

# GRADUATE COLLEGE SELECTION AND ITS IMPACT ON BRANDING: A GERMAN PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

*This study explores the criteria that are important for graduate students in selecting a university in Germany; how these criteria match up with students' views of the institution they ultimately attended; and how graduate students gained information about the colleges/universities they considered. This study reveals that public university graduate students in Germany consider a wide variety of criteria when deciding on which colleges/universities to apply; and that their actual behavior in terms of enrollment may not directly reflect the importance they state they give to certain selection criteria.*

## INTRODUCTION

What's in a name, a school, a graduate program? With the growth of the number of graduate school options, the choice of which program to apply to and attend has become exponentially complex. The time and cost of applying to graduate school is high, so potential applicants and enrollees must limit their options. In addition, they are committing a minimum of one year and all of that time, funds, and substantial effort, once they commit to a single graduate program. So, the choice of which to attend must be carefully considered and the options weighed. What factors though are most important to potential graduate applicants? Which factors are weighted the most heavily and how they effect graduate application and enroll-

ment choice is the topic of interest in the current research, Graduate schools, and for school marketers alike.

To better understand how graduate students arrive at their final institution of choice, a list of criteria of selection for graduate programs is compiled and examined. The types of questions we are trying to answer, so that graduate schools can better serve and market to potential students, are what's in a name, a school, a graduate program? The brand or image of the school is not built in a day, but carefully strategized, invested in, and constructed over the years ("B-Schools as Brands," 2007). Having a distinct brand has become of increased interest to schools and programs, as they face increased national and international competition (Harsha & Shah, 2011; McKibben, 2005). Students of today are not always buying into the

first ranked school and are shopping around and buying into school brands (Lockwood & Hadd, 2007). The brand of a school is comprised of not only its reputation or prestige, but also its offerings both academic and otherwise to students that will enhance their experience (Lockwood & Hadd, 2007; McKibben, 2005). The more recent trends of adding more aesthetic and recreational experiential aspects to a university brand is especially of interest (McKibben, 2005), as the strictly academic reputation of a university seems to no longer be sufficient to convince students to attend a school. Such changes in student criteria are important for researchers and administrators alike to understand. The current article will examine the criteria previously found to be important in the literature and use it as a guide to explore the factors that impact graduate school choice today.

In regards to reputation as a potential factor, the literature provides mixed data. Although older research found support for its importance (Hooley & Lynch, 1981; Webb, 1993), some more recent research calls this assumption into question. Recent findings indicate that perhaps the intricacies of universities make them difficult to advertise using a single, cohesive brand image (Lowrie, 2007; Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009). Application likelihood also was found to increase for larger universities, when their ranking decreased, and to not be an important factor for the majority of students in the US and Europe, when selecting a higher education institution (Clarke, 2007; Drewes & Michael, 2006; LipmanHearne, 2006; McDonough, Antonio, & Horvat, 1997). Given more recent research such as this, we suspect that graduate students of the future will likely use a new set of criteria than those indicated in the past literature. Factors such as technology and campus atmosphere have been more recently introduced into the literature as potentially important factors (Geoffrey & Julia, 2002).

More studies, as the ones listed above, have examined the choice of whether to attend college and which undergraduate institution to attend, but fewer have examined the choice of which graduate school to attend. Those who have examined graduate school attendance seem to suggest that the cost of such programs is not a major factor in considering whether or not to attend (Montgomery & Powell, 2006) or which graduate school to attend. One study of graduate school choice found that tuition or cost of attendance makes very little difference in which program is chosen (doubling the cost of the graduate school decreased the chance it would be chosen by only 7%) (Montgomery, 2002). In a separate study on college selection (not graduate specific), it was found that students in New Zealand do not list cost as one of the main influences and that they actually demonstrate a positive cost-value relationship in choice of enrollment (Holdsworth & Nind,

2005). Although we do not make predictions about the direction of the relationship, we believe that perhaps cost is no longer a main consideration of graduate students.

Another important factor from Montgomery's study (2002) was the location of the graduate school; they found that graduate school candidates preferred schools that were close to or in their geographic region. More specifically, students were 98% less likely to attend a school if it was outside of their geographic region (pg. 478). The imperativeness of location seems to be a trend that holds true for both undergraduate school choice and graduate school choice for other programs (McCook & Moen, 1992; Simõesa & Soaresa, 2010).

Previous research has also separated out marketing controlled factors and non-marketing factors; for example, it was found that non-marketing factors of parents and friends were more influential than the marketing factors of campus visit and information about a specific major (Donnellan, 2002). Although the current research does not explicitly examine these differences, it does collect information about exposure to marketing versus non-marketing influences. Based on the research cited above, we expect that many students will be exposed to both marketing and non-marketing influences as they make their enrollment decisions.

In summary, we believe the graduate students have likely been exposed to and guided by many sources of information. The factors that become important are the main focus of our research and are imperative to the understanding of graduate school choice. Education administrators and marketers alike can benefit from such knowledge. Administrators can utilize such information to better lead and shape their programs and school to fit the new demands of graduate students. In addition, marketers can better understand how to reach out to potential candidates and increase enrollment potential.

Early research on factors underlying college choice suggested that financial, geographic, and academic factors were important to parents; while students tended to rely on social, cultural, and word-of-mouth influences in making college choices (Bowers and Pugh 1973). More recently, Aurand, Gorchels, and Judson (2006) found that the four main factors that assist a student in determining which college to attend are (1) image or reputation, (2) cost, (3) location, and (4) majors offered. Others suggest that additional factors may be important in the college selection process such as student experiences or other intangibles (Lockwood and Hadd 2007) or individual characteristics such as a student's ethnic background, religion, age, sex, academic ability, and duration of the institution search process (Dawes and Brown 2002). Though most studies suggest that academic reputation of an institution

is an important criterion, further exploration into what comprises academic reputation reveals that the ability to get a good job following graduation, the perceived expertise of the faculty, and up-to-date technology are strongly associated with the academic reputation of an institution (Conard and Conard 2000).

## PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The current study was undertaken to explore which criteria are important for graduate students in selecting a university in Germany; how these criteria match up with students' views of the institution they ultimately attended; and how graduate students gained information about the colleges/universities they considered? While the literature offers a number of criteria that may impact the choice of institution for a prospective college student, institutions differ considerably by size, program offerings, (non-) religious affiliation, cost, amenities, and reputation. Thus, the focus of this study is to explore what criteria are most important to those students who selected a public university for their graduate education.

Other studies have limited their exploration to only one type of factor or a very limited set of factors/categories (for a review: (Malaney, 1987; Raposo & Alves, 2007). In addition, models such as the one used by Raposo & Alves (2007), which explored the role of a few categories (institution's overall reputation, education offered, previous knowledge about institution, individual factors, and influence of others) found that their model only explained 10% of the variance in the data. This indicates the need for future studies to include more factors that will add to the explanatory power of such choice models. Our contribution to the literature is in exploring a full range of potential factors that might impact graduate school selection, to create a fairer test of which factors are important in the selection process.

## UNIVERSITY BRANDING IN GERMANY

University students in Germany were selected for the focus of this study due the limited understanding of this segment, in addition to the changes made throughout the European higher education. We will expand upon these changes in the following sections.

In 1999, the Bologna Process was introduced in the member states of the European Union in order to create a European Higher Education Area. The main goal of the Bologna Process was to introduce a homogeneous higher education system in Europe. More specifically, the existing national systems of higher education degrees were replaced by a Bachelor- and Master system and the system of credits (e.g., ECTS) was introduced, allowing higher edu-

cation degrees become more comparable. Additionally, these changes facilitated student as well as academic and administrative mobility (European Commission 2012; Wächter 2004); thus, triggering competition among universities and the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education (European Commission 2012).

In some countries, like for instance Germany, another political objective of the Bologna Process was to increase the number of higher education graduates. With the Bachelor degree, students are now able to obtain their first university degree in a shorter period of time, which is thus less costly than before (at least in German states ("Länder") which do not charge tuition fees) (Horstschräer and Spritsma 2010). With this process, the German central office for the allocation of places in higher education has been disestablished for most fields of study (Stiftung für Hochschulzulassung 2012). The office used to assign university places to students based on their average A-Levels grade. The university itself seldom had a say (Hochschulrahmengesetz 1976). Now, the university's right to select its students is restored, which means that students send their application directly to the university. Many universities still rely on the average A-Levels grade, but combine this criterion with, for instance, interviews and admission tests (Stiftung für Hochschulzulassung 2012).

As a consequence of the developments in higher education in Europe, German universities have to differentiate themselves from other universities in Europe and the United States of America. Importantly, German universities need to find ways to attract and actively recruit national as well as international students. University branding initiatives has thus become a hot topic. Whereas the United States has recognized the benefits of strong university brands for quite some time, only recently has the majority of University leaders in Europe realized that strong brands represent a competitive advantage in this field.

In Europe, Oxford and Cambridge in the UK are examples of strong university brands with a long and rich tradition (Rothblatt 2008), which are also regularly listed in global university rankings (Marginson and Van der Wende 2007). In Germany, few universities have built similar strong brands that are internationally recognized (Gerhard 2004); examples include Heidelberg University, LMU Munich, and the University of Mannheim.

Presumably, university students in Germany are influenced by a University's reputation and rank; however, other factors are likely to be considered when deciding on which university to attend. The literature on university choice models (Obermeit 2012) calls for more explorative research on the choice criteria and background factors that potentially influence the university choice decision

by prospective students in Germany. Thus, we attempt to fill this gap in the literature.

**METHOD**

The study was conducted at a public university in Germany. The intention was to gather opinions from college students during the fall semester, as the college selection process was most recent for this cohort. The surveys were distributed during class time over a two-week period. No incentives were offered for participating in this study.

**RESULTS**

Characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 1. Of the 141 respondents, 76% were female. As expected, most graduate students were in their early-to-mid 20s, with 70% in the 23-25 age range. Most (66%) had applied to multiple universities during the selection process and had obtained information about the university to which they were admitted from advertising (55%), word of mouth (46%) and by visiting the institution (36%).

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of twenty-four criteria in the consideration of the colleges/universities to which they applied. The criteria were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from (1) "did not consider," (2) "not at all important," (3) "not very important," (4) "somewhat important," to (5) "very important." The respondents were then asked to rate these same twenty-four criteria in de-

scribing the university that they chose to attend. Table 2 provides the mean for each statement for both the consideration set and the university they now attend. Those criteria with a mean above 4.0 suggest that this item was at least somewhat important in the consideration of a college/university. The items are arrayed from most to least important on college/university consideration criteria. The top five criteria were housing, attractive campus, small class sizes, student services and public university. The bottom five criteria were scholarships, faculty/student ratio, low cost of education, reputation of the faculty and reputation of the university. In all, respondents indicated that six (6) criteria including housing, attractive campus, small class size, student services, public university and friendly environment were at least somewhat important in the consideration of the colleges/universities to which they applied. With the exception of friendly environment, these criteria continued to be at least somewhat important in attracting students to the university they are now attending. Additionally, community involvement, latest technology, acceptance rate, name recognition, location, and faculty/student interaction were also noted as being at least somewhat important in attracting students to the university they now attend.

Paired t-tests were conducted to determine whether students' views of criteria for consideration set institutions differed from their views of the institution chosen to attend. As shown in Table 2, the institution chosen received significantly higher marks on smaller class sizes, student services, public university, community involvement, latest technology, acceptance rate, name recognition, location, faculty/student interaction, faculty/student ratio, reputation of the faculty, and low cost of education. Interestingly, the institution chosen received significantly lower marks on highly-rated criteria such as living accommodations/housing, attractive campus, friendly environment, and athletic program as compared to the general group of colleges/universities considered, seemingly supporting the tenuous link between attitudes and actions in this context.

Principal component analysis was used to identify whether these items grouped together to form constructs of interest to the prospective student in considering colleges/universities. Six factors were identified, following the deletion of three items with low item-to-factor scores. As shown in Table 3, the factors pertained to the amenities/facilities, university/faculty reputation, small class size/acceptance rate, location/academic programs, cost/available funding and public institution. These factors explained 63% of the variance among the items.

Gender	
Female	76%
Male	24%
Age	
21-22	15%
23-25	70%
Over 25	15%
Did you apply to other universities?	
Yes	66%
No	34%
How did you obtain information about (this university)?	
Advertisement	55%
Word of Mouth (family/friends)	46%
Visited the University	36%
Current University Standing	
Graduate Student	100%

	Colleges/ Universities Considered	University Chosen	Comparison of Consideration Set vs. University Chosen	
	Mean	Mean	T-statistic	p-value
Living Accommodations/Housing	4.72	4.39	5.412	<.001
Attractive Campus	4.60	4.16	5.622	<.001
Small Class Sizes	4.55	4.76	-3.826	<.001
Student Services	4.24	4.67	-5.887	<.001
Public University	4.23	4.50	-4.089	<.001
Friendly Environment	4.09	3.77	3.655	<.001
Community Involvement	3.91	4.42	-4.591	<.001
Size of the University	3.81	3.81	-.086	.932
Athletic Program	3.67	3.39	2.248	.026
Latest Technology	3.66	4.40	-7.636	<.001
Acceptance Rate	3.65	4.42	-7.085	<.001
Name Recognition	3.57	4.26	-7.938	<.001
Academic Programs	3.55	3.58	-.278	.782
Accredited University	3.35	3.19	1.201	.232
Location	3.09	4.13	-11.037	<.001
Quality Education	3.03	3.04	-.074	.941
Availability of Financial Aid	2.93	2.89	.235	.815
Facilities	2.91	3.69	-6.080	<.001
Faculty/Student Interaction	2.71	4.08	-9.547	<.001
Reputation of University	2.65	2.76	-.897	.371
Faculty/Student Ratio	2.62	3.90	-10.393	<.001
Reputation of Faculty	2.62	2.91	-2.099	.038
Low Cost of Education	2.62	2.95	-2.413	.017
Availability to get a Scholarship	2.49	2.55	-.551	.582

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The study reveals that while branding initiatives may build awareness and shape the image of a university, personal interaction during campus visits, word-of-mouth from friends/family, and advertising continue to play an important role in disseminating information about colleges/universities to prospective students. This study also reveals that public university graduate students in Germany consider a wide variety of criteria when deciding on which colleges/universities to apply; and that their actual behavior in terms of enrollment may not directly reflect the importance they state they give to certain selection criteria.

While some of the university selection criteria examined appear to remain consistently important over decades of

research, amenities/facilities emerged as an important selection factor in this study and would seem to reflect a 21<sup>st</sup> century view of the university experience. Our findings suggest that these amenities may be very important selection criteria to the modern graduate student when choosing among higher education alternatives in Germany.

Additionally, using data from 1986, a comprehensive study investigating graduation school choice, particularly attending University of Michigan, revealed that graduate students considered school reputation as more important than social factors. Although we cannot directly compare the results, these factors reveal differing results from the current study indicating that in the past 20-30 years significant changes have occurred in the criteria used by graduate students in selecting a school. Such results point to the importance of continued research in this field.

**TABLE 3**  
**FACTOR ANALYSIS OF COLLEGE/UNIVERSITY SELECTION CRITERIA**

	Component					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Availability of Financial Aid	.162	-.130	.000	-.072	<b>.796</b>	.214
Small Class Sizes	.342	.173	<b>.508</b>	-.201	.065	-.298
Faculty/Student Ratio	<b>.534</b>	.233	.497	-.257	-.059	.051
Public University	.149	.017	.133	-.100	.139	<b>.761</b>
Low Cost of Education	.070	.145	.337	-.139	<b>.632</b>	.016
Athletic Programs	<b>.735</b>	-.077	.194	-.161	-.221	.168
Facilities	<b>.768</b>	.152	.096	.073	.012	.036
Location	.191	-.154	-.073	<b>.720</b>	-.144	.018
Reputation of University	.015	<b>.886</b>	-.013	.062	.082	.022
Scholarships	<b>.676</b>	.078	.089	-.258	.340	-.128
Size of University	<b>.539</b>	.245	.121	.296	.086	.061
Students Services	<b>.680</b>	-.040	.272	.216	.270	-.026
Academic Programs	.116	.421	.140	<b>.556</b>	-.072	-.157
Friendly Environment	<b>.593</b>	.199	-.055	.355	.123	.248
Name Recognition	.025	<b>.875</b>	-.036	.004	-.023	.123
Community Involvement	<b>.740</b>	.178	.023	-.021	.119	.131
Quality Education	.248	<b>.792</b>	-.019	.012	-.026	-.018
Latest Technology	<b>.627</b>	.103	-.041	.193	.009	.065
Accredited University	.184	<b>.624</b>	.377	.004	-.125	.107
Reputation of Faculty	.159	<b>.801</b>	.062	-.026	.068	-.114
Acceptance Rate	-.076	-.030	<b>.786</b>	.133	.212	.308

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.  
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

In a more recent study on graduate school choice, “academic reputation, accreditation, evening classes, programs, potential degree marketability, part-time programs, completion time, proximity, costs, faculty contact time, location, library size, reputation in the community, parking, and placement reputation” were found to be major factors in the choice of a graduate business school for a sample taken from Ohio schools (Webb, 1993). In this case, some of the factors seem to overlap with the important factors found in the current study, but many also seem to contradict current findings. It is possible that some factors remain stable while other factors have been in flux in the past two decades. It is also possible that there are cultural and/or national differences in choice strategies, but this question is beyond the scope of the current research. The current study, therefore, reveals that future research should con-

tinue to address cultural and generational differences in the graduate school selection process.

It should also be noted that higher education institutions differ considerably by size, program offerings, cost, amenities, and reputation. Not all students will be equally drawn to each type of institution. This study focused on the interests of those students who attend a public institution. The importance of these selection criteria might well have differed if the students surveyed had attended a private institution. Future researchers should expand on this study by exploring the importance of different selection criteria among different student groups and institution types.

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