd, 1998). Additionally, the leadership at HBCUs began to change. Once primarily led by Whites, Blacks began to seek leadership roles, with Mordecai Johnson becoming the first Black HBCU president of Howard University in 1926 (Allen & Jewell, 2002).

In 1954, legal segregation in American higher education came to an end with the Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* (347 U. S. 483, 1955). Prior to this case, many states had laws establishing separate schools for white students and Black students. This landmark case made those laws unconstitutional. It overturned the *Plessy v Ferguson* decision of 1896, which had allowed states to legalize segregation within schools and private businesses (163 U.S. 537, 1896). This monumental decision placed HBCUs and PWIs in direct competition with one another for recruiting African American students (Drewry & Doerman, 2001; Wenglinsky, 1996). After the Brown decision, desegregation at Southern public schools was slow to occur, with many HBCUs and PWIs maintaining their racial compositions to this day (Gasman, 2010). However, in the years that followed, both public and private HBCUs found themselves struggling as PWIs in the North and the South began intentional marketing
campaigns to attract academically superior Black students once institutions began to see the value in diversity (Gasman, 2008).

The 1960s revealed a greater interest in HBCUs from the federal government. The Higher Education Act of 1965 finally recognized the uniqueness of these institutions and led to an increase in federal funding on their behalf. Defined by the Higher Education Act of 1965, HBCUs are designated as, “any…college or university that was established prior to 1964, whose principle mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans” (Fleming, 1984, p. 8). Despite their intended purposes of educating Blacks, HBCUs have always included and invited participation of students from a wide array of racial and ethnic backgrounds (Redd, 1998).

Specifically, Title III of the Higher Education Act focuses on strengthening and providing much needed funding to minority serving institutions (Williamson, 2008). This would not be the last time the federal government would provide assistance to HBCUs. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed Executive Order 12232, which implemented a federal initiative to increase the participation of HBCUs in federally sponsored programs and to alleviate any inequities that may exist. Since Carter’s presidency, every U.S. President has renewed this order (Gasman, 2010).

Currently, some policymakers challenge the continued existence of HBCUs, citing that they no longer serve a purpose in an integrated system of higher education (Hale, 2006). In fact, in the Supreme Court decision, U.S. v. Fordice, states were required to “educationally justify or eliminate” any evidence of segregation, including HBCUs (112 U.S. 2746, 1992). Nothing in the Fordice case protects the continuing existence of HBCUs, but the Supreme Court noted, “that an institution is predominantly White or Black does not in itself make a constitutional violation,” (112 U.S. 2743, 1992). Nevertheless, the Court emphasized closings and mergers as possible
solutions. Under the decision, states are neither required nor forbidden to maintain HBCUs, leaving their future existence in the hands of state legislatures.

As HBCUs continue to combat threats to their existence by lawmakers and those who dispute the relevance of HBCUs, administrators search for solutions. One area HBCUs can articulate their benefits and justify their relevance in higher education is through effective marketing initiatives.

**Marketing and Admissions**

In the realm of higher education, colleges and universities produce and market educational programs as their products. As Kotler and Keller (2006) said, “marketing management is the art and science of choosing target markets and getting, keeping, and growing customers through creating, delivering, and communicating superior customer value” (p. 6). Understanding what the customer wants, examining what the institution provides, understanding how the institution is externally perceived, and determining how the university can adapt to better satisfy what the customer wants are the central tasks of marketing in education (Kirp, 2003). For marketing and promotional strategies to be successful, they must address academic quality and reputation, create awareness in the higher education community, positively differentiate themselves from the competition, and generate inquiries (Kirp, 2003).

Marketing is not new to higher education. For example, as early as 1636, Harvard officials made special efforts to recruit by visiting the homes of wealthy White males, encouraging them to attend the institution (Rudolph, 1990). With the exception of a very few, most colleges did not admit White men from varying social classes until the late 1880s and women and ethnic minorities were not regularly admitted for several years to come (Rudolph, 1990).
While the term “marketing” in higher education was not formally recognized until the 1970s, colleges and universities did put effort into marketing their institutions to targeted prospective students (Henderson, 1998). It was during the 1970s and early 1980s that formalized marketing and enrollment management began to take form in response to declining enrollments and increased competition among colleges and universities. From 1979-1988, the number of traditional college-aged students dropped from 4.5 million to 3.5 million (Cohen, 1989). This dip in the student population drove many traditional admission methods to shift toward a more marketing-centered approach (Bryant & Crockett, 1993). Additionally, during that same time period, colleges and universities had to strategize about attracting the nontraditional student population. “During the decade from 1972-1982…, the enrolments [sic] of 25- to 34-year-old students increased by 70% as compared with a growth of 35% in total enrollments during that period” (Trow, 1998, p. 571). It was during this time period that several books and articles were produced to guide admission professionals. The National Association of College Admission Counselors (NACAC) and the American Association of College Registrars and Admission Officers (AACRAO) established professional journals and documents to guide the profession. Conferences were organized to address this new concept, and discussions of how colleges could duplicate the target marketing efforts of major corporations became quite common (Mackey, 1994).

Today, college admission offices rely heavily on marketing strategies adopted from the business world. The Four Ps of marketing: product, price, place, and promotion, are a traditional integrated marketing strategy used to create, communicate, and deliver value for consumers. The Four Ps represents the seller’s view of the marketing tools available to influence the buyer
(Kotler & Keller, 2006). However, the dramatic surge of information available on the Internet has altered the familiar ways of marketing and student recruitment for admission offices.

To combat those challenges, institutions must understand how their students’ searching behaviors have evolved. During the decline of projected enrollments in the late 1970s and 1980s, students became consumers of education, searching for specific types of college experiences (Kinzie et al., 2004). As Norris (2007) pointed out “prospective students had no choice but to come on your campus for a visit because it was the only avenue to information” (p. 2). Today, the Internet allows students to access everything they want to know about an institution without ever having to communicate with the admission office until they submit an application.

The Internet has replaced direct mail, print, and television advertisements used to generate interest, awareness, and inquiries (Merante, Huddleston, & Drexel, 2006). Internet marketing has resulted in fewer prospective students directly contacting a university admission officer during the information-gathering phase, which limits opportunities for establishing relationships with prospective students early in the process. The role of admission officers varies among institutions depending upon their enrollment management strategy and their admission philosophy (Swann & Henderson, 1998). Prior to the explosion of the Internet, prospective students seeking more information about an institution would contact the university directly or indirectly by responding to a direct mail piece or a television ad. Admission officers could attempt to contact the prospective students directly and gain a sense of their interests and academic backgrounds. This two-way communication between the prospect and the admission officer established a relationship and positively influenced the prospective students’ interest in attending (Henderson, 2001). With the increase in Internet use by prospective students, this two-
way communication has been decreased dramatically, and research suggests that this may be having a detrimental impact on the number of potential applicants to an institution (Norris, 2007).

Today, college marketing has the additional challenge of addressing reputation, academic quality, and competitive differentiation to a diverse student population via the institution’s website. In the past, higher education used mass marketing strategies that focused on how consumers were similar and used a one-size-fits-all strategy (Lewison & Hawes, 2007). As competition increases and resources decrease, marketing strategies at colleges and universities need to consider differences among potential students and adopt a targeted marketing approach that treats students as individuals (Henderson, 2001). Since the Internet has become a tool that college and university admission offices are using to regain some of the results that direct mail, print, and television used to have, it is key to understand how a university has targeted prospective students via the use of the World Wide Web in their college search process and how they may be generationally different from other prospective student populations (Lewison & Hawes, 2007).

**The Four Ps of Marketing**

Often referred to as the Marketing Mix, the term “Four Ps of Marketing” was coined in 1960 by E.J. McCarthy. Based on the premise that marketing your business is contingent upon how you position it to meet market needs, the Four Ps include product, price, place, and promotion (Ivy & Naude, 2004). In the higher education realm, the Four Ps include the programs and extracurricular activities along with the personnel (product); dollar cost, student effort and stress, and requirements for admission (price); location of program and facilities (place); and activities that communicate services to target markets (promotion) (Hayes, 1991).
Historically, the thought process has been that if the product is good, it will sell itself. However, in today’s competitive markets, there are no “bad” products (Ivy & Naude, 2004). When thinking about product in higher education, most people will focus on the earned degree as the product. However, the products of college enrollment are much broader than academics. Athletic programs, study abroad, student life, and various other institutional amenities and resources also contribute to the product of an institution. Virtually any aspect of the institution can be changed to market and attract more consumers to an institution (Swann & Henderson, 1998).

Deciding what price consumers will pay for an education can be tricky. Institutions must understand their target market and realize what price point will be most appealing. If the price is too low, consumers may question the quality of the education, and if it is too high, enrollment goals may go unmet (Haynes, 1991). Careful consideration and analysis of the market is essential.

When the term place is used, one may automatically assume that what is being referred to is geographical location. However, the term place refers to how the educational product is distributed. For example, is the educational experience being delivered via an in-person lecture, online, at a satellite campus, during the day, in the evening, or on the weekend? Marketing in education can be changed substantially by adding additional delivery systems. Today, one of the most common changes in delivery has been the implementation of online education programs (Ivy & Naude, 2004).

Promotion is the set of activities that most people commonly associate with marketing. In its most literal sense, promotion encompasses any activity used by the institution to inform prospective consumers of their offerings (Swann & Henderson, 1998). Activities include, but are
not limited to brochures, events, paid advertisements, press releases, and multimedia materials. Emphasis is placed on what messages are being conveyed about the institution and how those messages should change (Haynes, 1991).

In an ideal setting, market goals can be achieved by manipulating one or more of the Four Ps. Often, an institution will focus solely on promotion and fail to address issues in some of the other areas (Swann & Henderson, 1998). For example, institution enrollments could possibly be increased by lowering tuition (price). On the other hand, academically gifted students may be attracted to higher fees because they perceive the higher price to mean a better quality educational experience (both product and promotion). Market responsiveness to any of the four Ps varies by geographic region, academic discipline, and an array of other intangible factors (Hayes, 1991). In considering marketing opportunities, an institution may recognize that potential biology majors are being lost to a nearby institution whose cost is three times as much. Perhaps publicizing the lower cost institution’s academic quality and lower cost could boost enrollments (Swann & Henderson, 1998).

When considering the Four Ps of marketing and the college search process, each of the Ps has the ability to play an influential role. Colleges and universities that are able to create an appropriate balance of the Four Ps have the opportunity to see significant increases in their enrollments.

**College Choice**

The literature on college choice seeks to measure the factors that contribute to college search and matriculation (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989). According to Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), a variety of informational sources can shape prospective students’ institutional choice.
Proximity to home, cost, and family or relatives proved to be major influences on college choice prior to 1950 (Kinzie et al., 2004). In the 1950s, factors such as academic reputation, gender, parents’ educational background, and socioeconomic status became more prevalent in the college choice of undergraduates. Differences in the undergraduate choice patterns between students and parents began to emerge in the 1960s to the mid-1970s, and four major groupings were identified as influential to college choice: 1) academic reputation, 2) prestige, 3) external factors including location and proximity to home, and 4) human influences such as personal and family input (Kinzie et al., 2004).

An understanding of college choice behavior became even more important to colleges and universities in the 1970s because it allowed them to consider strategies that would offset declining student enrollments, budget deficits, and increasing competition. Colleges had to figure out unique ways to attract students and influence their college choices (Kinzie et al., 2004). As a result, decision-making models were developed as a way to explain the college choice process.

**College Choice Models**

The literature on college choice models is grouped into four major types: 1) econometric models, 2) socialization or status attainment models, 3) information processing models, and 4) combined models (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). Each model provides a different perspective on college choice behavior and will be discussed in detail below.

**Econometric Choice Models.** Following a cost-benefit framework, econometric college choice models assume that the individual going through the process is completely aware of the potential costs and benefits of having an education and not having an education before they arrive at a decision regarding college choice (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996). In this model, students decide if
their postsecondary plans should include going to college, getting a job, joining the military, and getting married, among other things. The individual going through the search process and his/her family are able to list advantages and disadvantages for each postsecondary option and the final decision will be based on the greatest perceived benefit with the lowest cost. Economic models tend to be objective, rational, and expand possibilities of alternatives to attending college (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999).

**Sociological/Attainment Choice Models.** Instead of being based on costs and benefits, sociological/attainment models narrow the number of possibilities related to college choice (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). “Status attainment models describe how variables interact with one another as students make decisions about which college to attend” (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996, p. 181) and consider the relationship between an individual’s family background and education choice behavior that is usually dictated by societal and family norms. For example, a student’s desire to attend college may be the result of coming from a family where all members have gone to college and it is considered to be an expectation from other family members and society. Sociological models assume that behavioral variables interact with background variables; however, they do not take into consideration the role of the institution or any of the actions an institution may take to influence a student’s college choice (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996).

**Information Processing Choice Models.** Information processing is a cyclical development process where uncertainty is reduced when the output of one stage becomes the input to another stage (Hossler & Hamrick, 1996). Using this approach to understand college choice, emphasis is placed on the student who is actually gathering and processing information. Students will make
their decisions by using exclusionary statements such as considering only large institutions, or only HBCUs, for example (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999).

**Combined Choice Models.** Combined choice models merge econometric, sociological, and/or information processing models to provide more understanding and perspective to the college decision-making process. These models are considered to be the most in-depth models because they allow a researcher to focus on or combine variables from all three of the other models (Hamrick & Hossler, 1996). The four major combined college choice models are based on research from 1) Jackson (1982), 2) Hanson and Litten (1982) 3) Chapman (1984), and 4) Hossler and Gallagher (1987).

Consisting of three stages (preference, exclusion, and evaluation), the Jackson (1982) model is student-based. The preference stage is based in sociological theory where academics in high school, for example, correlate with a desire to attend college (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). Economic theory serves as a basis for the exclusion stage where factors such as cost or location cause students to eliminate certain schools from their college lists. During the evaluation phase, students evaluate the remaining institutions on their college lists and make final decisions.

Chapman’s (1984) model of college student choice posits that college choice is often based on the influence of significant others such as parents, peers, high school personnel, or mentors. These significant others play a role in how a student perceives a particular institution. Additionally, Chapman’s (1984) model reveals that marketing and recruitment efforts made by colleges and universities directly affect how the student’s perceptions of the institution are shaped. Specifically, items such as the institution’s website, admission brochures, and promotional items distributed to prospective students can play a large role according to this
model. Fixed characteristics such as location, size, price, availability of academic majors, and financial aid also play significant roles in the selection process. Chapman’s (1984) model suggests that a combination of the influence of significant others, the marketing and recruitment efforts made by the institution, and the fixed characteristics lead a prospective student to choose a particular institution.

Combining the Jackson (1982) and Chapman (1984) models, Hanson and Litten (1982) proposed a five-step college choice model (Hossler et al., 1999). The five steps include having college aspirations, starting the search process, gathering information, sending applications, and enrolling. Throughout each stage, a broad set of variables influence the college choice process, such as parental income and education, race, gender, academic ability, class rank, cost, size, institutional characteristics, and the timeliness in responding to student inquiries (Hossler et al., 1999).

**Hossler and Gallagher’s Three-Phase Model.** Much of the college choice literature indicates that the college choice process is a three-step process that can begin as early as seventh grade (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989). According to Hossler and Gallagher (1987), the three-step process, which will be one of the theoretical models used for this study, includes the following stages: predisposition, search, and choice.

During the first stage, students decide if they would like to pursue postsecondary education after high school. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) found factors such as socio-economic background, parents’ education, and parent/peer influence to continue education had positive influences on the “predisposition” of college choice. In the model, the researchers found prospective students weighed the characteristics of the various opportunities at higher education institutions, actions of their peer group, and their academic ability to decide if they had the
predisposition to continue the educational search process. If students did have the motivation, they would continue to the next phase of the process. If they did not, they would likely move into the workforce.

The second stage is when the students learn about the various features and benefits offered by an institution and determine which colleges best meet their needs and goals. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) stated this is the time when interactions between institutions and prospective students begin; students look for colleges and colleges look for students.

In the final stage, the student develops a list of schools that will potentially be a good fit for him/her. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) asserted that students refine their institution lists and begin more active measures to enroll (interviews, campus visits, calls to recruiters). It is also during this phase that colleges are most likely to try to entice students to apply to their institutions through customized campus outreach events and personal contact.

The work of Hossler and Gallagher (1987) is important because it synthesized earlier college choice models and identified the most critical phase of institution selection as the search phase. Hossler and Gallagher liken the process to dating and refer to these as “courtship” activities. They encouraged university administrators to not only realize the impacts of personal factors of prospective students, but also be aware of those recruitment interactions that they can control. Specifically, reaching students during the search phase is the best way for institutions to expand their applicant pool because, during this phase, students are beginning to formulate questions about the institutions and realizing the important factors to look for when selecting a college. It is imperative that admission professionals focus on the information gathering and attitude formation processes of prospective students (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). For this study,
specific emphasis will be placed on the second and third phases because it is during these phases that institutional attributes and characteristics are taken into consideration by the student.

As a whole, the literature reveals that choosing which college to attend is an extremely complex decision based on several different factors that includes both wide-ranging criteria and unpredictable emotions (Sevier, 2000). Some prospective students may make a cursory decision based on superficial reasons, while others will contemplate several factors before making the final decision. Looking for the best deal, some prospective students may “shop” institutions based on educational quality and price (Lauer, 2006).

The models considered in this literature review are consistent in their first step as it relates to a student’s decision to pursue higher education and the information-gathering process that follows. The information gathering stage is essential to an institution’s marketing program because, “in the information-gathering and decision-making phases, institutions influence a final choice by the way they provide data about their campuses and programs” (Christiansen et al., 2003, p. 14). It is important to note that previous research suggests that the aforementioned college choice models focus on White students and not the experiences of minority, low-income, and or urban students (Smith & Flemming, 2006). The college choice research on underrepresented populations is limited.

**HBCUs and College Choice**

Even more limited than the research on college choice and underrepresented students is research on HBCUs and college choice. Since HBCUs served as the only educational option for Blacks until the mid-20th century, there is very little research on the college choice of Blacks and HBCUs. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that scholars began to take more interest in Black students at HBCUs and PWIs, focusing primarily on student experiences, with a small
number of studies focusing on college choice (Gasman, 2010). Understanding why students pursue HBCUs is particularly helpful in addressing student recruitment and retention strategies and can also be used to support arguments that promote the continued existence of HBCUs (Freeman, 1999).

Freeman (1999) conducted a multi-school study across the cities of Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, D.C. focusing on interviews with 70 Black high school sophomores, juniors, and seniors. The interviews revealed three factors that contributed to the consideration of HBCUs during the college search process: personal affiliation, appreciation of the HBCU legacy, and interest in the HBCU majority-Black environment. Although Freeman’s study serves as one of the most preeminent studies on Blacks’ HBCU college choice, it does have several limitations. Unsystematic samplings, failure to identify students’ post-secondary plans, and an essentially unconfirmed model have all been cited as possible limitations to this study (Gasman, 2010).

In another study focusing on high school students, McDonough, Antonio, and Trent (1997) considered how race, class, and ethnicity influenced the access and social mobility of freshman students. Based on data from the 1993 UCLA Cooperative Institutional Research Program’s (CIRP) freshman survey, information revealed that HBCU students typically came from households with incomes less than $20,000 and had lower academic achievement records than African American students at PWIs (McDonough, Antonio, & Trent, 1997). These students also selected HBCUs largely based on a personal connection to the institution, a finding similar to Freeman’s (1999) work. The study also revealed that many Black students at both HBCUs and PWIs were influenced by geographic location, living in or near an HBCU state.

Examining characteristics of students who consider HBCUs, Freeman and Thomas (2002)
noted student and institutional characteristics were as important in college choice. Additionally, several studies note that financial resources appear to play an important role in African American college choice, and especially in HBCU choice (Cross & Astin, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

While the body of literature on HBCUs and college choice is growing, there are challenges to future research. According to the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (2010), there are 106 HBCUs representing 3% of the United States institutions of higher education. This small representation in America’s higher education system can explain why HBCUs are so absent in many studies, particularly national studies (Gasman, 2010). Furthermore, as HBCU undergraduate populations are becoming more diverse, research on HBCUs and college choice must extend to include diverse populations as well as consider generational differences.

**Today’s College Student**

Today's traditional college applicants are members of the Millennial Generation, which includes individuals born between 1980 and 2000. In their book *Millennials Go to College*, Neil Howe and William Strauss (2003) researched trends and data to identify traits and behavior patterns of this generation during the college years. They highlight seven primary characteristics: "special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, conventional, pressured, and high-achieving" (Howe & Strauss, 2003, pp.51-52). Howe and Strauss argued that each characteristic of this generation will impact college recruitment and admissions. "A special child also wants to go to a special institution, where he or she will be prepared to play a special role" (Howe & Strauss, 2003, p. 70). Referring to being sheltered, they suggested that both parents and applicants are looking for, "a feeling of close community, small class size, teachers who care and know your
name, in loco parentis\(^1\) rules, core curricula, traditions, and a shared enthusiasm for academics that transcends preparation for the professions" (Howe & Strauss, 2003, p. 78).

While the suggestion that applicants need to feel special and sheltered is likely to align well with traditional qualities and recruitment strategies of today's colleges and universities, some of the proposed expectations may not be as well aligned. For example, Howe and Strauss (2003) suggested that Millennials’ team orientation may mean that they want to attend schools with their friends instead of going to college on their own. Additionally, they indicated that this generation has a conventional nature that may lead them toward well-known colleges with prominent brand names, such as the Ivy League schools or large state schools with local and national reputations. Howe and Strauss (2003) noted that a school looking for "originality of experience and expression" may sound negative to these applicants (p. 34). Today’s students have different inclinations from previous generations about what qualities they are searching for in a college or university. To understand those differing inclinations, it is helpful to consider their college choice processes and the factors that influence them.

**Theoretical Framework Rationale**

Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-phase model of college choice and McCarthy’s (1960) Marketing Mix Framework (also known as the Four Ps of Marketing) provide the theoretical framework for this study. These perspectives and concepts provide context and perspective to understanding the perceptions of Black undergraduate students on how HBCUs market themselves through their undergraduate admission offices. For years, the Four Ps of Marketing have been used to help businesses create effective marketing strategies to attract consumers. Considering the Four Ps in the context of a student’s progression through Hossler

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and Gallagher’s (1987) model can provide colleges and universities with a clearer understanding of the appropriate balance of the marketing mix for prospective students.

The aforementioned research on the complexity of the college choice process, the traits of this generation, and the evolution of marketing in the field of college admissions reinforces the suggestion that recruitment strategies and resources are critically important. As a result, HBCUs must be aware of their applicants' mindsets, characteristics, and expectations, and how these align with their institutions' features and recruitment resources. Furthermore, gaps in the literature including the limited research on HBCUs, the limited research on the college choice process of Black students, and limited research on college choice and HBCUs, make this study even more relevant.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that influenced Black students’ decisions to attend a PWI as opposed to an HBCU. The following research questions guided this study:

(1) What factors influenced Black undergraduate students to choose a PWI instead of an HBCU?

(2) To what extent does the admission marketing of an HBCU influence students’ college choice processes?

This chapter will discuss the research design and methodological rationale used to conduct this study. The following sections will be addressed in this chapter: (a) the design of the study, (b) participants, (c) data collection, (d) data analysis, (e) trustworthiness, (f) ethical considerations, (g) limitations, and (h) researcher’s positionality.

Design of the Study

According to Merriam (1998), five major characteristics define qualitative research. First, all qualitative research has “the goal of eliciting understanding and meaning” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). Qualitative research seeks to understand the phenomenon under study from the participants’ perspectives. Specifically, it seeks to understand the meaning they have constructed of the phenomenon. Second, in qualitative research, the researcher is “the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). As the primary instrument, the researcher has the ability to interact directly with participants and can respond, react, adapt,
clarify, summarize, and explore information as needed throughout the research. However, it is critical that researchers remain “meaningfully attentive to their own subjectivity” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 17), as not to influence or skew the research with their own biases. Third, qualitative research usually involves the use of fieldwork that requires the researcher to interact with the participants in their natural setting. Fourth, qualitative research “takes an inductive orientation to analysis” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). In qualitative research, the findings emerge from the data; the data are not used to deductively prove or disprove an expected finding. Finally, qualitative research uses thick, rich description. It uses words and pictures to describe context, participants, and actions. Direct quotes and documents are used to support qualitative research findings (Merriam, 1998).

For the purposes of this study, a qualitative approach was used to examine the perspectives of undergraduate students who experienced the college search and selection process within the last two years, to gain insight on their views regarding their college choice and HBCU marketing practices.

According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), there are three types of problems appropriate for qualitative research: 1) attempts to understand the meaning and nature of an individual’s challenging experiences, 2) explorations into areas about which little is known, and 3) inquiries into feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to learn about through more conventional research methods. In line with the criteria identified by Strauss and Corbin (1998), I designed a study to understand the college choice of students attending a PWI who also considered attending an HBCU. Since the enrollment rates at HBCUs have consistently declined over the past several years, it is important to understand why students are less frequently choosing these institutions.
Narrative Analysis. The feature that distinguishes narrative analysis from other qualitative methodologies is that the unit of study is some form of story. According to Merriam (2002), the key to narrative analysis is using the stories and first-person accounts of experiences as data. Narrative analysis “involves coherent stories about particular experiences…best captures the experiential particularity of human action and intentionality, and it involves reasons, intentions, beliefs, and goals” (Baumeister & Newman, 1994, p. 677). According to narrative theory, humans understand their lives in a storied form.

Merriam and Simpson (2000) asserted that narrative analysis encompasses three approaches: psychological, biographical, and linguistic. An individual’s life inclusive of that person’s thoughts and motivations serves to explain the psychological approach, while the biographical approach considers the person in relation to society and considers the influence of race, gender, and class. Central to the linguistic approach is an examination of the text to help determine the order of the story (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Since I was interested in understanding why the participants selected a PWI as opposed to an HBCU, the psychological approach was most appropriate for this study.

Participants

Participants for this study included 11 currently enrolled, first-year, undergraduate Black students at a large research PWI in the Southeast. Additionally, participants applied to and considered attending at least one HBCU. First-year students were chosen because I believed they would be able to contribute the most insight on the college selection process since they most recently experienced the process. Additionally, in interviewing first-year students, it was my assumption that the admission marketing materials of the schools applied to would be less likely to have significantly changed over the course of one year. The sample included 9 females and 2
males, and the average age of participants was 18. Ten of the eleven participants were from the southeast. An overview of participant’s demographic information can be found in Appendix A.

**Participant Selection.** According to Patton (1990), the “logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information rich cases” from which “one can learn a great deal about the issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (p. 169). Participants for this study were solicited via an email sent to Black, first-year undergraduate students at a large southeastern research PWI. I obtained participant emails by requesting referrals from professionals working in various student affairs offices including the Career Center, Residence Life, the Department of Campus Life, and the Office of Institutional Diversity. In my request for referrals, I stated that I was interested in receiving email contact information for first-year, Black students who applied to and considered attending at least one HBCU. Additionally, after moderating a panel discussion about HBCUs at the institution where this study was conducted, I invited audience members who met the established criteria to submit their email contact information if they were interested in participating in the study. Once a list of referrals was established, I drafted an email to be sent to my list of referrals and the audience members from the panel discussion that submitted their email contact information (see Appendix B) for email solicitation. A total of 16 students responded to my request for participation. After verifying respondents met the established criteria via email, I followed-up with them via email to arrange an interview date and location. Of the 16 students I established interview times and dates with, 11 actually participated in an interview. There were 5 students who either had scheduling conflicts, or did not show up for the interview.
**Data Collection**

Based on the psychological approach to narrative research discussed earlier in the chapter, the primary sources of data for this study were interviews. Interviews in qualitative research can range from a series of tightly-structured questions to a completely unstructured, informal conversation (Patton, 2002). Along this continuum, there are a variety of interview types each designed to elicit certain data. Collecting data for qualitative research can be accomplished using a variety of methods. However, for this study, in-depth, open-ended interviews were highly suited. According to Patton (2002) interviews yield direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge. Using this method, I was able to obtain detailed descriptions and thorough understanding from the participant interviews of why Black undergraduate students chose to attend a PWI as opposed to an HBCU.

According to Flick (2006), researchers should select a data collection method “on the basis of the character of the material” they want to collect (p. 205). My research questions investigate the reasons individuals decided not to attend a PWI as opposed to an HBCU and the role that admission marketing materials played in that decision-making process. As described in the literature review, there are many factors that influence the college choice of students. This research method allowed me to elicit a complete picture of participants’ personal stories and experiences to understand why they made the decision not to attend an HBCU. A component of these interviews was the participants’ review of the admission websites of the institutions they considered for enrollment.

The times and locations for the interviews were mutually-agreed upon private meeting spaces on campus that were convenient and conducive for the participants. Spaces were quiet
and free from distractions as to avoid anything that could have interrupted the dialogue between the participant and me (Bogdan & Biklin, 2007).

In order to maintain the open-ended nature of the narrative method, the interviews were in-depth and loosely structured, so that I could “introduce the topic, then guide the discussion by asking specific questions” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 5). Glesne and Peshkin (1992) supported the open-ended nature of questioning participants because “the researcher cannot always know the ideal scope until data collection is underway” (p. 16). Guided questions were developed to keep the interviews on track (see Appendix C). In developing questions for the interview guide, Patton’s (2002) tenets of qualitative interviewing, which elicit responses in the areas of experience/behavior, values/opinions, feelings, knowledge, sensory, and demographics, served as a guide. The interview guide questions covered topics such as the participants’ college search process, reasons for their ultimate college choice, and the role of the Internet and marketing in their college search process. The interviews facilitated the emergence of themes that allowed me to interpret and make meaning of what influenced a student’s decision not to attend an HBCU and the role admissions marketing played in that decision.

During the interview, I asked participants to review the admission website of the HBCU(s) they considered attending and the PWI they currently attend, through the use of my personal laptop computer. For the purposes of this study, only the admission content of the websites was reviewed since I was specifically looking at the marketing initiatives of the institutions’ admission office. This method allowed me to capture additional insights and information relevant to the participant’s college choice process during the interview. Additional questions regarding recruitment practices and print marketing materials were discussed throughout the interview, but a greater emphasis was placed on the admission marketing pieces
available online because, according to Lancaster and Stillman (2002), the Internet has become students’ main source for information regarding colleges. Written notes were taken while participants critiqued websites to capture any non-verbal communication that would not be apparent in the audio recordings. For example, as students navigated the websites of Southeastern State and the HBCUs they applied to, I noted their facial expressions and any other non-verbal clues that could be translated to their perception of the institution. Common reactions included looks of confusion, interest/disinterest, and satisfaction/dissatisfaction.

Each interview was transcribed following the interview. Additionally, my written notes were used to support the information considered during the data analysis. The notes consisted of observations I made about participants as well as notes I took while the participants reviewed the admission websites.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study consisted of multiple coding techniques to help organize and analyze the data. Coding occurs in a step-by-step fashion that progresses from unsorted data to the development of more refined categories, themes, and concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). To begin the analytic process, I developed codes based on items that initially emerged in the interview transcripts. I used the process of open coding, described as “the interpretive process by which data are broken down analytically” (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 12). Open coding allowed for initial thoughts, ideas, and meanings hidden in the interview transcripts to be revealed (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). For example, pros and cons of attending an HBCU were coded as positive HBCU benefits (+HBCUBen) and negative HBCU perceptions (–HBCUPercep). Influences in the college search process were coded as INFL and were made more specific depending on the type of influence (for example, if it were a family influence, it
was coded as Infl Fam). Once coding was complete, I had a total of 36 codes (Appendix D). As the codes were being developed I considered Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model and noted which stage of the college search process each code fit within and noted it in the margin of the transcript. I also considered McCarthy’s (1960) Marketing Mix and related the codes to the Four Ps of Marketing. I read and reread the text searching for “patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes that shape qualitative texts into research texts…” (Clandinin & Connely, 2000, p. 133). The process of rereading enabled me to identify keywords, which allowed me to uncover patterns and meaning in the interview transcripts. Guided by my theoretical frameworks, the next level of coding was much more focused and categories were developed as I reexamined the keywords from the open coding and began grouping them into different categories. The categories included characteristics associated with the phases of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model and McCarthy’s (1960) Marketing Mix such as predisposition, search, choice, product, promotion, price, and place. For example, if the code was +Interact w/ Admiss (positive interaction with admissions), I placed it in the choice category since it corresponds with Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) choice phase of the college search and selection process. If the code was Poor Qual Print (poor quality print materials), I related it the promotion efforts of an institution and placed it in the promotion category. Finally, thematic coding was implemented to develop highly refined themes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). After reviewing the codes and categories I developed, I then compared and contrasted the participant interviews with each other searching for patterns and the following six themes emerged: Influences on the initial attraction to the HBCU experience, Yearning for a change in environment, The perceived lack of prestige at HBCUs, Financial considerations that impact college choice, The role of admission websites in
the college search process and The impact of admissions marketing and communication on prospective students. These refined themes were determined through a thorough review of all previous coding.

This coding process was first done for each individual participant’s transcript, and then across participants’ transcripts. Focusing on individual participants first allowed me to understand the individual experiences of each participant. Once their personal narratives were considered, I began to compare and contrast the collective experiences of the participants. This process allowed me to not only identify common themes, but also portray the larger picture of the participants’ experiences.

**Trustworthiness**

Quality and trustworthiness evaluation is an important piece of qualitative research because it allows the researcher to validate findings in a credible way. To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, it is essential to pay close attention to issues relating to validity and reliability. Internal validity considers how accurate data are and if the data relate to reality, while external validity allows one to generalize findings across different settings (Creswell, 2007). These definitions are not easily transferable to the rigor and purpose of qualitative research and were developed to serve the purposes and intent of quantitative research, which is generalizability (Creswell, 2007). As a result, qualitative researchers developed terms that met the needs of ensuring internal and external validity and reliability. As it relates to qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) used terms such as creditability, authenticity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as equivalents for internal validity, external validity and reliability. These terms have allowed qualitative researchers to ensure the scholarly nature of their work while remaining true to the naturalist approach of qualitative research.
To ensure credibility, I employed a member checking technique. Once interviews were transcribed, the interviews were shared with the participants to review for accuracy and provide any clarification deemed necessary. Participants were also given the opportunity to share any additional thoughts that may have been omitted in the initial interview. Member checking gave the participants the opportunity to review the collected data and judge my accuracy and credibility (Creswell, 2007). With regard to transferability, my use of rich, thick description allows readers of this study to determine if the findings are generalizable and applicable to other settings (Merriam, 2002). I also used the peer review technique to ensure an external check of the research. Having another set of eyes to review the research makes certain that the research is unbiased and that the correct questions are being asked.

The dependability of the study was strengthened through the use of peer examination. Fellow doctoral students reviewed and provided feedback throughout this study. Using peer review or debriefing provided an external check of the research process. As noted by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the peer reviewer is an individual who keeps the researcher honest, and asks difficult questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations.

**Ethical Considerations**

Throughout the research process, it was important that special attention was paid to ethical issues, as to guard participants from harm and risk (Creswell, 2007). According to Bogdan and Biklin (2007), confidentiality is one of the most important factors to consider when conducting qualitative research. Researchers have possession of very detailed, personal information about the participants. To ensure the participants are treated in an ethical manner, I established precautions regarding ethical issues in research with human subjects. Prior to beginning research, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board of the institution.
where the study took place. Before beginning my interview with the participants, I explained the purpose of the study and had each participant sign an informed consent form (see Appendix E).

To protect the participant’s rights to privacy and confidentiality, I asked the participants to select pseudonyms. I informed the participants that their real names would not be attached or referred to in any publication or presentation that may come out of this study. As further protection for the participants, I will omit from any publications or presentations resulting from this study any irrelevant information that could potentially be sensitive or personal in nature to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. In reporting the data, a coding system was used to remove all traceable data. For example, names and locations were given pseudonyms to protect participants’ identities.

Additionally, all digitally recorded files were stored on my personal computer hard drive with password protection and with the participants’ pseudonyms as file names. Any documentation linking the participants to the data is in password-protected files. Notes taken during the interviews and transcriptions were stored in a secure home office until the study was completed.

**Limitations**

Focusing primarily on the effect of admission marketing on enrollments can be considered a limitation of this study. While admission marketing can be a factor in the declining enrollments at HBCUs, it is not necessarily the only factor. The state of the economy and the growing number of postsecondary options can also be considered as factors contributing to a decline in enrollments, but are not considered in this study.

Nine of the 11 participants in this study attended a majority Black high school. As a result, many of the participants expressed a desire to experience a majority White college or
university. If most of the participants had attended high schools with students from a variety of
different backgrounds, this study could have yielded very different findings.

Another limitation of this study is that all participants currently attend the same large research PWI. The participants’ perspectives may not be representative of Black undergraduates at other PWIs. For example, a similar study conducted at a private liberal arts institution may yield quite different reasons for not selecting an HBCU.

The web content viewed during the interview process of this study also serves as a limitation. In an effort to focus the study, I had the participants only review the admission page of institution websites. This is a limitation because there are other pieces of the institution’s website participants viewed that could have influenced their college choice. Additionally, by allowing the participants to direct their own navigation of the websites, each student chose to review different aspects of the website, making it difficult to compare perceptions.

Finally, while I believed that it was most logical to focus on first-year students since they most recently went through the college search process, the valuable perspective of older students could have offered different findings.

**Researcher Positionality**

Background knowledge of higher education admission and recruitment practices were critical in designing this study, constructing the interview protocol, conducting interviews, analyzing and interpreting data, identifying commonalities in the data, and formulating the study's findings. Given this background, it is important to consider my professional experiences and how they may have influenced the interpretation of the data collected in this study. Over the past eight years, my work experience has revolved around college recruitment, college choice, and college selection. I started my career working as an admissions counselor for a highly
selective, private, liberal arts institution. One of the duties as an admissions counselor was to visit various high schools to recruit students. This duty allowed me to see the types of experiences high school students were looking for in a college or university. Having an understanding of what the students were looking for allowed me to tailor my presentations to meet their needs and make the institution as appealing as possible.

In my next professional position, I served as a Director of College Counseling at a private high school. In this role, I interacted with college admission officers from all over the country. Every fall, over 50 different college representatives would visit the high school, armed with glossy college viewbooks and other promotional materials aimed at attracting prospective students. I kept files for each institution that visited, so that if a student was interested in that particular college, he/she could easily look at that school’s most updated information. Also, I participated in several college tours conducted by admission offices. These tours allowed me to experience an institution first-hand and gain a sense of the type of student that would thrive in that environment. If I was not able to meet with an admission officer or go on a tour of the institution, the next best resource was the institution’s admission website. I noticed that for both my students and myself, the level of interest in a particular institution depended upon whether the website was easy or difficult to navigate. A poorly-designed website was an immediate turnoff and caused many of my students to consider other institutions, even though the one they were viewing may have been a great fit for them.

Finally, as a proud graduate of an HBCU, I can attest to the numerous accomplishments and benefits of these institutions that often get overlooked. However, having visited several HBCUs and reviewed some of their marketing pieces, I do not know if the accomplishments and benefits are being highlighted enough and in a way that will attract prospective students.
What fueled my interest in the marketing of HBCUs even further was a recent trip I took to my alma mater. In November 2010, I went back to Hampton University to celebrate my 10-year class reunion and participate in Homecoming festivities. The weeks leading up to the event were filled with excitement. Classmates posted old videos and pictures on Facebook and it was evident that everyone was eagerly anticipating a return to what they referred to as their “Home by the Sea.” When my flight touched down in Newport News, Virginia, it was almost as if we had been transported back in time. The Newport News airport is fairly small, so as soon as I stepped off the plane the reunion began. At the airport, I saw at least 15 of my classmates. Some faces were not as familiar as others, but it did not matter because if you went to Hampton, you were a part of the family. One of the first lessons I learned at Hampton was “At Hampton, we don’t shake hands, we hug.” So, in keeping true to our Hampton upbringing, the baggage claim area was filled with hugs, screams of excitement, and smiles. Once we arrived on campus, the hugs continued and the nostalgia was overwhelming. Even though 10 years had come and gone, it was as if we had never left. Sure, there were some new buildings here and there, but it was still my beloved Hampton University. The number of classmates who returned for the reunion was amazing. The weekend was spent laughing, reminiscing, and remembering how much our alma mater means to us. One thing that I enjoyed and appreciated was interacting with some of the older alumni who came to Homecoming. I remembered chatting with a Class of ’58 alum who said he has never missed a Hampton Homecoming! Alumni young and old filled the campus and bonded over their shared love for the institution. What makes Hampton University so special and causes us to keep it so near and dear to our hearts?

This dedication and loyalty displayed by my fellow Hamptonians is not solely characteristic of Hampton. I have many friends who have attended Historically Black Colleges
and Universities and they share very similar sentiments. If these institutions have such profound impacts on the lives of its students, why are enrollments declining and why are actions being taken to permanently shut their doors?

After pondering this question, I decided to look at Hampton University’s admission webpage. In browsing the website, I tried to view it through the eyes of a prospective student and was unable to find anything that really made me want to know more about the institution. There was a large advertisement for an Open House program; an event that occurred a month earlier. As a prospective student, I would find that to be frustrating and disappointing if it were a place I was really interested in attending. There was an “online tour,” but it was much different than ones I had seen on other institution websites. Instead of a narrated video, it had black and white pictures with a description of the pictures off to the side. With all the advances in technology and competition from other institutions growing, I began to think that the marketing of Hampton on their website could possibly be deterring future students. Even though my experience tells me how wonderful and beneficial a Hampton education is, I do not know if that is necessarily being reflected externally. I looked at other well-known HBCU websites and ran into similar concerns. Information was difficult to find, there were broken hyperlinks, and the overall aesthetics were lackluster. I began to wonder what role the marketing of an HBCU plays in the ultimate decision to enroll at the institution and what can be learned from these student’s perspectives.

These experiences have shaped my views on college recruitment and marketing and enhanced my interpretations of the participants’ perspectives, the themes identified, and the conclusions that resulted from this study.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to examine the college choice of Black students who attend a PWI, but also considered attending an HBCU. Specifically, this study investigates the reasons individuals decided to attend a PWI as opposed to an HBCU and the role that admission marketing materials played in that decision making process. Each of the participants of this study applied to and considered attending an HBCU, but ultimately chose to attend a PWI.

This chapter will introduce each of the participants by providing a comprehensive narrative of their experiences with the college search and selection process. Following a summary of the participant’s college search narratives, I will provide an analysis of the participant’s story and consider how the extent to which participant’s experiences align with the theoretical models of Hossler & Gallagher (1987) and McCarthy (1960). Finally, I will present the core themes derived after analysis and provide a description of each theme.

Amber’s College Search Process

Amber’s College Search Process

A 19-year-old freshman from the suburbs of a large metropolitan city in the southeast, Amber always knew that she would attend college. As early as elementary school, Amber participated in math and science camps at a local university, so the idea of college was ingrained in her at a very young age. Amber was also in the school’s magnet program where teachers and administrators expected students to pursue higher education.

In recalling her college search process, Amber remembers doing much of her search on the Internet during her senior year of high school. Considering her grades and SAT scores,
Amber would visit the websites of different colleges to determine if she met their standard requirements. Additionally, Amber knew that she wanted to major in something communications-related, so she made sure the colleges she researched offered communications-related majors. She admits that her search process did not have too much “rhyme or rhythm,” but she felt that she was able to compile a reasonable list of colleges based on what she was interested in majoring in and where she believed her grades and test scores fit safely into the admitted student profile of each institution.

Amber initially considered HBCUs because several of her friends were considering them and she thought it would be fun to go to college with her friends. A trait characteristic of the Millennial generation, the comfort and ease of going to a school with friends and people from a similar ethnic background attracted Amber. Teachers and family friends played a large role as well. Many shared their positive experiences at HBCUs and this attracted Amber even more:

I just heard a lot of people say how much they like it, like a lot of my teachers had come from HBCUs and they were talking about their experiences and it sounded great…So I guess it was the influence of hearing about everybody else’s experiences and…wanting that comfort of being in a setting where everybody looks like me….

As a result, Amber applied to three HBCUs and two PWIs. However, after heavily considering all of her options, Amber decided to attend a PWI. Having attended a predominantly Black high school, Amber felt that she was ready for a change in the environment, despite her interest in finding comfort as stated in the quote above. Also playing a role in her decision were some of the negative stereotypes associated with HBCUs:

I’ve always just heard that there is this level of like dis – not disorganization, but things just not being as up-to-date as other institutions. And that was one thing that turned me
off…and then some people were saying…”You might as well go to [Southeastern State] where you can have these kind of opportunities, kind of for a little bit less.” I mean, because…[Miller College] was asking for a lot…And then I had heard that [Miller] didn’t have air conditioning...And someone was like the dorms aren’t very nice…

Amber believed that the PWI she ultimately chose had more prestige and the resources would far outweigh that of an HBCU.

Since she did not have the opportunity to visit any of the HBCUs she applied to, Amber relied on websites and the material sent to her in the mail by each school’s admission office:

The Internet was big, because any time there was a school…I was Googling it to see what their page looked like, and what majors they offered, what organizations they had, how much they cost, what were their requirements. So the Internet was a very key element in choosing colleges. I mean, I used it for everything. I used it to look at the applications, to find information, to learn about the school. If it wasn’t for the Internet, I’m not sure how I would have applied to school…I learned about the process and all that through their websites, you know? The Internet was my best friend, senior year.

Amber noted that she was not impressed with the admission materials she received in the mail from two of the HBCUs she applied to:

I want to say it was [Valley Grove] that sent me something in the mail and I was just like, what’s wrong with this paper? Like the print, like some of the words were kind of…you know how when you print something and maybe it didn’t go through all the way, so you can’t really see some of the words, and I was just like, “Okay, what’s wrong? Is there something wrong with the printer?” This is supposed to be really professional, college is really a big investment, so I expected papers to look very professional…because when
Southeastern State’s] came it was just very neat, and I don’t know, I never noticed any type of little mistakes like that.

She also indicated that the HBCUs she applied to were slow in sending her notification of acceptance:

One of the things with admissions is that for HBCUs it took a while to get stuff back. And by the time stuff was coming back, I had already accepted [Southeastern State’s] offer. Even though like, I think it was [Valley Grove] didn’t send something about housing until almost the end of the summer, and I was like, are you serious? I’m about to pack up and be rolling out in a month, you know, I needed to know this a while ago…

Even if Amber wanted to attend the HBCU, she would have been forced to choose the PWI because the HBCU correspondence was not timely and would have caused her to miss important acceptance and financial aid deadlines.

**Analysis of Amber’s College Search Process**

In analyzing Amber’s college search process, it is easy to categorize her process into the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model. Amber’s predisposition to college occurred at a young age when she was attending various academic enrichment camps. Additionally, the social networks to which Amber was exposed encouraged her to pursue higher education. The influence of social networks was most salient in Amber’s decision to consider attending an HBCU. Having attended a predominantly Black high school, Amber had many teachers and friends who attended HBCUs. Amber noticed that these teachers and mentors held tremendous pride for their alma maters and what they shared with her left an indelible impression. The positive experiences Amber heard about HBCUs served as her initial attraction to the HBCU experience. It is important to note that this initial attraction or desire to attend was derived without having ever
set foot on the campus of an HBCU; it was solely the result of what Amber heard others say about HBCUs. Amber valued the thoughts and opinions of her teachers and friends so much that they were able to play an influential role in her college search process.

Just as the positive experiences of her teachers and friends influenced her interest in applying to HBCUs, some of the negative rumors and stereotypes dissuaded her from attending. Amber considered what she heard about HBCUs as it related to their administrative practices and what she perceived to be a lack of resources compared to their PWI counterparts. Amber took into account the negative aspects she heard about the HBCUs she was applying to and rationalized that a PWI would be more organized and have more resources. Also, with at least one of the HBCUs she was applying to, she determined that attending Southeastern State would be in her best interest economically and would still provide her with facilities superior to that of the HBCU.

As Amber progressed through the search and choice phases of the process, the role of the Internet became much more significant. Once Amber narrowed down her list of colleges, she relied heavily on the Internet. For Amber, the information she was able to gather from admission websites was critical in her decision to ultimately submit an application. Searching a school’s website gave Amber more detailed information about an institution, depending how through the school website was. From Amber’s reflection it can be inferred that, to her, it was important that the information communicated on an institutions website was informative and easily accessible because it helped inform her decision of where to attend.

Also of importance to Amber was the timeliness of communications and the quality of print materials she received from the institutions to which she applied. Amber’s comments regarding the timeliness of communications and the professionalism of print materials impacted
her thoughts about the schools she was applying to. Since some of the HBCUs she was applying to were slow to respond with pertinent information, she inevitably became less interested. Also, the perceived poor quality of print material made her question the professionalism of the institution. Southeastern State was able to hold Amber’s interest with their professionalism and timeliness and she eventually enrolled.

Inconsistent with Hossler and Gallagher’s model was the level of interaction Amber had with college admission officers. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) discuss the importance of admission officers “selling” the institution to prospective students. For Amber, this aspect had virtually no impact on her college choice. In fact, Amber had no verbal communication with admission officers and conducted much of her search and selection process online. Of importance to Amber was the quality and timeliness of admission communications and the design and information provided on a school’s website.

In considering the Marketing Mix with regards to Amber’s search process, it appears that the combination of product, price, and promotion were relevant in her decision making process. Level of prestige, cost of attendance, and the way the institution was portrayed on their website was of utmost importance to Amber. Place seemed to be the least relevant, as Amber never mentioned it as a factor in her choice process.

**Elle’s College Search Process**

Slightly reserved, but eager to participate in this study, Elle is a mature college freshman from a rural southeastern town who attended a predominantly Black high school. With an older sister who attended college, Elle knew that she would eventually do the same. She remembers her college search beginning in the 10th grade when she attended a college fair. She was uncertain about the characteristics she was looking for in a college, so she found herself looking
at a variety of HBCUs and PWIs. The Internet was very helpful during her search in that she was able to quickly and easily look up admission requirements and learn about a variety of institutions.

HBCUs were very appealing to Elle during her childhood. Seeing HBCUs portrayed in television shows and movies made her want to seriously consider attending one. When asked how she learned about HBCUs, she stated:

Honestly, watching *A Different World* and *The Cosby Show*…shows that really…put that stuff out there, made it known to the world, and watching movies like…*Drumline* and *Stomp the Yard*. So I mean…that’s really where I learned [about HBCUs].

Also, she was naturally drawn to HBCUs because her older sister attended one and strongly encouraged her to consider attending, as well:

I considered [Russell College] because my older sister went there… and my twin sister actually is there right now. And, I heard a lot about the school and how great it was from my sister…she would tell me all these stories of the fun she had there.

After visiting her older sister at Russell, the atmosphere resonated with her:

The atmosphere there is just so good and confirms your Blackness. Colleges where a lot of Black people are involved, the Black culture, and stuff like that…that was the one reason to choose an HBCU.

While she really liked the institution her older sister was attending, she decided that she did not want to go to the same school. When Elle’s twin sister decided to attend Russell College, Elle, was even more motivated to consider going elsewhere. For Elle, an identity separate from her sister’s was important.
While Elle was attracted to the history and traditions of HBCUs, she still ultimately decided on a PWI. Like Amber, she was attracted to the perceived prestige of a PWI and was ready to be in a more diverse environment. The negative stereotypes of HBCU facilities not being up to par with their PWI counterparts played a role in her decision as well:

I didn't think it was like as a prestigious school as [Southeastern State]. …I didn't hear a lot of things like “Oh, the academics are wonderful.” Mainly because when I would hear about it I heard about the band aspect. So I guess I didn't get much about the academics…And I mean just the facilities, I've always had like this thing like the HBCU facilities are not up to par.

Additionally, she began to reflect on her experience attending an all-Black high school. Elle joked, “I kind of got sick of Black people I guess you could say. I just wanted to see what other people were doing and how they interacted with the world.”

Finally, she felt that her presence was more desired at her PWI of choice. She spoke of admission representatives contacting her and really encouraging her to attend. She said that at the HBCUs, it did not really seem to make a difference to them if she enrolled or not.

**Analysis of Elle’s College Search Process**

Elle’s college search process closely aligns with the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, with some differences in the types of influences she received during each phase of the process. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) note that factors such as socio-economic background, parents’ education, and parent/peer influence had positive influences on the predisposition of college choice. Elle’s predisposition towards college began through influences from her family, but also through images portrayed in the media, a factor not considered by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). The depictions of HBCUs in movies and television were critical links in helping Elle create a
picture of what the HBCU experience was like and instilled in her a desire to attend. While her knowledge of HBCUs was not solely derived from media, it certainly played a role in shaping her initial thoughts and desires to consider attending an HBCU.

During the search phase of her process, Elle began to identify what was most important to her in terms of a college fit. This is consistent with Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model as they note during the search phase students become more actively involved in researching and learning more about schools. However, one thing that differed from the model was race is not discussed as an influential factor in the college search phase. As Elle became more engaged in her college search process and reflected on her experience attending an all-Black high school, she wondered if a change in environment would be better for her. In her opinion, Elle believed that a PWI would offer a more accurate reflection of the real world and ultimately it would better prepare her for her future career. Like many of her fellow participants, Elle was searching for what she considered to be a more diverse experience.

The negative stereotypes that Elle heard about HBCUs also impacted her college choice decision. When she heard people talk about HBCUs, academics were never something that were highlighted. The popularity of HBCU marching bands overshadowed anything that was related to academics and left Elle with the impression that academics were secondary at HBCUs. Also of concern was her perception of the facilities at HBCUs. Unclear where she got the notion, Elle concluded that PWI facilities were superior to that of HBCUs.

In line with the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, after researching and collecting information on the schools she was most interested in, Elle was able to reach a final decision. Ultimately, Elle decided on a PWI because she assumed that a PWI environment would provide her with more diversity than an HBCU and the resources would be greater.
For Elle’s college search process, the marketing mix she placed the most emphasis on was product and promotion. Most important to Elle was the prestige and reputation of her institution of choice. Factors such as prestige and reputation are most closely related to the product and the ways in which it is promoted. Place and price had little impact on Elle’s decision-making process.

**Jada’s College Search Process**

Jada grew up literally around the corner from the PWI she ultimately decided to attend. Having visited the school many times as a child, Jada never believed that she would go to Southeastern State. In fact, she vowed to her parents that she would never attend Southeastern State because she did not want to go to college so close to home.

Jada began her college search in her junior year of high school and determined that she wanted to stay in state to take advantage of the state scholarship program, which provides full tuition at public institutions and $3,000 at private institutions, provided the student maintains a certain GPA. After reviewing the postsecondary options available in her state, Jada was able to narrow her college list down to three schools, two PWIs and one HBCU.

Her high school counselor suggested the HBCU she considered. It had a national reputation, which added to her intrigue:

I heard some great things about [Miller] just from my counselor in high school…that was a school that she said I would be interested in, due to good academics in the field where I wanted to go in, which was journalism…and my mom, she also kind of influenced me a little bit with [Miller], just saying that if I did choose there, I wouldn't be going wrong. After visiting the campus, Jada easily envisioned herself there. She knew the academics were strong and the opportunities for involvement were endless. However, it did not come with a
small price tag. Since it was a private institution, she and her family would be responsible for paying much of the tuition. Jada discussed the cost of attending Miller, stating:

The only thing with [Miller] that really turned us away was the price, since it was a private school and the [State] Scholarship only covered part of it. So that was the bigger part of why I didn't choose [Miller].

Jada began to wonder if going to Miller would be worth the high tuition.

Still keeping her options open, Jada visited the PWI that was in her backyard. She attended a program for underrepresented students, and much to her surprise, she liked it. She liked the size of the institution and she felt that it was much more diverse than the HBCU she was considering. She began to wonder if she wanted to be in the HBCU environment where she felt everyone “looked the same.” Jada noted of the PWI:

To me it was just kind of more of a diverse look at the college life. Like I saw so many…different I guess…cultural or ethnic things going on and not just one group of people that looked the same. I saw so many different people and I just knew that I felt like that would help me prepare more for the real world after college, just being in a diverse environment and experiencing different things.

When it came time to make a final decision, the reasons to attend the PWI around the corner outweighed the reasons to attend the HBCU. It had everything she was looking for and she was eligible for the full tuition scholarship. Jada noted that even if the HBCU had been cheaper, she probably still would have chosen the PWI because she perceived it to have better opportunities for networking and helping her to secure a job in the future.
Analysis of Jada’s College Search Process

Jada’s predisposition toward college started at a very young age. Living just minutes from Southeastern State, her parents often took her to different events on the campus. Although she did not have the desire to attend Southeastern State as a child, the exposure to the campus allowed her to determine that college was in her future.

Initially, Miller College was a top choice for Jada. Both her school counselor and her mother were heavily influential in her desire to attend. During the early parts of her search phase, Jada’s heart was set on Miller, but there was one thing that made her slightly reluctant to attend. Only $3,000 of Miller’s almost $35,000 price tag would be covered through the State Scholarship program, whereas the entire tuition at Southeastern State would be covered because it is a public institution.

While Jada’s college search process fits into the combined choice model of Hossler and Gallagher (1987), her search process more closely resembles that of an information processing choice model. Information processing is a cyclical development process where uncertainty is reduced when the output of one stage becomes the input to another stage (Hossler & Hamrick, 1996). In this particular model type, students will make their decisions using exclusionary statements (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999). For example, early in her process, Jada made the determination to not consider any out-of-state schools. From the beginning, cost drove her college search and selection process because she wanted to save money by utilizing the state scholarship program.

With regard to the Marketing Mix, price and place were most influential in Jada’s college search. Her ultimate decision was heavily based on the cost of the institution, while place played
a large role because of her desire to attend an in-state school. Product and promotion were pieces considered in Jada’s search process, but not to the extent of price and place.

**Jason’s College Search Process**

An 18-year old former class president, Jason is a very involved freshman from the suburbs of a southeastern city. His high school experience is slightly different than many of his peers; he transferred high schools during his senior year. His previous high school was predominantly Black, and then when his family moved in his senior year, he had to adjust to his new White high school.

Jason started his college search earlier than the other participants of this study. He took the SAT as a sophomore, and from there he began to research colleges online. He involved himself in many academic related activities, and as a result several teachers and administrators suggested a wide range of institutions to him. However, his heart was set on an HBCU in the mid-Atlantic, Henderson University. Many of his friends had attended Henderson University and he determined that it would be the perfect school for him. He had very strong feelings about attending an HBCU. Although he thought it might be a good idea to go to a PWI to get out of an all-Black environment, he was still very interested in experiencing an HBCU. All of his friends who attended HBCUs had great experiences and a love for their school that could not compare to the PWIs he was considering:

Everyone I talked to, that goes to Morehouse, that goes to Spelman, that goes to Clark, goes to Howard, they all had this same feeling about their school, like you know, they may have some trouble with certain things, but overall it’s just like, “Man, I love my school,” and people from [PWIs], African-Americans, I had …never heard anyone say,
“Oh, I love my school”…I heard, “It’s cool, it’s not bad, it’s okay.” And I was like, “Well, that’s – that’s not what I wanted, I want the best experience.”

However, his decision quickly started to change when he began to receive financial aid packages from the schools to which he applied. The financial aid package that he received from the HBCU was less than what he expected and he could not fathom spending that much money, especially when attending school in-state would be so much cheaper. When asked what influenced his final decision, Jason stated:

Financially, that was the ringer. Like I said, [Henderson] was the way to go. And just seeing the financial aid, I was like, “I can’t do this,” and my parents were like, “Well, you know, we can work it out,” but I just hate to put them through that. That’s just too much. So I was like, “Well, you know, I’ll consider [Southeastern State].” I didn’t really want to stay in state. The decision was pretty much a financial one.

He did not want to place financial burdens on his parents, so he opted for the in-state PWI. Although Jason was not interested in staying in state, he did not completely regret his decision. He felt that Southeastern State did an excellent job of attracting him to the institution and he was confident that he would receive an excellent education complemented by unlimited social opportunities. He is enjoying Southeastern State, but still has a desire to attend an HBCU. He is considering attending an HBCU for graduate school.

**Analysis of Jason’s College Search Process**

When Jason began researching colleges he was heavily influenced by his friends. Jason was attracted to the experience that he perceived his friends were having at HBCUs. For Jason, college was not just about getting a great education, but getting a well-rounded experience in addition to a great education. Jason believed that he could find that well-rounded experience at
an HBCU. Jason was familiar with some of the negative stereotypes about HBCUs, but they did not dissuade him from wanting to attend. What dissuaded Jason and caused him to choose Southeastern State instead of Henderson University was the financial aid package he received. Had it not been for the cost, Jason would have definitely attended Henderson.

Jason differed from the other participants of this study in that his desire to attend an HBCU remained constant throughout his entire search process. Despite the negative stereotypes associated with HBCUs, he still had the desire to attend for the experience he believed could not be duplicated. Jason’s college search fell very much in line with Freeman’s (1999) research on HBCUs and college choice. As Freeman noted, knowing someone who attended an HBCU, seeking cultural roots, and a desire to increase cultural awareness, were also important factors and influences on his college search. Cost was the main reason Jason decided not to attend Henderson University. This aligns with several studies that note that financial resources appear to play an important role in Black college choice, and especially in HBCU choice (Cross & Astin, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Unfortunately, cost prohibited him from attending his first choice institution.

Price obviously played the largest role when considering Jason’s college search as it relates to McCarthy’s Marketing Mix (1960). Fearful of the debt he would incur if he attended Henderson University, price was the main factor Jason considered when he decided which college to attend. Product, place, and promotion had little bearing on his decision.

Kay’s College Search Process

Kay is a 19-year-old college freshman who attended high school in a small town in the southeast. Due to her enrollment in Honors and Advanced Placement courses, Kay’s teachers often talked about colleges and junior year she began her search. Initially, she attended college
fairs to gather information, but decided where to apply by listening to what other people had to say.

Kay’s decision to apply to an HBCU was heavily influenced by her friends. In fact, the particular HBCU where her best friend was attending was at, one point, her top choice:

I guess the culture of HBCUs and some of my high school friends, made me think that I would feel more comfortable there at an HBCU and I knew a lot of people who were going there. My best friend was going to [Frank College], so I wanted to be with her, and then at the other HBCUs, like a lot of my classmates were going there.

She participated in campus visits and was very attracted to what she described as the “HBCU Lifestyle,” and likened it to that of something out of the movies. Greek life, the marching band, and homecoming festivities were what came to mind when Kay thought about the HBCU experience. She also talked to several HBCU alumni, and was left with the impression that she would feel more comfortable at an HBCU.

Once Kay established her list of colleges, she visited their admission websites to gain more information and apply. She remembers being excited about going to the websites of the colleges she was interested in, but then feeling disappointed with some of the HBCU sites because they seemed out of date or difficult to navigate:

I can remember doing college searches, being excited to look like through the websites, like, “Ooh, might be going here.” But, I guess it was kind of – not a damper, but like to see how some of the sites were not as up to date, or – you know, fancy cool graphics compared to others. So I guess that kind of like influenced my decision, ya know? Like maybe the school is not all that, because their website isn’t as cool as [Southeastern
State’s] is or it’s kind of hard to navigate…thinking about the websites now, it was more apparent that [Southeastern State] was I guess ahead technology-wise.

This apparent gap in technology made Kay question the quality of some of the institutions she was considering.

As Kay weighed her college options, she determined that a PWI would be the best fit for her. She considered PWIs to be more prestigious than HBCUs and based on reviews of the websites and visits to campus, she determined that PWIs had more resources:

[I]t would look better overall to go to a top school like [Southeastern State], compared to an HBCU. Even though it was…cheaper to go to [Southeastern State], it was more I guess, what’s the word…appreciated or more like, I don’t want to say fancy, but…

Similar to other participants in this study, she believed she would have a more diverse experience at a PWI and desired a change from an all-Black environment. She shared:

I'm not knocking on HBCUs…I think it would be just as great an experience, but I mean, there’s also the good things that a PWI can give you, like diversity and I mean, just the resources here are crazy. Like I'm taking advantage of them, like I'm going to do it all.

Finally, cost was a factor. The in-state PWI was far less expensive than the out-of-state HBCU she was considering and was a compelling factor in her decision to attend the PWI.

**Analysis of Kay’s College Search Process**

Kay’s college search was consistent with Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model. From predisposition to her final choice, key components of each phase can be identified throughout her college search process. Similar to other participants, Kay initially learned about the HBCU experience through its portrayal on television and in the movies, but was further drawn to them through her friends. For her, HBCUs could provide a feeling of comfort. Being in an
environment that was familiar to Kay was reassuring while she was initially investigating colleges, but as she further engaged in her process she began to think differently about HBCUs. Easily influenced by the opinions of others, Kay’s teachers were able to convince her that she needed to attend a “top” school. Since many HBCUs are perceived to not have the same wealth and prestige as PWIs, they are often considered to be an inferior education. Kay’s teachers instilled this idea and she made the decision to attend a PWI instead. The resources at the PWI were very evident for Kay and she did not feel she could get the same opportunities at an HBCU. She determined that if she did not attend the PWI, she would be missing out on several opportunities.

Kay also noted the impact technology had on the interest level she had in a school. She concluded that if a website was not technologically advanced, she was inclined to believe that the school could not provide a high quality education. Since Southeastern State’s website seemed to be superior to the other schools she applied to, she assumed the school as a whole was also superior.

The aspects of the McCarthy’s (1960) Marketing Mix that were most relevant in Kay’s college search process were product and promotion. Prestige of an institution and how the institution promoted itself through marketing was important to Kay. It was in these two areas that Kay believed HBCUs were lacking and caused her to ultimately choose Southeastern State. Price and place did not play a significant role in her decision.

**Kensy’s College Search Process**

Kensy grew up in the North and moved to a southeastern suburb when she was in middle school. In her junior year of high school, she started to receive mail and emails from various colleges and many of them offered to waive the application fee if the student responded to the
correspondence and applied. Since it did not cost Kensy anything, she decided to apply. As a result she applied to a long list of schools that varied in size, type, and location. Her final college list had a variety of public and private schools, but only one HBCU.

Kensy considered the HBCU Henderson University because there was a family history of attendance: “My family was definitely influential in my decision to apply to [Henderson] and possibly go there…it’s a legacy.” Both her parents and older sister attended Henderson and it was assumed that Kensy would do the same. Throughout her childhood, Kensy assumed she would attend as well. She had visited the campus many times and liked the fact that it felt so familiar to her. Her application process was very straightforward and she did not run into any complications with the timeliness of communications like some of the other participants. She even received a partial scholarship to go to Henderson. Her family wanted her to continue the legacy, but were also very supportive and wanted Kensy to make the right decision for herself.

Even though the HBCU seemed to be the clear choice, there were two things that made Kensy have second thoughts about attending. First, the location of the school concerned her. When she lived in the North it would only be a few hours away, but now that her family lived in the southeast, it would be nearly 16 hours away. Kensy is very close with her family and did not think she could handle being that far away. Secondly, if she stayed at the in-state PWI, she would be eligible for the state scholarship that covered full tuition. Even with the partial scholarship from the HBCU, attending the PWI would be far more economical. As Kensy recalled her decision on where to attend, she rationalized:

Henderson, since it’s out of state, money was definitely a deciding factor about where I wanted to go to school, because [the state scholarship] was a great incentive to stay in state and just get through my undergrad, so [the state scholarship] was definitely the
deciding factor...because I was only going to get like one scholarship from [Henderson], so it wasn’t really worth it to me.

Kensy decided that the money her family would have to spend to send her to the HBCU would be too much of a burden and decided to attend the PWI.

**Analysis of Kensy’s College Search Process**

Kensy’s desire to attend an HBCU was derived solely from the influence of her family. With both her parents and her sister having attended Henderson University the importance of following the family tradition was instilled in her at a young age. In comparing Kensy to other participants in this study, she seems to have the least desire to genuinely want to attend an HBCU. When asked what attracted her to Henderson University, it was clear that her interest was fueled entirely by her family. She admitted not knowing much about HBCUs and the only thing she considered to be distinctive about these institutions was that all of the students were of the same ethnicity. Henderson was a viable option because it was the only college she was familiar with in the early stages of her college search process.

As it relates to Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model, Kensy’s process followed certain aspects of the model, but not completely. She never became overly involved in her search phase. She applied to Henderson because of her family legacy and the other schools she applied to were schools that sent her applications. She applied to several schools, but she was never actively engaged in seeking more information about the schools.

If Kensy’s family did not move to the southeast when she was in middle school, she would have followed in her family’s footsteps and attended Henderson University. However, Kensy turned down Henderson University and discussed how the state scholarship, a tuition award for in-state students who meet established criteria, was a deciding factor for her.
For Kensy, price and place were the only aspects of McCarthy’s Marketing Mix (1960) that played an important role in her decision where to attend. Kensy wanted to take advantage of the state scholarship to save her family money and the distance between Henderson and her concerned her. The combination of these two factors led her to decide that Southeastern State would be the best choice for her. If Kensy had been more engaged in the search phase of her process, product and promotion would have been relevant. Kensy knew that she wanted to attend college, but she was indifferent about where she wanted to go to college. The only thing that could have changed Kensy’s mind was if Henderson University had offered her a full scholarship.

**Miranda’s College Search Process**

Miranda grew up in the southeast and attended a predominantly White high school. She admits that her college search was slow to start. She did not start thinking about searching for colleges until her senior year of high school. She applied to a range of institutions. For Miranda, hearing the experiences of significant people in her life, made her consider certain colleges. Miranda seriously considered HBCUs based on the positive experiences of significant individuals, while admission officials at PWIs swayed her in their direction by staying in contact with her and providing her with any information she needed.

HBCUs were appealing to Miranda because she was ready to experience an all-Black environment and finally be a member of the majority culture:

I think ‘cause I went to a white school, it was like I want to experience being around everyone from the same culture…because it’s just every time I talk to someone, it’s like they can’t explain how different it is, you know, and I think that’s what it was. I really wanted to be around that rich culture…
She heard the HBCU experience was something words could not describe and she desired to be surrounded by the rich culture she heard they embodied. Her uncle, an alumnus of an HBCU strongly urged her to consider attending his alma mater. He told Miranda that he would pay for everything because he knew she had reservations about the school’s hefty price tag. When she went for a campus visit, she could envision herself there and was impressed with how all of the buildings had some type of meaning or tradition. The only concern Miranda had about this particular HBCU was that it was quite a distance from home. The other HBCU she considered was close to home and her mentor, a local newscaster she interned with, was a graduate.

As Miranda navigated her college search process, she utilized the Internet and contacted a variety of admission officers. It was her interaction with admission officers that allowed her to determine that she wanted to attend a PWI:

Oh, my gosh! I know this is probably just my experience, but he was just so unprofessional… you want me to come to this school, so you need to be selling me…So I didn't have good experiences with the admission or financial aid office at all. So I think it’s just that effort that you put into it, that’s actually going to pay off, because someone is actually paying attention. It’s definitely the presentation. It might not be any better of a school, but just because [Southeastern State] came across -- very polished and presented themselves well. Because honestly, it’s all about image with everything.

Relationships are very important to Miranda and the negative interactions with the admission officers of the HBCUs she was applying to made her reconsider attending. She described them as rude and unprofessional, referring to a few phone conversations she had with HBCU admission officers. She felt as if she was a burden whenever she called to ask a question. Her experiences with the PWIs she applied to were completely different. She said they called,
they texted, and they emailed to check if she needed assistance with anything. Even down to the acceptance letters, Miranda discussed how the PWIs went above and beyond to show excitement, while the HBCUs sent a simple letter and asked for an immediate deposit. Miranda said that feeling desired and important really had an impact on her decision of where to attend.

**Analysis of Miranda’s College Search Process**

Although Miranda’s college search started later than the other participants, it still closely mirrored the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model. Like several of the other participants, Miranda was initially attracted to the rich history and traditions of HBCUs that she learned of from her uncle and her high school mentor. Having spent her entire schooling as a minority, Miranda wanted to experience college life as a member of the majority culture. She desired to be in an environment where her culture was shared and celebrated. Based on what she learned from others, she was certain an HBCU could provide her with this type of experience.

However, as Miranda navigated her college search process and moved into the search and choice phases of her process, HBCUs became less appealing to her. Miranda was turned off by the interaction she had with the admission officer of the HBCU she was applying to. As Hossler and Gallagher (1987) note, it is during this phase that colleges and universities should be taking measures to entice prospective students. In Miranda’s case, the HBCUs did just the opposite, and dissuaded her from wanting to attend as a result of their unprofessionalism and lack of effort in recruiting her. As a result, she made the decision to attend Southeastern State.

The piece of McCarthy’s Marketing Mix (1960) that was most salient during Miranda’s college search was promotion. For Miranda, it was important that admission officers conveyed professionalism and a desire for her to attend. Miranda’s interaction with admission officers played the biggest role in her decision to attend Southeastern State. If interactions with the
HBCUs she was applying to were better, she may have made the decision to attend an HBCU. Product, price, and place did not appear to be factors in Miranda’s decision-making process.

**Noel’s College Search Process**

Upon first meeting Noel, it is apparent that she is a very organized individual. As such, her college search was extremely organized. Born and raised in the southeast, Noel started her college search process in her junior year of high school. She applied to schools where she knew someone who was attending or that had sent her recruitment materials in the mail. Her list of colleges was a mix between HBCUs and PWIs. Between junior and senior year, she visited each of the schools on her list.

After visiting all of her choices, there was one HBCU that stood out from the rest. After hearing the experiences of family and friends who attended the institution, she was convinced that it was going to be the perfect fit for her. When discussing why she was interested in attending, Noel noted:

I really wanted to go because a lot of my family members went…Just the atmosphere and the way my family explained their experience going to HBCU, like my dad went for undergrad, but my mom didn't, so after they both told me about their experiences, and then both of my aunts went [to an HBCU], so just hearing what people had to say [influenced me to want to attend].

Unfortunately, this particular HBCU was out of state and private and she knew it was going to cost a lot of money. The only way she would be able to attend was if she received a scholarship.

In February of her senior year, she started receiving acceptance letters. She was admitted to all of the HBCUs she applied to and several of the PWIs. As she compared financial aid packages it appeared that she was going to need to stay in-state because she had not heard
anything about financial aid from the HBCU she planned to attend. She then made the decision to attend the in-state PWI because she believed it had a good reputation and it made the most sense economically. About a month later, she found out she received a scholarship at the HBCU, but she did not get the information until after her decision to accept at the HBCU was due. In venting her frustration regarding the late distribution of information, Noel stated:

Make sure if you're going to offer people scholarship money, it comes before the decision is due. Because that just really set me off. I already said I was going to go to [Southeastern State]. But, just the fact that they sent me information after the decision was due let me know that they’re not organized.

The disorganization she experienced with the HBCU solidified her decision to attend the PWI. She also believed that since she attended a predominantly Black high school, attending a PWI would be something new and different. Many of her friends from high school attended state HBCUs, so she decided to attend an in-state PWI, because she “didn’t want to go to school with a whole bunch of people from [high] school.”

**Analysis of Noel’s College Search Process**

For Noel’s college search, family members played the largest role in initially attracting her to HBCUs. Hearing the perspectives on both the HBCU experience and the PWI experience influenced Noel into thinking that an HBCU experience was much closer to what she was seeking in her own college experience.

However, as Noel thought more deeply about her college experience and transitioned to the search phase, she began to think that she would enjoy being in a more diverse environment that was not as reflective of her high school. Her desire for diversity and choice to attend a PWI
derived from wanting to get away from other students from her school. Many of her classmates attended state HBCUs, so she decided to attend an in-state PWI.

Noel’s college search process aligned closely with Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model, clearly transitioning from predisposition, search, to choice. However, her choice phase was not influenced by the typical characteristics noted by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). Instead, her decision was by default. Since she had not heard from Harvey University about financial aid, she assumed she did not receive any and decided to go to Southeastern State. Additionally, her desire to attend a different institution from her fellow classmates played a role in her decision.

Although Noel had the desire to attend Harvey University, the components of McCarthy’s Marketing Mix that impacted her college decision most were price and promotion. The high tuition combined with tardiness of admission communications was enough to cause Noel to decide to attend Southeastern State. Product played a slight role in her decision, as well. Due to receiving late materials from admission, Noel assumed that the educational quality of the institution was poor and disorganized. Place had little impact on Noel’s decision.

**Penelope’s College Search Process**

Penelope’s college search differed most from the other participants because she attended an elite private school in the southeast. At her school, the search was much more structured and guided by her college counselor. In her junior year, she met with her college counselor and they co-created a list of schools that would be a good fit, based on criteria that were important to Penelope. She started with a list of about 20 institutions and kept a binder with each school’s application and brochure. Sifting through the information she gathered on each school, she then narrowed the pile down by considering attributes such as prestige, cost, and major offerings. She applied to six schools.
Penelope remembers first becoming interested in HBCUs in elementary and middle school. In her childhood, she attended predominantly Black schools and recalled, “[A]lmost all of [my teachers] went to HBCUs. ‘Cause that school was majority Black. And all the teachers were Black. And so they always pushed you to – they were pro-HBCUs.” Penelope remembers the teachers discussing their experiences and pushing the students to seriously consider HBCUs when it came time for them to go to college.

As Penelope began to take ownership of her college search process, she heavily utilized admission websites to gain more information about institutions. She discussed her frustration with some of the HBCU websites she reviewed:

When you’re a prospective student, I feel like links need to be very straightforward…because when you’re trying to do something like applying to colleges, it’s overwhelming…So with some of the HBCU sites that was kind of annoying…If the website is like this then what is the institution going to be like? What are my daily interactions going to be like with the Registrar’s Office, with the Financial Aid Office? I didn’t have time to request info, I don’t have time to wait two weeks for you all to send me something about the school. I need to be able to go find it and look for it.

For Penelope, information such as cost and extracurricular activities were not easily found and she felt she left the sites with many unanswered questions.

Penelope visited two HBCUs and was impressed with their campuses, but like many of the other participants, the final decision came down to money. Penelope decided early in her search process that she was going to go to the institution that gave her the most money. She applied to Southeastern State because there was a scholarship opportunity that she was sure she
would be able to take advantage of. Unfortunately, once she was admitted, she found out that the scholarship was no longer available.

While the HBCUs offered some funding, in her opinion it was not enough and she decided to attend a Southeastern State. Also playing a role in her decision was the stereotype that HBCUs do not have the same prestige as a PWI. Penelope admitted that HBCUs having less prestige is definitely a stereotype and its “probably not true, but it’s just me thinking that way,” but nonetheless it contributed to her ultimately selecting Southeastern State.

Analysis of Penelope’s College Search Process

In analyzing Penelope’s college search process, Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model was clearly evident. The only participant to attend a private high school, Penelope’s school gave her access to a college counselor afforded her the opportunity to have someone guiding her through each phase of the process.

Penelope’s predisposition to college can be detected during middle and elementary school. Her teachers who attended HBCUs always spoke very highly of their experiences. As her teachers, these individuals had a significant impact on her life and shaped her opinions on HBCUs at an early age.

As Penelope advanced into the search phase of her process, she discussed the importance of easy navigation on an institution’s website. Particularly with some of the HBCUs Penelope applied to, she indicated that the websites were not easy to navigate and did not provide the information she needed in a straightforward manner. As a result, Penelope developed ideas about what her experience would be like if she actually attended the institution and decided that if the website was that difficult to navigate, then she would certainly have difficulty navigating the institution. This finding suggests the importance of designing websites that are easy to
navigate and user-friendly. Websites that are challenging to navigate could cause a prospective student to lose interest in a particular institution or make false assumptions about the organization of an institution.

When Penelope reached the choice phase of her process, she decided that cost was an extremely important factor in her ultimate college choice. Like several other participants, she rationalized that Southeastern State would provide the best education at the lowest cost. Penelope believed the prestige of Southeastern State was so great, that despite not receiving the scholarship she wanted, she did not regret her decision to attend Southeastern State. In her opinion, the perceived prestige associated with the institution made it worth attending. She believed that she would have more opportunities for networking and jobs in the future.

Three of the four components of McCarthy’s Marketing Mix (1960) were central to Penelope’s college search process. The mix of prestige (product), scholarship money (price), and web appeal (promotion) each informed Penelope’s ultimate college choice. Place was not mentioned as an influential factor.

**Saxaphone’s College Search Process**

A tall and lanky musician, Saxaphone attended a magnet school in the southeast and was very involved with his school’s marching band. Being in the magnet program at his school, his teachers encouraged him to investigate his college options. In thinking about where to apply, he knew he wanted to go to a school with a strong band program and far enough away from home that he could live independent of his family. His final list of colleges included schools that he was familiar with through family and friends and also schools he had been exposed to through different science and engineering camps in which he participated.
The one HBCU Saxaphone applied to was his mother’s alma mater, much to his mother’s delight. He was also excited about that particular HBCU because the band had a national reputation and was very strong in the major he was interested in pursuing. He was familiar with the campus since he had visited many times as a child. Also of interest was the fact that his grandparents had a home near the HBCU and his living expenses would be drastically reduced because he could stay at his grandparents’ home.

As Saxaphone submitted applications, he began to think contemplate his decision and what was most important to him. First, he started to have second thoughts about attending his mother’s alma mater. He stated, “I guess since my mom pushed [Overton University] so much, I wanted to go, but at the same time, since she had pushed it so much, it kind of made me not want to go.”

Also influential in narrowing down his college list, Saxaphone discussed how he formed opinions of a school based on their website:

If your website sucks, then maybe your academics suck. If you don’t put a lot of effort into the school website, then I’m like, okay, maybe you don’t put a lot of effort into your academics. I mean because if I didn't really like your website too much, you were on the back burner for me.

Additionally, many of his teachers from his magnet program tried to dissuade him from attending the HBCU by telling him he needed to attend the biggest name school he was admitted to. Saxaphone noted that he tried not to let others influence him and in the end he decided to go to the school that was the most affordable. His parents encouraged him to attend wherever he wanted to go, but he did not think going into debt for college was worth it and decided to attend the in-state PWI:
I finally came down to it, I was like, “Out of state tuition is going to be too much. I can’t really afford that. And if I’m trying to go to medical school after then that undergrad tuition isn’t as worth as much as medical school.” So I was like, “Man, I might want to stay in state, because I have [the state scholarship] here.” So I decided to stay in state.

In retrospect, Saxaphone felt he made the best decision. Had he attended an HBCU, he believed he would not have focused as much as he does at his PWI and he did not feel he would have been exposed to diversity at an HBCU.

**Analysis of Saxaphone’s College Search Process**

After analyzing the college search process of Saxaphone, the influence of his mother is of importance to note. Like other participants of this study who had family members attend HBCUs, Saxaphone felt pressure to consider attending the same HBCU that his mother attended. The pride his mother carried for Overton University caused her to convince Saxaphone that it was the right college fit for him, too. While he initially thought that Overton would be a good fit for him too, as he progressed into the search phase of his college search process, he began to think more deeply about what the best environment would be for his needs.

With his search process mimicking that of Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model, Saxaphone’s search phase also consisted of an intense Internet search of institution websites. He was very critical of poorly designed websites and discussed how easily the design can inform a prospective student’s perception of a school. Though Saxaphone’s comments were not specific to PWIs or HBCUs, they indicate how influential a website can be in attracting and maintaining a prospective student’s interest.

Additionally, cost was a consideration in Saxaphone’s college choice. He found that scholarship and financial aid opportunities at Overton did not compare to the packages he was
being offered at the PWIs to which he applied. Ultimately, he made his college choice decision based on the state scholarship. In Saxophone’s case, his family was willing to make the financial sacrifice, but he was not comfortable placing that burden on his family. He believed that it would be much wiser to invest his money into medical school. He believed that if he saved money on his undergraduate education, he would have more money to pay for his graduate education expenses. While cost is taken into account during the choice phase of the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model, there is no mention of the influence of future educational goals and aspirations.

Out of all the participants in this study, Saxophone’s college search was the only one who seemed to consider all components of McCarthy’s Marketing Mix (1960). The appropriate balance of finances (price), the distance of a school away from home (place), the prestige of an institution (product), and how it was marketed (promotion), allowed Saxophone to make an informed decision to attend Southeastern State.

**Tiffany’s College Search Process**

Hailing from Mississippi, Tiffany is a bright young woman who has always excelld academically. A Gates Millennium Scholar, Tiffany had the opportunity to attend any school she was admitted to with a full scholarship. With her parents both holding terminal degrees, Tiffany always knew that college was in her future. Her search for colleges began during her junior year and was difficult because her school did not have a college-going culture. Fortunately, Tiffany had a counselor that recognized her potential, helped her through the process, and encouraged her to apply for the Gates scholarship.

An HBCU was always something Tiffany found appealing. Growing up, she learned of the rich history and traditions of HBCUs and many family members, including her father,
attended HBCUs. She was attracted to the pride and school spirit she saw people carry for their school and she was under the impression that the HBCU environment was much more supportive and helpful than that of a PWI. When Tiffany finalized her list of colleges, she decided to apply to three HBCUs and one PWI. For Tiffany, there was one HBCU that caught her attention over the others:

I guess growing up…[Miller] was always like…a really renowned HBCU, and I actually had two friends who attended [Miller]. So, they really liked the experience and told me a lot about [Miller] and the prestige that comes with being a [Miller] woman and everything. So I think that's why I was intrigued by [Miller].

The PWI she considered was based on her sister’s recommendation. Her sister lived in the southeast and suggested a school not too far from where she lived. She did not know much about the institution, but agreed to consider the PWI.

As Tiffany became more engaged in her college search and selection process, she began to consider some of the negative stereotypes associated with HBCUs she had heard from family friends. Tiffany reflected on the experience she had at her predominantly Black high school and thought:

At my school the students weren’t as ambitious as they could have, would have, should have been, and so I think maybe I equated that to that's what it would be like at a college with all Black people. But I found since I've been in college and interacting with students who attend HBCUs, that that's not really the case. Like it’s just like a misconception or a stereotype.
After visiting the campuses of the colleges on her list and interacting with some of the admission officers, Tiffany was able to make the decision that she would prefer attending the PWI. Her visits to the HBCUs and interactions with admission officers were very disappointing:

With [Graham State], I felt like [finding the answers to my questions] took a little time and like they didn't really know who I needed to speak with [about financial aid]…and it was just kind of like – I don't know what I'm doing and you don’t know what you're doing, so this could go really poorly. So from a business standpoint, that turned me off. And then the [Miller] admissions people were rude, actually…they weren’t really concerned about whether I came to the school or not, like my questions were a burden, kind of thing…Their attitude was “You can come here or you cannot, we don’t even care.”

Additionally, she requested information from Miller and did not receive the information until after she was accepted to Miller.

Her visit to the PWI was excellent. Everyone seemed excited and enthusiastic about her attending and she left feeling that the school would suit her well. When Tiffany spoke of her visit to Southeastern State, she could not hide her excitement noting:

[When I came to [Southeastern State] and took my tours and stuff, everybody was just really welcoming and inviting – “At the end of the day, we want [Southeastern State] to be your choice” and it made you feel like [Southeastern State wanted] my $40,000 a year, I guess that was the difference. The people at the Visitor’s Center were really, really nice, and answered any question I had, or if they couldn't – if they honestly did not know the answer, I had a million business cards. Like, “This person can help you with that.”]
Even though it seemed to be the perfect fit, both she and her mother were concerned about the lack of diversity the PWI might have, but as she perused the admission website of the PWI, she was able to get a sense of diversity and she was certain she would be able to find her place. In discussing the website of Southeastern State, Tiffany shared:

That is one thing that I did really navigate heavily on the site, was like trying to find the diversity on campus—it wasn’t difficult at all. Like it was really easy to find the numbers and to find programs, um, that's one really good thing about the website. Information is really easy to find. Like if you need to know about programs and you need to know about 500 organizations here, and you need to find something to do like it’s really…anything you want to know about the university can be found on their website.

Tiffany’s visit to Southeastern State solidified her decision to attend. Despite her initial attraction to HBCUs, the PWI captured her attention by showing an interest in her becoming a part of the Southeastern State community.

**Analysis of Tiffany’s College Search Process**

Hossler and Gallagher’s Three-Phase Model is clearly evident in Tiffany’s college search process. As Tiffany progresses through the phases of predisposition, search, and choice, she is able to reach a college choice with which she feels comfortable. As identified by Hossler and Gallagher (1987), the most critical phase of institution selection is the search phase. It is during this phase where interaction with college admission offices can be most impactful. Evidence of how impactful this phase can be is demonstrated in Tiffany’s story when considering her interactions with admission officers and how it ultimately influenced her college choice. For Tiffany, it was important to feel desired and welcomed by an institution, and she did not feel that
from the HBCUs to which she applied. The personalized attention she received from her PWI of choice was reassuring to her and led her to believe that the PWI would be a better environment for her.

In considering the 4 Ps of Marketing in Tiffany’s search process, the mix of product and promotion were most impactful on her overall decision. The two main things that influenced her decision revolved around the perceived reputation of an institution (product) and what measures the institution took to sell it to her (promotion). Since Tiffany had a full scholarship, the importance of price and place did not seem to be factors she considered.

Tiffany was predisposed to HBCUs at an early age. The rich experiences articulated to her by friends and family had a strong influence on her desire to attend. Attracted to the culture, history, and traditions of HBCUs, Tiffany decided early on that this was an experience she desired. Contrary to other participants of this study, Tiffany believed one of the HBCUs she was considering had a sense of prestige and found this to be very attractive. This attraction to the HBCU experience was enough to encourage Tiffany to apply to HBCUs, but influences during the second and third phase of her college search process would eventually deter her from attending.

Initially, Tiffany was slightly hesitant about attending a PWI because she did not know if she would feel comfortable being a minority in a majority white environment. However, after perusing the admissions website of Southeastern State, she became more comfortable with the idea. For Tiffany, it was important for her to get the sense that Southeastern State was inclusive and diverse. Since she was able to find information about underrepresented students and different services and organizations available, she felt much more at ease. Interesting to note was how easily a few blurbs on a website about diversity could give Tiffany a sense of
inclusiveness. Tiffany was not the only participant who was attracted to the diversity piece on the website. Other participants shared similar sentiments thus revealing that the marketing of diversity at Southeastern State was effective. Additionally, whether their claims about diversity were true, what was portrayed on the institution’s website was enough to encourage participants to enroll.

Also, since Tiffany came from an all-Black high school with low achievement levels, she naively thought that she would find a similar environment at an HBCU. She eventually recognized that it was just a misconception she had, but at the time it greatly impacted her decision to enroll at a PWI.

What solidified Tiffany’s decision to attend Southeastern State was when she compared her interactions and campus visits. Feeling desired and appreciated made a difference in Tiffany’s college choice. Southeastern State made her feel like they truly wanted her to be a member of their community, while Miller did not convince her that they wanted her. Tiffany’s desire to feel special closely aligns with the characteristics Howe and Strauss (2003) attribute to the millennial generation. Colleges and universities that used a personal approach in their admission marketing and communications made a difference in the college search process for Tiffany.

**Identification of Themes**

After a thorough analysis of participant interview transcripts and review of written notes primarily taken while participants conducted website reviews, I was able to identify the following themes from the experiences of the participants: *Influences on the initial attraction to the HBCU experience, Yearning for a change in environment, The perceived lack of prestige at HBCUs, Financial considerations that impact college choice, The role of admission website*
design in the college search process and The impact of admissions marketing and communication on prospective students. This section will provide a brief description of each theme and any sub-theme that may fall within each.

**Influences on the initial attraction to the HBCU experience**

Each participant’s initial attraction to HBCUs was the result of some type of influence that highlighted the HBCU experience. Throughout each of their personal journeys, participants identified several influences in their lives that made them aware and attracted them to the rich history and culture of HBCUs and often described it as an “experience like no other.” Influences included movies and television, family, social networks, teachers, and mentors.

What is interesting to note is that while these influences provided an initial interest in HBCUs early in the participants’ college search processes, it was not enough to sustain the their interest as they went further along in their college search process. The more research participant’s did and the more communication they had with admissions office (if they had any), the less they seemed to be interested in HBCUs.

**Yearning for a change in environment**

One of the main findings across participants was that a PWI was their ultimate choice because they desired a more diverse college environment. Nine of the 11 participants attended a predominantly Black school at some point in their educational careers and decided that a change in environment would be in their best interest making statements such as “If you went to a predominantly Black high school, you should probably venture out and try something different” or “…the real world isn’t all Black. I kind of want to diversify myself.” Additionally, the participants also relied heavily on the institution’s admission webpage to get a better feel for the level of diversity at the PWIs they considered.
The perceived lack of prestige at HBCU

Also playing into the ultimate decision of participants of this study was the idea that HBCUs did not hold the same level of prestige as PWIs. The wealth and resources of PWIs was often cited as a reason for not choosing to attend an HBCU. Also, many of the negative stereotypes associated with HBCUs including lack of resources, disorganization, and antiquated facilities contributed to the decision participants made not to attend.

Of interest to note is that the discussed stereotypes were usually rumors heard by the participants and even though they allowed these rumors to heavily influence their decisions, they acknowledged that they were rumors and did not necessarily believe that they were true. Perhaps because the rumors and stereotypes were widespread and believed by others, participants chose to attend a PWI, instead.

Financial considerations that impact college choice

For some participants in this study, the ultimate decision of where to attend college came down to cost. Despite what they heard about HBCUs and PWIs, their final college decision centered on cost. Participants were searching for the institution that was going to be the best value for them. Even though they may have desired a more expensive HBCU, they considered the impact cost would have on their family, as well as future educational aspirations. For participants who were considering private or out-of-state institutions, their decisions not to attend HBCUs were typically made because a student did not want to incur the costs. Additionally, some participants had parents and family members who were supportive and willing to pay for private or out-of-state schools, but several did not want to be a financial burden on their family. This particular theme more closely aligns with an econometric college choice model, which operates from a cost-benefit framework.
The role of admission website design in the college search process

For all of the participants of this study, their initial interest and desire to attend an HBCU came from an external influence. However, as revealed in the participant interviews, this interest and desire to attend dwindled after time. As participants began conducting Internet research on schools, their opinions of institutions began to change. Several of the participants noted how easy it was for a website to either increase more interest or less interest in a particular institution. The overall design of a school’s website led participants to draw conclusions about the school. For example, participants noted that disorganized websites equated to a disorganized institution and if a web design was done poorly, then their academics were poor. They connected the quality of the website to the quality of the school.

The impact of admissions marketing and communication on prospective students

Another important factor that appeared in the later stages of participants’ college search processes was the impact of admissions marketing and communication. Interaction with admissions officials, quality of print materials, and timeliness of communications played a role in participants’ decision-making processes and left participants with either positive or negative perceptions of institutions.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

The eleven narratives presented in this study provide a contextual understanding of how participants navigated the college search and selection process and what factors dissuaded them from attending an HBCU. This chapter will discuss the findings presented in Chapter Four and their relevance to the literature presented in Chapter Two of this study. As stated in Chapter One, the following research questions guided this study:

(1) What factors influenced Black undergraduate students to choose a PWI instead of an HBCU?

(2) To what extent does the admission marketing of an HBCU influence students’ college choice processes?

Specifically, I will first discuss where the findings are situated in the existing literature and then explain instances where the findings add to the literature. The chapter will conclude with implications for practice and suggestions for future research.

Considerations for the College Search Process

While there has been very little research on the factors that influence enrollment patterns for HBCUs, traditional factors that have been attributed to the shifting enrollment at HBCUs include: inadequate facilities, lack of resources, and low-profile faculty (Fleming, 1984; Hale, 2006). For the participants of this study, inadequate facilities and lack of resources were mentioned, but were certainly not the main themes of the findings. Low-profile faculty was
something that was not mentioned at all. For the participants, major factors for not choosing HBCUs included cost, the perceived lack of prestige, the perceived lack of diversity, and poor recruitment efforts.

Kinzie (2004) identified four major groupings as influential to college choice: 1) academic reputation, 2) prestige, 3) external factors including location and proximity to home, and 4) human influences such as personal and family input. The participants’ reasons were in line with Kinzie’s groupings, but additionally, financial factors were extremely important. Money played a large role in many of the participants’ decision not to attend an HBCU. Lauer (2006) noted that in finalizing college choice, some prospective students may “shop” institutions based on educational quality and price. The findings of this study were very consistent with Lauer’s research. Several of the participants decided against HBCUs solely because they believed they could get a better education at a better price if they attended Southeastern State. However, it is important to note that the findings as they relate to financial concerns could have been remarkably different if there was not a state scholarship playing a role in many of the participants’ decisions. The state scholarship afforded participants who met a certain criteria the opportunity to attend any in-state public schools tuition-free. In their opinion, the participants believed that the state flagship had the most prestige and therefore offered the most opportunities for future success.

Freeman’s (1999) study on HBCUs and college choice revealed three factors that contributed to the consideration of HBCUs during the college search process: personal affiliation, appreciation of the HBCU legacy, and interest in the HBCU majority-Black environment. Personal affiliation and appreciation of the HBCU legacy were reasons participants of this study considered HBCUs, however, the majority-Black environment became
less appealing as participants went further along in their search process. Many believed that a PWI would offer them a better reflection of the real world and better prepare them for their future careers. It is important to note that a majority of the participants attended all-Black high schools, therefore, this finding may have been different if participants had attended majority White high schools.

**Considerations for HBCU Marketing**

As noted in Chapter Two of this study, research on the marketing of HBCUs is scarce. In one of the few resources found on the marketing of HBCUs, Ponder and Gray discuss the importance of HBCUs clearly articulating their strengths to enhance their marketing initiatives (as stated in Grimes, 2000). Although purely anecdotal, Ponder and Gray’s assessments coincided with the findings from this study. Participants agreed that marketing materials from the HBCUs they applied to did a poor job of highlighting the institutions’ strengths and accomplishments. If they were aware of the accomplishments of HBCUs, it was not through marketing materials, but rather through word-of-mouth. Based on the data analyzed in this study, for Black undergraduate students at a PWI, it can be inferred that HBCUs are struggling to effectively market themselves to today’s Black college student. After analyzing the transcripts from this study, it is clear that the correct combination of *product, price, place, and promotion* is necessary to attract and entice Black undergraduate students. The Four Ps of Marketing assumes there is a one size fits all combination that can be applied to effectively market to consumers. This study reveals that when attracting Black students to an HBCU, there is not just one combination that will work, but rather a variety. However, of importance to note is that this combination of the Four Ps is not necessarily balanced, with some Ps having far more emphasis than others.
In considering all of the elements of the 4Ps, for the participants of this study, price carried the heaviest weight. Nine of the eleven participants noted that one of the biggest reasons they chose to attend a PWI had to do with the cost of the education. Based on negative stereotypes, many of the participants already held the belief that an HBCU education (product) was inferior; therefore they were not willing to pay more for it. Additionally, they did not want to put themselves into debt or be a financial burden on their family.

The participants revealed that promotion of an institution is a piece that is weighed heavily in college choice as well. Interaction with admission officers, quality of marketing materials, and the design of a college website can affect how a student feels about a particular institution. Each of the participants in this study noted ways in which the promotion of an institution either positively or negatively influenced their level of interest.

In terms of product, participants were not completely convinced that the end product of an HBCU could compare to a PWI in terms of quality. While the participants appreciated the history and tradition that could be experienced from an HBCU, eight out of the eleven participants did not feel that the resources and opportunities could compare to that of a PWI. These participants determined that an HBCU education was somehow inferior to that of a PWI and overall considered PWIs to be much more prestigious.

Finally, place appeared to be the least significant of the 4 Ps to the participants. Of the eleven participants in this study, only two mentioned location as being an influential factor in their ultimate college choice. However, it should be noted that most of the participants had already established that they would stay in-state to be eligible for the state scholarship program, therefore many of them did not even consider out-of-state schools.

According to Kirp (2003), for marketing and promotional strategies to be successful,
they must address academic quality and reputation, create awareness in the higher education community, positively differentiate themselves from the competition, and generate inquiries. Additionally, Kotler and Fox (1995) note that articulation of an institution’s features and benefits should be evident and consistent throughout their marketing and communication mechanisms. Based on the findings of this study, it appears that the marketing and promotional strategies of the HBCUs that participants considered were not successful in highlighting their academic quality and reputation. Literature reveals that HBCUs have been extremely successful in educating Black students. In fact, Freeman and Cohen (2001) noted that Black students attending HBCUs exhibit a greater level of academic involvement and demonstrate higher levels of educational achievement. However, according to the participants of this study, these accomplishments are not translated through HBCUs marketing efforts. In review of the HBCU websites and other promotional materials, participants were unable to get a sense of academic quality or reputation and allowed rumors and stereotypes from external sources influence their decision not to attend. Often depicting scenes of Greek Life or the marching band, the promotional materials of HBCUs left participants with a “social” or “fun” feel as opposed to one of academic rigor. Additionally, as it relates to differentiating themselves from the competition, participants indicated that it was difficult for them to find anything distinctive about HBCUs. Looking at the marketing materials of the HBCUs they considered, one participant noted, “they just seem to have a lot of Black people.”

Several studies indicate that prospective students use college websites as a primary information gathering tool for enrollment information; one could assume prospective student attitudes about the university could be affected by the messages presented on the sites (Art and Science Group, 2001; Harrington, 2000; Jo & Kim, 2003; Martin, 2004; Mechitov et al., 2000).
In line with this literature, the participants of this study agreed that the first place they went to gather information about institutions they were interested in was the admission page of the school’s website. From there, they were able to quickly determine if they remained interested in the institution. A well-designed webpage with easy-to-find information kept students interested in an institution. Pictures and videos attracted students, as well. For the participants of this study, the more interactive options available on a webpage, the more they felt they could learn about the school. The main reasons for losing interest had to do with information being difficult to find, pages not found, and lackluster graphics. For participants, if a website was poorly designed, then the academics at the institution were also assumed to be poor.

A majority of the websites that left participants with a negative perception came from HBCUs, but it is important to note that there were also some comments from participants about poorly designed websites from PWIs. Although my study focused solely on the website of Southeastern State, a few of the participants commented on the websites of other PWIs.

Christiansen et al. (2003) suggested the importance of the information gathering stage to an institution’s marketing program by noting, “in the information-gathering and decision-making phases, institutions influence a final choice by the way they provide data about their campuses and programs” (p. 14). The participants of this study reiterated this point. Whether it was information found on the institution’s website, print materials received in the mail, or interactions with an admission officer, participants revealed the importance of the information-gathering phase. If information was difficult to find, if print materials were of poor quality, and if they had negative interactions with admission professionals, participants lost the interest they once had in attending HBCUs.
In discussing today’s college student, Howe and Strauss (2003) suggested that Millennials’ team orientation means that they want to attend schools with their friends instead of attending college on their own. While this held true for many of the participants in the early phases of their college search process, toward the end, participants came to the realization that they wanted to get away from their familiar surroundings and experience something different. Some participants even chose not to attend local HBCUs because too many of their friends were attending. Additionally, Howe and Strauss (2003) suggested that this generation has a conventional nature that may lead them toward well-known colleges with prominent brand names, such as the Ivy League schools or large state schools with local and national reputations. Even though none of the participants had aspirations to attend an Ivy League school, many of them selected Southeastern State because they felt it had a national reputation and they wanted to attend the “best” school to which they were accepted. Important to note about the research of Howe and Strauss is that it may not necessarily be reflective of Black millennial students. Further research on the characteristics of Black millennial students would be helpful in better understanding Black student college choice.

Finally, participants in this study inquired about the HBCUs they were interested in based on what they heard from other people. What kept participants’ interests were well-designed websites, informative brochures, and personable admission officers. With the increase in Internet use by prospective students, Norris (2007) notes that two-way communication between prospective students and admission professionals has decreased dramatically, and research suggests that this may be having a detrimental impact on the number of potential applicants to an institution. Participants did not necessarily prefer using the Internet over personal communication with admission officers, but rather a combination of the two. Findings of this
study aligned closely with the notion that decreased interaction with admission professionals has a detrimental impact on the number of potential applicants as it was evident in participant interviews that communication with admission professionals was valued and contributed to a student’s interest in a particular institution. Participants were able to access necessary information about a school through the Internet, but they appreciated opportunities to connect with an actual person at the college. Findings also suggest that for the participants of this study a fifth P, *professionalism*, could be an addition to the Four Ps. The *professionalism* of admission officers greatly impacted participants as they progressed through the college search process. Interesting to note is the expectation participants had of admission officers. The participants of this study expected superior customer service in their interactions with admission officers and if they believed an admission officer was rude, unhelpful, or indifferent about the participant attending, their level of interest in the institution diminished. The findings from this study indicate that admission officers have a responsibility to meet the needs of prospective students if they want to convert an admitted student to an enrolled student.

**Implications for HBCU Admission Professionals**

The findings of this study have important implications for not only HBCU admission professionals, but also those at other institution types who wish to understand the college choice and decision-making process of Black students. While the implications presented below were specifically created with HBCUs in mind, they can be implemented at other institutions that struggle with declining enrollments.

**Utilize Alumni in Recruitment Efforts**

According to the results of this study, HBCU alumni played a strong role in initially attracting participants to HBCUs. Utilizing alumni on a volunteer basis is one of the best and
most cost effective recruiting tools HBCU admission offices have. Many alumni speak fondly of their alma maters and could assist in recruiting students in areas where admission representatives are unable to be present. Providing alumni with the proper training on the application procedures and deadlines, they could be used to articulate the benefits of an HBCU education to prospective high school students. Through high school visits and special receptions, alumni can help perpetuate the positive aspects of the HBCU experience and encourage more students to actually enroll. Additionally, being available to serve as resources and answer prospective students’ questions could have a positive impact on HBCU enrollments. Utilizing alumni would provide students with an account of the HBCU experience without the added pressure that can sometimes come from family members or admission officers that are encouraging prospective students to apply.

**Improving Technology**

With the Internet being a main source prospective students use to gather information about colleges, it is critical for colleges and universities to ensure their web pages are current, intriguing, and informational. For students who may not have the opportunity to physically visit an institution, the website may be the school’s only opportunity to gain their interest. Social networking links, testimonial videos, and virtual campus tours are ways institutions can personalize an applicant’s visit to their webpage. Conducting focus groups with prospective high school students can aid institutions in understanding what is most appealing to that demographic and information gleaned from the focus groups can be implemented into the improvement of the institution’s website.
Improving Marketing Content

Research indicates that HBCUs have many unique features and benefits. However, according to the participants of this study, these unique features and benefits are not being reflected in the marketing materials of HBCUs. Institutions need to tout notable accomplishments, programs, and alumni to appeal to prospective students. Investing in improving marketing content will help in building the reputation of the institution.

A Personalized Recruitment Approach

The findings from this study indicate that the participants appreciated personal connections they were able to make with admission officers and other professionals affiliated with the institution. These personal connections made students feel wanted and welcome. Training of all office staff members is integral to ensuring that everyone is providing the same level of customer service to prospective students. When prospective students are visiting a college campus, institutions must do their best to ensure visitors feel like welcomed guests. Ways in which admission officers could personalize their recruitment approach include telephone calls to prospective students, emails, and or hand-written notes. During high school visits and college fairs, admission officers should project enthusiasm and excitement with every student they meet and follow-up with them following their meeting to ensure they have all of their questions answered. Additionally, incorporating a chat function on the admission webpage could assist in creating a more personalized feeling for prospective students. An admission representative could be available during office hours via chat to answer any questions and concerns prospective students may have.

The responsibility of creating a more personalized recruitment approach should not fall solely on the admission office. A collaborative effort across all campus offices should be made
to be receptive and welcoming to prospective students. Additionally, this receptiveness should extend beyond the campus visit. Prospective students with questions and concerns should have access to important phone numbers and should be able to get their questions answered accurately and efficiently. Providing prospective students with superior customer service will positively impact their perceptions of an institution and could possibly influence their decision to enroll.

**Timely Distribution of Information**

At all costs, institutions must make every effort to distribute information to prospective students and applicants as timely as possible. As seen in the results of this study, late or never-received information was an immediate turnoff for participants. Not only does untimely communication serve as a turnoff for prospective students, but it also serves as a reflection of the organization of the institution. As a result, negative stereotypes will continue to be perpetuated if prospective students continue to experience issues receiving admission information. To alleviate issues with late information, important and frequently used forms or brochures should be posted on the institution’s website. The participants from this study discussed the importance of being able to access information immediately. If institutions make their information accessible through their websites, they can alleviate some of the issues they have with information and brochures arriving late.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

A number of future studies could evolve from this research. The present study was conducted at a large public PWI in the Southeast. A study of the experiences of Black undergraduates at other institutional types including private, non-selective, community colleges, and single-sex institutions, could yield a different set of perspectives given the various characteristics associated with each institution type. Additionally, the research methods and
interview protocol could be adapted to incorporate focus groups, allowing a richer discussion where participants can build on each other’s observations and reflections.

A similar study at an HBCU could be conducted to understand what influenced participants to choose an HBCU as opposed to a PWI. Comparing and contrasting the two studies could lead to greater understanding of college choice process for Black undergraduate students.

Although this study incorporated the use of qualitative methods and traditions, and involved the use of one data collection site, it provided a framework for which to grow and develop future studies around the same topic. Perhaps in the future this study could be conducted using a quantitative approach, which would allow for a broader predictive value in the findings. The results of this study could be quantified and used to create a survey instrument that could be administered to a nationally representative sample of institutions to test their generalizability by focusing on issues related to why Black students chose not to attend an HBCU.

Questions to consider for future researchers include, how would administrators at HBCUs respond to the value of the marketing strategies as identified by this study? Are the findings from this study generalizable to a broader population of HBCUs? What are the factors that influence Black undergraduate students to attend an HBCU?

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that influenced Black students’ decisions to attend a PWI as opposed to an HBCU. Eleven first-year, Black undergraduate students participated in this qualitative study by completing in-depth, semi-structured interviews. After careful analysis of the data, six themes of: *Influences on the initial attraction to the HBCU*
experience, Yearning for a change in environment, The perceived lack of prestige at HBCUs, Financial considerations that impact college choice, The role of admission websites in the college search process and The impact of admissions marketing and communication on prospective students, were identified.

Although some of the findings from this study were consistent with the existing literature on college choice, there were findings that raised questions for consideration when HBCUs develop promotional and marketing strategies aimed to increase enrollments.

Historically, HBCUs did not have to concern themselves with marketing efforts or competition with PWIs, because they were once the only educational option for Black students. Now, in a competitive environment and PWIs looking to diversify their campuses, HBCUs must make a concerted effort to appeal to Black students. Participating in professional development opportunities and benchmarking with other institutions can be a great starting point, however, listening to the voices of the students who have recently gone through the college search and selection process can prove to be most effective.

The findings from this study can provide a starting point for these discussions in the HBCU admission community, and it is my hope that changes can be made in the recruitment practices of not only HBCUs, but also any other institution types that struggle with declining enrollments and that the voices of my participants will be heard.
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## APPENDIX A
### PARTICIPANTS’ DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

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APPENDIX B
PATRICIPANTS’ EMAIL SOLICITATION

Dear Student:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Dr. Michelle Espino in the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at The University of Georgia. I invite you to participate in a research study entitled: Understanding College Choice: An Examination of Black Student College Choice who Attend a Predominantly White Institution and Considered Attending a Historically Black College or University. The purpose of this study is to understand the college choice of Black students who attend a PWI, but also considered attending an HBCU. Particular attention will be paid to the reasons they ultimately chose a PWI, and the role that marketing may have had in their decision-making processes.

Participants of this study must be Black, currently enrolled, first-year undergraduate students who applied to a Historically Black college or University.

Your participation will involve an interview and should take no more than two hours of your time. Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Any individual-identifiable information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified about you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. You will be asked to submit a pseudonym to protect your identity in any published results.

The findings from this project may provide current and future admission professionals at Historically Black Colleges and Universities insight into developing marketing materials that appeal to today’s college student and ultimately aid in increasing enrollments.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me 678.799.2146 at or send an email to jawaan@uga.edu. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to The Chairperson, University of Georgia Institutional Review Board, 612 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; telephone (706) 542-3199; email address irb@uga.edu.

By responding to this email and verifying that you fit the established criteria, you are agreeing to participate in the above described research project.

Thank you for your consideration! Please keep this email for your records.
Sincerely,

Jawaan J. Wallace
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. The purpose of this interview is to develop an understanding of factors influencing the college choice of first-year students who considered attending a Historically Black College or University, but ultimately chose to attend a Predominantly White Institution. Specifically, the role that admission marketing efforts played in college choice will be a central focus. The results of this study will allow me to gain insight into why students decide not to attend a Historically Black College or University.

The interview will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Everything we discuss will be completely confidential as explained in the informed consent form you signed. Your comfort during this interview is most important to me. If there is anything that you are uncomfortable answering, please let me know. Additionally, if you need any clarification on a question or want to know why I am asking, please feel free to ask me. You are free to stop the interview at any time. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Questions:

1. Describe to me your process of applying to college. How did you decide where you ultimately wanted to go to college?
2. What influenced you to consider attending an HBCU?
3. How did you hear about the HBCU/s you applied to and what attracted you to it/them?
4. Why did you choose to attend this institution?
5. What role did family or friends play in your college choice? What role did the college admission officer at any of the institutions play in your college choice?

6. I’m very interested in how different institutions market themselves to potential students, particularly through the Internet. I am wondering if you could share the ways that the Internet helped you during your college search. How did it help you in making your decision, if at all?

7. Let’s take a few minutes and look at the admission websites of your current institution and the HBCUs you applied to.
   a. What type of information were you looking for when you searched through their website? Why was that important to you? Did you find all the information you needed? What was missing? What did you appreciate about the information offered?
   b. Based on your review of these websites, how do you think the content influenced your decision to apply and ultimately enroll at the institution?

8. During your college search, what admission recruitment events did you participate in and how did those events influence your decision to apply to a particular institution? (i.e. college fairs, open house programs, campus tours, etc.)

9. Did the HBCU/s you applied to send you any print materials in the mail and if so, in what ways did they influence your decision to apply to the HBCU? In what ways did they influence your final choice?

10. Based on your experience with the HBCUs you applied to, what advice would you give to students who are considering HBCUs? What advice would you give to the HBCUs based on your decision not to attend that HBCU(s)? [RQ2, marketing mix framework]
11. If you were to pursue graduate studies and go through the college search again, how would your process be different and would you consider HBCUs?
APPENDIX D

CODES, CATEGORIES, & THEMES

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-Web Exp PWI  Negative web experience at PWI

CATEGORIES

**Predisposition**
- Exp
- Fam Trad
- Infl Alum
- Infl Fam
- Infl Media
- Infl Ment
- Infl Peers
- Infl School
- Know HBCU

**Search**
- +Web Exp HBCU
- -Web Exp HBCU
- + Web Exp PWI
- -Web Exp PWI
- Res
- Tech
- Int Use
- Infl Alum
- Infl Ment
- Infl Peers
- Infl School

**Choice**
- + Interaction w/ Admiss
- - Interaction w/ Admiss
- UCC
- Poor Qual Print
- Poor Web Des
- Org
- +Ben HBCU
- -HBCU Percep
- Web Crit
- Reas HBCUs
- Reas PWIs
- HS Dem
- In State
- Out State
- Fac
- Div
- Schol

**Promotion**
- +Web Exp HBCU
- -Web Exp HBCU
- +Web Exp PWI
- -Web Exp PWI
- Poor Web Des
- Poor Qual Print

**Product**
- +Ben HBCU
- -HBCU Percep
- Org
- Res
- Fac
- Schol
- Fin Con
- Schol

**Price**
- In State
- Out State

**Place**

THEMES

Influences on the initial attraction to the HBCU experience
Yearning for a change in environment
The perceived lack of prestige at HBCUs
Financial considerations that impact college choice
The role of admission websites in the college search process
The impact of admissions marketing and communication on prospective students
APPENDIX E
PARTICIPANTS’ CONSENT FORM

Understanding College Choice Research Consent Form

I, ________________________________, agree to take part in a research study titled, “Understanding College Choice” which is being conducted by Jawaan Wallace from the University of Georgia, through the Department of Counseling & Human Development Services under the direction of Michelle Espino, Ph.D.

The purpose of this interview is to understand the various factors that influenced the college choice of first-year students who considered attending a Historically Black College or University, but ultimately chose to attend a Predominantly White Institution. A main focus of the interview will be the role that marketing played in college choice. I understand that I will not benefit directly from this research. However, my participation in this research may lead to information that could benefit future admission practices at Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

I understand that I do not have to take part in this study; I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have information related to me returned, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

If I volunteer to take part in this study:

(1) I must be at least 18 years old when I participate in the interview.

(2) I will be asked to participate in an interview where I will be asked to speak about my experiences as it relates to my college choice. During the interview, I will be asked to review the website(s) of the HBCU(s) I applied to for admission. This interview should last no more than two hours and will be digitally taped. If necessary, I may be contacted at a later date to clarify information or to answer additional questions. I will also be asked to review the transcripts of the interview to make sure that the information is accurate. These contacts will be by e-mail.

(3) No discomforts or stresses are expected. No risks are expected.

(5) Any individual-identifiable information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified about me will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with my permission or as required by law. I will be asked to submit a pseudonym to protect my identity in any published results.

(6) Digital files will be kept on a personal computer in a password-protected file. Transcripts and electronic files will be kept for 3 years after the completion of the study, and then destroyed.
The researchers will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project. Contact the Department of Counseling and Human Development Services at (706) 542-1812 or email the co-researcher, Jawaan J. Wallace at <jawaan@uga.edu>.

My signature below indicates that the researcher has answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I consent to volunteer for this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

____________________________________  ____________________________
Signature of Researcher               Date

Signature of Researcher               Date

Signature of Participant               Date

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 612 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu