

# Factors Influencing College Choice By Out-of-State Students

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*What motivates students to attend an out-of-state school? To find out the answer, two groups of students were surveyed. One group was attending with the financial assistance of a scholarship designed to recruit out-of-state scholars. The second group included students who matriculated via the general admissions process. Information was also compared by gender.*

*Students' perceptions of academic programs, campus climate, cost, and the influence of other people in their lives were examined. The overall academic program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UN-L), scholarships received, cost of tuition, and interest in a specific academic program were the major reasons why surveyed students chose to attend UN-L.*

The number of students seeking a college degree has increased in the 1990s, and these students expect a higher level of quality in their services and programs. In an effort to attract and retain students, college and university officials often expand the programs and services they provide and, consequently, may raise tuition to cover costs of such programs and services. As students and their families seek a quality education at a low price, high tuition can become an inhibiting factor in college choice.

With increasing competition for college students (Butler and Little, 1988) and higher tuitions, officials of colleges and universities must re-examine features that attract applicants (Goldgehn, 1989; Matthews and Hadley, 1993), perhaps offering scholarships to students who have displayed high academic potential. Such scholarships are often incentives for students to attend the awarding institution. While some students may decide to attend specific institutions based solely on the amounts of their awards (Massa, 1991), cost cannot be the only factor in college selection because outstanding high school seniors are often awarded scholarships at different institutions (Sanders, 1986). What, then, are factors that students use in determining their choices of colleges to attend?

## Stages of the Decision Making Process

Since the early 1960s, researchers have conducted studies on student college choice (Heath, 1993). Consistently, researchers have concurred that a student's decision is generally considered a long-term process (Martin and Dixon, 1991) that consists of a variety of factors. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) described college selection as a three-step process.

The first stage was referred to as the "predisposition" stage, wherein students' personal attitudes and influences determine decisions whether or not to attend college. Following the predisposition stage, students search for information and select colleges and universities they wish to consider. In the final stage, students examine their options and make their final decisions. During any stage of the three-step process, students are influenced by a number

of factors that may eventually lead to the choice of a college or university. Davis-Van Atta and Carrier (1986) described a similar process, consisting of three stages; inquiry, application, and *enrollment decision*.

## **Factors of Choice**

What are the factors that motivate students to enroll in one college rather than another? The factors are in four clusters: academic program, social climate and location, cost, and influences of significant persons in a student's life (Johnson, Stewart, and Eberly, 1991; Martin and Dixon, 1991; Sevier, 1994).

## **Academic Program**

The academic program includes several elements. Institutional reputation plays a part in how students view a college or university, and students tend to prefer to attend the one they perceive to have the best academic reputation (Johnson, Stewart, and Eberly, 1991; Sevier, 1994). National Merit Scholars rate the academic excellence of an institution as specifically important (Rickman and Green, 1993). While attending the college with the highest academic reputation is often important, many students will trade local status against academic reputation. Students and their families tend to equate academic reputation with likely acceptance into a profession or graduate school (Dixon and Martin, 1991; Sanders, 1986).

For many prospective students, a college's rate of enrollment in post-baccalaureate work is very important, as is the percentage of graduates who are hired in their fields and the starting salaries of those graduates (Heath, 1993). Students are conscious of how a degree from a particular institution will affect their marketability, so academic merit becomes a factor in the decision process (Wanat and Bowles, 1992). Minority groups hold the same factors important as other applicants. African-American students rank college reputation and availability of major as the two most important factors (Sevier, 1994).

How students determine academic reputation is based on a variety of considerations. Some students will do extensive research about the colleges on their list; others will use a college's average SAT scores for entering freshmen as an indicator (Leppel, 1993). According to Heath (1993), students are likely to choose a school with an average SAT within 100 points of their own when all other factors are held constant. Still others rely upon ratings assigned annually by popular magazines (Wanat and Bowles, 1992). Often, simple name recognition is a useful indicator in determining institutional prestige (Wanat and Bowles, 1992).

Students also consider the reputation of professors to be an indicator of a college's academic merit. Often, the more challenging professors are also perceived as those with the highest reputation; a college's collection of professors who offer exciting challenges to their students is an important asset for recruitment (Wanat and Bowles, 1992). Related to the reputation of professors is the reputation of a particular discipline (Erdmann, 1983). Students are interested in the specific opportunities which professors can provide them while they attend college.

Undergraduate research opportunities are sometimes a factor, as is the quality of classrooms, labs, and equipment (Wanat and Bowles, 1992). Another indicator used by students to determine academic merit is average class

size; smaller classes are perceived to be better suited for academic success (Wanat and Bowles, 1992).

As students weigh the academic reputation of an institution, they may seek the advice of others. Information provided by high school counselors is invaluable for entering freshmen; the high school counselor is often the single greatest source of information students have (Johnson, Stewart, and Eberly, 1991). Furthermore, a college's recruitment staff can play an important part in the matriculation of students. Through campus visits, brochures, and other means, admissions counselors can give students the information needed to determine the academic reputation of universities under consideration (Heath, 1993; Johnson, Stewart, and Eberly, 1991; Sevier, 1994; Wanat and Bowles, 1992).

## **Campus Climate**

Students may choose a particular college due to cost, academic merit, and the influence of others without consideration of the campus community. For other students, however, the social climate of an institution may be the most important factor in a decision to attend. Dixon and Martin (1991) reported a general inclination toward nonacademic reasons for attending college, although the majority of work in the field refutes this finding.

Some students seek to attend a place where they can achieve social status quickly (Martin and Dixon, 1991). Others are interested in being a part of an athletic tradition (Murphy and Trandel, 1994) or in attending a place where the people are friendly (Johnson, Stewart, and Eberly, 1991). Still others appreciate the aesthetic beauty of a campus (Heath, 1993). Some students are especially interested in the social atmosphere as well as in activities on weekends and at other times (Wanat and Bowles, 1992). Officials of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln conducted a telephone survey of incoming first-year students in 1993. Those students were particularly influenced by the beauty of the UN-L campus, the distance from home, and by a specific program of study (Study of College Choice Indicators, 1993).

## **Cost of Attendance**

Students will weigh academic status against the cost of attendance. High school students (Dixon and Martin, 1991) will maximize the perceived benefits of their choices by attending either an institution that has offered them a scholarship or one with low tuition and fees if the latter institution has an acceptable rating for academic reputation. While Johnson, Stewart, and Eberly (1991) reported that cost was a factor in only about half of their sample population, Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) indicated the effect of institutional financial aid was weak to moderate. Others (Flint, 1991; Heath, 1993; Moore, Studenmund, and Slobko, 1991; Somers and St. John, 1993; Wanat and Bowles, 1992) reflected that cost is an important factor in the decision to attend; "One common reason for not applying [to a certain institution] is cost" (Flint, 1993, p. 30). Parker and Summers (1993) found that an increase in the level of tuition and fees charged by an institution caused a significant drop in the number of students who chose to matriculate.

In the 1960s, enrollment decisions were influenced by tuition charges (St. John, 1993), which presumably led to the rise in student grants and scholar-

ships. Prior to the National Defense Education Act of 1958, the primary vehicle of financial assistance to students was merit-based aid (Massa, 1991), but students have been able to find funds more readily as institutional and other grants have doubled in real dollars between 1983-84 and 1992-93 (Chance, 1994).

Wanat and Bowles (1992) suggested that financial aid is actually more important than the overall cost of attending, because families in their study were likely to weigh the low cost of one institution against another institution's high cost minus scholarship aid. Thus, student aid often improves enrollment rates (Flint, 1993; Moore, Studenmund, and Slobko, 1991). Aside from the defrayment of cost that students receive when awarded a scholarship, student aid often is a psychological recruiting tactic, especially for the academically talented (Wanat and Bowles, 1991). The overall cost of attending is related to an institution's award of student aid to defray expenses. "As competition for students among higher education institutions intensifies, financial-aid policy is commanding greater attention" (Morrell, 1992, p. 21). Morrell also asserted that "Trustees have realized that financial aid policy can be a critical strategic weapon" (p. 21). For example, to lure middle-income students to their institutions, some colleges may offer loans that students need not pay back if they maintain a high GPA (Collison, 1992). Moore, Studenmund, and Slobko (1991) noted that students with higher SAT scores tended to be more sensitive to cost issues, presumably because the academically talented have more colleges from which to choose.

Offering financial aid to students can be a negative or a positive recruitment factor. While schools have noticed an increase in enrollment due to scholarships, Morrell (1992) noted a drawback: "To support higher student charges and attract applicants, colleges and universities have found it necessary to offer more financial aid, setting off a form of price war" (p. 22). Wanat and Bowles (1992), however, noted a student perception that schools not offering financial aid were insensitive to student needs.

## **Influential Persons**

Often, students are not carrying the financial burden of college alone; parents face an awesome task of paying for their children's college. Not surprisingly, parents are the most influential persons (Boyer, 1987; Cowart, 1988; Johnson, Stewart, and Eberly, 1991; Martin and Dixon, 1991; McGinty, 1992; Wanat and Bowles, 1992) because they are often able to visit college campuses with their children, and sometimes are the only people with whom students feel comfortable discussing colleges (McGinty, 1992). Related to the influence of parents is a student's desire to choose a college close to home (Heath, 1993; Leppel, 1993; Wanat and Bowles, 1992) as "having Mom and Dad just down the road" can be important. A few studies have been conducted about the factors that parents rank as most important in the college selection process (Flint, 1992; McDonough, 1994). These studies indicate that parents, like their children, are most interested in academic excellence.

Other persons may influence a student's college choice. Counselors can be especially influential (Johnson, Stewart, and Eberly, 1991), as can friends (Heath, 1993; Johnson, Stewart, and Eberly, 1991; Wanat and Bowles, 1992).

Furthermore, Moore, Studenmund, and Slobko (1991) reported that students who have relatives who are alumni of a particular college are influenced in favor of a relative's alma mater.

## **Out-of-State Recruitment at UN-L**

Pricing wars touched the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where officials responded by sponsoring a variety of scholarships for outstanding students and targeting out-of-state students for recruitment by initiating a scholarship aimed at that population. As is customary, UN-L has traditionally awarded scholarships to outstanding seniors to recruit them to UN-L; however, members of the entering freshman class in 1995-96 were awarded a newly established scholarship—the Scholarship for New Nebraskans (SNN)—as a part of the increased initiative at UN-L to recruit scholars from out-of-state. The scholarship grew out of the combination of a desire to attract students nationwide and a recent change in students' ability to establish residency in Nebraska for tuition purposes. The Scholarship for New Nebraskans ranged in award from \$500 to the complete differential in out-of-state tuition—approximately \$2,500.

Beginning in the fall of 1995, students were granted residency status only after they had established a dwelling in Nebraska for one year before beginning classes at UN-L. The new policy was a significant change since Nebraska had been considered one of the few universities in America with an "easy" residency policy. The former policy stated that students could be granted resident status after living in Nebraska for 180 days while attending UN-L. Thus, the Scholarship for New Nebraskans provided a pool of students to assess factors that influenced the decision of students to attend a college in another state.

## **Research Questions**

Several questions were posed to assess students' decisions to attend UN-L.

- What were the factors that influenced students to attend from out-of-state?
- Were factors for out-of-state students different from those of all college students?
- Did the factors influencing scholarships for out-of-state students differ from those non-scholarship, out-of-state students?

## **Design and Methodology**

To assess the influence of selected variables on the college choice of out-of-state students, 295 UN-L students were asked to complete a survey. Scholarship students (n=148) were selected based on their class rank during the senior high school year and their ACT/SAT scores using an index maintained by UN-L's Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid. The entire population of students receiving the Scholarships for New Nebraskans was selected for the survey. Of the scholarship students surveyed, 96 (65%) were female. All students were non-residents of Nebraska, meaning that the students' parents or guardians resided outside Nebraska, and the students had not resided in the state for more than 12 months before beginning school.

The non-scholarship sample consisted of 147 first-year students whose permanent address, as recorded by the registrar's office, was not in Nebraska.

**TABLE 1**  
**Percentage of Levels of Influence of Academic Program Factors**  
**By Gender and Scholarship for New Nebraskans Status**

Academic Program Factors	Group							
	Male	Female	SNN*	Non	SNN*		Non SNN*	
					Male	Female	Male	Female
Size of classes	18.1%	8.0%	12.3%	8.4%	15.4%	8.9%	16.6%	5.8%
Opportunity for hands-on experiences in students' field	32.5	41.8	37.6	41.2	28.2	32.8	24.9	49.1
Interest in a specific academic program	57.0	52.7	55.9	49.9	51.2	44.8	41.6	50.0
Percent of graduates in preferred academic program employed in the field or admitted to graduate school	24.3	23.1	25.1	19.9	23.1	20.9	16.6	20.5
Reputation of professors in preferred academic field	43.2	53.6	54.6	41.2	11.0	52.3	24.9	47.0
Reputation of preferred academic program	32.5	26.8	31.6	26.6	30.7	20.8	16.6	29.4
Overall academic program at UN-L	55.7	65.5	55.6	65.5	46.1	52.3	41.6	55.8

\* SSN = Scholarship for New Nebraskan recipients.

Females comprised 79% of this population. These students were selected randomly by computer. No special academic criteria were used.

### Instrument

A 29-question survey was prepared; variables were selected based upon Martin and Dixon's (1991) work. The questionnaire was divided into four categories: academic program, campus climate, cost issues, and influential persons.

The instrument was reviewed for face validity and content validity by three full-time members of the teaching and administrative staff of UN-L. The three professionals critiqued the survey for clarity of questions, content, and overall effectiveness of the instrument.

A pilot test was conducted to determine the consistency of the questions and clarity of the instrument. Thirty-two students participated in the pilot, which was determined to be reliable at the 0.6 alpha level or better. Following the critique and pilot test, the instrument was modified to that used in the research.

**TABLE 2**  
**Percentage of Levels of Influence of Campus Climate Factors**  
**By Gender and Scholarship for New Nebraskans Status**

Campus Climate Factors	Group							
	Male	Female	SNN*	Non	SNN*		Non SNN*	
					Male	Female	Male	Female
Number of students enrolled	22.7%	28.4%	36.3%	27.5%	17.9%	41.8%	24.9%	29.4%
Number of people you know enrolled at UN-L	6.9	10.2	9.7	8.6	2.6	11.9	16.6	5.8
City of Lincoln	38.4	31.2	40.7	19.1	38.5	38.8	25.0	17.6
Distance from home	40.8	45.0	46.3	38.2	30.8	47.8	41.6	38.2
Activities on campus	41.8	43.0	46.3	34.6	35.9	44.8	23.2	35.2
Friendliness of people at UN-L	36.2	49.9	26.3	40.4	33.3	40.3	24.9	44.1
Beauty of the campus	29.4	40.3	36.6	39.2	25.6	39.3	24.9	47.1
Athletic tradition	59.0	39.0	47.3	40.3	43.6	41.8	75.0	32.3

\* SSN = Scholarship for New Nebraskan recipients.

### Data Collection

The instrument, accompanied by a cover letter, was mailed to students. A self-addressed envelope was enclosed, and students were asked to return their surveys within the week at an on-campus address. Data were subsequently collected and analyzed by scholarship and gender.

### Limitations of the Design

The population included only students from out-of-state, and the information contained may not be generalized to other groups of students. Furthermore, the sample, which included all the participants of one group and only a portion of the members of the other, may provide data that are skewed in some manner.

### Results

The return from the mailing was 53% (156 of 295). Of those surveys returned, 62% of them were from scholarship students and 30% from non-scholarship students. Twelve returns (8%) were unusable because the respondents neglected to indicate their gender. Of the surveys retained, 64% were from females.

The students were asked to rate 29 factors by rating each item on the scale: Not at All; A Little; Somewhat; A Good Deal; and Very Much. The results are reported by combining the percentages for two levels of influence: "A Good Deal" and "Very Much." The sum of these two percentages provides an insight into the relative weight of a factor in students' decisions. Percentages are reported for (a) females and males and for (b) recipients of the Scholarships

**TABLE 3**  
**Percentage of Levels of Influence of Cost Factors**  
**By Gender and Scholarship for New Nebraskans Status**

Cost Factors	Group							
	Male	Female	SNN*	Non	SNN*		Non SNN*	
					Male	Female	Male	Female
Cost of tuition	57.5%	61.1%	68.9%	39.9%	53.9%	67.2%	33.2%	38.2%
Cost of student fees	29.5	44.8	47.4	24.3	27.2	49.3	16.6	26.4
Cost of room and board	37.1	41.7	48.9	22.2	23.3	49.3	24.9	20.5
Amount of federal financial aid	33.2	36.4	40.2	26.2	28.7	28.4	16.6	23.5
Scholarships received	56.7	61.3	76.2	35.8	56.4	77.6	25.0	32.3
Residency policy	11.0	13.4	11.1	15.8	10.3	7.5	8.3	17.6

\* SSN = Scholarship for New Nebraskan recipients.

for New Nebraskans (SNN) and non-recipients. Percentages may not total 100% because of rounding the numbers.

**Cluster One: Academic Program.** Seven factors were identified for the cluster, Academic Program.

In order of greatest influence, these are:

- overall academic program of UN-L,
- interest in a specific academic program,
- reputation of professors,
- opportunities for hands-on experiences,
- reputation of your academic program,
- percent of graduates in preferred academic program employed in the field or admitted to graduate school, and
- size of classes at UN-L.

**Cluster Two: Campus Climate.** Eight factors included in the cluster related to campus climate, ranging from the size of enrollment to the attractiveness of the city of Lincoln.

In order of greatest influence, these are:

- athletic tradition,
- distance from home,
- activities on campus,
- friendliness of people at UN-L,
- beauty of the campus,
- the city of Lincoln,
- number of students enrolled at UN-L, and
- number of students you know enrolled at UN-L.

**Cluster Three: Cost Issues.** Six factors were related to cost issues, and the respondents were asked to indicate the extent each factor was of importance to them in matriculating at UN-L.

In order of greatest influence, these are:



**TABLE 4**  
**Percentage of Levels of Influence of Persons**  
**By Gender and Scholarship for New Nebraskans Status**

Influential Persons Factors	Group							
	Male	Female	SNN*	Non	SNN*		Non SNN*	
					Male	Female	Male	Female
Parents	37.7%	40.4%	41.6%	34.6%	43.5%	32.8%	33.3%	38.2%
High school guidance counselors	9.0	3.0	6.3	2.1	10.2	2.9	0.0	2.9
Friends	18.1	16.0	14.3	21.2	15.4	10.4	16.6	23.4
Relatives	27.2	27.2	29.1	23.2	28.2	23.8	8.3	29.4
Alumni	13.5	12.2	16.8	4.2	12.9	15.0	8.3	2.9
Coaches	20.9	14.5	17.4	14.8	18.0	13.4	16.6	14.7
Siblings	14.1	11.9	12.4	12.9	7.7	12.0	24.9	11.8
College staff	32.4	17.5	26.2	12.9	30.8	19.3	16.6	11.7

\* SSN = Scholarship for New Nebraskan recipients.

- scholarships received,
- cost of tuition,
- cost of room and board,
- cost of student fees,
- amount of federal financial aid, and
- residency policy.

**Cluster Four: Influential Persons.** Parents, high school guidance counselors, friends, relatives, alumni, coaches, siblings, and UN-L staff members formed the set of influential persons. Over one-third of the students from all groups—males, females, SNN recipients and non-recipients—noted that their parents were important persons in their decision making. No other persons were so influential. “Relatives,” and “College staff,” were next in importance followed by “Friends,” “Coaches,” “Siblings,” and “Alumni.” The least influential were “High school guidance counselors” as males (9.0%) attributed some influence to them.

## Discussion

Students’ perceptions of their motivations for attending UN-L were similar, regardless of gender or financial assistance from the Scholarship for New Nebraskans. Scholarship students (76.2%) recognized, however, that the scholarship was a mitigating factor in their decisions to attend. That all students would perceive most of the factors much the same is striking, and may indicate

that all students are affected nearly equally by the same factors. Students may not have felt that their reasons for matriculation were accurately expressed by the instrument, or perhaps students were unable to define specific qualities that attracted them to UN-L.

The most influential cluster was comprised of the factors of academic programs at UN-L. Students were influenced in attending UN-L by the overall reputation of the institution and by its offering a specific program that interested them. Students were least influenced by the percent of graduates in their preferred academic program employed in the field or admitted to graduate school or by the size of classes at UN-L.

Students were moderately influenced by the climate factors of the campus. The only factor of this cluster that received over 50% recognition was "Athletic tradition" by males (59.0%).

Cost apparently plays an important role in college choice. "Scholarships received," and "The cost of tuition" were important factors in deciding to attend UN-L. Scholarship students (76.2%) indicated that a scholarship was an important reason for choosing UN-L. The amount of federal aid was not a factor, possibly because the amount of federal aid students are awarded is independent of the college they choose to attend. The recently-adjusted residency policy, however, was an important factor for only about one in eight students.

The data were highly congruent with relevant literature regarding students' perception of influential persons. Students indicated that parental influence was higher than any other group although no group had high influence over decisions to attend UN-L. Such information supports the literature that indicates that parents are one of the strongest influences upon college choice. In this study, only about one in twenty respondents indicated that high school counselors were influential in their decisions to attend UN-L.

Students choose an institution of higher learning for a variety of reasons. Students from out-of-state choose colleges for many of the same reasons that in-state students select an institution. In recruitment, therefore, public institutions should continue their trend of offering scholarships to out-of-state students, and students should be recruited using the same methods as similar factors are important in choosing a college.

If the number of students entering college decreases, and the competition for students increases, officials will need to continue their research to determine what factors influence the college of choice. Such understanding has become invaluable in pricing wars and will continue to be so. Administrators of each university will need to strive to maintain their share in the recruitment of students if they hope to lead their institutions into a prosperous 21st century.

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