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Effects Of Perceived Financial Accessibility Of Colleges And Universities On Students’ Assessment Of Institutional Desirability

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EFFECTS OF PERCEIVED FINANCIAL ACCESSIBILITY OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES ON STUDENTS’ ASSESSMENT OF INSTITUTIONAL DESIRABILITY

By

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A Thesis Submitted to the Honors Council

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Abstract

This study focused on the effects of socioeconomic exclusivity indicators on college students’ attitudes toward a hypothetical private liberal arts university. Students enrolled in two undergraduate courses in Education at an elite private liberal arts university in the northeast were randomly presented with one of three versions of an admissions brochure describing a fictitious university. The three versions of the brochure varied in their portrayals of the institution’s financial exclusivity, ranging from high exclusivity to low exclusivity. Each student was asked to review the brochure and respond to a questionnaire, containing items pertaining to the overall desirability of the institution, as well as its student culture, academic program, campus traditions, and alumni network. Based on Thorstein Veblen’s theory of the leisure class and Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction, it was hypothesized that students would judge the institution most favorably in all areas under the high exclusivity condition and least favorably under the low exclusivity condition. It was further hypothesized that differences in students’ ratings of institutional desirability would be mediated by their own financial aid statuses. Results of a two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed significant (p < .05) interactive effects of institutional exclusivity and student aid status on the perceived desirability of the academic program and campus traditions of the institution. While recipients of need-based financial aid tended to rate more socioeconomically exclusive institutions more favorably on these two variables, those who were not receiving need-based financial aid tended to rate such institutions less favorably. Implications of the findings for student affairs practice are discussed and recommendations for further research are presented.
Chapter I: Introduction

Unfortunately for many, knowledge has long been a source of power and thus social class status in our society. This means that an exclusive few hold the knowledge that is necessary to be successful, defined by high social mobility, and hold places of power, while large majorities are left socially immobile through their lack of knowledge (Barry, 2011; McCarthy, 1996). Starting with the oral tradition, whose structure provided knowledge only to those who were chosen or were members of royalty and could memorize the stories that contained a society’s foundational structure, such access meant prestige and power (Vansina, 1985). As history progressed, this pattern continued, with rich rulers, monarchs, and tyrants using the knowledge they gained through commissioned explorations and secret societies to build exclusive and celebratory structures (e.g. pyramids, royal gardens, monuments), to take over the world, to manipulate their peoples, and to maintain control of their societies (Bond & Gilliam, 1994). Even in more modern times, it was only the elite who could afford to do scientific experiments, had the time to write poetry, and had the knowledge, resources and financial capital to create a successful industry for our capitalist society, while most others, the non-elites, were preoccupied with simply surviving (Brown, 1989). In this way, the perception of knowledge and the ability to be socially mobile have become associated with only the exclusive, upper echelons of society.

This perception of access to knowledge, and the social mobility that such access gives, carries over to the perception of the American higher education system (Class Matters, 2005; Hudson & Wong-MingJi, 2001). Especially during difficult economic times, parents of both prospective and current college students are wondering which college will secure their children’s places financially and socially in the future (Arnold, 1995; Bok & Dunlop, 1970). Parents are searching for colleges and degrees that will give their children the best job prospects (Bok, 2003).
Here, in their ability to provide students with opportunities to access or maintain places in the upper strata of society, is where elite private colleges, typically characteristic of America’s northeast, find their student market (Steinberg, 2002; Stevens, 2007).

These schools thrive off exclusivity, because it is what sets them apart from other institutions; it makes them appear more prestigious than their competitors in the academic market. While the current recession has been beneficial to these institutions, insofar as it has increased their appeal to those who already have the means to attend, it has posed certain challenges as well, because their student market has narrowed. Recession reduces the number of students with the means to afford these institutions’ high price tags, while increasing the number of students who will be examining them from a financially limited, working-class, perspective.

When it comes to the value of higher education institutions in America, perception is king. For proof, one need only look at the job of the institutional advancement (communications), development, alumni relations, president’s, facilities, and admissions offices. These offices function to develop a positive image of an institution through various media publications, meaningful relationships, public appearances, campus upkeep (or lack thereof), and tours. Some examples of the products these offices produce include social media pages, mailings, admissions brochures, student calling programs, homecomings, reunions, traditions, meticulous landscaping, and hand-picked, student tour guides. Each of these products is specifically developed in an attempt to maintain and perpetuate an image of an institution that will result in parents wanting their students to attend, students desiring to get in, and alumni wanting to give back.

The type of student that an institution attracts is central to the image that the institution develops and maintains and is ultimately a determinant of the type of people who will hold the power in our society. As such, the students who attend elite institutions must perceive these
schools as places where they can earn or maintain their place in society, while others are also kept in theirs, so that the first group feels exclusive in their attainment. Thorstein Veblen, critically acclaimed socio-economist, in his 1899 masterpiece, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, critiqued upper-class westerners. He described two concepts known as the leisure class and conspicuous consumption. With these two concepts, he laid the groundwork for an evaluation of higher education that serves as the basis for this study.

The leisure class is comprised of those who have very little necessity to work and therefore whose lives are filled up, by and large, with leisure (Veblen, 1899). Their ability to have lives of leisure comes from those jobs to which they have gained access through attending exclusive higher education institutions (Reisman, 2012). As a result of achieving and maintaining lives of leisure, attending elite educational institutions, and attaining extremely high-paying jobs, this class creates perceived legitimate distinctions, in terms of the quality of their culture, between themselves and those of other social classes. This process of differentiation exists both to validate their egos (Reisman, 2012) and to emphasize power differences across the social classes. With the rise of the middle class, it will become even more compelling for members of the leisure class to distinguish themselves.

One way the leisure class did, can, and will distinguish themselves from the middles class is through conspicuous consumption. Conspicuous consumption is purchasing luxury goods in order to publicly display economic power. Veblen writes that conspicuous consumption is the visible evidence that helps give tangible distinguishers to the leisure class as a people distinct from and better than others (Veblen, 1899). One key indicator of class status in America is financial standing, as represented in the form of money. The upper class is characterized by how much money its members have and therefore one’s class status progressively decreases as one’s
money decreases. Whereas it can be difficult for observers to know that one has excessive
amounts of money, public recognition of one’s privileged social status depends upon possession
of something perceived as legitimately better and different from those goods possessed by
everyone else. In this same way, one’s class status is reflected in how much one pays to attend
college. Paying for an elite higher education institution is a form of conspicuous consumption by
the leisure class.

While Veblen’s concepts have helped articulate where perceptions of financial
exclusivity at elite higher education institutions come from, questions remain as to the
assumptions people make about these institutions based on those perceptions. Developing a set
of assumptions about the world, acquiring the right kind of knowledge, attending certain events,
and taking up certain hobbies are central to being able to act properly in a given class and thus be
admitted to their institutions of power. Secondly, starting and maintaining relationships with the
right people and organizations are the keys to understanding how to attain positions in
professional fields, such as medicine, business, law, education, and engineering, and ultimately
securing such work. These pieces of culture are something Pierre Bourdieu calls “cultural
capital.” Bourdieu, in his work *Distinction*, published in 1979, develops a theoretical frame work
for understanding social positioning based on cultural capital; the more cultural capital someone
has, the higher the social position that he or she can attain. In the same vein, Bourdieu
characterizes relationships with the right people and organizations as “social capital.” Like
cultural capital, social capital helps with social positioning by connecting people within classes
to each other. Universities, therefore, especially high ranking liberal arts universities
characteristic of America’s northeast, as keepers and distributors of said knowledge, have
become the places people need to attend in order to position themselves socially. For in
American society, this knowledge means good, high paying jobs, which result in an individual achieving upper-class status; the perceived American dream where all is well and true independence lies.

Among students from a working-class background, as opposed to those from the leisure class, perceptions of an institution’s financial accessibility are completely different. St. John, Andrieu, Asker, Hossler, Oescher, & Starkey (1989-2003) researched working-class students’ perceptions of higher education, based on a financial-nexus model they developed. With this model, they found that a range of socio-economic factors played large roles in working-class students’ perceptions of college, but financial accessibility, by and large, played the most impactful role. Since finances affect almost every part of these students’ lives, they must consider cost in almost every decision they make. Accepting the premises of Veblen and Bourdieu, it would seem likely that in order for higher education institutions to persist, they must be perceived by the working-class as places accessible to them and their culture, while simultaneously being perceived by the upper-class as exclusive and distinguished reinforcers of their social class dominance.

The current study sought to determine the degree to which the pursuit of higher education was perceived as a form of conspicuous consumption and a source of Bourdieu’s cultural and social capital, among students enrolled at an elite private liberal arts college in the northeast. One possible factor in perceptions of higher education institutions as places where access to knowledge, power, and class attainment lie, is through their pricing. Through the cost of attendance, students and families may believe it is possible to purchase a higher place in society. Through their investment in an expensive education, they would thus affirm their status as members of the upper class. In the same way, students who are not able to attend, due to their
financial standing, would be denied such status by not being associated with the institutions that promote upward social mobility (Kaplan, 2010). Therefore, it was anticipated that students would perceive an institution as more or less desirable, based on indicators of financial accessibility, and that this perception of desirability would be reflected in their perceptions of an institution’s academics, student life, traditions, and alumni networks.

In order to assess these perceptions, the researcher developed four tools. The first was a 19 item perception survey that gathered demographic and socio-economic data on the research participants and assessed their perceptions of an institution’s social environment, academic rigor, institutional traditions, and networking opportunities. In addition to the common questionnaire, the researcher developed three versions of a fictitious university’s general admissions brochure. While holding all other factors constant, the researcher manipulated financial accessibility indicators within the content of the three brochures. By producing three brochures of the same school with varying levels of financial accessibility, ranging from relatively accessible to completely exclusive, the researcher was able to assess students’ perceptions of an institution based on financial exclusivity alone.

The study was conducted at private liberal arts university in the Mid-Atlantic region. This institution was found to be uniquely and ideally suited to the purpose of this study. With its posted tuition and fees approaching $60,000 per year, the institution is one of the most elite, exclusive, private liberal arts universities in the country. Despite its reputation as a highly exclusive institution, the university has devoted extensive resources to increasing the socio-economic diversity of its student body, through recruitment initiatives undertaken in cooperation with the POSSE and Jack Kent Cooke Foundations. Whereas the institution has a largely upper-class student body, but is currently trying to expand the amount of socio-economic diversity on
its campus, it was deemed to be a suitable context for an investigation of the extent to which students who are drawn to elite institutions view college attendance as an act of conspicuous consumption, and what level of socio-economic diversity they are willing to accept. It was anticipated that the participants’ attitudes concerning such matters would be reflected in their opinions on an institution’s students, academics, traditions, and alumni.

The participants in the study consisted of 87 undergraduate students enrolled in education courses at the aforementioned university. The participants varied in gender, class standing, financial aid status, home community type, and major. Data was collected, using the 19 item survey, and then entered into the Statistics Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. It was hypothesized that there would be a significant difference in participants’ mean ratings on each of the instrument’s five scales, depending on which of the three brochures they received. It was further hypothesized that differences in students’ scores across the three conditions would be affected by whether or not they received need-based financial aid.

This thesis is organized in five chapters. The purpose of this first chapter was to provide a general introduction to the intent of the study and its overall design. Chapter two will include a review of the literature pertaining to attitudes of the upper and working classes toward higher education. Chapter three will set forth in detail the methodology utilized in this study. Chapter four will reveal the results of the analyses. Finally, Chapter 5 will discuss the implications of the results and further detail the limitations of the study.
Chapter II: Literature Review

As discussed in the introduction, the exclusive, small, private liberal arts colleges, characteristic of America’s northeast, have become an upper class, socioeconomic status symbol for many of the students, families, and alumni these institutions represent. Because these institutions serve as gatekeepers to the knowledge and social networks necessary to attain or maintain one’s standing within this class, attending one of these institutions has become almost necessary for social and economic access and opportunity. Part of this exclusivity comes from these institutions’ perceived cost of attendance. Simply put, in order to attend one of these institutions, a student and his or her family must have the financial means required to do so. This means these institutions, solely based on their price, are only accessible to those students who can afford them and therefore are perceived by most as exclusively available to the upper-class. Based on an institution’s perceived financial accessibility or exclusivity, students make assumptions about its student culture, academics, traditions, and alumni, which reflect what they know or believe about the upper-class. These assumptions typically include a belief that greater exclusivity is associated with a higher caliber of students, more challenging academics, a higher quality of traditions, and more supportive alumni (Sowell, 1986; St. John & Asker, 2003). While financial exclusivity has traditionally contributed to the allure of elite private colleges and universities, there exists a growing recognition that student diversity enhances the quality of education that colleges and universities are able to offer to all of their students. Driven in part by a series of court rulings pertaining to affirmative action in higher education admissions, colleges and universities of all types have come to embrace a broad definition of student diversity that includes socioeconomic status as one of many points of differentiation among prospective students (Arthur & Shapiro, 1995). Thus, elite private colleges and universities currently find themselves at a crossroads. In order to maintain their traditional niche in the competitive higher
education world, they must continue to be perceived as exclusive. At the same time, if their perceived financial exclusivity becomes too pronounced, due to price escalations, their ability to achieve their evolving goals of increased diversity and equal access to education for all will be threatened.

In this chapter, the theoretical literature that formed the basis for this study will be examined in greater depth. This literature review will seek to examine the development of the perceptions of the upper class, based on the works of Thornstein Veblen and Pierre Bourdieu, situate these perceptions in the nature and function of elite higher education institutions, and synthesize the findings of more recent research on perceptions of financial accessibility in higher education, in order to provide a framework for the current study.

Veblen

At the dawn of the industrial age, a time when the growth of low-wage factory work and urbanization were changing everything in America, but most notably its social class structure, Thornstein Veblen (1899), a critically acclaimed socio-economist, wrote his signature work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*. As the title suggests, this work focused on the development and nature of what Veblen termed the leisure class, as well as the social institutions with which this emerging class interacted, including the educational system. Important to understanding the leisure class is a concept Veblen introduced as *conspicuous consumption*. Conspicuous consumption is the public display of wealth by purchasing goods not necessary for survival and known for their high cost. Understanding the leisure class in general, and their consumer behavior in particular, can aid in understanding modern day upper-class students’ perceptions of higher education institutions and their costs. This understanding will be
essential if recruitment professionals are going to build classes that sustain their institutions. The goal of advancing such understanding influenced the design and focus of this study.

The leisure class is, by definition, the class of people whose lives are characterized by large amounts of leisure time, due at least in part to their excessive wealth, which reduces their need to work. Veblen (1899) wasted no time in describing this class, as he wrote in his opening statements:

The institution of a leisure class is found in its best development at the higher stages of culture… In such communities the distinction between classes is very rigorously observed; and the feature of most striking economic significance in these class differences is the distinction maintained between the employments proper of the several classes... But the rule holds [that the] upper classes are exempt from industrial employments, and this exemption is the economic expression of their superior rank (p. 1).

Although the leisure class remains most prevalent at the upper extreme of the social status hierarchy, contemporary authors have noted that as the middle class in America grows, with the continual rise of middle-managers and their emulation of upper level executives, so does the nation’s leisure class (Whitney, 2006). What the contemporary and historic literature suggests is that the higher one’s social status, the more important it is to emphasize one’s leisure.

Further, leisure manifests itself in the lines of work in which members of the upper class take part. During Veblen’s (1899) time, occupations that provided excessive amounts of leisure time included “government, warfare, religious observances, and sports” (p. 1). Reisman (2012), whose contemporary work synthesizes Veblen’s theory and makes it more accessible to the non-economist, writes that in more modern economies the most prevalent careers of the leisure class are those to which exclusive higher education institutions provide access, including engineering,
medicine, law, and business management. The most salient trait of such occupations is the absence of demands for time consuming manual labor. Membership in the leisure class places a person in an exclusive group and keeps that individual from associating with those of lower status by means of separation of employment (Veblen & Lerner, 1948). As the lines between the classes continue to blur, it will become even more necessary for the leisure class to distinguish itself from the lower classes, through such factors as the exclusivity of higher education institutions attended, if it is to persist in the post-industrial age.

Separation of the leisure class from the working class through employment and excessive leisure is not enough to ensure that members of the upper class will feel distinguished from the lower class. Veblen argues that the leisure class must emphasize and flaunt their exclusivity through consumption (Veblen, 1899; Hobson, 1963). In his Theory of the Leisure Class, Veblen (1899) wrote, “In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence; for esteem is awarded only on evidence” (p. 42). Reisman (2012) states that incremental wealth means incremental respect but only if it is “shown off” (p. 104). In order to really exemplify and highlight one’s elite status in society, and in so doing distinguish oneself from the working class, one must make one’s wealth known publicly through tangible evidence.

Conspicuous consumption is the means through which Veblen’s (1899) leisure class offers evidence to support their social class distinction. In The Theory of the Leisure Class, Veblen provided examples of the conspicuous consumption indicative of his time, including the excessive amounts that wealthy men’s wives spent on clothes, food, beverages, narcotics, and gifts. Furthermore, in The Place of Science in Modern Civilization: and Other Essays Veblen (1906/1990) wrote, “economic success is in our day the most widely accepted as well as the most
readily ascertainable measure of esteem” (pg. 393-394). One of the primary ways people achieve economic success in the post-modern world is through higher education (Jaramillo & Moizeau, 2003). There are not many better ways to appear and stay more distinguished than the millions of other college students trying to attain social mobility than going to an exclusive institution that only accepts elite students, and can only be accessed by certain social classes.

Casanova (2013), in the Encyclopedia of Social Problems, writes that as the industrial revolution broke down traditional ways to emphasize wealth and with it the indicators of social stratification, “conspicuous consumption also became a way for the upper-class elites to reaffirm their place at the top” (p.163-165). Reisman (2012) makes conspicuous consumption even simpler. On conspicuous consumption he writes:

“[the capitalists or leisure class] want to maximize their profits because they want to stand out in the crowd. Success is successful. Failure is shaming. Finance rules. Money talks. We are all social beings. We all need non-ego validation” (pg. 95).

In order to set themselves apart, as a distinctive elite class, the members of the leisure class must be easily perceived as exceptional. Even today, Veblen’s concept of conspicuous consumption helps us understand that many excessive purchases are made for the sole purpose of setting oneself apart from another (Brooks, 1981). It would seem, therefore, that for students and families who could achieve their educational goals through the student’s enrollment in a less expensive institution, selection of a financially exclusive college or university may constitute a form of conspicuous consumption.

One investment that can be excessive, depending on the actual cost of the institution, and the type or quality of knowledge that it claims to disseminate, is enrollment in a college or university; a matter on which Veblen was one of the first to comment. Indeed, he felt so strongly
on the matter that he dedicated an entire chapter of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* to “The Higher Learning as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture” (Veblen, 1899, p. 370-400) and later wrote a book entitled *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men* (1935). In both works, he argued that higher education had become a means of stratifying the social classes by distinguishing types of knowledge and giving access to certain types of institutions only to those who could afford it.

In order to show how higher learning solidifies social stratification, Veblen (1899) first distinguished between two types of knowledge, which had come to be associated with two distinct types of educational institutions. Veblen traced the history of higher education back to when it was reserved for the priestly class in order to serve the gods. As time went on and economies advanced, this type of learning evolved into the liberal arts, which continued to be reserved for the priestly class and the leisure class, while practical knowledge for trade-work arose as another type of higher learning (Veblen, 1899, 1935). America’s current higher education system can still be seen to parallel this two-tiered system, with the rise of trade-schools, technical institutes, and community colleges, which by and large prepare the working class for lower status jobs while liberal arts institutions endure for the upper class.

On top of the social divisions between types of knowledge, and thus education, Veblen (1899, 1935) saw how economics influenced college choice. Reisman (2012) writes that “the world outside the cloister [referring to academia] is supply and demand” (p. 98). In capitalist economies, which now dominate the global economy, there are only so many jobs that will place or keep students in the leisure class, which is to say that the supply of jobs is low. Meanwhile, most students want a job that will place or keep them in the leisure class, and thus the demand for jobs is huge. This short supply and high demand for jobs creates competition for acceptance
into the higher education institutions that will give students access to those jobs that are available (Gautam, 2011). In *Higher Learning in America*, Veblen (1935) wrote, “under the strain of the price system and the necessities of competitive earning and spending, many men and women are driven by an habitual bias in favour of a higher ‘practical’ efficiency in all matters of educations” (p. 42). Accordingly, today’s parents and students are looking for an education that will quickly and with ease get students the jobs of their choice, thereby securing their financial and social futures (Reisman, 2012).

When the social stratification of both institutions and forms of knowledge is combined with the competitive search for access to well-paying jobs, the real or perceived need for exclusivity in higher education becomes clear. If an institution can be perceived as offering access to those types of knowledge that are associated with the upper class, while limiting such access to a select few, then the institution will be successful (*Public Perceptions*, 1995). One of the easiest ways for an institution to be seen in this way is through financial exclusivity. High tuition and fees make an institution something to be conspicuously consumed by the leisure class, by creating the assumption that the institution offers knowledge only attainable to those with resources.

The social and economic theories of Veblen help to explain why financial exclusivity might play a role in public perceptions of higher education institutions. Important to this study are the assumptions that students make about an institution and its students, academics, traditions, and alumni, based on these perceptions. Along with going to school to get a good job, today’s students want to attend institutions where they feel they will fit in well with the other students. They are seeking institutions that will feel like a second home (Benjamin, 1993). If students perceive a school as exclusively for the leisure class, because of financial exclusivity, it would
seem likely that they might make assumptions about the culture of its students, the quality of its academics, the richness of its traditions, and the networking ability of its alumni.

Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu (1984), a critically acclaimed sociologist and anthropologist, wrote *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, in which he explored the reasons why people choose to eat certain foods, attend certain events, and spend time with certain people in order to attain their goals. Unlike Veblen, who was an economist, Bourdieu argued that money, while being one factor in the perceptions and choices of the upper-class, was a small piece in the large social and cultural puzzle of justification of taste (Swartz, 1997). In doing so, he created the concepts of social and cultural capital. In later work, Bourdieu showed how the judgments that agents of higher education institutions made about their prospective students’ tastes acted as a draw for upper-class students and a perpetuator of social stratification (Bourdieu et al., 1990). Understanding Bourdieu’s concepts of social and cultural capital will aid in understanding the assumptions people make about financially exclusive schools and their students, academics, traditions, and alumni.

Just as Veblen focused on how the leisure class utilized the economy and their economic means to distinguish themselves from the other classes, Bourdieu (1984) focused on, as his title suggests, “taste.” His basic argument was that by the upper class’s deeming of certain types of action, experience, art, food, humor, dialect, vocabulary, childrearing techniques, fashion, and other cultural elements to be of higher value, the lower classes’ tastes come to be seen as invalidated, inappropriate, and not the most valuable or correct way of experiencing life. In his own words:
The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile - in a word, natural - enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane. That is why art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences (p. 7).

By refusing to participate in, and by being satiated without, the lowly activities and lifestyle preferences that constitute the culture of the lower-classes, the upper-class validates its perceived superiority (Calhoun et al., 1995). In doing so, it creates a “social function” -- distinguishing classes through cultural tastes -- that gives rise to “legitimate” perceived, “social differences” (Dicks, 2010, p. 517). In the context of this study, it would seem plausible that people might assume that the culture and quality of more financially exclusive institutions are more desirable, because of the tastes that are associated with those who can afford the price tag.

The perceived value of a college or university (or any other institution for that matter), according to Bourdieu, will thus be directly associated with the amount of cultural capital that its members possess. Bourdieu (1984) writes, “if it is true that the first dominant class constitutes a relatively autonomous space whose structure is defined by the distribution of economic (Veblen) and cultural capital among its members, each class fraction being characterized by a certain configuration of this distribution to which there corresponds a certain-lifestyle,” then their institutions will reflect this distribution (p. 260). Cultural capital is a form of worth directly connected to the approved tastes, material purchases, qualities, techniques, and recognitions of a certain culture (Banks & Esposito, 2009). This capital comes from what Bourdieu called a “cultural field,” which encompasses the complete interaction between an individual and his or
her institutions, rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations, and appointments, and in turn creates perceptions for the individual of objective hierarchies that produce and approve certain discourses and activities (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002 p. 24). Without certain cultural capital, students could not get into higher education institutions, but more importantly for this study, without institutions’ being perceived as places with cultural capital to offer, such as valuable degrees and experiences, students would not want to attend them.

Another important factor in distinguishing oneself as a member of the upper class and separating oneself from the lower classes is the amount of social capital one has. Along with Bourdieu, James Coleman played a major role in the development of the concept of social capital. Together, they argued that social capital, like cultural capital, is both a product of social stratification and a contributor to its perpetuation. Social capital consists of the types of connections to the rest of the world that one culture deems appropriate to its place in the social structure (Coleman, 1988; Bourdieu, 1984). As such, Mincyte (2008) writes that social capital is an “advantage embedded in relationships that enables individuals to achieve certain desired ends through networks and unites societies through trust and shared norms and values” (862-863). According to Field (2003), a collegiate institution’s ability to attract students from the upper class is dependent on its perceived ability to confer social capital in the form of connections to influential alumni. One of the reasons why the relative costs of higher education institutions affect this perception is that alumni with the resources to attend more financially exclusive institutions are generally better positioned to facilitate the social advancement of those who come after them than are those who must settle for more accessible institutions.

Higher education institutions, according to Bourdieu, play a unique role in perpetuating social stratification. Through the admissions process, in which each student of the incoming class
is hand-picked, the university simultaneously verifies both the cultural and the social capital of the prospective students. By accepting certain students and rejecting others, the institution metaphorically tells the chosen that they have the appropriate capital to attend such an institution, while others do not (Zimdars, Sullivan, & Heath, 2009). Secondly, the institution grows its own capital by placing a certain amount of faith in the likelihood that these students will conduct themselves in a certain way during their enrollment and will subsequently attain levels of academic, social, and financial success that will further enhance the prestige of the school (Clegg, 2011). Bourdieu called this process reproduction, because the schools reproduce the status quo of social stratification by requiring certain capital for admission and creating that capital through perceptions of their alumni (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Robbins, 1991; Webb et al, 2002).

Perceptions of Higher Education among the Working Class

Theoretical perspectives on the role of higher education in reinforcing social class distinctions suggest that wealthy and upwardly mobile students would likely perceive those institutions that are financially exclusive as places where the academics are more difficult, the students are more like them, the traditions make sense, and the alumni provide beneficial connections. Veblen showed that these institutions can use financial exclusivity to mark themselves as places that provide access to the jobs of the leisure class and educational opportunities that can be conspicuously consumed. Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural and social capital reveal how, as a reflection of financial exclusivity, these institutions are perceived as reproducers of social stratification. Among working-class students, however, financial accessibility can greatly affect the decision to apply for admission, and if elite higher education institutions are going to share in the benefits of a more diverse student population, they will need to be perceived as places that working class students can attend. The demographic changes that
are a result of the growing wealth gaps from the richest of the rich to the poorest of the poor will continue to result in the increase of working-class students with a decrease in leisure class students. As such, there will be more competition among elite colleges and universities for less and less students who are able to afford their extravagant price-tags. Furthermore, from an educational standpoint, working-class students increasingly represent those students from different cultures and backgrounds, whose perspectives make the academic, professional, and personal experience of most college students meaningful.

Central to current understandings of college choice and persistence among working class students has been the financial nexus model developed by Paulsen and St. John (2002). Originally published two decades ago, this model was updated in 2002 to reflect fundamental changes in public funding for higher education from largely grant-based student aid to loan access. In addition to changes in the forms of aid available, the last 20 years have brought a progressive reduction in the overall level of government funding for higher education. This means an average college costs more than it did two decades ago, when students and their families paid less for college overall. Based on changes that occurred in the interim, the authors saw a need for new research that focused on the changing picture of higher education, and especially how changes in financial access to higher education affected students of different socio-economic statuses.

Choosing a college can be a product of various developmental factors in a student’s life, many of which are influenced by the individual’s socioeconomic status, as discussed earlier in this chapter. In a series of studies from 1989 to 2003, St. John, Andrieu, Asker, Hossler, Oescher, and Starkey found that different students made explicit and direct choices about college attendance based on a series of factors, ranging from national, state, and institutional policy to
aspects of their own personal circumstances. The researchers found that many students’ choices were based on factors associated with their lack of social mobility, their family backgrounds, and their limited financial access to higher education (St. John & Hossler, 1998). Each of these factors was found to have specific effects on students’ maturity and therefore their ability to choose where to apply for admission. Any of the factors identified by the authors could limit the range of institutions that students might consider, in addition to preventing some students from attending college at all. Thus, changes in financial access to higher education hold the potential to affect students’ perceptions of higher education as a whole, as well as their attitudes toward individual institutions.

Taking into account the factors identified in their research, St. John and Hossler (1998) developed the financial nexus model, which was designed to bring together the many other choices that students make in their lives, which affect their college choices and persistence. Applying this model through various studies, they found, as expected, that the lower the socio-economic status of the student, the more seriously financial access affected college choice (St. John, Andrieu, Oescher, & Starkey, 1994). They further found that students had a sustained mental contract of sorts with their chosen institutions (St. John, 1991). The student’s perception of a school’s financial accessibility affected the initial commitment to enroll, while the actual cost of attendance affected persistence to degree completion (St. John, 1999). Through their research, St. John and his colleagues found that perceptions and experiences of financial access to higher education routinely reproduced the existing social class structure in America, rather than disrupting it. The large majority of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds attended less prestigious institutions, because they perceived or experienced limited access to the more expensive institutions that would have offered the social mobility they desired. Conversely,
students who could afford to attend more expensive institutions did so, and thereby solidified their place in the upper-class world.

More recent work by Schoenherr (2009) suggests, further, that social class fundamentally affects how students perceive collegiate institutions and their own prospects for attaining a college degree. First, the researcher noted that institutions attended by high income students tend to be more expensive and more exclusive than those attended by students of more modest means. From the less than ideal family structures of many poorer students to their lackluster primary educational institutions, these students typically do not have the structural support to create a positive perception of higher education (Hossler & Stage, 1992). Generally, students whose parents have college degrees and whose schools have proper college advising staffs are better equipped to see the value in a college education and to see it as something attainable than are students who lack such support (Schoenherr, 2009). In an expansion of St. John’s work, Green (2005), found that perceptions of financial accessibility were often the deciding factor in lower income students’ college choices. This researcher found that perceptions of financial access created a “self-fulfilling prophecy,” in which students did not consider applying to certain institutions, even if there was a chance that they would actually qualify for substantial financial assistance. In this way, perceptions of financial access affected the decisions made by lower income students.

Abowitz (2005) examined perceptions of the American Dream in relation to higher education attainment among students from different social classes. She found that, across social classes, students believed that if they worked hard enough, they would get into a reputable college or university, and get a good job that would help them achieve their own versions of the American Dream, which almost always included social mobility. This finding suggests that,
despite all the barriers to lower class students’ achieving a college education, including the effects of perceptions that have been explored here, these students still believe they can attain a college education.

**College Choice Process**

In addition to all of the factors discussed above, regarding the development of college perceptions and, as a result, assumptions of students across social classes about the quality of a college, it is important to understand the process of college selection in general. A landmark national and longitudinal study entitled, *College: The undergraduate experience in America,* commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation and written by Ernest L. Boyer (1987) provides a solid foundation for understanding the process of college selection in America. By and large, Boyer writes that the college selection process has only gotten more complicated and difficult for our nation’s high school students. According to Boyer and Chapman (1979), factors influencing the process, in order from most influential to least, include the college’s perceived ability to provide career preparation, prospects for placement in suitable employment, cultivation of students’ general academic ability, and opportunities for social and personal development. People influence the student’s college choice too. In order from most to least, these parties include parents, friends, counselors, and teachers (Boyer 1987; Matthay 1989). Finally, Boyer found two main judgments that students and parents often make about higher education institutions, which can affect the student’s college choice. First, parents and students often believe that an institution’s reputation is directly related to the likelihood of its graduates finding jobs upon completion of their enrollment. Second, parents and students believe that there are no major differences in the education provided by public versus private institutions. Kinzie, Palmer, Hayek, Hossler, Jacob, and Cummings (2004) conclude that this combination of beliefs, along
with the continued development of technology to enhance students’ ability to find information about colleges and universities, adds stress and information overload to the college selection process. All of these new developments have resulted in a process that can and does take a toll on both the parents’ and students’ financial, social, and psychological health, and one that ultimately affects students’ experiences with college as whole (Warwick & Mansfield, 2003).

Limitations of the Prior Literature and Rationale for the Current Study

The current study is intended to fill a gap in the literature on student attitudes toward collegiate institutions and how these attitudes are shaped by perceptions of financial exclusivity. While the works of Veblen and Bourdieu give insight into perceptions of college attendance as a social statement and St. John et.al offer particular insight into the challenges presented to the lower class when faced with rising tuition costs, the current study endeavors to assess the degree to which these perceptions result in significant differences in assumptions about a school based on how it presents itself financially.

This study is of potential interest to all college administration and faculty tasked with enrollment management. Understanding how perceived exclusivity affects institutional desirability will allow institutions to manage any unintended consequences of greater socioeconomic diversity, while understanding differences in perceptions across socioeconomic groups will allow institutions to target their messaging as needed. Efforts to increase socioeconomic diversity are a continued focus of colleges and universities as the research continues to show the educational benefit of all types of diversity (Bimbau & Bensimon, 1983; Bown & Bok, 1998; Kuh, 2005).

Clearly, higher education is perceived in various ways for many different reasons. The purpose of this study was to clarify how perceptions of financial exclusivity, in particular,
affected the desirability of an institution in the eyes of both upper-class and working-class students. Based on the works of Veblen and Bourdieu, it was hypothesized that students would perceive higher education institutions differently, based on their levels of financial exclusivity, with more exclusive institutions evaluated more positively overall and in regard to their student cultures, academics, alumni networks, and traditions. Based on the financial nexus model, it was further anticipated that effects of perceived financial accessibility on evaluations of institutional desirability would be mediated by students’ own socioeconomic statuses.

Chapter Summary

This chapter expanded on information presented in the introduction by identifying the ways in which some colleges and universities serve as status symbols for members of the upper social classes, while erecting barriers to social mobility for members of other social classes. Secondly, the chapter introduced the major voices in the literature on how social class affects perceptions of colleges, most notably those of Veblen and Bourdieu. Finally, the chapter identified gaps in the literature and the value of this study by revealing a need to understand the degree of difference in the assumptions made by the various social classes, based on the ways in which colleges present themselves financially. Finally, this chapter explored new developments in the college choice process as a whole. The following chapter will provide a detailed description of the methods utilized to explore these topics.
Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the methodology utilized in carrying out this study. Special emphasis will be given to the development of the instruments. Since the focus of this study was on students’ perceptions of a hypothetical institution, based on printed informational materials, the development of those materials and the questionnaire used to assess students’ perceptions was a critical step in the research plan, which held the potential to affect the results of the study. Other topics addressed in this chapter will include the general perspective that guided the research, the context within which the research was developed and executed, the selection and recruitment of the participants, the data collection procedures, and the strategies for conducting the data analysis. This structure will show the progression and development of the methodology and justify its utilization.

It should be noted, however, that the development of the methodology for this study was an evolving process. As in most studies that focus on developing new knowledge, through experimental research, the development of the methodology was a learning process. From the inception of the idea, to the drafting of the thesis proposal, to the submission of the IRB proposal, to the final revision of the research protocol, the methods and instruments needed to grow and change in order to meet the demands of various constituencies and to accurately reflect accepted standards of empiricism and the best judgment of the researcher and his advisors.

The General Perspective

In order to place the details of the research design in their proper context, it is important to understand the overarching research perspective. This perspective broadly influenced the structure of the study as a whole and the methods used. Based on the sociological concepts of conspicuous consumption and social reproduction, as well as the various components of the
financial nexus model, the researcher aimed to quantify students’ perceptions of higher education institutions. This approach was predicated on the assumption that these concepts were social realities and therefore could best be expressed through the use of numerical rating systems.

With this in mind, the research took on experimental and evaluative characteristics, insofar as the data took the form of evaluative measures of participants’ attitudes toward a hypothetical institution, based on information provided to them, which varied based on random assignment. The independent variable was the level of financial exclusivity conveyed in descriptions of the institution, while the dependent variables were the research participants’ perceptions of the institution’s student culture, academic offerings, campus traditions, and alumni network, along with their general assessment of its desirability. Once the reliability and validity of the questionnaire were established, the study could proceed and the statistical significance of differences in perceptions could be assessed. Statistically significant differences in perceptions of the institution, across three levels of financial exclusivity, served as the basis for testing the research hypotheses.

*The Research Context*

This study took place at a highly selective private liberal arts university in the Mid-Atlantic region, during the spring semester of the 2012-2013 academic year. For purposes of this study, it is important to understand the larger cohort of colleges and universities that this particular institution represents. This institution is a prime example of a select group of elite private liberal arts universities, which have come to recognize the value of student diversity, but must continue to rely largely on a sufficient number of upper-class students to generate the revenue necessary to support their operations.
The institution is a comprehensive, four-year, private liberal arts university with approximately 3,600 undergraduate students. Its curriculum and student composition stand in contrast to those of community colleges, technical institutes, state universities, for-profit schools, and private research universities. It carries on a long tradition of liberal arts education, characteristic of America’s northeast, while providing professional training through its education, management, and engineering programs. Although its students have traditionally come from the upper class of the northeast, several relatively new recruitment initiatives have begun to result in a more diverse and nationally representative student body. While the institution has continued to serve a predominantly White upper income clientele, a growing number of working class and ethnic minority students have begun to make their way into the campus population.

As a liberal arts institution, the research setting is characterized by a type of education that focuses on the whole student. Its professors are simultaneously teachers, researchers, and community servants, with much of the emphasis on teaching, as no graduate students teach classes. Along with the faculty, members of other departments, including the offices of residential education and campus-activities, the performing arts center, and various departments dedicated to serving underrepresented students, provide educational opportunities outside of the traditional academic classroom. The institution provides not only academic programs, but a total college experience.

Participants

The participants in this study were 87 undergraduate students. They included 38 males and 49 females. Their class standings were as follows: 19 first-year students, 45 sophomores, 9 juniors, and 13 seniors. Their majors included engineering (n=3), management (n=7), math and science (n=18), and arts and humanities (n=59). Only three of the participants were first-
generation college students. Their home communities were overwhelmingly suburban, with 72 participants claiming that category, compared with only 8 who described their home communities as urban and 7 as rural. Slightly less than half of the students received some form of non-merit based financial aid (n=36) while the majority did not receive aid (n= 51). A majority of the participants (n=47) attended public high schools, though a substantial number (n=39) also attended private secondary schools and one was homeschooled. Reflecting the high selectivity of the institution, 47 participants indicated that they graduated in the top quarter of their high school classes, 32 in the second highest quarter, 7 in the third highest quarter, and only 1 in the lowest quarter.

All of the participants were enrolled in either of two courses in Education, two sections of Social Foundations of Education (n=68) and one section of Quantitative Research Methods (n=19). Both of these courses are open to students of all majors. Quantitative Research Methods is open to students of any class standing, while Social Foundations of Education is ordinarily closed to seniors.

*Instruments*

To assess the relationship between indicators of financial accessibility and student perceptions of desirability among higher education institutions, the researcher developed three versions of a brochure describing a fictitious university and a questionnaire designed to assess perceptions of the institution’s general desirability, as well as its desirability in each of four specific areas: academics, student life, traditions, and alumni relations. The three different brochures reflected three levels of socioeconomic exclusivity, while unrelated variables, such as admissions criteria and academic programs, were held constant in an effort to isolate the financial indicators. It should be noted, however, that it is difficult to isolate financial indicators
from all other institutional characteristics in American society, because they are so inherently connected to certain other characteristics, such as the racial composition of the student body.

The first version of the brochure (see Appendix I) was the “high exclusivity” version. This brochure’s financial aid section presented a very expensive school with low reliance on student financial aid. Additionally, more subtle status indicators, such as the styles of students’ clothes, the percentage of students who had cars on campus or were legacies, and the design of campus buildings, were manipulated to create the image of an institution where students could afford to present themselves at a high level of social standing. The next brochure, described as the “moderate exclusivity” version (see Appendix II), reflected a more socioeconomically diverse school than the one presented in the “high exclusivity” brochure. As such, its price and financial aid indicators, as well as the quality of the students’ clothes and the campus buildings portrayed a more modestly priced institution and a less affluent clientele. The third version of the brochure, which reflected “low exclusivity” (see Appendix III), portrayed an even more financially accessible school than the previous two. Its tuition costs were lower, while the percentage of its students who received need-based financial aid was higher. Also, student and campus indicators, such as clothes, building quality, and cars on campus, reflected its greater financial accessibility.

To assess students’ reactions to this accessibility, the researcher developed a “Perception Survey” (see Appendix IV). The questionnaire first asked for some demographic information in an attempt to get a picture of the students’ socioeconomic backgrounds and other personal characteristics. These items allowed the researcher to check for equivalent representation of various socioeconomic statuses across the three treatment groups, and to detect interactive effects of student socioeconomic status and institutional exclusivity on perceptions of
institutional desirability. The rest of the items were designed to assess students’ perceptions of the institution’s academic rigor, student culture, campus traditions, alumni network, and general desirability. Each of these items was followed by a Likert type scale, which allowed the student to express the degree to which the corresponding item accurately reflected his or her feelings towards the relevant aspect of the institution. After an initial review of the questionnaire by the researcher’s advisors, for the purpose of establishing face validity, a pilot test was conducted. The purpose of this test was to establish the internal consistency of the questionnaire’s scales, based on data collected from students enrolled in one section of Social Foundations of Education during the fall semester of the 2012-2013 academic year (n=33). Based on the results of the pilot test, several items were removed from the questionnaire, in order to maximize its reliability. Perceptions of the general desirability of the institution were gauged by a single item, while the remaining dependent variables were measured by multi-item scales. The internal consistency of the final versions of the four multi-item scales, based on the pilot test data, was as follows: Tradition, $\alpha=.703$; Social, $\alpha=.813$; Academic, $\alpha=.893$; Network, $\alpha=.825$.

Procedure

In order to ensure uniformity in the conduct of this study, several specific procedures were used in collecting data from all participants. Prior to the collection of data, approval of the university’s institutional review board (IRB) was sought and granted. The researcher then requested that the instructors of the three course sections allow him access to their students during class time. Once the requests were granted, appointments were set up for the research to begin. Approximately 15 minutes were allocated at the beginning of each class period for the purpose of data collection.
Prior to each appointment, the researcher prepared a separate packet of materials for each student in the class and placed these materials in large envelopes. Each packet contained a copy of the questionnaire and one brochure. The three versions of the brochure were randomly distributed in the packets in equal numbers. Because class time was used to collect the data, separate packets were prepared for students electing not to participate in the study. These packets contained a set of readings on contemporary issues in higher education which were made available for students’ perusal during the data collection process (see Appendix V). No students opted against participating in the study.

At the beginning of each of the designated class periods, the course instructor introduced the researcher to the class and then left the room until after the data collection was completed. Following this introduction, the researcher read the approved informed consent form (see Appendix VI) and instruction sheet (see Appendix VII) and gave the participants an opportunity to ask questions before signing the form. Once the forms were signed, the packets were passed out for students to review the brochures and complete the questionnaire. After all of the questionnaires were completed and the materials placed back in the envelopes, the researcher read a debriefing statement, revealing further details of the study (see Appendix VIII) and gave the participants an opportunity to withhold their responses if they chose to do so. The packets were then collected and stored in a secure location until data analysis could be completed.

Data Analysis

The completed questionnaires produced a large amount of raw data for analysis. Data from each student’s questionnaire was entered into a spreadsheet, using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), where each item on the survey was initially treated as a separate variable and coded for entry. In order to reduce the data, items that fell into each of the four
multi-item scales were grouped together to produce mean scores for their respective categories of institutional desirability.

In this way, the researcher was able to use SPSS to see if there were significant differences between the means in each category, based on the brochures that the participants received. To further delineate the interactive effects of institutional exclusivity and student socioeconomic status, the researcher employed a two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) in which cases were grouped according to whether or not the participant received need-based financial aid and the level of institutional exclusivity portrayed in the brochure that he or she received. The dependent variables were the student’s rating of the institution’s overall desirability and his or her mean rating of its favorability on each of four multi-item scales: (1) Tradition, (2) Social, (3) Academic, and (4) Network.

Hypotheses

Using the aforementioned procedure, five main hypotheses were tested. The five hypotheses were as follows:

1. Students’ ratings of a fictitious university’s overall desirability will be more favorable when provided with brochures depicting greater socioeconomic exclusivity than when presented with those depicting more open accessibility.

2. Students’ mean ratings of the fictitious university’s traditions will be more favorable when provided with brochures depicting greater socioeconomic exclusivity than when presented with those depicting more open accessibility.

3. Students’ mean ratings of the fictitious university’s student social life will be more favorable when provided with brochures depicting greater socioeconomic exclusivity than when presented with those depicting more open accessibility.
4. Students’ mean ratings of the fictitious university’s academics will be more favorable when provided with brochures depicting greater socioeconomic exclusivity than when presented with those depicting more open accessibility.

5. Students’ mean ratings of the fictitious university’s alumni networks will be more favorable when provided with brochures depicting greater socioeconomic exclusivity than when presented with those depicting more open accessibility.

It was further hypothesized that students’ responses to the various portrayals of institutional exclusivity would differ, based on their own statuses as recipients or non-recipients of need-based financial aid. However, no specific predictions were made as to the nature of these interactive effects. Thus, a one-tailed test of significance was used for each of the main hypotheses, but a two-tailed test was used to establish the significance of any interactive effects that might be detected. A probability level of .05 was used to establish statistical significance in all hypothesis testing.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the methodology employed in the conduct of this investigation. Since the study employed quantitative measures of social realities within the context of a traditional empirical design, it was classified as a quantitative, experimental study. The research context was a comprehensive, elite, private liberal arts university, located in America’s northeast. With a long history of education in the liberal arts and selected professional fields, the university garners the admiration of the northeast’s upper class. The students in this study varied somewhat in their high school achievement, academic majors, and socio-economic statuses, but were generally representative of the undergraduate population of the university as a whole. Materials created for use in the study included three versions of an
admissions brochure for a fictitious university, each designed to depict a different level of financial exclusivity, and a questionnaire designed to assess students’ perceptions of the institution’s overall desirability and that of its student culture, academic offerings, campus traditions, and alumni network. Students enrolled in two undergraduate Education classes were given a copy of the questionnaire, during a regularly scheduled class period, along with one of the brochures. The three versions of the brochure were randomly distributed in equal numbers within each class. Students were asked to review the brochure and complete the questionnaire, based on the information presented. The data were recorded in SPSS, and a two-way MANOVA was used to test the main effect of financial exclusivity indicators on students’ assessment of the institution’s desirability, as well as the interactive effects of exclusivity indicators and their own financial aid statuses on this same set of variables. A detailed account of the results of this analysis will be presented in the following chapter.
Chapter IV: Results

Five main hypotheses were tested in this study, under which it was anticipated that students’ perceptions of a fictitious university’s overall desirability, as well as the desirability of its traditions, student social life, academics, and alumni network, would be more favorable when presented with brochures depicting greater socioeconomic exclusivity than when presented with those depicting more open accessibility. It was further hypothesized that students’ responses to the various portrayals of institutional exclusivity would differ, based on their own statuses as recipients or non-recipients of need-based financial aid. Therefore, a two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to test the main effects of institutional exclusivity and student financial aid status on ratings for each dependent variable, as well as the interactive effect of exclusivity and aid status on each of these same variables. The results of this analysis are summarized in Table 1, while descriptive statistics on the dependent variables for each exclusivity and aid category are presented in Table 2.
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<th>F</th>
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\(^a\) R Squared = .091 (Adjusted R Squared = .035)  
\(^b\) R Squared = .159 (Adjusted R Squared = .139)  
\(^c\) R Squared = .075 (Adjusted R Squared = .015)  
\(^d\) R Squared = .137 (Adjusted R Squared = .084)  
\(^e\) R Squared = .116 (Adjusted R Squared = .062)
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Overall Desirability

The first research hypothesis stated that student ratings of the overall desirability of the institution would be positively associated with portrayals of its socioeconomic exclusivity. The results of the MANOVA revealed no significant difference across exclusivity categories in student ratings of overall desirability (F = 1.644, p = .200). Therefore, this hypothesis was rejected.

Further, the results of the analysis revealed no significant main effect of student aid status on ratings of the overall desirability of the institution (F = .971, p = .327) and no significant interactive effect of student aid status and institutional exclusivity on ratings of its overall desirability (F = 2.529, p = .086). The results do not support the conclusion that portrayals of greater socioeconomic exclusivity are associated with perceptions of greater overall institutional desirability, either independently or in conjunction with the financial aid status of the student.

Campus Traditions

The second research hypothesis stated that the favorability of students’ attitudes toward campus traditions would be positively associated with portrayals of the institution’s socioeconomic exclusivity. The results of the MANOVA revealed no significant difference across exclusivity categories in students’ mean ratings of items included in the tradition scale (F = .919, p = .403). Therefore, the hypothesis of a main effect of exclusivity on attitudes toward campus traditions was rejected.

However, the results of the analysis did reveal a significant main effect of student aid status on mean ratings of items included in the tradition scale (F = 10.375, p = .047). While need-based aid recipients’ mean ratings of items on this scale averaged 3.065 (sd = .824), those of non-recipients averaged only 2.529 (sd = .902).
The results also revealed a significant interactive effect of student aid status and institutional exclusivity on mean ratings of items included in this scale ($F = 4.171, p = .019$). While need-based aid recipients assigned their highest mean ratings ($\bar{x} = 3.482$, $sd = .868$) under the high exclusivity condition and their lowest mean ratings under the low exclusivity condition ($\bar{x} = 2.611$, $sd = .897$), this pattern was reversed for non-recipients, whose mean scores ranged from a low of 2.315 (sd = .754) for the high exclusivity condition to a high of 2.684 (sd = .899) for the low exclusivity condition.

The results do not support the conclusion that portrayals of greater socioeconomic exclusivity are associated with more favorable attitudes toward campus traditions generally. However, there is evidence to suggest that recipients of need-based financial aid may be more likely to respond to such portrayals as anticipated than are non-recipients and to hold more favorable attitudes toward campus traditions across institutional contexts.

**Student Social Life**

The third research hypothesis stated that student ratings of the student social life of the institution would be positively associated with portrayals of its socioeconomic exclusivity. The results of the MANOVA revealed no significant difference across exclusivity categories in student ratings of student social life ($F = .558, p = .575$). Therefore, this hypothesis was rejected.

Further, the results of the analysis revealed no significant main effect of student aid status on ratings of the student social life of the institution ($F = .001, p = .970$) and no significant interactive effect of student aid status and institutional exclusivity on ratings of its student social life ($F = 2.543, p = .085$). The results do not support the conclusion that portrayals of greater socioeconomic exclusivity are associated with perceptions of more desirable student social life, either independently or in conjunction with the financial aid status of the student.
Academics

The fourth research hypothesis stated that the favorability of students’ attitudes toward academic quality and difficulty would be positively associated with portrayals of the institution’s socioeconomic exclusivity. The results of the MANOVA revealed no significant difference across exclusivity categories in students’ mean ratings of items included in the academic scale (F = .512, p = .601). Therefore, the hypothesis of a main effect of exclusivity on attitudes toward the academic life of the institution was rejected.

However, the results of the analysis did reveal a significant main effect of student aid status on mean ratings of items included in the academic scale (F = 4.072, p = .002). While need-based aid recipients’ mean ratings of items on this scale averaged 3.393 (sd = .741), those of non-recipients averaged only 3.029 (sd = .759).

The results also revealed a significant interactive effect of student aid status and institutional exclusivity on mean ratings of items included in this scale (F = 3.627, p = .031). While students who were not receiving need-based aid assigned their highest mean ratings (\(\bar{x} = 3.281, \text{sd} = .782\)) under the low exclusivity condition and their lowest mean ratings under the high exclusivity condition (\(\bar{x} = 2.732, \text{sd} = .873\)), those who were receiving need-based aid assigned lower mean ratings under the low exclusivity condition (\(\bar{x} = 2.986, \text{sd} = .588\)) than under either the moderate exclusivity condition (\(\bar{x} = 3.600, \text{sd} = .755\)) or the high exclusivity condition (\(\bar{x} = 3.593, \text{sd} = .746\)). The results do not support the conclusion that portrayals of greater socioeconomic exclusivity are associated with more favorable attitudes toward the academic curriculum generally. However, there is evidence to suggest that recipients of need-based financial aid may be more likely to respond to such portrayals as anticipated than are non-
recipients and to hold more favorable attitudes toward academic curricula across institutional contexts.

Alumni Relations

The fifth research hypothesis stated that student ratings of their ability to network with the alumni of the institution would be positively associated with portrayals of its socioeconomic exclusivity. The results of the MANOVA revealed no significant difference across exclusivity categories in student ratings of their ability to network with alumni ($F = 2.153$, $p = .123$). Therefore, this hypothesis was rejected.

Further, the results of the analysis revealed no significant main effect of student aid status on ratings of student ability to network with alumni of the institution ($F = 1.176$, $p = .281$) and no significant interactive effect of student aid status and institutional exclusivity on ratings of student ability to network with alumni of the institution ($F = 2.512$, $p = .087$). The results do not support the conclusion that portrayals of greater socioeconomic exclusivity are associated with perceptions of greater student ability to network with alumni of the institution, either independently or in conjunction with the financial aid status of the student.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the results pertaining to the five hypotheses tested in this study. These hypotheses posited that students’ perceptions of the fictitious university’s overall desirability, as well as the desirability of its traditions, student social life, academics, and alumni network, would be more favorable when the brochures depicted greater socioeconomic exclusivity than when they depicted more open accessibility. It was further hypothesized that students’ responses to the various portrayals of institutional exclusivity would differ, based on their own statuses as recipients or non-recipients of need-based financial aid. While no main
effect of institutional exclusivity on students’ attitudes toward any of the five aspects of institutional desirability was found, significant interactive effects of institutional exclusivity and student financial aid status were found for two of the five dependent variables. Students who did not receive need-based aid preferred the more financially accessible school in the categories of traditions and academics, while students who did receive such aid preferred the more financially exclusive school in these same categories. A complete summary of the study, interpretation of the results, a discussion of its implications for higher education, and recommendations for future research will be presented in the following chapter.
Chapter V: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of perceived socioeconomic exclusivity on students’ attitudes toward colleges and universities. Students currently enrolled at an elite private liberal arts university in the northeast were selected to participate in the study. Participants were randomly assigned to three conditions, under which they received different versions of a recruitment brochure for the same fictitious university, each portraying a different level of socioeconomic exclusivity while keeping other institutional characteristics uniform. Based on the information provided in the brochures, students were asked to complete a questionnaire, designed to assess their impressions of the institution’s overall desirability, as well as the favorability of their attitudes toward its student social life, campus traditions, academic curriculum, and alumni network. A two-way MANOVA was used to compare responses on each of the scales across two need-based student financial aid categories (recipient and non-recipient) and three institutional exclusivity categories (high exclusivity, moderate exclusivity, and low exclusivity). In this chapter, the results of the data analysis will be recounted and interpreted, and implications of the findings for professional practice and future research will be discussed.

Summary and Interpretation of Findings

The theoretical foundation for this study was rooted in the works of two noted 19th and 20th century sociologists, Thorstein Veblen and Pierre Bourdieu. In his work on the leisure class, Veblen asserted that ostentatious displays of wealth, which he termed conspicuous consumption, functioned as a means by which to enhance one’s socioeconomic status within an industrial economy. In subsequent work specifically on the historical development of higher education, he sought to show how, for the upper class, attending an expensive college or university could serve largely as a means of attaining social distinction (Veblen, 1934, 1935; Reisman, 2012). For his
part, Bourdieu held that such status attainment was facilitated by two types of personal resources, which he termed *cultural capital* and *social capital*. Bourdieu maintained that both forms of capital were necessary for students to gain admission to elite colleges and universities and that such institutions in turn magnified the volume of such capital possessed by those who ultimately enrolled, resulting in a form of patronage that continually reproduced existing social class structures (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Clause, 1990). As such, depending on the socioeconomic backgrounds of students and the ways in which colleges and universities present themselves to prospective students, those who are considering enrollment may see themselves as having or not having the capital necessary to be successful in certain institutional environments (Benjamin, 1993). Furthermore, they may see the social and cultural capital to which certain institutions provide access as being of greater or lesser value than others in supporting their own efforts to maintain or advance their social standing.

It is in relation to the pursuit or maintenance of high socioeconomic status that the results of this study take on theoretical meaning. While the results of the two-way MANOVA indicated no significant main effect of socioeconomic exclusivity on any of the dependent variables measured in this study, there was a significant interactive effect in the way students perceived the fictitious university’s academic difficulty and the meaningfulness of its traditions, based on a combination of the institution’s exclusivity and their own need-based financial aid statuses. The descriptive statistics showed that students who did not receive need-based aid preferred more financially accessible schools, while students who did receive such aid preferred more exclusive schools. These findings suggest that students’ perceptions of academics and traditions may be in part a reflection of their own socioeconomic status attainment or lack thereof.
Socioeconomic diversity in the student population has become an institutional priority for many colleges and universities, due in part to the evolution of affirmative action law, from the late 20th century to the present (Arthur & Shapiro, 1995). From its decisions in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* in 1978 to *Grutter v. Bollinger* in 2003 and *Fisher v. Texas* in 2012, the Supreme Court has continually ruled that college admissions processes cannot systematically discriminate based on race, but that race can be considered in the admissions process as one of many forms of student diversity (Davis, 2012). Under this contemporary theory of affirmative action, diversity has been championed by colleges and universities across the nation as a means through which the education that they offer is enhanced (Karr, 2008; Lee, 2003). Further, with the encouragement of the courts, institutions have broadened their views of diversity to include socioeconomic status, among other student characteristics (Fullinwider & Litchtenberg, 2004). This growing emphasis on diversity has manifested itself in admissions offices highlighting the diversity of their students through their websites and print materials.

Since the educational value of diversity has become more widely recognized among elite, private colleges and universities, students who are already established socially and economically, those who do not receive financial aid, may see a more socioeconomically diverse school as more desirable. In this study, the data from such students showed that they favored more financially accessible institutions in the categories of academics and traditions. These findings suggest that these students have perhaps truly seen the educational value of diversity in the classroom setting. Likewise, they appear to recognize that gaining an understanding of the traditions that encompass a diverse student body is a form of cultural capital that is of value.

In contrast, students who do receive financial aid, those who are likely still striving for upward mobility, may see drawbacks to a more open-access and potentially financially strapped
institution. Among those who have successfully gained entry to an exclusive university, but who are still trying to take their place among the culturally elite, a more accessible school may not be seen as offering the type of highly coveted cultural capital that has proven to be within their own reach. Furthermore, in comparison to students who are not eligible for need-based financial aid, these students are more likely to have attended underfunded public elementary and secondary schools. As such, they would have experienced the effect that limited monetary funds have on the academic process. Therefore, as the results of this study suggest, they may see a more financially exclusive school as a place with better academics, based on their own prior experience with financially accessible public education.

**Implications for Higher Education**

For the most part, this is all good news for elite institutions like the one that served as the site of this investigation. Since upper class students appear to value socioeconomic diversity, there seems to be little risk for these schools in continuing to pursue greater openness to students from less privileged backgrounds. On the other hand, a public image of exclusivity may appeal to some students from less affluent backgrounds, at least as it relates to academics and traditions. As such, it appears that the best way to move forward would be for these institutions to continue to present themselves the way that they have been. Students looking for upward social mobility are likely to work hard to gain admittance and students who are already of high socioeconomic status are likely to value the diversity that less wealthy students would bring to campus.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Despite all of the information that came out of this study, there were limitations in the research design. For example, the brochures that were handed out were not professionally developed. This could potentially have affected students’ perceptions, because they might have
made assumptions about the school, based simply on the quality of its publications. Furthermore, the differences in the financial accessibility of the institution, as portrayed in the various versions of the brochure, may have been too subtle. With the stated tuition differing across the three versions of the brochure by only about $10,000, students may not have perceived the variation as significant, when considering their assumptions about the school. The quantitative nature of the study may also have oversimplified the variation among students’ responses and missed some important distinctions in their perceptions. Finally, the participants in the study were all drawn from a single university, which represents a very narrow segment of American higher education.

Given the limitations of this study, suggestions for further research are in order. Improving the quality of the printed materials to more realistically portray those of the typical admissions offices of elite private institutions would perhaps provide a more accurate measure of students’ perceptions, because the quality would reflect what they have come to expect from these schools. Additionally, increasing the differences in affordability to a more dramatic ratio within the brochures may exaggerate students’ perceptions of accessibility, so as to identify where the significant differences lie and what thresholds colleges could aim for in ensuring optimal financial accessibility. Furthermore, students’ perceptions of collegiate institutions and their choices among them are usually based on more than the content of a brochure. Performing a qualitative study focused on what role, if any, financial accessibility plays in students’ perceptions of colleges and universities would provide a fuller picture of their thought processes. Finally, although the research site was representative of the type of institution on which this study was focused, it is part of a relatively small sector of higher education. This study could be replicated in community colleges, state universities, and less competitive private institutions for a
broader understanding of how socioeconomic exclusivity shapes student attitudes toward institutions across a fuller spectrum of accessibility.

**Conclusion**

There remains little doubt that financial accessibility plays a role in the way students perceive colleges and, thus, the assumptions they make about these institutions. This study helped reveal how, among elite, private liberal arts universities, that role is different for students from the working and upper classes. At least in terms of academics and traditions, students from the upper class appear to prefer more financially accessible schools, while students from the working class seem to prefer more financially exclusive schools. Colleges and universities must navigate these perceptions in order to maintain their student bodies and ensure the success of an increasingly diverse student population.
Works Cited


Kaplan, E. J. (2010). *Peer Social Networks among Low-Income Students at an Elite College.* Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest LLC.


Zimdars, A., Sullivan, A., & Heath, A. (January 01, 2009). Elite higher education admissions in
the arts and sciences: Is cultural capital the key?. *Sociology*. 43, 4, 648-666.
Appendix I

High Exclusivity Brochure

Student Life

- 67% Students have cars on campus
- 11% Students with jobs on campus
- 71% Students involved in organizations
- 57% Students who are legacies

A senior said, "I've had the opportunity to do research, and this is one of the best experiences I've had at McMillan." The school runs well, and there's "very little red tape" holding up administrative functions—a rarity in the world of higher education. McMillan staffers are "always willing to help you," and the administration is generally student-oriented.

McMillan University

Student Profile

A top-ranked university offering a personalized and comprehensive liberal arts education to exceptionally talented students from across the U.S. and around the world. With academic programs in the arts, engineering, humanities, management, social and natural sciences, and broad opportunities outside of class, McMillan is much more than you could imagine.

Find McMillan online @
www.McMillan.edu
www.facebook.com/McMillanU
Email: info@McMillan.edu

Contact McMillan
V70 Beach Road Lane
Old Gooze, NY 17645
Appendix I

High Exclusivity Brochure

WHO WE ARE

APPLICANTS
• Applicants 8,120
• Admitted 2,323 (28.6% admission rate)
• Enrolled 916 (42% admission rate)

FINANCIAL AID

The REALITY of 691,465. If you qualify for financial aid, the above price is not the price to you. Some students receive enough financial aid that the cost is lower than other, less expensive universities.

ACADEMICS

Academic Scholarships
13 - Presidential Fellows
18 - Dean Scholars
8 - William McMillan Inaugural Scholarships
29 - Campus Enrollment Scholarships
36 - Art Mart Scholars

The Facts
• 37% of undergraduate students receive financial aid from McMillan each year.
• 50% of undergraduate students receive financial aid of some form.
• $19,000 is the average total financial aid package (including grants, scholarships, loans and work-study) for students.

Financial Aid Budget

Academic Area of Interest | Applied | Admitted | Enrolled
--- | --- | --- | ---
Unrelated | 1,544 | 486 | 247
Science | 1,473 | 458 | 166
Social Science | 1,146 | 257 | 108
Engineering | 218 | 49 | 10
Management | 601 | 189 | 83
Computer Science/Math | 394 | 128 | 49
Fine Arts/Humanities | 69 | 18 | 7
Education | 169 | 123 | 21
Total | 8,120 | 2,323 | 916

McMillan is a balanced combination of “great academics, a liberal arts education, beautiful campus, sterling reputation, and great social scene.” At this prestigious small school, instructors are top notch because “teachers are all interested in their subject matter and are always willing to let class discussion take its course.”

SEE YOURSELF HERE
Appendix II

Moderate Exclusivity Brochure

Student Life

43% Students have cars on campus
26% Students with jobs on campus
71% Students involved in organizations
33% Students who are legacies

A senior said, "I've had the opportunity to do research, and this is one of the best experiences I've had at McMillan. " The school runs well, and there's "very little red tape" holding up administrative functions—a rarity in the world of higher education. McMillan staff members are "always willing to help you," and the administration is generally student-oriented.

McMillan University

Student Profile

A top-ranked university offering a personalized and comprehensive liberal arts education to exceptionally talented students from across the U.S. and around the world. With academic programs in the arts, engineering, humanities, management, social and natural sciences, and broad opportunities outside of class McMillan is much more than you could imagine.

Find McMillan online:
- www.McMillan.edu
- www.facebook.com/McMillanU

Contact McMillan:
378 South Farm Lane
Old Gaywah, NY 13665
Appendix II

Moderate Exclusivity Brochure

WHO WE ARE

APPLICANTS
- Applicants: 8,120
- Admitted: 2,323 (27.6% admission rate)
- Enrolled: 916 (40% of admitted students)

FINANCIAL AID
The REALITY of $55,235: If you qualify for financial aid, the above price is not the price to you. Some students receive enough financial aid that the cost is lower than other, less expensive, universities.

The Facts
- 52% of undergraduate students receive financial aid from McMillan each year.
- 65% of undergraduate students received financial aid from some form.
- $27,000 is the average total financial aid package (including grants, scholarships, loans, and work-study) for students.

ACADEMICS
Academic Programs:
- Arts
- Business
- Education
- Engineering
- Environmental Studies
- Fine Arts
- Humanities
- Nursing
- Science
- Social Sciences

McMillan is a balanced combination of "great academics, a liberal arts education, beautiful campus, stellar reputation, and a great social scene." At this prestigious small school, instruction is top notch because "teachers are all interested in their subject matter and are always willing to let class discussions take its course."

SEE YOURSELF HERE

Financial Aid Budget

<table>
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<th>Academic Area</th>
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<th>Enrolled</th>
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<td>2333</td>
<td>916</td>
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</table>
Appendix III

Low Exclusivity Brochure

Student Life

A senior said, "I've had the opportunity to do research, and this is one of the best experiences I've had at McMillan. " The school runs well, and there's "very little red tape" holding up administrative functions—a rarity in the world of higher education. McMillan staff members are "always willing to help you," and the administration is generally student-oriented.

29% Students have cars on campus
41% Students with jobs on campus
71% Students involved in organizations
10% Students who are legacies

McMillan University

Student Profile

A top-ranked university offering a personalized and comprehensive liberal arts education to exceptionally talented students from across the U.S. and around the world. With academic programs in the arts, engineering, humanities, management, social and natural sciences, and broad opportunities outside of class McMillan is much more than you could imagine.

Find McMillan online @
www.McMillan.edu
www.facebook.com/McMillanU
Email info@McMillan.edu

Contact McMillan
376 Sweet Run Lane
Old Gardar, NY 17815
Appendix III

Low Exclusivity Brochure

WHO WE ARE

APPLICANTS
- Applicants: 8,120
- Admitted: 2,323 (29% admission rate)
- Enrolled: 916 (40% of admitted students)

FINANCIAL AID
The REALITY of $8,725. If you qualify for financial aid, the desired program isn’t the price to you. Some students receive enough financial aid that the cost is lower than other, less expensive institutions.

ACADEMICS

Academic Scholarships
- Presidential Scholar
- Dean Scholar
- William Rowley/Williams Scholar
- Cabinet/Regents/Admissions Scholar
- Arch. Methodist Scholar

The Facts
- 71% of undergraduate students receive financial aid from McMillan each year.
- 80% of undergraduate students receive financial aid of some form.
- $35,000 is the average total financial aid package (including grants, scholarships, loans, and work-study) for students.

McMillan is a balanced combination of "great academics, a liberal arts education, beautiful campus, strong reputation, and great social scene." At this prestigious small school, instruction is top notch because "teachers are all interested in their subject matter and are always willing to let class discussion take its course."

Financial Aid Budget

<table>
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<th>Academic Areas of Interest</th>
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<td>Business</td>
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<td>Computer Science/Mgmt.</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<td>2,323</td>
<td>916</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SEE YOURSELF HERE
APPENDIX IV

Perception Survey

Please describe yourself, based on the following characteristics.

1. Gender:

2. Age:

3. Class Standing: Senior Junior Sophomore First-Year Other

4. Academic Major:

5. Did either of your parents attend college? Yes No

6. Home community status: Urban Suburban Rural

7. Home community population: <5,000 5,000-9,999 10,000-100,000 >100,000

8. Percentage of total college expenses covered by non-merit based financial aid:

   None <25% 25-50% 51-75% >75%

9. Type of secondary school: Private Public Home

10. Relationship status: Single Coupled Engaged Married Divorced Other

11. High school GPA on a 4.0 scale: 2.0-2.5 2.6-3.0 3.1-3.5 3.6-4.0

12. High school rank: Top 1/4 Second Highest 1/4 Third Highest 1/4 Bottom 1/4

After reviewing the enclosed brochure, please complete the questionnaire below, by rating each descriptor of McMillan University on a scale of 1-5, referring to the following scale.

1: “This descriptor captures my feelings towards McMillan completely inaccurately.”

2: “This descriptor captures my feelings towards McMillan somewhat inaccurately.”

3: “This descriptor captures my feelings towards McMillan neither accurately nor inaccurately.”

4: “This descriptor captures my feelings towards McMillan somewhat accurately.”

5: “This descriptor captures my feelings towards McMillan completely accurately.”
**APPENDIX IV**

Perception Survey

1. I could make friends here.

   1 2 3 4 5

2. I would have beneficial connections here.

   1 2 3 4 5

3. An alumnus or alumna would be likely to offer me a good job after graduating from here

   1 2 3 4 5

4. I would have to think deeply here

   1 2 3 4 5

5. There would be activities I like to do here

   1 2 3 4 5

6. The alumni would support me here

   1 2 3 4 5

7. I could continue the traditions that have been established here

   1 2 3 4 5

8. I understand what this school is "all about"

   1 2 3 4 5

9. I would find and join clubs that I would enjoy here

   1 2 3 4 5

10. I would need to work hard to do well here

    1 2 3 4 5
APPENDIX IV

Perception Survey

11. This school has a meaningful history
   1  2  3  4  5

12. Academics would be competitive here
   1  2  3  4  5

13. I would do more homework here than I've done before
   1  2  3  4  5

14. Classes would be hard here
   1  2  3  4  5

15. I would find people like me here
   1  2  3  4  5

16. There would always be something to do here
   1  2  3  4  5

17. I would enjoy myself here
   1  2  3  4  5

18. I would study more here than elsewhere
   1  2  3  4  5

19. This is the type of university that I would consider attending
   1  2  3  4  5

Items 1, 5, 15, 16, & 17 are items that make up the social desirability scale. Items 4, 10, 12, 13, 14, & 18 are the items that made up the academic difficulty scale. Items 7 & 11 are the items that made up the tradition scale. Items 2, 3, & 6 are the items that made up the alumni scale.
Appendix V
Packet of Readings: Works Cited


Appendix VI

Informed Consent Form

1. Purpose of the research: The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of informational materials on students' attitudes toward various aspects of colleges and universities.

2. General plan of the research: As a participant in the study, you will be asked to review a brochure, describing a fictitious university. You will then be asked to complete a questionnaire in which you will share your subjective impressions of various aspects of the university depicted in the brochure.

3. Estimated duration of the research: Your participation in the study is expected to take approximately 10 to 15 minutes.

4. Estimated total number of subjects: The researcher anticipates that approximately 150 students will participate in the study.

5. You are encouraged to ask any questions at any time about the study and its procedures, or your rights as a participant.

6. The investigator's name, address, telephone number and e-mail address are included below so that you may ask questions and report any study-related problems. The investigator will do everything possible to prevent or reduce discomfort and risk, but it is not possible to predict everything that might occur.

Tyler McClenithan
Trm019@bucknell.edu
484-951-5744
Bucknell Mailbox c1504

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in research involving human subjects, you may direct your questions to Dr. Abe Feuerstein, Associate Dean of Social Sciences and Chair of the Institutional Review Board at afeurstn@bucknell.edu.

7. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you agree to participate in this research, you may change your mind at any time. You may refuse to answer any questions and/or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

8. You will not receive any compensation for participating in the study. However, by participating in this study, you will potentially aid in expanding current understanding of how student attitudes toward colleges and universities are affected by information presented in institutional recruitment materials.

9. The informational records associated with the study will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless you specifically give permission, in writing, to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which would link you to the study.
10. This research will result in no anticipated discomforts and there are no known risks associated with participating in this research.

11. It is not possible to disclose all aspects of the study at this time, because doing so could potentially affect the findings. Upon completion of the questionnaire, you will be debriefed on these aspects of the study, at which time you will have the option of withholding your data, should you so choose.

I have read the above description of the research. Anything I did not understand was explained to me by Tyler McClenithan and I had all of my questions answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research, and I acknowledge that I have received a personal copy of this signed consent form.

By signing below, I affirm that I am at least 18 years of age or older.

Signature of Subject: ___________________________ (Date)
Appendix VII

Instructions

Hello, students. My name is Tyler McClenithan and I am a senior Education major working on my thesis. My thesis will focus on students' perceptions of higher education Institutions, based on printed informational materials. I'm here to ask for your participation in my research. Your participation is not mandatory and will not affect your grade in any way, although I would greatly appreciate your help in my research.

At this time, I am passing out an informed consent agreement, which I will review with you. [Distribute the form, instructing students to each take two copies of the document. Once the form has been distributed, read through it and allow the students to follow along.] Are there any questions? [After answering any questions, continue.] If there are no further questions, and you wish to participate in the study, please sign both copies of the form, return one copy to me and keep the remaining copy for your own reference. [Once informed consent agreements have been collected, continue.]

In a moment, I will be distributing the materials that we’ll be using in collecting data for my study. In the meantime, I have several interesting articles pertaining to contemporary issues in higher education, which I will make available at this time to any of you who do not wish to participate in the study. Please take a copy of these materials only if you do not wish to participate in the study. Copies of these materials will be made available upon request to participants in the study, only after the data collection process has been completed. [Distribute readings to anyone who does not wish to participate in the study.]

I will now distribute the materials that we will be using to collect our data. If you have agreed to participate in the study, please take one of these envelopes. [Distribute envelopes containing brochures and questionnaires.] The envelopes that I am passing out contain a brochure for a fictitious university and a questionnaire. Please take a moment to read over the brochure. Afterwards, please complete the questionnaire, based on your initial reaction to the university described in the brochure. You may refer to the brochure as you complete the questionnaire, but it should not be necessary for you to deeply analyze its content or to struggle with your responses.
I am interested in your overall impressions of the institution, which may be based on a simple "gut reaction." Once you have completed the questionnaire, please place both the questionnaire and the brochure back in the envelope and seal it. Please do not put your name on the envelope or on any of the printed materials. I am interested in your personal responses to the materials, so please do not communicate with one another about the brochure or the questionnaire until all of the packets have been returned to me.

If you have any questions, please approach me up front and I will address them individually.

Thank you for your assistance.

[Once all students have completed the questionnaires and sealed their envelopes, read the debriefing statement to the class, before collecting the envelopes.]
Appendix VIII

Debriefing Statement to be read after questionnaires have been completed.

Thank you, again, for participating in this research. The study you just participated in is titled: Effects of Perceived Financial Accessibility of Colleges and Universities on Students’ Assessment of Institutional Desirability. The purpose of this study was to examine students’ perceptions of higher education institutions, based on indicators of those institutions’ financial accessibility.

My hypothesis is that students’ perceptions of an institution’s financial accessibility will affect how they view its academics, social life, traditions, and alumni culture, as well as its overall desirability. This hypothesis is rooted in Thorstein Veblen’s concept of conspicuous consumption and Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of social capital. Veblen theorized that the upper class makes purchases as a signifier of their class status. Bourdieu’s concept of social capital refers to the personal connections that allow people of the upper-class to maintain or move forward in their social standing. Taken together, the work of these two theorists suggests that students’ perceptions of higher education institutions may be different, depending on the cost of attendance and the social classes from which the institutions’ students are drawn.

To test this hypothesis, I developed three different brochures, each portraying a different level of financial accessibility, and thus, different financial indicators in student life. In the first version of the brochure, students were portrayed as being of uniformly high status, with minimal socioeconomic diversity. In the second version, they were portrayed as moderately diverse in their socioeconomic statuses. In the third version, they were portrayed as highly diverse in their socioeconomic statuses. Otherwise, the admissions criteria and academic indicators were held constant. It was anticipated that all aspects of the institution portrayed in the brochure would be rated highest by those students receiving the first version of the brochure and lowest by those receiving the third version.

I did not reveal to you the true nature of this study prior to your completion of the questionnaire, because doing so might have impacted your responses. I wanted to be sure that your responses to the questionnaire reflected your natural reactions to the version of the brochure that you saw.

If you no longer wish to participate in the study, in light of this information, you may withhold your completed questionnaire at this time. If you still wish for your data to be used in the study, please pass your sealed envelope forward.

Thank you, again, for your time and cooperation.