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## **Sell Yourself: Building a Foundational Structure Around an Institution's Position in the College Application Process**

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SELL YOURSELF:  
BUILDING A FOUNDATIONAL STRUCTURE AROUND AN INSTITUTION'S  
POSITION IN THE COLLEGE APPLICATION PROCESS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Communication Studies

by  
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August 2018

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## **ABSTRACT**

The act of persuasion, specifically in the context of higher education recruiting, lacks both a breadth and depth of research. This could be due to economic trends inevitably promoting college attendance for high school seniors. With the recent influx of both online education, as well as for-profit institutions, there has been a shift in the approach to recruiting potential students to enroll at affiliated institutions each year. This study took a qualitative, grounded theory approach to understand both the intended persuasive strategies conceived by participating four-year Universities in the state of Utah, as well as the actual messages delivered to prospective students. Data was gathered through observation and interviewing. Results showed five themes based on message content: (a) financial value and affordability, (b) academic resilience, (c) engaging student life, (d) optimal location, (e) customer flexibility and personalization, as well as three categories based on message form: (a) narrative, (b) reputational esteem, (c) and fear appeals. The central theoretical idea emerging from the results indicated the narrative paradigm (Fisher, 1984, 1985, 1987) the theoretical backing for this research, with narratives being the most commonly used and shared strategy by the participating institutions. This study is a preliminary approach to help understand the effectiveness of persuasion tactics in the context of recruiting students to pursue an education at the college level.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Immediately following the completion of my undergraduate degree, I was hired to work for a state institution as a full-time regional recruiter. My primary focus was to travel across the western United States and convince students they should come pursue an education at a quality institution. At the time of my hiring, the admissions office was undergoing both a hierarchical restructuring, as well as a brand identity crisis. Both factors motivated our office to create our own strategic recruiting plan for prospective students.

Our strategic plan began by us asking questions:

- How do we convince students that we are the best option for them post-high school?
- What are the core messages we want to send in our recruiting presentations?
- How can elevate our pitch over other regional competitors?
- What segment of the population should we target to ensure the most productive use of our time?

In the beginning, we failed to come up with definite answers, or at least answers that could guarantee success. Consequently, the first few years of our recruiting campaign appeared more trial-and-error, than execution from a definitive set of principles. We tended to use situational data to formulate our own charter and institutional campaign. And we saw success: Within five years, we recruited and retained some of the highest enrollment numbers ever recorded at our institution. We attributed much of that success to three factors: (1) recognition of the niche populations most likely impacted by our institutional offerings, (2) discovery of the core persuasive messages that clicked with our target audience, and (3) tremendous growth in our recruiting skills.

In hindsight, the enrollment success potentially influenced the levels of narcissism in my own personal schema. When I stepped away to pursue my doctorate degree in the summer of 2015, I assumed my contributions to the enrollment numbers would drastically decline. My replacement was a young, untested graduate student with no previous recruiting experience. At the time of my departure, they would later unveil a brand-new Customer Relations Management (CRM) software to connect digitally with students. I felt, however, that recruiting battles were won on the ground through personal interactions with students. My presence on the recruiting trail would be greatly missed.

In a shocking fashion, I was not that powerful of a recruiting force, as admissions numbers went through the roof the following year, increasing by an astonishing 317%. Perhaps my presence on the recruiting trail was not as impactful as I once imagined. This outrageous spike in numbers caused me to question the approach we forged in the previous five years. Are students persuaded to attend a specific institution more by the number of e-mails, text messages and digital connections they make through an expensive software and not by the relationships they make with recruiters?

The silver lining to my ego came when I learned the following fall that although admissions numbers had skyrocketed, enrollment numbers had plateaued. They were nearly identical to reported enrollment numbers the previous summer and were slightly lower than two previous years' enrollment. These trends caused me and my former colleagues to question the validity of the persuasive recruiting tactics we had used and the implementation of the new software. Was there really no method to our madness? Is it all just pure luck? Is there no correlation with enrollment counts and the persuasive ability of college recruiters? Is there a formulaic approach to achieving success in higher education

recruitment, or are enrollment numbers out of the hands of admissions offices? These questions are not unique to our situation, but have been repeatedly asked as admissions offices and social researchers deliberate over the driving factors that push a student to attend their institution.

In this study, I will examine strategies used by various universities in the state of Utah who have similar traits and target similar markets. I will observe presentations delivered by several recruiters and look to uncover consistent themes and patterns existing in their assigned content. Additionally, I will look to understand whether communication theories can be applied to the influence of higher education recruiting, and whether universities can use these theories to center a competitive advantage. During my time as an admissions officer, we would repeatedly pilot different approaches to decipher the most effective influential strategy. While we saw success with some of our efforts, there was never a uniform core strategy we felt we could rely on in our delivery. The purpose of this study is to gain a macro-perception of higher education strategies in the state of Utah by taking hands-on content being delivered to current high school students, and understand whether there is a theoretical backdrop to which it can be placed.

### **Higher Education Priority**

Conventional wisdom argues that pursuing a degree in higher education is a staple for success in an individual's life. The need for college attendance can largely be attributed to economic returns. According to 2013 data, individuals holding a four-year degree made, on average, 98 percent more per hour than individuals without a degree. Those numbers rose from 89 percent in 2009, 85 percent in 2003, and substantially higher than 64 percent in the 1980's (Shierholz, Davis, & Kimball, 2014). The average college graduate earns

\$12,000 more annually than a person who does not attend college (Greenstone & Looney, 2012).

From a longitudinal standpoint, the median lifetime salary of a person holding a bachelor's degree hovers around \$1.19 million, over twice what the average high school graduate receives, and roughly \$335,000 more than what someone with an Associate degree receives (Hershbein & Kearney, 2014). These financial incentives are associated with higher percentages of college graduates in the workforce, with studies showing 66% of all jobs in the country are held by those with some college experience (Hanson & Gulish, 2016). A student's drive into higher education can be accredited to the economic return they will make from their degree. Regardless of the motivation, in the fall of 2016 nearly 21 million students were enrolled in higher education institutions across the country (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016).

Perhaps because of the perceived necessity for a college degree, there has been increased pushback regarding the excessive inflation of tuition prices nationwide. Since 1973, the average tuition for public colleges has increased by 274 percent, while comparatively speaking, the median household income has only risen by seven percent, a staggering disproportion (Figure 1.1). An even sharper increase is evident since the recession in 2008, with tuition prices jumping nearly 30 percent between the 2007-08 and 2015-16 school years (Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2016). The state of Utah has seen large increases since the recession, with tuition rising 37.1 percent, or \$1,723 per student (Figure 1.2). Some of the highest jumps overall came in Arizona, with tuition at a four-year

public institution now \$10,646 annually (Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2016).

Inflation-adjusted average tuition and fees at public four-year institutions, and income for select groups (1973=100%)

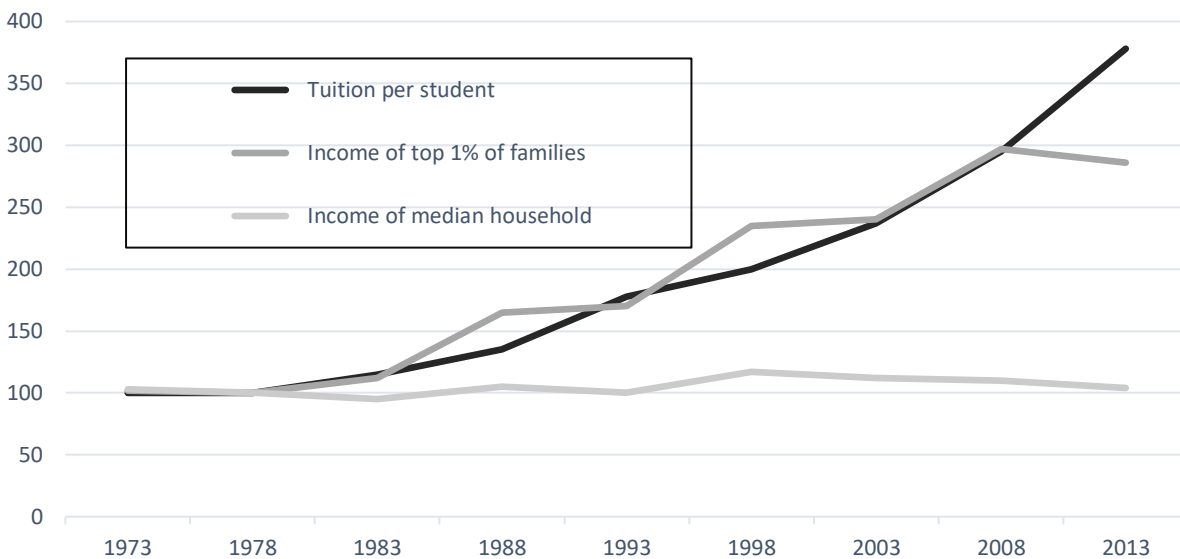


Figure 1.1. Tuition Growth Has Vastly Outpaced Gains. Adapted from Mitchell, M., Leachman, M., & Masterson, K. (2016). Funding down, tuition up: State cuts to higher education threaten quality and affordability at public colleges. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, p. 16.

A noticeable impact of the recession is the drive for people to go back to college and complete their degrees. Education was seen as a fallback resource for those without jobs to turn to in a time of crisis in 2008 (Brown & Hoxby, 2014). Since the economic culture has stabilized however, tuition prices continue to significantly rise across the country. With the rising costs of college attendance, student loan debt has inflated to over \$1.4 trillion, (FinAid, 2017), ballooning to be the second-largest household debt, behind home mortgages (Akers & Chingos, 2016). The increases in costs for students also can be attributed to the reduction of support by respective states for their potential students (Figure 1.3), thus shifting the burden of tuition costs from government support to personal pocketbooks.

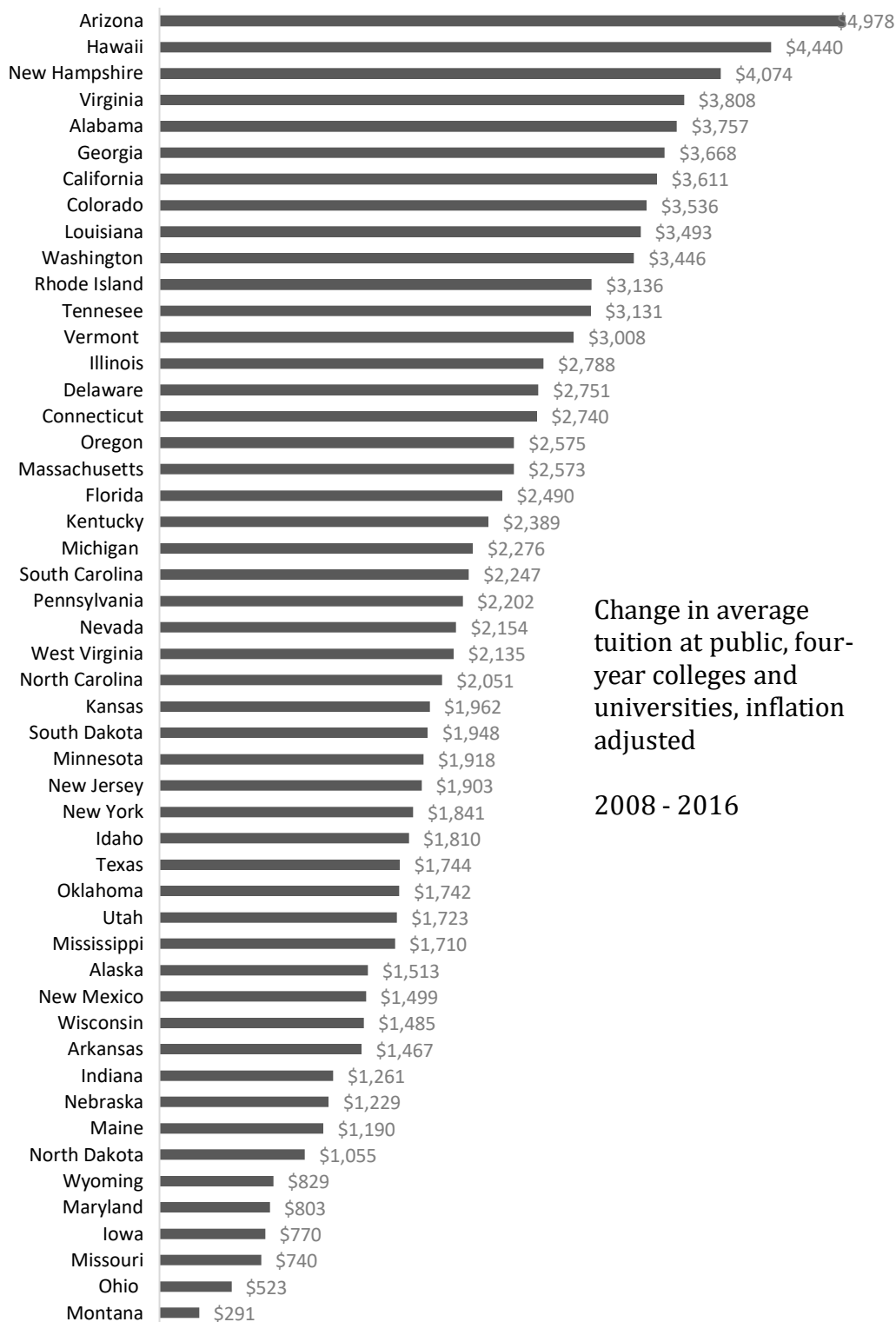


Figure 1.2. Tuition Has Increased Sharply at Public Colleges and Universities. Adapted from Mitchell, M., Leachman, M., & Masterson, K. (2016). Funding down, tuition up: State cuts to higher education threaten quality and affordability at public



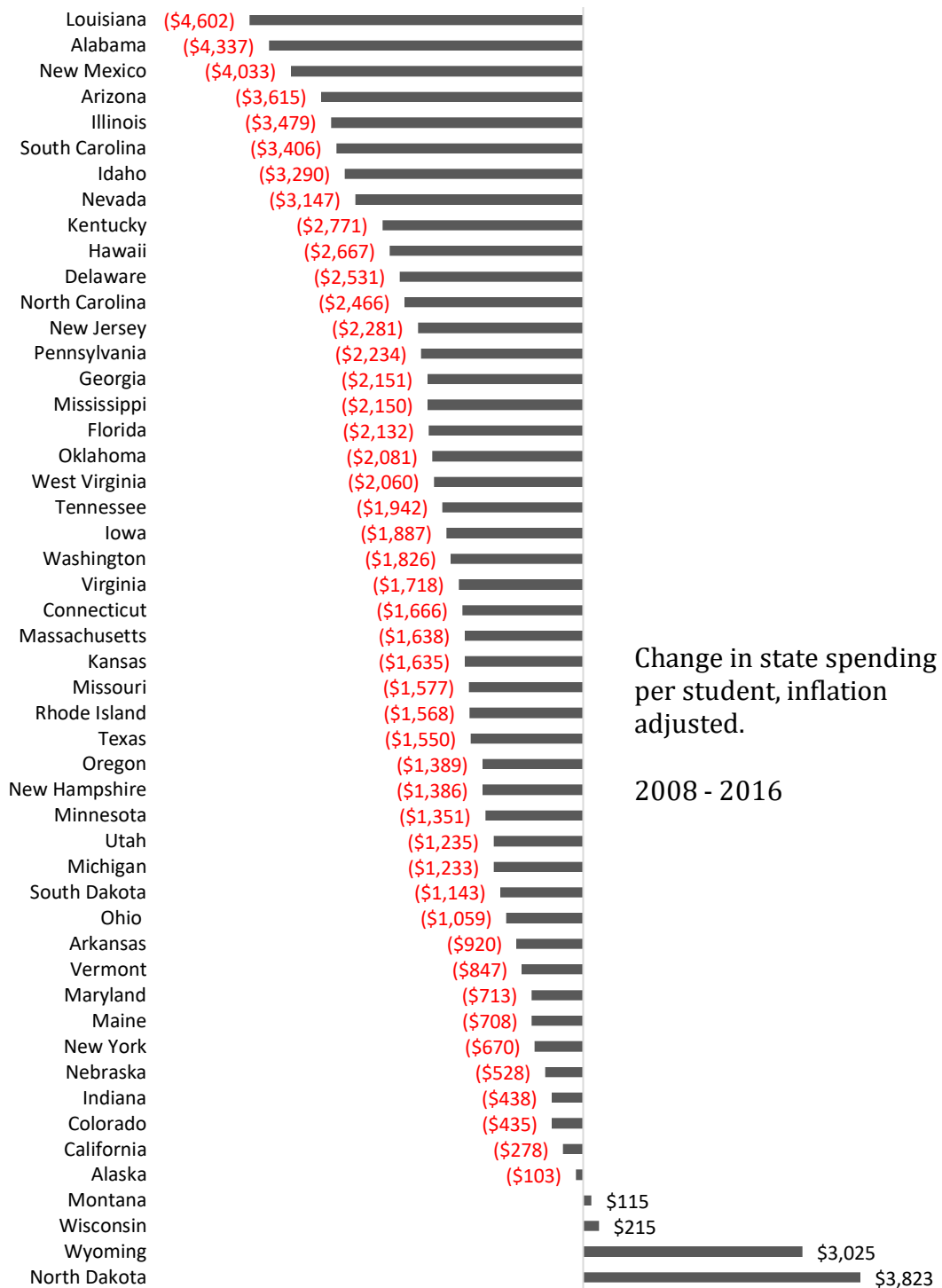


Figure 1.3. State Funding for Higher Education Remains Far Below Pre-Recession Levels in Most States. Adapted from Mitchell, M., Leachman, M., & Masterson, K. (2016). Funding down, tuition up: State cuts to higher education threaten quality and affordability at public colleges. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, p. 13.

While tuition cost has been on the rise, research consistently shows a negative relationship between college costs and enrollment (Hemelt & Marcotte, 2011). A meta-analysis by Leslie and Brinkman (1987) showed for every \$100 increase in tuition price, there was a corresponding 0.6 to 0.8 percentage point decline in college enrollment. Heller (1997) and Kane (1996) both revisited this estimate, showing for every \$100 increase in tuition at four-year institutions, enrollment decreased slightly under 0.5%. With these figures, admissions officers face the dilemma of solving the equation with variables of higher tuition costs and higher enrollment counts pulling in opposing directions. Past research brought forth fundamental models to assist in the recruiting process for admissions offices (Jackson, 1980; Chapman, 1981; Hansen & Litten, 1982; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). With the influx of technological advances and digital strategies, however, students have a larger amount of information at their disposal, making the recruiting battle more difficult for traditional institutions (Shenoy & Aithal, 2016).

Another rising challenge admissions offices face is the growing number of private, for-profit institutions available to prospective students. The popular self-paced, and largely computer-mediated, college classrooms give many students the option of completing their degrees at their own pace, and without the possibility of having their admission status declined. At face value, the rewards of a for-profit school give the impression of fewer hoops to jump through for admission and the flexibility of start and completion dates for both traditional and non-traditional students. The costs are literal in the sense that tuition is substantially higher than non-profit institutions (Table 1.1). The sizeable difference in tuition can be seen by the comparative amount of student loan debt accumulated by the American public (Looney, & Yannelis, 2015).

**Table 1.1. FOR-PROFIT SCHOOLS DRIVING STUDENT LOAN DEBT**

**2000**

**2014**

| Rank | Institution                           | Total Student Debt | Rank | Institution                           | Total Student Debt |
|------|---------------------------------------|--------------------|------|---------------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1    | New York University                   | \$2.2B             | 1    | *University of Phoenix-Phoenix Campus | \$35.5B            |
| 2    | *University of Phoenix-Phoenix Campus | \$2.1B             | 2    | *Walden University                    | \$9.8B             |
| 3    | Nova Southeastern University          | \$1.7B             | 3    | Nova Southeastern University          | \$8.7B             |
| 4    | Pennsylvania State University         | \$1.7B             | 4    | *Devry University-Illinois            | \$8.2B             |
| 5    | University of Southern California     | \$1.6B             | 5    | *Capella University                   | \$1.6B             |
| 6    | Ohio State University-Main Campus     | \$1.5B             | 6    | *Strayer University-Global Region     | \$1.5B             |
| 7    | Temple University                     | \$1.5B             | 7    | *Kaplan University-Davenport Campus   | \$1.5B             |
| 8    | Arizona State University              | \$1.4B             | 8    | New York University                   | \$1.4B             |
| 9    | Michigan State University             | \$1.3B             | 9    | *Argosy University-Chicago            | \$1.3B             |
| 10   | University of Minnesota-Twin Cities   | \$1.3B             | 10   | *Ashford University                   | \$1.3B             |

\*Indicates for-profit institution.

Table 1.1. For-Profit Schools Driving Student Loan Debt. Adapted from Mitchell, M., Leachman, M., & Masterson, K. (2016). Funding down, tuition up: State cuts to higher education threaten quality and affordability at public colleges. Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, p. 21. By A. Looney and C. Yannelis, "A Crisis in Student Loans? How Changes in the Characteristics of Borrowers and in the Institutions They Attend Contributed to Rising Loan Defaults," Brookings Papers on Economic Activity, Fall 2015, Table 5. <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/projects/bpea/fall-2015/looneytextfallbpea.pdf>

Whether a student attends a non-profit or a for-profit institution will continue to be an ethical debate for the growing population, with variables such as admissions rates and debt contributing to the decision process. While those elements weigh heavily on the application process for potential students, this study hopes to understand the various strategies and implementations of various institutions across the state of Utah. During my time as a recruiter, we believed the product we were offering to prospective students was valuable to their overall success in life. Each year we competed against hundreds of alternate options that offered that same product; therefore, we needed to be precise in our

strategy. This study will look to understand the current strategies utilized by institutions and decipher the theoretical application backing those strategies.

## CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### College Selection Process

During my time as a college recruiter, I thought there must be a systematic formula to convince a student to attend our institution. Essentially, behavioral outcomes should be calculated by understanding how a student population responds to specific messages delivered in the classrooms on the recruiting trail. Our office also thought one of the variables in that hypothetical equation was the amount of personalization delivered to each and every student on a consistent basis. Being at a smaller state college, one of the central messages we used in our stance was the personalization of education. In many instances, students often feel lost in the quantitative shuffle, overwhelming them on many levels (Hogg & Hogg, 1995). Personal relationships with those students alleviated some of the stress, and in our opinion, were beneficial variables in the recruiting model we constructed.

Each institution may have different models they utilize to construct their own recruiting approaches; however, there is a contextual background surrounding the college selection process. Through various fields, breakthrough models were constructed, standing as foundational approaches for current researchers. Early studies on the college selection process relied on stage models for their construction. Kotler's (1976) seven-stage model argued the student's perspective was seen through the elements of (1) decision to attend, (2) information seeking and receiving, (3) specific college inquiries, (4) application(s), (5) admission(s), (6) college choice, and (7) registration. Hansen and Litten (1982) expanded this model to include a separate track focusing on the financial aid application/decision process college students go through. Lewis and Morrison's (1975) longitudinal study is seen as one of the most detailed stage models to evolve from this era, with conditions such

as timing, sequence, and content added to provide better insight as to how a student handles the college admissions process altogether.

Based on the previous research and findings, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) constructed a three-phase model describing the various stages of college choice being predisposition, search, and choice. First, predisposition, where potential students become attracted to, and influenced by, attending college in hopes it will increase their potential for personal and career success in life. Second, or search, students become actively engaged in searching out information that relates to specific colleges in their corresponding areas. Finally, choice, is the student's actual decision to attend the college itself. For "traditional" college students, those enrolling immediately following their high school careers, the predisposition stage occurs in the range of 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade, the search stage in the range of 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and the choice stage in the range of 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001).

While stage models are helpful in outlining the various phases of the college selection process, Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989), as well as Paulsen (1990), agreed on two theoretical perceptions about college accessibility and corresponding choice: economical, and sociological.

Many researchers (e.g., Kane, 1999; Long, 2004; Manski & Wise, 1983) used economic approaches in their research, more specifically human capital investment models, to understand how a student decides where to attend college. Human capital theory hinges on the idea of enhancing the physical and mental abilities of a human being, which in turn translates to economic development for the individual and the overall population. Formal education falls under the criterion of mental development and

potentially translates to a higher quality of life. If a person is willing to spend time enhancing his/her education, it then increases the productivity and efficiency of his/her corresponding career. Simply put, under human capital theory, “an educated population, is a productive population” (Olaniyan, & Okemakinde, 2008, p. 480).

Human capital theory is also contingent on the idea that individuals make rational decisions on where to invest their time, weighing the overall costs with the expected lifetime value of the degree from both monetary and non-monetary positions (Paulson, 2001). The costs of higher education are both direct to the institution itself (tuition, fees, books, housing, meals), as well as indirect, such as lack of time, traveling time home and back, sleep, and relationship development (Becker, 1993). In comparison, the primary rewards are initially recognized as higher annual earnings. Additional rewards of attending college have reported more fulfilling work environments, better physical and mental health, lower probabilities of unemployment, and improved life quality overall. College graduates also recognize collective enhancements such as higher participation in both social, and cultural events, as well as the elevation of social status in their corresponding communities (Baum & Payea 2004; Bowen, 1997).

Multiple studies use human capital theory to frame college admissions research (Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Long, 2004; Manski & Wise, 1983). The majority focus specifically on the third stage of the college selection process, the decision regarding where a student will attend. While the human capital investment model focuses on evaluating both the costs and rewards of attending an institution, it should be noted that additional variables such as tolerance for risk or uncertainty may also sway the college choice (DesJardins & Toutkoushian, 2005). Personal preferences can, in some ways, skew the results of the

model, thus invalidating the idea that college choice is strictly made as an economic decision. While human capital investment theory showcases the economic value of deciding where to attend college, it is limited in the fact that every decision made is not rational, nor do the students making the decision have a comprehensive understanding of all the available information.

The second theme previously mentioned is the sociological-cultural approach to college decision-making. In detail, this approach focuses on a student's background from a socio-economic position influencing the institutional decisions they make (Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001). Established sociological models usually concentrate on the effect of a student's socio-economic status (SES) in relation to their aspirations, both educational and occupational. A student's status is the driving factor behind the college decision-making process, and that status is heavily influenced by encouragement from their surrounding network, namely parents, teachers, peers, and guidance counselors. The reinforcement they receive then drives them to set higher aspirational standards for themselves, which in turn leads to greater occupational and educational decisions.

While human capital focuses on the physical and mental development for the enhancing of production value, sociological constructs focus on the cultural and social capital used as resources for the population (Coleman, 1988). Cultural capital represents systematic attributes, such as language skills, cultural knowledge, and mannerisms describing an individual's class status, and is often most heavily influenced by an individual's parents (Bourdieu, 1986). Middle to upper-class individuals have the most valuable cultural capital, and in turn have higher educational aspirations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).



Social capital is more focused on the social networks surrounding an individual, and the ways those networks are created and sustained over time (Morrow, 1999). A concrete definition of social capital is not a consensus, as Coleman (1988) and Bordieu (1986) disagreed over the unified explanation. Coleman's (1988) definition is largely utilized in educational research, and focuses on a person's ability to draw on resources from fellow members of specific networks in which they belong (Álvarez & Romaní, 2017). Essentially, individuals have multiple fields of networks in which they can draw upon for support.

SES also focuses on an individual's habitus, or an "individual's internalized system of thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions that are acquired from the immediate environment, conditions an individual's college-related expectations, attitudes, and aspirations" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 206). In this sense, an individual does not decide to attend college using rational analyses, but more through sensible choices that are specific to their own preferences. Habitus is internal in its nature and catered to the dispositions of individuals, which are influenced by one's surroundings (Horvat, 2001). Overall, the variables of habitus, social capital, and human capital reinforce the concept of the socio-economic approach for college choice, which differs from human capital theory in that although humans are rational in their nature, other elements outside of the equity of a transaction affect how and why a student decides to go to college.

During the time of my employment as a recruiter, our strategy looked at both approaches to design the message we sent to potential students. We banked on the assumption that many of the students we were talking to made rational decisions when they had logical evidence presented to them in a dyadic interaction. We also felt we had a clear advantage in the message we were delivering to students. We were not shrouding the

image of our campus with smoke and mirrors to deceive them. Our message was clear, and our institution a rational, intelligent choice. Additionally, we felt a strong push to focus on target networks in specific geographic locations. We built a reputation in certain niche markets, which in turn aided our influence on the students we presented to every year. Certain areas came to our attention where we saw above average enrollment numbers at the corresponding schools, and therefore hoped whoever we were recruiting in those areas would recognize that social influence and adjust their college choice decision accordingly.

While both approaches are fundamental in their understanding of the college decision-making process, Perna (2006) argued neither the HCT nor SES are fully complete models, due to their primary focus on isolated variables. Manski (1993) supported this idea, stating economic approaches develop a framework, but are limited in examining both the quality and quantity of information available to the recipients. Thus, to merge the gap existing between both the economic and SES pathways, Perna (2006) introduced a hybrid model of college choice (Figure 2.1).

Perna's (2006) model assumes there are four layers to understand a student's situated context for college choice. As directed under previous models, researchers understand there is not a single, direct course leading to college enrollment. Instead, a variety of routes are possible. Perna's (2006) model dissects a student's college choice into four layers: (1) the individual's habitus; (2) school and community context; (3) the higher education context; and (4) the broader social, economic, and policy context. These layers center around the human capital model, which breaks down the proposed costs and rewards analyzed by each prospective student. Costs are classified as both monetary and

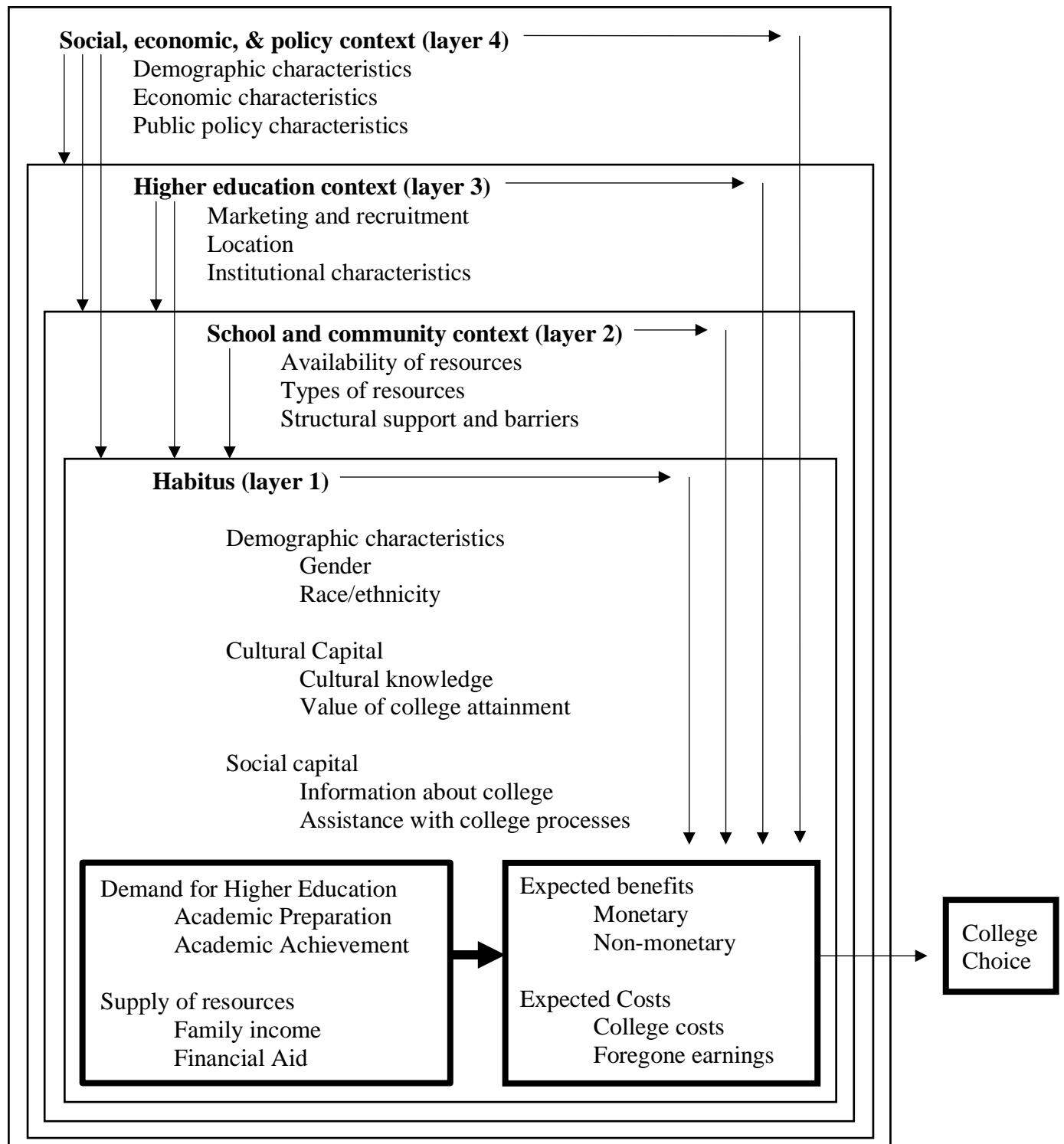


Figure 2.1. Perna's model of student college choice. Adapted from: Perna, L. W. (2006). Studying college access and choice: A proposed conceptual model. In *Higher Education*: (pp. 99-157). Springer Netherlands. p. 117.

nonmonetary and are taken into consideration when a student is making the decision as to which institution they will attend.

Layers 1, 2, and 4 lay out different elements that affect a student's perspective toward higher education; however, this study will primarily focus on the elements of layer 3, the higher education context. One obligation of an admissions office is to provide as much information about their institution to prospective students as possible. Institutions do this largely through tactical and strategic marketing angles, as they "sell themselves" to thousands of students. Nora (2004) argued there is the potential of personal quirks and trademarks colleges may have that align with a student's preferences and personality.

Perna's (2006) model is thorough in its approach to the prospective pathways students can take on their route to higher education; however, the goal of this study is looking at the elements in reach of the institutions themselves. Variables in layers 1, 2, and 4, such as demographics, economic characteristics, availability of resources, or assistance with the college processes are out of the hands of admissions offices, and points that are largely out of their focus. In relation to layer 3, there is a competitive marketization among higher education institutions trying to win over the crowds with their persuasive techniques (Ek, Ideland, Jönsson, & Malmberg, 2013).

Theoretical models have been constructed to understand the stages in which students operate in relation to attending college. At the same time, there remains a disconnect between educational research and the value placed on the contextual relationship between a college recruiter and a prospective student. Higher education may understand the segmented stages to present the material to their target audience, yet, they may not fully grasp the effectiveness of the message content they are delivering.

Foundational elements of the communicative process, specifically the emphasis on the message, and the existing relationship between the recruiter and student are valuable points of consideration if one hopes to fully understand the effectiveness of higher education recruitment.

As college recruiters, we were trained in the methods of when to pitch to a college student, and what information to relay to them. Even so, there was a distinct gap in understanding how to deliver those types of messages in order to see the highest return on our efforts. This study looks to identify what strategies current recruiters are using, which in turn could promote future studies understanding the effectiveness of those strategies, which will fill the existing empirical gap.

### **Communication and Marketing**

On an annual basis, admissions offices debate what marketing tactics they should employ. Over the past 40 years, “marketing efforts at many higher education institutions became highly organized and tightly controlled by entirely new marketing units that were established to create, maintain, and promote a school’s image” (Anctil, 2008, p.18).

Newman’s (2002) empirical analysis of over 1,000 universities found the most common marketing techniques used by institutions were strategic planning, advertising, marketing planning, and target marketing. These findings reaffirm ideas brought forth by Clark and Hossler (1990) that basic principles and ideas in the field of marketing are fundamental for higher education enrollment success.

Marketing an institution to an audience is difficult, in that college recruiters are selling education, a product that is not tangible (Anctil, 2008). The transcendent success of having a college diploma is the ultimate goal institutions showcase; however, that triumph

is simply an idea, not a physical product. The task institutions face is selling an intangible product (lifetime success, greater opportunities) with tangible options of their university (class size, campus appearance, current students and alumni). Institutions have reached a point in their approach where they identify the characteristics they offer, and compare those same traits to competing institutions. Kemerer, Baldrige, and Green (1982) termed this tactic as “positioning”. Positioning involves knowing your institutional position, and developing recruiting plans around that position. This idea is fundamental to creating a brand, and selling that brand to potential students (Maringe, 2006).

From a marketing perspective, understanding an institutional brand is vital to achieving success in the context of higher education recruiting. From a communication perspective, however, research argues it is not simply about the mass promotion of a brand that can achieve success. Value exists in the personal relationship between a prospective student and a higher education employee promoting their respective school (Waldeck, 2007). Dunn and Griggs (2000) support this claim, arguing that “true” learning is established through personalized relationships in higher education.

My personal experience as a college recruiter subjectively supports these claims. Our admissions office made a strong push to emphasize the value of a student to our institution, and we would often display that value through personal phone calls, text messages, e-mails, and face-to-face interactions. When incoming freshmen were polled about their reasons for attending our institution, the overwhelming primary response was how they felt appreciated by the college as an individual student and were not funneled through as an unidentifiable admissions statistic. The relevance of these claims was drawn from a very small sample size, was primarily gathered solely by our admissions office, and

was not formally published by institutional research. Nonetheless, in our recruiting efforts we strongly asserted that personalized attention to the individual would lead to behavioral loyalty to our brand.

Personalized attention is a valuable point to consider in relation to the idea of persuasion. Building and sustaining a personal relationship with a prospective student promotes attitude change about that institution, which then incites behavioral action to both apply, and be admitted for their academic career. This idea is what the act of persuasion is centered upon, the initiation of attitude change towards a particular subject. Early research on persuasion by Hovland, Janis, and Kelly (1953) looked to understand how source, channel, message, and recipient factors affected attitude change. Since that point, there have been multiple theoretical concepts brought to the forefront of social science research regarding persuasion, such as Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957), Social Judgment Theory (Sherif & Hovland, 1961), Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), Theory of Planned Behavior, (Ajzen, 1985), and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). One persuasive concept, embraced more as a fluid paradigm in the Communication discipline than an actual theory, is the Narrative Influence (Fisher, 1984, 1985, 1987).

## **Narratives**

The narrative paradigm dictates that all modes of human communication, regardless of historical backgrounds, cultural influence, or character types, are fundamentally rehearsed stories (Fisher, 1987, 1989). Fisher proposed that we are naturally engineered to deliver stories in our daily interactions, and narration is an inherent, universal trait built into the natural schema of human beings (1984, 1985). This idea stemmed from the

metaphorical premise constructed by MacIntyre (1981) describing human beings as “homo narrans,” or “storytelling animals” (p. 201). From these stories, Fisher (1984) argued we are best able to create reason in our own lives, which promotes behavioral change. This in turn provides a way of understanding the variety of manners in which human beings communicate and behave in their social interactions.

Fisher (1987) contrasted his ideas with what he labeled as the rational world paradigm, or a system of thinking within the scopes of rhetoric and science. Under the rational world paradigm, humans observe the scientific method, as well as prioritize the value of argumentative positions and logical reasoning. The rational world paradigm posits people as essentially rational, while the narrative paradigm poses humans as storytellers. Fisher’s dichotomous comparison did not challenge one way of thinking over another; rather it embraced the rationality and narrative mindset that all forms of rational communication between individuals are fundamentally stories (1989) and that “all persons have the capacity to be rational in the narrative paradigm” (1984, p. 10).

While the narrative paradigm posits that the world is a series of stories from which we choose and constantly create our lives. Fisher (1987) argued the interpretation of those stories hinges on the principles of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity. Coherence relates to the structure of a story, and to whether the plot, characters, details, and facts are probable and rational. Fidelity focuses less on the structure of a story, and more on the reliability and accuracy of the narrative. Elements such as high relevance, consistency of values, and impressions of transcendence influence a narrative’s fidelity. Baesler (1995) combined these elements into a model to gauge the level of persuasiveness upon an audience. Additional research confirmed that both narrative coherence and narrative



fidelity can influence human perceptions (Stutts & Barker, 1999; Appel & Richter, 2007; Anctil, 2008).

Green and Brock (2000, 2002) explored the narrative paradigm even further with the transportation-imagery model arguing that a phenomenological experience occurs transporting the receiver into a narrative world which in turn can affect their acceptance of the beliefs implied by the narrative. Essentially, the more someone is transported into the narrative world, the more the narrative will influence their beliefs. This is comparable with Slater and Rouner's (2002) advancement of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). The Extended ELM outlines the ability to be absorbed by a story, and that the immersion of the content of the narrative stands as the arbitrator between behavioral and attitudinal change. The more immersed one becomes with the received narrative, the less critical they may be of the context, and the more likely they are to change their attitudes or behaviors (Shrum, 2012).

These models support the idea that the use of stories impacts the perception of someone in the narrative paradigm. Persuasive research in both the organizational and health contexts reinforces the influence of personal testimonials upon the given audience (Braverman, 2008; Walker, Field, Gildes, Armenakis & Bernerth, 2009). Similar data were found in a comparison of objective statistic-based messages and personal testimonial-based messages (DeWit, Das, Vet, 2008). Organizations learned that potential employees were more likely to apply for positions when narratives were used to describe the values of their organization (Highhouse, Hoffman, Greve, & Collins, 2002). This finding was reiterated from the educational perspective by Burns, (2015), who found narratives influencing the perceptions of students who had narrowed their choice of prospective college. Burns' study

is an outlier in the sense that while narratives have been on the radar of communication researchers for the past 30 years, there is a gap between the use of persuasive narratives and promoting higher education institutions.

### **Higher Education Recruiting**

For potential incoming students, acquiring knowledge about institutional characteristics impacts their decision-making process. For recruiters, understanding the type of knowledge relevant to the decision-making process is important for developing effective marketing strategies (DesJardins, Dundar, & Hendel, 1999). A large amount of the received knowledge about higher education institutions is instilled by college counselors, teachers, as well as parental guidance (Bryan, Young, Griffin, & Henry, 2015). At the same time, institutions still face the challenge of pitching that information to the students in hopes their approach will convert that interest into a tuition check.

On a national level, designated organizations focus their sole purpose of recruiting students on a quantitative level. The National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC) coordinates national recruiting events, creating over 50 regional fairs across the country, giving a large percentage of the student population the opportunity to hear pitches from over 400 different institutions. Smaller regional fairs across the country follow the same “warehouse-style” format, with regions such as the Pacific Northwest, (PNACAC), West (WACAC), Great Plains (GPACAC), Rocky Mountain (RMACAC) and a few dozen other similar organizations nationwide, creating the open forum conferences where students have the luxury and ability to speak to hundreds of college representatives in just a few minutes.

Admissions fairs for respective states give students the ability to talk with representatives in a comparable fashion as the national organizations, or in some cases on more personal levels. Larger populated states (California, Texas, Washington, Oregon) follow a similar model as the NACAC format, where hundreds of college representatives place themselves in large convention centers, and students funnel in, gathering information for two to four hours at a time. Other smaller populated states (Arizona, Wyoming, Idaho, Utah) give their respective institutions a smaller ratio of student to recruiter, and give colleges the opportunity to do personalized sales pitches in small group settings, in hopes that the intimacy of the delivery will be more effective upon the targeted recipients.

The backdrop of college fairs is the context of this study, more specifically the state of Utah itself. Generally speaking, Utah has a distinct approach to education, largely influenced by current Utah Governor Gary Herbert, whose platform and focus has been on the improvement of education as a whole. Since his inauguration in 2009, the state of Utah has been one of the leaders of higher education support, most notably the amount of devoted tax revenue. In 2017, 72 percent of the annual budget was put back into education, 24 percent of which to higher education (Utah State Budget Report, 2018). Additionally, Herbert unveiled the “66 by 2020” initiative, a call for two-thirds of all Utah adults to hold either a technical certification or college degree by the year 2020. The fiscal and objective support from the state influences the impact and communication college recruiters have with prospective students. From the fall of their junior year, students are exposed to a continuous stream of information about their potential college opportunities.

This initiative assisted in the transformation of higher education recruiting in the state as well. Throughout the 1990’s and 2000’s, the Utah System of Higher Education

(USHE), and Utah Higher Education Association of America (UHEAA) sponsored the Utah Post-High School Tour (PHST). On the PHST, representatives from colleges would not meet at a centralized regional location, but would go to a specific high school each day, where delivered three personalized presentations on behalf of their institution to small groups ranging from 3 to 100 students at a time. These events took place in the fall of the academic calendar, and specifically targeted high school seniors.

In 2014, the Utah State Board of Regents felt the point at which students were being recruited by higher education institutions was behind schedule. Targeting high school seniors in the fall of their senior year did not give the students ample time or information to prepare to decide where they would attend following graduation. Additional research argues the more information students receive earlier in their high school careers, the more impactful the recruiting messages will be upon the particular students, and in turn can help them be better prepared for the next step in their academic trajectories (Cooke & Boyle, 2011).

In 2015, a pilot initiative was unveiled by UHEAA called the College Day program, where institutions sent admissions representatives to individual high schools, and assisted seniors in the application process for their school. This is in contrast to simply delivering a persuasive message to the students about why they should attend their college. Ideally, this focused on jumpstarting a student's behavior to apply for college, rather than being only a provider of information to them. Over the span of two years, the College Day Program increased its membership from 13 high schools, to all 151 public high schools across the state of Utah.

The College Day initiative was executed alongside a restructuring of the PHST. In 2016, the PHST was absorbed by the Utah Association of College Registrars and Admissions Offices (UACRAO). Taking the Board of Regents' focus on earlier dissemination of information to potential students, the PHST events shifted from the fall semester to the spring semester. This transition also shifted the target audience from high school seniors, to high school juniors. The stage of a student's college choice is determined in both their 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade years, (Terenzini, Cabrera, and Bernal, 2001), USHE, UHEAA, and the participating institutions felt the need to target their students earlier in their high school careers. The combined recruiting effort of both UACRAO's modification to the PHST, as well as unanimous participation in College Day by Utah high schools, remains a unique approach to higher education marketing in comparison to other states' college readiness programs.

While Utah colleges have a distinct method to reaching out to prospective students, the core idea is still the same as regional and national fairs; deliver as much information about your institution as possible, and let the student decide. College admissions counselors/recruiters in effect are classified as sales representatives, doing whatever possible to persuade their audience to attend their institutions. Recruiters use various channels of communication, ranging from promotional videos, to tri-fold handouts, to brochures, even face-to-face presentations. The focus for each recruiter remains the same, which is to first, understand their respective institutional position, and second, send the best possible message about their institution to each prospective student.

Manusov (1990) argued how "people are active interpreters of the events occurring in their social sphere" (p. 105). The interpretation of events can in turn cause them to make

logical assumptions and attributions as to why a particular action is successful in a given situation. In the case of higher education recruiting, an admissions director may have a specific strategy in place that their institution uses to deliver persuasive messages to prospective students. Manusov assumes there is a cause for every behavioral action. That message is the primary focus for this study. While there are both benefits and drawbacks to attending any given college, a recruiter faces the task of delivering only the pros to the student and establishing a positive relationship with that student, in hopes it will sway their opinion. To better understand these processes, we need to first learn what college recruiters think works. Therefore, the first research question is:

**RQ1a: What are the intended persuasive message strategies designed by admissions offices for target audiences of perspective students?**

In addition to understanding what the institutional strategy is, this study looks to understand if the strategies of a particular institution align with the messages that are delivered to prospective students on a consistent basis. Therefore, a supplement to RQ1a is:

**RQ1b: What are the actual persuasive messages delivered to target audiences of perspective students both interpersonally, and digitally?**

Additionally, there is a lapse in research done on the topic of persuasion used in the context of college recruiting, both in the strategic messages that are sent and received, as well as the situational context surrounding the persuasive message.

This study looks to bridge that gap by applying theoretical assumptions to the received data. Therefore, the following question is posed:

RQ2: Is there a theoretical relationship that can be deciphered through grounded theory analysis?

### **CHAPTER 3. METHODS**

This study explored the persuasive messages and techniques used by higher education institutions in their recruiting presentations to potential students across the state of Utah. Primarily, data were collected from an observational position, as I witnessed recruiters deliver interpersonal presentations to groups of high school students actively pursuing information about admissions to the respective institutions. As stated previously, the state of Utah is unique in the sense that admissions representatives from each higher education institution meet at a shared site, most often a local high school, and give students the opportunity to listen to them deliver a 25-40 minute presentation. Recruiters differ in their style of presentation in that some follow a more authoritarian lecture style, whereas other recruiters engage in a collective discussion and feed off group dialogue.

Because of my previous affiliation with the Utah Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (UACRAO), I had a networking advantage with admissions administrations in regards to being an outside observer of the Higher Education Day events. My prior relationship with many of the administrators gave me full access to presentations traditionally given only to potential students. I also saw the benefit of having been removed from the Utah State Higher Education Day Events for a few years. This showed as many of my former colleagues representing admissions offices for institutions have since moved on to other opportunities, which paved the way for new faces and personalities delivering pitches to high school students. This advantage was beneficial for two reasons: First, I had no interpersonal relationship with any of the recruiters who delivered presentations, therefore limiting any potential for pre-conceived biases regarding the content and delivery of their messages. Second, because I was not affiliated



with an institution in an official recruiting capacity, I could maintain anonymity and the genuine nature of their message as well.

In effect, I wanted to maintain as natural of an environment as possible for the recruiters as they delivered their presentations to the students, in order to gather the purest data for later analysis. This approach was very beneficial for the course of the entire study.

## **Participants**

Participants of this study are active member institutions of the current Utah Higher Education Day events (N=5). The schools selected are all public, four-year, non-profit institutions with regional admissions representatives recruiting throughout the state of Utah. Two institutions are open enrollment, while admissions rates for the remaining three are high. These five institutions were selected based on their similarity of available four-year degrees, the budgetary allotment for admissions offices, and the commonality of target markets in which they focus their recruiting efforts every academic year. The following institutions were represented:

**Dixie State University**-a four-year public university located in St. George, offering certificates, Associate, and Bachelor's degrees to over 9,000 students. DSU offers students an "active learning, active life." The most affordable university in Utah, Dixie offers more than 150 programs, small class sizes, and personalized attention that make the Dixie Life truly unique.

**Southern Utah University**-a four-year public university located in Cedar City, offering certificates, Associate, Bachelor's, and Master's degrees to nearly 9,000 students. SUU emphasizes project-based, experiential learning. Close to

several national parks, SUU features Division-I athletics, 150 undergraduate and 10 graduate programs with high acceptance rates to graduate school, and world-class job placement rates.

**University of Utah**-a four-year public university located in Salt Lake City, offering Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctorate degrees to nearly 32,000 students. The U of U is a top-100 university in the world, and a member of the PAC-12. Its more than 100 undergraduate programs prepare students to live and compete in the global workplace.

**Utah State University**-a four-year public university located in Logan, offering certificates, Associate, Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctorate degrees to over 28,000 students. With residential campuses across the state of Utah in 30 regional locations, USU is Utah's state university.

**Weber State University**-a four-year public university located in Ogden, offering certificates, Associate's, Bachelor's, and Master's degrees to nearly 26,000 students. In a small-class environment, low tuition, scholarships, and financial aid make WSU one of the nation's most affordable universities.

(Step Up to Higher Ed. 2016)

## **Procedures**

Participant observation of recruiting events, interviews with recruitment officers, and the collection of institutional recruiting materials were the primary techniques of data collection for this study. The system of higher education recruitment in the state of Utah is unique in that in-state students receive information from institutions on a more interpersonal level, and not from a broadcasted position. Other states with larger

prospective student populations such as Washington, Oregon, Arizona, California, and Nevada, often showcase warehouse events where hundreds of national institutions meet at a centralized geographic location, from which thousands of students are bussed in for three-hour increments, wandering through a maze of booths manned by recruiters.

Utah takes a much more personal approach to this method, in that members of the UACRAO work with both the Utah Higher Education Assistance Authority (UHEAA) and the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) to calendar a three-month long event where a representative from each institution travels from high school to high school delivering their recruiting pitch to high school students. For the previous 27 years, their messages were delivered to high school students in the fall of their senior year. In 2014, there was a push from UHEAA and USHE to make students more aware of higher education opportunities earlier in their careers; therefore, UACRAO adjusted their target audience from seniors to juniors. The 2017-18 school year was unique in that higher education institutions delivered their presentations in the fall semester to the senior class, and followed in the spring semester to the corresponding junior class, giving every student the opportunity to receive the recruiting message. The 2018-19 school year has Higher Education Day events beginning in September with schools targeting students in the junior class. Because of scheduling alteration for this school year, I observed institutional recruiters deliver their messages to both classes in the 2017-18 academic year.

Participant observations occurred as I watched institutional recruiters deliver presentations to potential students at local high schools across the state of Utah. On the morning of a UACRAO Higher Education Day, students meet in the auditorium of their high school for 30 minutes where a representative from UACRAO addresses them, covering

topics such as the importance of higher education, short summaries of each institution and their outreach, and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Following which, students are disbursed to participate in three consecutive presentations where they are instructed to pick potential schools they would like to attend and listen to the recruiters deliver a presentation about their institution. Presentations ranged from 25-40 minutes in length, with the average presentation being 33.41 minutes ( $SD = 4.33$ ). Initial presentations were observed and recorded using handwritten and electronic notes. Once initial open coding began, presentations were recorded and audio files were transcribed using Temi, an audio transcription software. Transcription produced 72 pages of single-spaced text for analysis.

Interviews were conducted by contacting Admissions Offices of the participating institutions and describing the nature of the study. Again, because of my previous relationship with admissions officers from the various schools during my time as a regional recruiter, many of the Directors and Vice-Presidents were amiable in working with me on this paper. Interviews were conducted in November and December of 2017. Questions ranged from recruiting tactics, to admissions application processes, to recruiter approach (See Appendix A). Interviews ranged from 45-90 minutes in length, with the average interview being 63.21 minutes, ( $SD = 18.97$ ). Each interview was recorded and audio files were transcribed. Transcription produced 52 pages of single-spaced text for analysis.

Recruiting materials were gathered through two processes. First, they were collected at the high schools on the Higher Education Days from the admissions officers. One of the common structures of a recruiting presentation consisted of the students entering into the classroom and being given a piece of literature about the institution that

in many instances the recruiters referenced in the delivery of their presentation. In each observed presentation, I gathered the corresponding materials in order to get the full experience. Second, I went to the future students page of each institution's website, and filled out a form requesting general information about that institution. Materials were then mailed out to my home address and added to the collection. Texts were randomly selected for coding, from which a total of 10 texts, two representing each university were chosen.

Because the observed recruiting presentations were public events held at participating public high schools in the state of Utah, I did not need approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to name the institutions in this paper. In addition, I did receive permission from each individual who was interviewed to identify them specifically by name, as well as their corresponding affiliation with an institution. I did receive IRB approval to carry out this study.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis occurred in stages where I used a classic grounded theory process of critically dissecting the data. Initially, this process began from a semi-ethnographic approach as I began attending and observing the Higher Education Day presentations in September and October of 2017. Initial data were not gathered in this process, as the intent was to become familiar with the recruiting cycle and acclimated to the process of daily presentations given by the respective admissions officers. This process was done while the Higher Education Day events were delivered to high school seniors, in the fall of their senior year.

Official data gathering occurred in the spring semester, as recruiters then focused their presentations for high school juniors. While the audience differed in demographic

classifications, the messages and presentations were nearly identical in their construction and delivery. A theoretical sampling process began as I gathered the data from the presentations and began my analysis. During this entire data collection process, I used a compare and contrast method for analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss 1987). This was established by open coding the gathered data to generate preliminary codes, which in turn allowed me to go back to my sampling and gather more data. As stated previously, data were gathered through note-taking as well as electronic recording and transcribing.

The open coding process was done through a progression of stages. Strauss (1987) discussed how the primary purpose of this style of analysis is breaking the data up into various elements, and then reorganizing it into categories to achieve full comprehension of the subject of study. Once I collected transcripts from the recorded presentations, I read them to ensure that I had a complete understanding of the recorded data. From that point, I went back and listened to the audio recordings meanwhile analyzing the notes I took during the delivery of the presentation. Next, I went back to the transcriptions and began forming categories based on the data.

The open coding process consisted of identifying three elements of the code: the open code itself, the properties of the code, and examples of the code from the participants' words. The open code was the name of the code itself. Properties of the code gave the code a structural definition of the code. Examples of the code from the participants' words included any verbal instances of that code being present, such as words, phrases, or any dialogue that met the outlined criteria. Once these open codes were created and categories began to evolve, I went back to the data and re-read the transcripts in order to make sure

nothing was overlooked. At this point, there were no theoretical assumptions yet made about the coded data.

During the open coding process, I began to recognize two specific features emerging from the data. First, persuasive messages appeared to follow a theme related to their actual content. Recruiters from the affiliated institutions made statements in their presentations specifically targeting a premise that they were trying to explain to their audience. These were noticeable in every received recording and transcript from the observed presentations. Second, the themed statements were often structured under a category of message delivery, those being the approach to which the messages were constructed. While themes were present throughout the presentations, there were points in which specific message structures were utilized by the recruiters. The recognition of these two features completed the open-coding process and began the next phase of developing the codebook.

I then began the process of axial and selective coding the data. Here, I recognized codes that had similar relationships with one another, and looked to identify predominant categories fully representing the coded data. At this point in the coding process I felt saturation had been reached, no new data would be received by the presenters in their presentations, and the formation of my preliminary codebook was complete. The observed presentations at that point reinforced the codes that I created in the coding process, and did not give me any new data to categorize.

Once this process was complete I went back and completed the actual codebook (Appendix B). In this process, I identified six primary components of the codebook: the code itself, a brief definition of the code, a full definition of the code, guidelines of when to use the code, guidelines of when not to use the code, and examples from the received

transcription of content. In the codebook, I identified five separate themes from the data relating to message content: (a) financial value and affordability, (b) academic resilience, (c) engaging student life, (d) optimal location, and (e) customer flexibility and personalization. Two of the themes (academic resilience, optimal location) had subcategories not strong enough to identify as independent themes. Additionally, there were three categories recognized in relationship to message delivery: (a) narrative, (b) reputational esteem, (c) fear appeals. The core, and most recognizable construct of the three categories was the narrative theme (Fisher, 1984). This theoretical construct was beneficial in giving me the ability to understand the data and its relationship to RQ2.

From this point I went back to the transcripts and recordings and began recognizing where these codes were present in the observed presentations. The coding process consisted of first, recognizing if the message could be coded under one of the five recognized themes. Much of the received data was coded in this fashion, as the strategies of the various recruiting offices were rigorous in their design, and very seldom had tangential information present. Following this, I then coded for the three categories of message delivery. These were separate from the five coded themes of message content, in that there were message themes that could be present in the message categories. For example, a recruiter could deliver a message constructed in the category of a narrative, which in turn had content under a theme of optimal location. Essentially, the coding process consisted of myself deciphering what was the content of the persuasive messages, followed by how admissions offices delivered those persuasive messages.



## CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

The first week following my hiring as a regional recruiter, our office held a meeting to discuss the trajectory of both our department and our institution. The critical point of the meeting was to outline what would be the key selling points we would unveil to the students as we became traveling sales representatives over the next academic cycle. Early on, we identified what features our institution had that other institutions could not potentially market in their own presentations. We wanted to find the points that would make our institution uniquely different than the other 11 competing schools we would be up against every single year. Essentially, what messages would stick to the ears of the students and cause them to alter their direction towards our campus?

This experience was the foundation behind this study, as I looked to understand if other institutions had a similar mindset in their own admissions offices. Do they critically analyze their own institutional position in relation to the competing schools across the state of Utah? Do they recognize the distinguishing features that set them apart from their peers? If so, are they delivering these messages to potential students in their admissions presentations. These inquiries lead to the following research questions:

**RQ1a: What are the intended persuasive message strategies designed by admissions offices for target audiences of perspective students?**

and

**RQ1b: What are the actual persuasive messages delivered to target audiences of perspective students both interpersonally, and digitally?**

## **Recruiting Events**

Participant observation of recruiting events, interviews with recruitment officers, and electronic reception of recruiting messages were the primary techniques of data collection for this study. The system of higher education recruitment in the state of Utah is unique in that in-state students receive information on a more interpersonal level, and not from a broadcasted position. Other states with larger student populations, such as Washington, Oregon, Arizona, California, and Nevada, often showcase warehouse events where hundreds of national institutions meet at a centralized geographic location, from which thousands of students are bussed in for three-hour increments, wandering through a maze of booths manned by recruiters.

Utah takes a much more personal approach to this method, in that members of the Utah Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (UACRAO) work with both the Utah Higher Education Assistance Authority (UHEAA) and the Utah System of Higher Education (USHE) to calendar a three-month long event where a representative from each institution travels from high school to high school delivering their recruiting pitch to high school students. For the previous 27 years, their messages were delivered to high school students in the fall of their senior year. However, in 2014, there was a push from UHEAA and USHE to make students more aware of higher education opportunities earlier in their careers, therefore UACRAO adjusted their target audience from seniors to juniors. The 2017-18 school year was unique in that higher education institutions delivered their presentations in the fall semester to the senior class, and followed in the spring semester to the corresponding junior class giving every student the opportunity to receive

the recruiting message. Because of this alteration, I was able to observe institutional recruiters deliver their messages to both classes in the 2017-18 academic year.

Participant observations occurred as I observed institutional recruiters deliver presentations to potential students at their local high schools. On the morning of a UACRAO Higher Education Day, students meet in the auditorium of their high school for 30 minutes where a representative from UACRAO addresses them, covering topics such as the importance of higher education, short summaries of each institution and their outreach, and the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. (FAFSA). Following which, students are disbursed to participate in three consecutive 35-40 minute presentations where they are instructed to pick potential schools they would like to attend and listen to the recruiters deliver a presentation about their institution. Through participant observation, I observed (33) different admissions officers, and (41) student ambassadors representing the five targeted institutions. Observations were made from October 2017 to March 2018 at 29 high schools throughout the state of Utah in Box Elder, Cache, Davis, Duchesne, Kane, Salt Lake, Tooele, Utah, Washington, and Weber counties (Table 4.1).

As described more fully in the previous chapter, data from presentations were observed and recorded for critical understanding. A portion of presentations were recorded using audio-visual recording equipment. Following which, transcriptions were taken from the recordings to give full accounts of what occurred at the site. Notes were taken from additional observations to gather insight and ensure that saturation would be reached. From this point, content was grouped into specific themes based on similarity in features. The data was then coded and organized into themes based off the presentations.

**Table 4.1. OBSERVED PRESENTATIONS OF PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS**

| County           | Box<br>Elder | Cache | Davis | Duchesne | Kane | Salt<br>Lake | Tooele | Utah | Washington | Weber |
|------------------|--------------|-------|-------|----------|------|--------------|--------|------|------------|-------|
| Institution      |              |       |       |          |      |              |        |      |            |       |
| Dixie<br>State   | 1            | 2     | 2     | 1        |      | 2            |        | 2    | 1          | 2     |
| Southern<br>Utah | 1            | 2     | 2     |          |      | 3            | 1      | 2    | 2          | 2     |
| U of U           |              | 2     | 2     | 1        | 1    | 2            | 1      | 2    | 2          | 2     |
| USU              |              | 2     | 2     | 1        | 1    | 2            | 1      | 2    | 2          | 2     |
| Weber            | 1            | 2     | 2     |          | 1    | 2            |        | 2    | 1          | 2     |

Table 4.1. Observed Presentations of Participating Institutions

\*Indicates the number of presentations observed in each county.

The codebook (see Appendix B) was organized as follows: the code itself, a brief definition of the code, a full definition of the code, guidelines of when to use the code, guidelines of when not to use the code, and examples from the received transcription of content.

Data from the observations led to a division of the presented messages into two types: message content, and message form. The former is defined as to what is being depicted by the recruiters in their presentations; that being the substance of the message itself. The latter identified as the construct of how the content is delivered; specifically, the technique to which the message is delivered to its audience.

Data shows five themes based on message content, and three categories based on message form that answer RQ1a and RQ1b. The following key themes for message content are as follows: (a) financial value and affordability, (b) academic resilience, (c) engaging student life, (d) optimal location, and (e) customer flexibility and personalization.

Categories for message content are as follows: (a) narrative, (b) reputational esteem, (c)

and fear appeals. Both themes and categories are listed in this chapter by the volume of messages by all five participating institutions.

When presented, all five themes are delivered to students on a micro-perception, in which they utilize the themes as specific selling points that differentiate their institution from others in the state. However, the first theme of value and affordability is often delivered as a macro-perception for the state of education in Utah altogether, that being how affordable higher education opportunities are in the state of Utah, compared to both resident and non-resident tuition costs.

### **Financial Value and Affordability**

Each recruiter representing all five of the participating institutions presented the theme of value and affordability in their corresponding presentations. Without question, this was the most common and dominant theme found through observation. Value and affordability is the monetary advantage an institution gives to a student by attending their University. As stated previously, value and affordability are delivered as messages from both a macro-perception, and a micro-perception, where recruiters discussed the financial advantages to: (a) staying in the state of Utah to pursue their higher education degree, and (b) selecting their institution for strategic advantages in both their tuition payments, and their potential career success. From a macro-perception, the state of Utah has one of the lowest collective tuition rates across the country. This led to a smoother transition for the recruiters as they delivered their pitches to potential students.

From a macro-perspective, UACRAO representatives made a strong push for students to consider attending in-state institutions for the sake of financially securing their future. On average, out-of-state tuition is \$9,000 more expensive than in-state tuition,

(GSED, 2016), and this point was repeatedly delivered in both the opening presentation by the UACRAO representative, and again reiterated by the institutional recruiter. In one presentation, a UACRAO representative stated, “Can we have a moment of silence for our non-resident friends? They are paying 10-20 thousand dollars more per year than we ever will.” Another UACRAO representative reaffirmed this idea through a message of minimalism. “Plain and simple, if you stay in Utah for college, you are going to have a significantly lower amount of student debt than if you go to school in California, or Arizona.”

On an individual level, value and affordability was one of the core messages each recruiter pitched to their respective audiences near the beginning of every presentation about their institution, additionally the angle to which they delivered these messages varied by institution based on overall cost of attendance. While tuition rates in the state of Utah are traditionally low, there is a variance of tuition costs between the respective in-state institutions. See Table 3. This variance affected how a recruiter would then pitch the value and affordability angle of their educational experience. Each institution could not claim they had the lowest tuition in the state of Utah. That appropriation was given to both Dixie State and Weber State University. Recruiters from Dixie State reiterated this fact in every single one of their presentations. One recruiter said, “Plain and simple, we have the lowest tuition. No other four-year school can say that.” In comparison, Southern Utah University, Utah State University, and the University of Utah all have the highest tuition rates for public institutions in the state of Utah. Therefore, this caused them to accentuate the “value” of their overall educational experience.

A recruiter from the University of Utah stated “We have the best value in the entire country, in relation to comparable Universities nationwide.” That statement is in congruence to the fact that they have the lowest tuition in the Pac-12 conference in comparison to Universities such as the University of Southern California, Stanford University, and the University of Washington. Another recruiter from Utah State University discussed how despite the fact they had higher tuition than other institutions in the state of Utah, the return on investment a student would make was substantially better than other institutions. They said, “We are not the cheapest school, but that is not what you are going to get out of Utah State. You are not going to get a cheap degree. Our school has more respectability, and in turn will open more doors for you down the road. Therefore, the value is something that no one can compare to.” The brand of Utah State would ask for more out of their wallet, however, they would open more possibilities for them down the road, which made them the most valuable college option in the entire state. This approach was reiterated in another presentation from a recruiter representing Utah State, saying, “You have to put money in, to get money out. We are the best return on investment you will get. And that makes us the most affordable college in the state of Utah.”

The transcendent angle was something additional colleges would pitch in their deliveries, specifically, the value that an education from their institution brings to potential students after they graduate. One recruiter told the story of how the former Vice President of Marketing for Nike was a graduate from their institution, stating, “This proves that if you attend our institution, and graduate from this specific college, you are guaranteed to make more money.” Another recruiter from Southern Utah University said, “We have nationally accredited programs that will guarantee you a job right out of the gate once you graduate.

We are worth spending your money on.” While each institution could not make the claim that they had the lowest tuition in the state, or would cost the least amount of money, the angle in which they delivered their messages accentuated the fact that students would get the most “bang for their buck” if they decided to go to their school.

An additional angle in this theme were the financial advantages students received while attending their institution, which ultimately would make their lives easier as they entered the higher education population. Schools talked about advantages in transportation, dining, entertainment, athletics, security, and clubs and organizations. Recruiters from the University of Utah repeatedly pitched how their student identification card was a free bus pass, and how if they joined the MUSS, the student athletic cheering club, they would get a free meal every Thursday night. Another recruiter from Weber State University talked about the housing on their campus by saying, “If you attend our school, you will get \$1000 for housing, where you’ll get free HBO now in your dorm room. And on top of it all, we’ll give you a free pass to ski at Powder Mountain ski resort.” Every institution had different incentives to pitch, however the message of financial value and affordability was a common theme in every presentation of the five participating schools.

### **Academic Resilience**

A core message each institution delivered to their audience was the concept of empirical growth, which in turn is a fundamental element behind academia altogether. Colleges are centered around the notion of academic resolve. The mantra behind this theme is the message of academic resilience each institution offers to potential students. Academic resilience is the persuasive message of intellectual development for students through their educational programs. From an academic position, the participating



institutions are divided into two tiers: open enrollment and selective enrollment. Open enrollment institutions are those schools who have no academic standards a student must meet in order to be fully admitted to attend. Admissions requirements often are standardized as the completion of an admissions application, submission of high school transcripts/GED, and payment of admissions fee. Whereas, selective enrollment institutions have differentiating academic standards a student must meet in order to be admitted. These standards may range from level of G.P.A., ACT/SAT score results, or involvement in extracurricular activities. This theme of academic resilience is broken down to two subcategories, with a correlation to the type of admissions tier a school is categorized. The two subcategories are (a) quantity of majors, and (b) quality of academic standards.

**Quantity of Majors.** From an academic position, the participating institutions can be broken down into two tiers: open enrollment and selective enrollment. Because of these distinctions, the messages they delivered about their academic programs differed in context. Dixie State and Weber State University are both open enrollment institutions, accepting anyone and everyone who applies for admission. While, Southern Utah University, the University of Utah, and Utah State University are all selective enrollment institutions, with admissions rates of 81%, 73%, and 95%, respectively.

The academic tiers influenced the type of message corresponding recruiters would say in their presentations. An institution with open admissions standards needed to address the perception that the prestige of an academic program may not be as esteemed as the variety of degree options available to them at that particular institution. Essentially, one could claim that because the standards of admission were lower than other

institutions, recruiters would be persuading more by quantity of degrees, than quality of degrees. One of the main points delivered by multiple recruiters from Weber State University was how they had more degree options available to students than any other institution in the entire state. One recruiter stated, “That’s over 225 degrees. No one else can give you those kind of options.” This message was similar to recruiters from Dixie State who used the tagline, “We are growing so fast, that we average four new programs every single year. If your degree is not at our campus, it will be here by the time you need it to be.” Both Dixie State and Weber State University are open enrollment institutions, therefore the selectivity and rigor of their academic programs could not be touted as major persuasive points. In contrast, variety fit their institutional model better.

**Quality of Academic Standards.** Recruiters from the selective admissions institutions delivered messages regarding the quality of their academic rigor, rather than the amount of potential landing spots they had for their incoming freshman students. Recruiters used tactics of both comparative esteem in relation to who they were up against, as well as statistical validation of their program’s national rankings to amplify the persuasive points they made to their audience about why their academic programs were better than other institutions offering the same degrees.

Comparative esteem messages were those delivered by stating something that their institution offered on their campus, and then likening it to similar offerings by institutions with national acclaim and customary standards of academic rigor. One recruiter from Utah State told students, “We have the 2<sup>nd</sup> oldest undergraduate research program in the entire country, second only to MIT. We are kind of a big deal.” Another recruiter from Southern Utah University delivered similar messages stating, “Our business program is ranked with

both Harvard and Yale.” In another session for Weber State University, a recruiter said, “In our health professions programs, we compete with Johns Hopkins University.” Similarly, the University of Utah delivered messages of their academic rigor by touting they were the only R1 institution in the state, and “held to the same standards as Stanford, USC, and UCLA”.

The University of Utah delivered the R1 message of academic resilience in the form of statistical validation. Statistical validation messages were those given by stating the value their academic programs had through the use of quantitative legitimacy. In multiple presentations from the University of Utah, recruiters stated that they were a “Top 25 research institution in the country.” Recruiters from Southern Utah University said, “This year, our students had a 95% acceptance rate into medical school. Last year it was 98%.” In other presentations, recruiters from the University of Utah touted the quantity of their library, saying “We have over 3.7 million books on our campus, more than any other school in the state.” Statistical validation was a technique used not only in themed messages of academic resilience, but also in other themed messages as well.

### **Engaging Student Life**

In each presentation, recruiters highlighted the activities and opportunities students were given once they became fully enrolled, messages such as these were coded under the theme of engaging student life. In both the UACRAO opening presentations, as well as the individual institutional presentations, recruiters often gave the disclaimer that college was not just about going to class and taking final exams. “Some of the best life lessons I ever learned were outside of the classroom, and that was the best part of college,” said a UACRAO representative in one of the opening presentations. This same idea was reiterated

in the individual presentations as recruiters would often discuss the logos of applying and enrolling at their college. From this point, they often switched to a more pathos approach in talking about the opportunities that students received once they paid their tuition bill.

On-campus student life were events occurring on the main campus, which were often sponsored by student-run organizations such as student government, or other University-recognized clubs and organizations. Students could participate in various clubs and organizations, which would in turn optimize their college experiences. An ambassador from Utah State University talked about how he joined over 100 clubs his freshman year, and it instantly gave him a network of people on campus. Recruiters from the University of Utah club had a specific slide in their presentation focused solely on student clubs. In a presentation, a recruiter said, "There are over 250 clubs on campus, and my favorite is the Doritos/Mt. Dew/cupcake club. And if we don't have your club, you can start one." This message was repeatedly delivered in every observed presentation by the University of Utah.

Another common activity mentioned by multiple recruiters was talking about college-sponsored dances. A recruiter from Utah State University stated, "We have the Howl. Which is the largest dance party west of the Mississippi. You all have heard of it. And it is honestly, the biggest dance that you will ever go to in your life. It is awesome." Recruiters from Southern Utah University had a similar Halloween dance message talking about the Scream. "At the Scream, we have people from all over come and get down. It is the best thing all year!" Dixie State University also mentioned their foam dance, and how it happens the first week of the year and sets the standard for how student life occurs on campus.

While institution discussed common activities held on campus, there were also unique student life activities specific to each institution, that were often used as key selling points for the respective recruiters. Utah State University referenced an activity where they created a home-made chocolate water slide down a large hill of their campus. Weber State referenced the Turkey Triathlon, a campus sponsored triathlon around campus, the Saturday after Thanksgiving. The University of Utah has Crimson Nights, where clubs come together during the week to socialize with local musical talent performing in the student quad. Southern Utah University talked about their “Casino Night” where students participated in a campus-wide gambling activity where the proceeds were delivered to charity. While Dixie State University heralded “The Great Race”, a ten-leg relay race across campus during the spring semester.

### **Optimal Location**

The history of each institution places them in a unique location in relation to one another. This in turn adds an element of distinction they utilized in their presentations. All five institutions referenced the optimization of their location in their presentations. Their messages in this theme are broken down into two sub-categories: Student activities based on recreational activities, and statistical validation.

**Recreational Activities.** Because of the exclusivity each institution has in respect to their geographic location, recruiters delivered messages about corresponding activities associated with their institution. Utah itself is a very outdoors state, and this in turn reciprocates to the delivery of “outdoor life” messages students can utilize when they attend their institution. One recruiter from Weber State University said, “We have so many outdoor trails right behind our campus available to use anytime.” A recruiter from Utah

State discussed how their campus was right at the base of Logan canyon, which opened up the possibilities for students when they are done with class. One of the first messages students heard when recruiters began presenting was the slogan that SUU was the “School of the parks”, essentially that they were at the gateway for five national parks.

Representatives from the University of Utah heralded the rural incentives juxtaposed with the urban privileges. One recruiter said, “If you want to go hiking, it’s five minutes away. If you want to go downtown to see the Jazz play, or go shopping, that’s five minutes away too. No other school has these perks with their location.”

**Statistical validation.** As seen in other themes, recruiters often used statistical statements to verify the truth of the messages they delivered about their campus. This was seen very frequently in messages about an institution’s optimal location. A recruiter from Weber State said, “We are voted for having the 5<sup>th</sup> best main street in America.” In another presentation, a recruiter from Weber State talked about how they were voted the “12<sup>th</sup> safest college in the United States”. Dixie State also referenced this in another poll claiming they were the “2<sup>nd</sup> safest state college in the entire country”. Both Southern Utah University and Utah State University discussed how over 80% of their student body were transplants who moved away from home, reiterating the point that their location is an optimal place to live.

Additionally, schools would often give short statistics to validate their claim of optimal location. Recruiters from Utah State University state, “We have over 10 ski resorts within two hours.” This statistic is reiterated in their student handout. Another example is the message from Weber State recruiters saying how there are over 200 miles of hiking and biking trails in the Ogden area. Dixie State recruiters also delivered messages in this

manner, where one recruiter said, “There are literally three lakes within 15 minutes” and that there are “12 golf courses surrounding the campus.” These unique statistics were given by strategic placement of the subjective statistic, but nonetheless, they reinforced the idea that the location of each institution was unique in its own right, with confirmed sources endorsing their claims.

### **Customer Flexibility and Personalization**

Participating institutions delivered messages under the theme of customer flexibility in their presentations. While admissions and attendance at college can be seen by some students as rigid, and demanding in its construct, recruiters from each of the five schools looked to disbar that barrier by focusing on the malleable nature of their institutions. Flexibility was seen in the advantages that both potential students, and current students enjoy.

From a macro-perception, students were told at the very beginning of the UACRAO presentation that the Higher Education Day is an opportunity students in other states will never experience. “Nowhere else will you find 12 colleges all coming together to talk to you like this about coming to their school. That is something you need to take advantage of “a UACRAO representative said in the very first observation. In every following opening presentation, UACRAO representatives brought this point to the attention of the students to reiterate how Higher Education in the state of Utah is both unique, and flexible.

On an individual level, messages were delivered about the flexibility of admissions standards for potential students. As stated above, two of the institutions, Weber State and Dixie State are open enrollment institutions. This fact is openly stated near the beginning of both schools’ presentations. A recruiter from Dixie State said, “We are open enrollment.

That means as long as you have a pulse, we will let you in.” Weber State had a similar message when they said. “We have a 100% acceptance rate. Everyone who applies is admitted.”

While not all five schools were open enrollment, the theme of customer flexibility was exemplified by recruiters discussing the degree options they had available to students. This differed from the subcategory of accumulation of majors in the academic resilience theme in that these statements were not simply declarations of what students could study. For example, a recruiter from the University of Utah told the following narrative:

We had a girl who came here to the U and wanted to be a Marine Biologist. Last time I checked, we’re in the middle of the desert, and don’t have a marine biology program. But she brought this up to her professors, and then her Dean. Long story short, she was allowed to take a few classes from a school on the coast, and then combine them with her classes at the U, and now she has a degree from the University of Utah in Marine Biology.

Academic flexibility was also seen by the common message of professor to student ratio. Each institution ranges in size from 32,760 (University of Utah) to 9,855 (Southern Utah University). Despite the substantial difference in size, each school sent the message that they had small class sizes with very personable professors. “The average class size at Utah State is 21 to 1” said a recruiter. This measurement was repeated by recruiters at Dixie State, Southern Utah, and Weber State University. In some presentations, this fact was reiterated on the graduate level. One recruiter from Southern Utah University said, “I’m in grad school right now, and the average class size is six students. Which is awesome!”

Another element of customer flexibility was the message that each school would have the opportunity for kinesthetic learning, or a “hands-on experience”, which many institutions said that they would receive solely at their schools. A representative from Weber State said, “We have over 50 cadavers on our campus, which means right from the



start you are putting your hands in dead bodies.” Another representative from Dixie State said, “I love the fact that my professors took me out to the desert to study tortoises. The classroom was out in the middle of nowhere. You can only experience that at Dixie.” Each institution had their own niche activity that students could participate in “hands-on learning”, which reinforced the idea that students had control of what they would be experiencing when they went to college.

There are three categories coded in the form of message delivery. These were not the content of the messages themselves, but the stage in which the messages were set. The following categories are discussed: narratives, prestige, and fear appeals.

### **Narratives**

The most dominant category of message form used by recruiters was the use of narrative messages. “Stories sell. They are what keep the audience engaged in our presentations” said Brett Schwartz, Director of New Student Programs at Dixie State University. Narrative form is divided into two subcategories: (a) shared narratives, similar stories told by recruiters from different institutions which shared the same logistical constructs, (b) exclusive narratives, independent stories delivered by recruiters about experiences unique to themselves and their corresponding institution.

**Shared Narratives.** While personalization exists as a content theme, all five admissions directors discussed the value of personalizing a presentation with a narrative to a corresponding audience. Brandon Wright, the Assistant Vice-President of Enrollment Management for SUU said, “It's all about storytelling. It's all about ‘how can I make a connection with that prospective student, and how can I tell a story to them?’” The intent of narrative form was agreed upon as a strategy of distinguishing a particular recruiter from

the rest of the field, however, there were multiple narratives used that were nearly identical in their construct, with minor variations for divisional purposes.

One example is what is called the “personal professor narrative”. In this narrative, recruiters referenced the intimate levels of academic interaction by telling instances of particular professors who broke social norms to unconventionally assist them in their academic endeavors. A recruiter from Dixie State said:

On my first day of class, my professor put his cell phone on the board and said, “If you need to call me for any reason, please do not hesitate to do so.” And I remember the night before our mid-term, I called him up at like 11:00 at night, and said, “I need your help with this Professor!”, and he very sweetly walked me through the issues and made sure I understood the content of the test. The next day I passed, and it was all because he let me call him and get help. This is what Professors at Dixie State will do for you.

Multiple recruiters from all five institutions used this narrative form in their own presentations to validate the idea of customer flexibility and personalization at their respective institutions.

Another shared narrative is the story of the “club week narrative”. In this narrative, a recruiter talked about a specific time of the semester in which university clubs and organizations would be available to recruit potential members. Following which, they stated the number of clubs existing on their campus, which then concluded with a listing of several clubs that were unique to their campus, and those which had an association to a caffeinated beverage. A recruiter from the University of Utah stated:

Every semester we have what’s called Plaza Fest where all of our clubs come and give you the chance to join. We have like 600 clubs there for you guys to choose from. There’s the Dungeon’s and Dragons Club, the My Little Pony

Bronies Club, we even have the Doritos, Cupcakes, and Mt. Dew Club. There's literally a club for everyone on our campus.

Recruiters from all five institutions referenced these campus-wide events in their presentations, and painted the picture of a network of unique people brought together by a common bond, which the potential students could also associate with once they came to campus. All five institutions also referenced the existence of a Mt. Dew club, despite no clubs of this nature being present on their institutional websites.

**Exclusive narratives.** In some circumstances, recruiters and ambassadors delivered a personalized message about their institution which was specifically unique to their school and could not be replicated, oftentimes because of the specificity of variables such as location, or campus branding. An example of this was a recruiter from Utah State University talking about her experience cheering with the Utah State student section, identified as "The Hurd":

I remember one of the biggest games of the year was when we played Nevada. We had like the whole student section screaming "I believe that we will win!" Over and over again. It was nuts. Did you know that we've recorded the second loudest decibel level in the entire country? Second to only the Cameron Crazies from Duke. I honestly feel that we willed our team to win that night. Being part of the Hurd is something you will find nowhere else.

Another example was an ambassador from Southern Utah University talking about the unique location of their campus in comparison to the national parks:

I love the fact that at SUU, we have more access to the outdoors than any other school. The other day I'm sitting in my apartment eating cocoa puffs and this kid knocks on my door and is like, "You want to go climb Angel's Landing?" and the first thing I thought was, "Okay, Stranger Danger" But I ignored that impulse and went ahead and hiked one of the most dangerous hikes in the world, but it was awesome! That's the best part of SUU. Those things are literally in our backyard.

## **Reputational Esteem**

The second most common type of message form was the use of prestigious elements to accentuate the value of a particular institution. This was done under the assumption that students understood the status of the associated statistic, individual, or brand, and this in turn elevated the institution's position in their mind, which then potentially lead them to express greater interest in becoming admitted the following fall.

**Statistical Esteem.** This was most common type of this message form and found throughout all five different types of content by each of the participating universities. This esteem was often given to show the quantitative value in relation to comparable programs, or institutions. These were often delivered to show supremacy in a particular division, which could promote appeal in the students' minds. A common fact from Utah State's presentation was that they were the "2<sup>nd</sup> oldest undergraduate research school in the entire country, second only to MIT". The University of Utah referenced individual program significance saying they had a top five medical school, and the number one video game design program in the country. Southern Utah University recruiters often talked about their women's gymnastics program which was currently ranked number three in the country. There were also instances where representatives used relevant facts that connected their school with extraneous details that had statistical relevance. For example, in each of their presentations, recruiters from Weber State University stated their location of Ogden, Utah had the "5<sup>th</sup> Best Main Street in the entire country" as ranked by USA Today.

**Individual Esteem.** The second most common type of this message form, where recruiters stated a specific person with some type of celebrity status, and then clarified the association that particular individual had with their school. A recruiter from Weber State

University said, “Do you guys know NBA superstar Damian Lillard? Yep, he’s a graduate of our Professional Sale program.” Recruiters from the University of Utah followed a familiar form by referencing how Kyle Kuzma, a former member of their men’s basketball team was now “lighting it up on the court” for the Los Angeles Lakers. In other presentations, U of U recruiters referenced popular musicians who performed on their campus such as Kid Cuddy, and American Authors. Similar musical references were seen by Dixie State recruiters as they talked about big names such as Macklemore, who performed in years past. One Dixie State recruiter said, “You guys heard of Portugal. The Man? Yeah, they’ll be on our campus in two weeks. You’re welcome.” This was followed by a comment about how the individual who invented the cereal box tab, Wayne Provost, is a tenured faculty on their campus.

**Brand Esteem.** Representatives used this type of message form to show the relationship they had with well-known brands around the world. Representatives from the University of Utah talked about how their graduates were often being “recruited to work at well-known companies such as Goldman-Sachs, IHC, Adobe, L-3, the Utah Jazz, and EA Sports to name a few.” Recruiters from Dixie State referenced in their presentations how their criminal justice graduates worked with the FBI on the Boston Marathon bombings. Also, in two separate presentations, recruiters from Utah State made the comment how they own the rights to the Chick-fil-A theme song.

### **Fear Appeals**

The final type of message form is fear appeals, in which institutions referenced hypothetical or literal situations students might be placed in if they decided not to attend their institution. These were done in conjunction with narrative form as well, however, the

main message they were delivering to their audience in these messages was the prospect of being placed in an uncomfortable situation. Both the susceptibility and the severity of the threat were posed as high levels to the students because of the commonality of these situations. Examples of this included representatives from Dixie State University, Southern Utah University, and Weber State University telling narratives of when they visited other campuses and feeling more like a statistic than an actual student because a lapse of personalization existed at that particular institution. One recruiter from Dixie State said:

My buddy goes to another much larger school and he tells me horror stories about how he never talks to his professor. He's literally in an auditorium with 1200 other students, and if he wants to meet with his teacher's assistants, he stands in line like he's at Disneyland for like three hours. It's ridiculous.

Another example of using fear appeals was when a recruiter from Weber State University talked about the increasing size of the national debt in relation to student loans. She said, "My sister got a bunch of student loans just to pay her tuition, and now she's 50K in debt, and living in my parent's basement." This was followed by an explanation of tuition rates at Weber State being so low, and how students at Weber State would not deal with those types of problems if they were to attend.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this study indicate that there are a number of similar features shared by the participating schools in the design of their recruiting presentations. This is in reference to RQ1b: What are the actual persuasive messages delivered to target audiences of perspective students both interpersonally, and digitally? Presenters delivered content-based messages distinguishing their institution's academic qualifications, financial

opportunities, optimal location, student personalization, and engaged student life. Further, these content-based messages were often delivered using the construct of a narrative, as well as reputational esteem, and in some instances, fear appeals, all of which have theoretical backing.

While there may be similarities existing in the persuasive messages recruiters deliver to students, there were notable distinctions separating the institutions. By definition of UHEAA, each institution is consistently classified as four-year state universities, however, their origin and distinguishing features are substantially unique. As a recruiter I often asked myself, “how can we distinguish ourselves from the rest of the participating institutions?” Each institution does have distinct traits that separate them from alternative institutions throughout the state of Utah. The next several chapters will examine the institutions from a singular point of view, rather than a collective assessment of their coded data. I will dissect their academic history, their institutional identity, as well as the discuss the coded data received from their observed presentations. This will both give a tailored context for the participating institutions, as well as provide evidence of the coded data from the results.

## CHAPTER 5. UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY: THE AGGIE FAMILY

“There is something special about our school, in that the whole community revolves around Utah State. You can’t find that anywhere else.”

--Grecia Jimenez, In-state recruiter

“We want kids to feel like they’re part of the family here. When people come on tour, we want parents to feel like, ‘Oh, they’re going to take care of our kids.’ When students come out on tours, we want them to be able to see themselves here and recognize that this is now their home.”

--Katie Nielsen, Director of Admissions

### History

In 1861, Senator Justin Morrill from Vermont submitted a bill titled the Land Grant College Act, allotting Senators and Representatives from each state 30,000 acres of land for the creation of higher education institutions. The donated proceeds were designed to supply each state the resources for “at least one college where the leading object shall be...to teach such branches of learning as related to agriculture and mechanic arts” (Congressional Globe, 1862). President Lincoln signed the bill into practice in July, 1862 and paved the way for Utah’s first land-grant institution in Logan, the Agricultural College of Utah (UAC), founded in 1888.

Agriculture was the primary focus of the institution until the turn of the century, when then President William Kerr looked to expand their curriculum outside the granted coursework. This shift caused disdain among supporters for the state’s alternative institution in Salt Lake City, the University of Utah, fearing the growth would be a detriment to their educational goals. Political affiliations pushed for a consolidation of the UAC into the University of Utah system of higher education. Later compromise restricted the UAC from any program outside agriculture, mechanical art, and domestic sciences.



Nearly all the curricular restrictions have since been repealed, excluding medicine and law, which to this day are still trademarked and operated by the University of Utah.

Utah State University saw tremendous growth over the next 50 years including the development of the Utah Cooperative Extension Service, offering research to local agriculturalists around the state, implementing an athletic program, the joint venture of international curriculum with Kardj College in Iran, as well as the initial granting of Doctoral degrees in 1950. Expansion pushed the institution to change their official name to the Utah State University of Agriculture and Applied Science, with “Aggies” recognized as their official nickname in 1957.

From that point, Utah State began excelling in the classroom, with the development of their Undergraduate Research Program, the second oldest in the country. They also saw success in extracurricular activities, more specifically their athletic programs, such as their college football team led by future NFL Hall-of-Famer Merlin Olsen ending the season as a top-10 team in 1961, as well as their women’s volleyball team being crowned national champions in 1978.

Utah State has continued to increase in size and optimization for students, offering long-distance programs at 34 regional locations throughout the state. In 2010, they acquired the College of Eastern Utah, absorbing their 5,000 students into their own system and also giving them three separate residential campuses in Logan, Price, and Blanding. Currently, Utah State is a public, doctorate-granting institution with a 94% acceptance rate, proudly claiming itself as one of the two flagship universities, and the only land-grant/space-grant institution available for students in the state of Utah. It is not officially recognized as an R-1 institution, despite its strong emphasis on undergraduate research. As

of fall 2017, there are over 27,000 students enrolled in the Utah State University system, with 19,569 students attending their primary campus in Logan. (USU-ER, 2017)

### **Institutional Identity**

The identity of Utah State University is deeply entrenched in its history as an agricultural-intensive institution. While that may be a foundational element of its construction, the identity of USU has expanded into a reputation of connectivity, with a semi-fraternal unity that binds students carrying the Aggie banner in classrooms all across the state of Utah. This is seen by their expansion of 34 satellite campuses across the state, with the most recent major acquisition being the merger of the College of Eastern Utah. One of the fundamental messages Utah State delivers to its potential students through presentations, personal mailings, and digital communication is that absolutely anyone can attend. “We give students the ability to take classes anywhere, and we are ranked one of the top online programs in the nation. No matter where you attend, your diploma will have the same three renowned words – Utah State University” (USU Guidebook, 2018).

With that flexibility, Utah State’s brand is synonymous with the communal ideal that everyone who attends Utah State will forever be branded as an Aggie, regardless of the completion of their academic degree. The “Aggie Family” as it is called, embraces potential students, current students, alumni, faculty, staff, and administration under the umbrella of a cohesive network of individuals united for a figurative hereditary purpose. This premise is also a fundamental message of their schematic, and partially answers RQ1a: What are the intended persuasive message strategies designed by admissions offices for target audiences of perspective students? Katie Nielsen, the Director of Admissions discussed how

this was an intentional marketing strategy used in their presentations across all levels of their institution:

We call it our Aggie Family, and literally our acceptance letter says, “Welcome to the Aggie Family.” It’s been over five years since we’ve been doing this, at least since I’ve been the Director, and everybody has embraced it. Our President, Dr. Cockett uses “Aggie Family” in everything... and I feel that we’re really lucky, that anyone from Utah State loves to be representing Utah State. Everywhere they go they’re in Aggie gear, or they’re saying they’re an Aggie too. And that’s kind of where this all came from is passing this along through word of mouth. ‘I’m an Aggie’ starts before you’re here, and it doesn’t stop when you graduate. People love Utah State.

In the 15 observed recruiting presentations, all seven of the participating recruiters endorsed this statement to their target audience, giving confirmation that the intended strategies were exemplified in action, also partially answering RQ1b: What are the actual persuasive messages delivered to target audiences of perspective students both interpersonally, and digitally?

As students walked into their presentation, recruiters showed them an opening promotional video with the headline being, “This is what it’s like to be an Aggie.” Students were then given a 28-page informational handout, with the first page reading, “Home of the Aggies. You graduate with more than a degree, you graduate an Aggie.” This messaging continued on to the next page where a map illustrated the location of each of the satellite campuses and lead with the tagline, “You can be an AGGIE anywhere.” The word “Aggie” underlined to again reinforce the idea that students had the opportunity to be part of an organization larger than a college, but an association of camaraderie unique to this specific institution.

In each of the 15 observed sessions, all of the seven recruiters began their presentation by talking about how much they enjoyed being an Aggie, and how over the

next 25-30 minutes they would explain how the audience members too could appreciate that advantage in their own lives by attending. This was supplemented by their corresponding Ambassadors openly stating how they loved being part of the Utah State network, and how being an Aggie was unlike anything else. In one presentation an Ambassador introduced themselves by saying, “I’m Aggie blue, through and through.” In another session, an Ambassador delivered the ultimatum that “The experience of being an Aggie is something that no other school can duplicate.” And that the Aggie lifestyle was “special” and “unique”. Again, reinforcing the persuasive idea that the Utah State Aggie experience was a society with distinctive characteristics.

The common thread of having an “Aggie Experience” was something both recruiters and Ambassadors reiterated continually throughout their presentations. This was supplemented by the fact that each of the seven observed recruiters were in fact alumni of Utah State University, therefore they had a distinct bias in talking about Utah State, as they themselves had lived the “Aggie Experience” and could easily share moments from their personal lives relating to potential students. This relationship was not something occurring by random coincidence but was a strategic point administration considered throughout the hiring process. Director Nielsen discussed this:

One of the biggest things we say to our recruiters is to be authentic. I need them to do the presentation that works for them. Like don’t try to be someone else. I want them to be authentic to the students. And authenticity comes from the experiences that they had while they were going to school here. That gives them a huge advantage going into their presentations, that they know what it is actually like to be here on campus. They’ve done this.

The fraternal niche of “Being an Aggie” is the most distinguishable theme recognized throughout each of the observed presentations and is also an underlying message distributed through their digital correspondence. As recruiters delivered messages in their

presentations regarding the selling points of their institution such as flexibility, various majors, value, and student life, they generated narratives signifying the unique lifestyle members of the “Aggie Family” have in Cache Valley no one else is able to duplicate, such as seeing the iconic “A” on Old Main tower light up blue after an athletic team victory, or purchasing Aggie Ice Cream being churned in an on campus processing plant since 1926. Utah State’s brand embraces the concept of timeless traditions only their school can offer, and proudly recognizes the 180,00-plus students as part of the family.

### **Categorical Message Content**

Out of the five observed institutions, there were two that adhered to the most inflexible script in their delivery of messages: The University of Utah, and Utah State. They were strict in the sense that there was minimal interaction between the recruiters and the student audience, and that their presentations were governed by a supplementary Power Point which kept them on track in their delivery. The Power Point did not hamper their ability to deliver a well-executed presentation, however it left them little room for deviation if any students wanted to interact with questions about the University. Out of the 15 observed presentations, there were only two dyadic interactions where recruiters responded to questions from the students.

Taking the rigidity into consideration, recruiters from Utah State still delivered a well-polished presentation that was strategic in its design and presented a case for their institution on all three rhetorical levels. Following the self-introductions, recruiters clicked on the first slide of their Power Point and stated there were four points they wanted to address about Utah State: flexibility, broad spectrum of majors, value, and student life. These four topics were coded in the results section and categorized into the five themes of

message content. However, the content was delivered in three different categories for message content with theoretical application: narrative, reputational esteem, and fear appeals.

## **Narratives**

As discussed in chapter three, the most common category of message content came as recruiters used personal stories or narratives. Results also showed narratives being coded into two sub-categories: shared narratives, or common narratives that were delivered by recruiters from all five institutions, and exclusive narratives, personalized narratives about their institution which were unique to their school and could not be replicated, oftentimes because of the specificity of variables such as location, or campus branding. This section will discuss the exclusive narratives used by Utah State, while common narratives will be addressed in chapter 10.

While the observed presentations from Utah State were very rigid in schematics, they were very malleable in regards to the recruiter's ability to share personalized stories from their own lives. Director Nielsen discussed how part of their administrative instruction is to help their recruiters adopt their own stories and utilize them in message delivery. "Our presentation itself is the stories. They are just that effective. Everything's a story for us."

Narratives themselves have shown to have a persuasive impact on the audience (Stutts & Barker, 1999; Appel & Richter, 2007; Anctil, 2008). Director Nielsen affirmed this in her interview as she talked about the hypothetical value of narratives impacting a student's life from a Pathos mode, which is greater than the impact quantitative data can have from the mode of Logos.

If I walk into a kid's school, they're not going to remember the statistics I tell them. But they are going to remember if I made them feel good, right? Students are more prone to say, 'Gosh, I remember that girl at Utah State told me a story that I really liked.' They're not going to remember that 84% of our students come from out of Cache Valley. I remember when I was a recruiter I always told the story about that I did an internship through the Red Cross, and then I went to New York, and was around the 9/11 Memorial for like three months. That was like the coolest experience I ever got to do at Utah State, and I still have kids come up to me and tell me about how much they loved me telling that story.

Nielsen's strategic placement of storytelling was represented as recruiters delivered exclusive narratives to students showcasing the originality of their institution. A majority of the exclusive narratives were delivered messages relating to the theme of engaging student life. One recruiter explained to students about Old Main Hill, a large 124-step hill on the West side of campus overlooking the entire valley. In the winter students use the hill for sledding, snowboarding, or skiing. Other campus events include the giant chocolate water slide. He said, "We get like a huge water slide and pour like hundreds of gallons of Hershey's syrup on it and then slide down it all night. It's crazy, but super fun."

Another recruiter discussed a new tradition emerging called POBEV, short for poetry and a beverage. "Here we all come together and drink Starbucks and recite poetry. It's pretty chill." Additional stories related to student life but were not limited to on-campus activities. For example, multiple recruiters described how students could go to a local restaurant downtown called Angie's and "clean the sink", which is the act of eating three pounds of ice cream, nuts, syrup, chopped nuts and cherries, anchored by four full bananas, delivered in a model makeshift kitchen sink. "You get like six people and try to do it, and it's a blast. My roommates and I have tried it like nine times, and we still can't eat it all" an Ambassador said. In another presentation, a recruiter talked about an improv off-campus event his freshman year that was so random it only increased his love for this institution.

So we're like driving around by first dam, and we see like this light in the woods, which looks like a fire. It's like 1 am, by the way. So we park our car, and start walking toward it, and there's like this huge bonfire with like 1000 other kids just dancing around it. And there's like a DJ, and a sound system, and it's all in the middle of the woods around a bonfire. So we just started dancing and had a blast. You get that kinda stuff at Utah State. That's how awesome it is.

Narratives were not limited to the theme of engaging student life. Message content in the theme of academic resilience also used storytelling to illustrate the uniqueness of the university. A narrative told by four of the seven recruiters discussed how Utah State students were able to use spiderwebs to help create synthetic spider silk technology stronger than Kevlar. Another example was how an Ambassador expounded on her undergraduate research opportunities, and how she was in the process of gathering data on homelessness awareness by Millennial students. One recruiter told her experience about what is called the "Finals Week Howl."

So I'm sitting in the library just minding my own business studying for my Biology final when everyone goes to the center hallway and just starts screaming. And I'm like a Freshman, and I have no idea what is going on. I'm like, is there a fire or something? Why is everyone just yelling? Come to find out that we do this like every finals week and it's just to get out all of our pent up frustrations that we have to deal with. So next semester rolls around, and I join in and just start screaming with everyone else. It's pretty fun, and like everyone gets in on it.

While there are two additional categories of message content, narratives and storytelling, specifically unique narratives were utilized and delivered to students substantially more than any other persuasive strategy.

### **Reputational Esteem**

While it was not as common as the use of narratives, recruiters used the form of reputational esteem in many instances to accentuate the value of their institution to their target audience. This was done assuming students recognized the prominence of the



statistical reference, or the public figure/brand having a connection to their institution. This also helped distinguish the sub-categories of statistical, individual, and brand esteem. Messages presented both interpersonally and digitally were coded into two of the three categories; statistical, and brand esteem. Individual esteem messages were not found in any of the data from Utah State.

**Statistical Esteem.** As previously indicated, Director Nielsen valued the message form of narrative over the use of statistical references in the delivery of their presentations. This did not, however, motivate them to eliminate statistical references in their delivery. In the handouts given to students, such as the student guidebook and information sheets, quantitative measures accentuated the imagery to persuade students from both a visual, and numerical position. Statistical esteem was seen with message content in all five themes of message content. Examples were how Utah State is the “#2 highest-ranked public university in the nation with lowest tuition” or that they give out “\$232 million in research awards.” There are only five high schools in Cache Valley where Utah State is located, therefore a large statement in their booklet stated how “84% of Aggies live away from home.” Essentially, this was done to accentuate the social norms of many students moving away from home to have the college experience, which could ease the tension of making such an impactful decision.

Logan itself is not known for being a warm-weather location, and Utah State recognized that with statistical references to their being “Over 10 ski resorts within 2 hours.” Only one resort is actually in Cache Valley itself, with the remaining ten being across the Wasatch Front and closer to the remaining four institutions. Nonetheless, this push was made to help students enjoy an “adventure beyond the classroom”.

Through digital communication, statistics were very prevalent in the received e-mails. These statistical references could also be found on their future student web page, which many of the received e-mails directed me to through hyperlinks. Examples of this were how Utah State is ranked the “#3 highest ranked public university in the West”, and has the “#5 lowest tuition in the nation”, as well as how they have “150 study abroad opportunities”.

Recruiters also referenced statistical relevance in the observed presentations, which were often catered to their own personal deliveries. One recruiter talked about how much they loved Utah State their freshman year, and how this shows with Utah State being “consistently ranked the number one college town in America.” Another recruiter exemplified the diversity, stating, “We have students from all 50 states and 88 different countries”. An ultimatum statistical reference spoken in nearly every presentation, as well as shared on the future student web page was how Utah State is “#1 in the world for most student experiments sent into space”. In their deliveries, recruiters often used the pitch, “the only people who send more stuff up to space besides us, is NASA.”

**Brand Esteem.** Utah State was unique in that none of the recruiters in their presentations referenced specific individuals having ties to their institution. Rather, they relied on affiliations with prominent organizations and brands to strengthen their position in the students’ minds. The school itself is in a peculiar position in relation to higher education in Utah, in that they do not feel they fit in socially accepted tiers. Dr. Nielsen addressed this:

We had a marketing company come in and do a series of focus groups to see where people saw Utah State. They asked them, “If you had to list all the schools in the state of Utah and put them in levels, where do we fit? Where do students put us?” And across the board, it was kind of like in our own niche.

You've got BYU and Utah as number one. Utah State is number two. And they have a number three that's like Weber, SUU, UVU. And so we're kind of that number two spot. Which is somewhat difficult. We're not a University of Utah. And I don't feel that we're a UVU. We're in the middle. But the hard part is that we want to try and align ourselves a little bit more with the University of Utah, making us more prestigious, more selective. Those kinds of things are how we're trying to talk.

The unconventional position influenced Utah State's delivery of messages related to prestigious organizations and brands. They looked to separate themselves from what students viewed as "lower-tier" institutions, and be viewed as more prominent, high-status institution. This was seen in each of their observed presentations, as recruiters referenced what could be seen as respected and impressive brands and organizations having an affiliation with their school. For example, there was the previously mentioned statistic on having the 2<sup>nd</sup> oldest Undergraduate Research Program. In every instance as recruiters would deliver this statement, they followed with the phrase, "second only to MIT". Some recruiters supplemented this fact stating how it was a "Carnegie Research facility." In multiple instances recruiters referenced how Utah State was a space-grant institution, and would repeatedly state their connection to NASA.

In one presentation a recruiter used a fellow institution to levitate their own position, specifically in football. He said, "You guys remember how we beat BYU this year? Yeah, we're that good on the field." Historically speaking, Brigham Young University has had nationwide success in college football, however the recruiter was referencing a 40-24 victory in the 2017 season, a season in which BYU finished 4-9, their worst record since going 1-9 in 1955. Other athletic esteem came in nearly all of their presentations, recruiters talked about "The Hurd", the Student Athletic Association. They often opened with a line about how they were a rowdy group of students and would follow with the narrative of

how seismic researchers did a study of how loud they were at home basketball games, and that they were the second loudest student section in the entire country, “second only to the Cameron Crazies at Duke”. Without question Duke is one of the premier institutions academically, and at some levels, athletically. This narrative looked to display to students how Utah State was equal to them in similar facets, which could then elevate their brand appearance.

### **Fear Appeals**

Of the three categories for message content, fear appeals had the lowest number of messages to students. This could somewhat be attributed to how recruiters wanted to paint an admirable image of their institution in the 30 minutes they had with them, and looked to make their presentations engaging and positive. The two most notable uses of fear appeals came in relation to the themes of customer flexibility and personalization, and financial value and affordability.

A public narrative recited by recruiters from all five institutions is that of small class sizes. Each school referenced the student to faculty ratio, and how they had engaged, personal professors who were willing to work with them individually. Utah State has a 21:1 student/faculty ratio, and referenced this in each of their presentations. This was a common strategy used by all institutions, which would usually be followed by a personalized narrative about a particular professor going out of their way to accommodate them in a specific class. Both of these message forms have been noted previously, however there were instances where some recruiters extended the dialogue into the frame of fear appeals as how this luxury was something they would not experience at other larger institutions. One recruiter said:

My buddy goes to a larger out of state school where he never talks to his professors. He just goes to class and watches online lectures. That's it. He tells me he couldn't pick out half his professors if they were lined up in front of him. And he hates that about college. At Utah State, I know all of my professors. I never feel like my buddy who's just lost in a giant maze.

No schools were specifically named in any of these messages, however these approaches framed large research-intensive institutions as distant, superficial organizations that would impede the personal growth of a student in their academic careers.

Another form of fear appeals came as recruiters talked about the costs of tuition and fees. Out of the five participants, Utah State has the second highest in-state tuition, and they were clear about how they were more expensive than other schools. However, they formed their message around the idea how a diploma from Utah State had more value to it, and it was worth spending the extra money. In nearly every presentation, recruiters explained how students could spend similar amounts of money for a degree, but that degree would not give them the same return when they went into the job market. In some instances, recruiters and ambassadors referenced third-party situations of associates spending substantial amounts of money, and not seeing any return on their investment. They said that was something they never dealt with at Utah State, and were fortunate that they made the right decision. Director Nielsen explained how this was the strategic approach they used to counter the objection of a higher cost of tuition, saying, "We're really blatant with them saying things like, 'You're going to spend thousands of hours and thousands of dollars on tuition, so make sure you're getting what you want out of your education.' That's why we talk about its worth in value and as an investment."

Similar to the academic appraisals of larger, detached universities, institutional comparison was made in this context describing how if students were to attend a lower-level institution, they would more than likely spend nearly equal amounts of their own money on their education, yet their degree would not have equivalent value on the market.

## **Conclusion**

Utah State University embodies the idea of the “traditional college experience” more than any college in the state of Utah. This is exemplified by being the largest organization in their tucked away location, as well as the majority of their student body being from outside Cache Valley, moving away from home and supplanting themselves in the college lifestyle. Utah State is also unique in the connections they make with potential students, prodding them to find value in their personal niche in the “Aggie Family”. Director Nielsen reinforced this:

If students want the college experience. We're 100 percent a college town. We are the epitome of a college experience. However, we also want to see if being here is a good fit for you. Fit is important to me. I want to make sure that you can get the opportunity you want here. At Utah State we have a unique experience where you get the whole college experience, and what we show students is this idea, the "I'm an Aggie" idea.

## CHAPTER 6. WEBER STATE UNIVERSITY: JUST WEBER

“One school could be more fun than another school, because of their recruiter, because of their branding, whatever they do, but that may not be the exact reason why a student will actually end up making the choice at the end of the day. You can get students all excited and riled up about your institution, but it's this balance of marrying emotion and logic.

People buy on emotion, defend on logic.”

--Scott Teichert, Director of Admissions

“Welcome to Weber State. A place where mountains meets Metro.

Literally, the best of both worlds.”

--Lauren Mason, In-state recruiter

### History

Recognized as the oldest city in Utah, Ogden is also informally known as the “railroad town” of Utah, and the gateway for state. This blue-collar utility value also held its weight in education, with the founding of Weber Stake Academy in 1889. Weber followed a track record of development similar to both Dixie State University and Southern Utah University in that it was initially founded by the LDS church, who would later renounce ownership to the state. Additionally, Weber Stake Academy went through a series of name and identity changes in its early years largely due to the sharp increases in developmental growth and student body; first to Weber Academy in 1902, to Weber Normal College in 1918, to Weber College in 1922.

Financial difficulties caused by the Great Depression instigated the official acquisition in 1933, where Weber, along with Snow College in Ephraim, was officially recognized as a state-sponsored junior college. This support drastically changed their direction from being a dependent institution, to being their own independent facility, as a decade later their exponential growth led to the purchase and development of 175 acres at the base of the Wasatch Front mountain range, where it currently resides.

Weber continued to grow both in and out of the classroom. In 1953, it was one of seven schools selected to pilot an Associate degree model for nursing education to combat a nursing shortage in the United States. Their program would develop into one of the top nursing programs in the country today and become a large feeder for pre-med students transferring to the renowned healthcare program at the University of Utah. That same decade saw the construction of a 3,500-seat football stadium, as well as their men's basketball program winning the NJCAA National Championship in 1959. Three years later, Weber began focusing its attention from two-year to four-year programs, which in turn generated another name change to Weber State College in 1962.

Throughout the 1970's and 80's, Weber State College began offering graduate degrees in both Education, and Accountancy with student enrollment breaking 15,000 in 1987. At this point, Weber State was in a positive predicament, that being not identifying with a specific tier of similar institutions. While it did not have the notoriety or reputation as larger institutions such as the University of Utah, Utah State University, or Brigham Young University, it was not a small-town school similar to Dixie State or Snow College. At this stage, then-President Stephen Nadauld began the process of transforming Weber State with the corresponding funding and support from the state Legislature. In January 1991, the institution was upgraded to university status and became Weber State University, one of two schools to do so that year (Southern Utah University).

Currently, Weber State University is a four-year public university, offering certificates, Associate's, Bachelor's and Master's degrees. Weber State is one of three state universities that are open enrollment, (Dixie State University, Utah Valley University). Despite the growth in graduate programs which currently stands at 11, Weber State



primarily relies on being a pedagogical institution, strongly reinforcing that they are a “teach-first” school with instruction as their priority. As of fall, 2017, it is the fifth-largest university in the state of Utah, with nearly 28,000 enrolled students (WSU-ER 2017). Over one-third of the student population comes from high school students taking concurrent enrollment courses at high schools in Weber, Davis, Morgan, Salt Lake, and Tooele Counties, also through satellite campuses in Davis, Farmington, and Salt Lake City. Weber State is notably recognized as having the largest Concurrent Enrollment (CE) program in the state of Utah.

### **Institutional Identity**

Specific features historically trademark each institution and are often built upon and used as calling cards by admissions offices. Admissions offices recognize these positive traits and structure their presentations around these foundations already implanted in the minds of prospective students. Weber State is unique in that their calling card is not one of positivity, but in contrast, a stigma of complacency subliminally engraved on their brand. “Just Weber”, a phrase many students echo, is the idea that Weber State does not have the same luster as alternative institutions, those being recognized with prestige and notoriety. It is also not the focal point of Ogden, which disqualifies Weber as being a “traditional college town” and places them more in the category of a community college. Those factors shape the idea to many students that Weber State is not an enticing destination as they graduate high school. Scott Teichert, the Director of Admissions recognized how this lackluster mentality has shaped their institutional identity:

Ogden has always been known historically in Utah as this industrial city, with railroads and saloons, and that kind of thing. That kind of runs counter to the narrative of most of Utah. It doesn't help Weber State either, as we're seen as more of a back-up plan. Most people have very, very few negative things to say

about the institution. But we're also not in the top of mind. For example, in Davis County, where you have a higher affluency, socio-economically, there's not really a negative reaction from parents about Weber, but they'll definitely say, "We're not going to send our kids there. We're going to send our kids to University of Utah, BYU, and if they don't get in there maybe Utah State." We weren't necessarily looked down on, it was just, Weber State just wasn't the place where people were going to send their kids.

Another variable affecting their institutional identity is the significant ratio of non-traditional students enrolled each semester. On the younger part of the age range, Weber State has a larger breadth of concurrent enrollment students than any institution in the state of Utah, with nearly 34 percent (9,121) of their student body comprised of students attending high schools across the Wasatch Front (WSU-ER, 2017). A much larger impact on their demographics is the number of non-traditional students enrolled each year. Nationwide, nontraditional students, students aged 25 years or older make up roughly 30 percent of the student population at any given university (NCES, 2017). Weber State however, recognizes nearly 55 percent (12,880) of their enrollment as these older non-traditional students. Enrollment trends such as this trace back to the idea that their institution is not necessarily a primary option, but more of a fallback for students, reiterating the idea that they are "Just Weber". While some students attend college for the idea of getting the true college experience, many students attending Weber State attend for the purely educational experience. "We know that a lot of our students 'sowed their wild oats' at other schools, and when they wanted to come back and take their education seriously, they enroll with us," discussed Director Teichert about the steady dominance of non-traditional and returning adult students attending Weber State.

One reason for the substantial influx of the non-traditional students could be the elimination of barriers many students face when deciding on which college they will attend.

Variables such as tuition cost, admissions rates, and variety of majors are potential roadblocks for students to face. Weber State however, uses these to their advantage and minimizes the amount of stress surrounding this decision. As stated previously, Weber State is one of three universities with open-admissions policies, essentially having a revolving door of students applying and being admitted throughout the entire year. They have the second-lowest tuition for public universities in the state (Dixie State University), which is also slightly higher than local community colleges such as Salt Lake Community College, or the Utah Applied Technology College. They also have over 225 different degrees for students to choose from, the largest number in the entire state. These in turn eliminate obstructions for students and gives Weber State a reputation of simplicity. Director Teichert addressed this:

The hallmark of a Weber State experience is, and please don't misunderstand me, every University is going to have a bureaucracy, but one of the really nice things about Weber is that we're very cognizant of our bureaucracy, and we're really trying to pull some of those things down. We also want to be the most logical decision for students to make. We want them to realize that we are the most logical institution to attend, based on the elimination of the barriers standing in their way.

Eliminating barriers to create the path of least resistance has been a major benefit for their institution as a whole, as their enrollment numbers have steadily increased each year for the past decade. And while they are often greeted with a predisposed stigma of being “Just Weber”, the public relations office has looked to supplant that message of negativity with one of affirmation. “Just Weber” was used in targeted videos and social media campaigns, delivering messages to students that they were “Just Right” and “Just For Them”, essentially reversing the obstruction and shading their institution in a new positive

light. Overall, Weber State University portrays an institution available to anyone, with the most academic options, at one of the lowest costs in the state.

### **Categorical Message Content**

Observed presentations were graded on a level of flexibility for the script of their presentations. Flexibility is the levels of dyadic interaction between students and presenters. Two of the participating institutions were very rigorous and strict on the iteration of their pre-described scripts (University of Utah, Utah State University), while the remaining three were more pliable in their delivery and often utilized student interaction and participation to fuel the direction of their presentations. Weber State was unique in that each of their 13 presentations were nearly identical in the layout of content, similar to the University of Utah, and Utah State. However, recruiters and ambassadors were conversely more engaged with their audience, and would repeatedly ask them questions to promote discussions, which they referenced in their transitions from point to point in their presentations. Director Teichert talked about the value of having open communication with the audience:

Our strategy at Weber, if I would sum up our strategy is that we want to master the pick and roll, that being having an open communication with students. And I know that sounds so trivial, but what I've found in my career, is that most institutions just aren't doing the pick and roll. They're just not communicating individually with students. They're not meeting the student on their terms. They're just running programs that aren't impacting them.

Weber State was also unique in that they were the only institution that looked to address any objections about their institution from the very beginning. As referenced earlier, the “Just Weber” tagline puts a subliminal asterisk next to the institutional brand in many minds of potential students. Additionally, Ogden, Utah has the least picturesque view in terms of aesthetics and visual stimulation in comparison to nearly every other

institution in the state. This detriment is recognized by Weber State administration as a pre-conceived objection students have before any messages have been delivered to them.

Director Teichert addressed this:

I think there is a historical prejudice against Ogden itself. As much as we drink the purple Kool-Aid at Weber, growing up here in Utah, we know that Ogden has a reputation of being the railroad town. Which in turn gives it a less home-like feel. So when crime or whatever is reported in the newspapers, people are quick to say, "Oh well that's Ogden." In reality, it's no different than a lot of spots in Utah. In fact, a number of those fronts it's far more progressive. But, that association over time has been difficult for someone in a high affluent neighborhood, such as South Davis to say, "Hey I want to send my kid to Ogden."

From the very beginning of each presentation, recruiters addressed these objections through multiple channels. Seven of the eight recruiters began their presentations by openly discussing the stigma surrounding both Weber State, and Ogden itself, and how those perceptions were often misplaced due to archaic thinking combined with lack of identifying the outstanding growth occurring over the past decade. In nine of the observed presentations, recruiters supplemented these statements by showing a three-minute video showcasing the highlights of Ogden, and what it had to offer students, with the tagline #beogden. Following the completion of the video, recruiters displayed the first slide of their presentation, which unlike the alternative four participants, was a conglomerative display of all of the positive achievements both Weber State, and Ogden received from third-party sources.

Director Teichert discussed how their primary objective in the first five minutes of each presentation was to shift the preconceived notions a student may have towards Weber State and put them on a trajectory to consider their institution a viable option, and not merely a back-up plan if they were not admitted to any other institution in the state.

This approach partially answers RQ1a: What are the intended persuasive message strategies designed by admissions offices for target audiences of perspective students? Following their addressing of potential objections, recruiters then delivered a script discussing their variety of programs, locational safety, cost of tuition, and student life. These four topics were coded and categorized into the five themes of message content. The content was also delivered in three categories with theoretical application: narrative, reputational esteem, and fear appeals.

### **Narratives**

As discussed in chapter three, the most common category of message content came as recruiters used personal stories or narratives as persuasive messages. Results also showed narratives being coded into two sub-categories: shared narratives, or common narratives that were delivered by recruiters from all five institutions, and exclusive narratives, personalized narratives about their institution which were unique to their school and could not be replicated, oftentimes because of the specificity of variables such as location, or campus branding. This section discusses the exclusive narratives used by Weber State, while common narratives will be addressed in chapter 10.

Director Teichert emphasized how narratives affect their target audience stating, “Stories are impactful. We want our recruiters and our ambassadors to share their own stories and get the dialogue moving with students.” They have also taken a different approach in that many of their stories were done through the mode of logos, rather than pathos, which in turn complemented their institutional identity and the commonsense message they delivered to students. “Our Vice-President has been a very logical person and

has been pushing for us to tell the logical story of our institution when it comes to financial aid, when it comes to outcomes, these kind of things. So we do that,” said Director Teichert.

Examples of these types of narratives came as in each of the 13 observed presentations, recruiters and/or ambassadors delivered messages under the theme of financial value and affordability. In each presentation a recruiter told a story of applying for scholarships and the simplicity of the application process for them. Multiple presenters discussed the DreamWeber program, a program created in 2010 to provide free tuition to students with an annual income lower than \$40,000. Often they described the financial difficulties to students, and then told their own stories about how daunting college may be, and that the DreamWeber program provided them an opportunity to get their degrees and not be bound by financial responsibilities they could not afford. One recruiter discussed not being eligible for scholarships, and how the affordability of Weber State made his college burden much easier, saying:

I had to pay for my school on my own. Before I went to college, I had to deliver plumbing supplies, and I had to save every penny so I could pay cash for my tuition. I thought that’s what college was like. I worked in school and graduated debt-free. And the fact that Weber State had such low tuition helped. I graduated debt-free with my Bachelor’s and my Master’s degree. And if I can do it, you can too.

In one presentation a recruiter made a semi-humorous jab at the rising cost of tuition with the narrative of the price he had to pay to get through college, saying “When I went to college I met a cute girl and used her for her books. She in turn used me for a ring, and a gown. So it worked out.”

Another dimension came as recruiters delivered narratives under the theme of academic resilience. A large portion of the scripted presentations came breaking down the six different colleges and the programs offered within. In each presentation, when the

presenting recruiter or ambassador displayed the sign of their corresponding college they often relayed the narrative as to why they selected that particular college, many of which entailed a particular faculty member or administrator assisting them in the selection process. In nine of the presentations, recruiters asked students if they were taking any classes in the concurrent enrollment program. Six presenters then told personal narratives of how they began taking college classes through Weber State at their own high school, and how this eased their transition into becoming a full-time college student. One ambassador told the narrative of how taking courses in the college of Engineering, Applied Science and Technology opened her eyes to the opportunities awaiting her once she graduated, saying, “One of my Engineering Professors took me under her wing, and showed me specific things to work on so that when I graduate next spring, I am going to be that much better off entering the workforce.” These responses partially answered RQ1b: What are the actual persuasive messages delivered to target audiences of perspective students both interpersonally, and digitally?

The final most common use of narratives came as recruiters deferred to their ambassadors and asked them to tell narratives about the engaging student life, many examples included cheering on their athletic teams. Multiple recruiters told narratives about cheering on their basketball teams in the famed Dee Events Center south of campus. Other recruiters talked about cheering on the men’s hockey team and the intense competitions developing with in-state rivals such as Utah State and BYU. In each of the 13 observed presentations, ambassadors discussed cheering on their football team that particular year, and how dominant they were in their conference, being crowned co-Big Sky



champions with SUU, and continuing their seasons well into the playoffs. One recruiter talked about witnessing their final game of the season:

It was like the most intense game of football I've ever watched. We flew out to Virginia and played number one-ranked James Madison, who had won like 25 games in a row. We were leading like the whole game until we lost on like a 47-yard field goal as time expired. We were all screaming, and going nuts. It was an experience unlike anything I've ever had in my life.

Another recruiter told the narrative of defeating Southern Utah University on the road in the playoffs, and how gratifying it was for them to beat them on their own field, saying, "Their fans were silent. They were embarrassed too. Like their big brother finally showed them who was boss, and there was nothing they could do about it."

### **Reputational Esteem**

While narratives were very prevalent in presentations, recruiters from Weber State delivered messages coded under the form of reputational esteem nearly as often as personal narratives. This was done assuming students recognized the prominence of the statistical reference, or the public figure/brand having a connection to their institution. Messages presented by Weber State both interpersonally and digitally were coded into all three categories; statistical, brand esteem, and individual esteem.

**Statistical Esteem.** Of the three subcategories of reputational esteem, Weber State delivered more statistical esteem messages both interpersonally, and digitally, than the other two subcategories combined. Both the first slide of their presentations and the opening pages of the guidebook given to students showed a conglomeration of statistical references to aspects of both Weber State and Ogden in general. Many examples followed similar pathways of the alternative institutions referencing the theme of academic resilience. Examples of this included how they have more than 225 different programs

available for students, their 21:1 student-to-teacher ratio, having a 99% grad school placement in honors programs, that 78 percent of the faculty have terminal degrees, how 85% of Weber graduates are employed within three months and earn an average of \$44,000 annually, and having the 3<sup>rd</sup> best online school in Utah. They also reference how both *U.S. News & World Report* and the *Princeton Review* rank them as “one of the best in the West”. One recruiter delivered a subjective statistic in her presentation stating how they had the very first crime lab in the state of Utah, followed by the statement, “It’s not the best, but it certainly is the first.”

Optimal location also showed a large number of examples. Some of the examples were similar to the alternative institutions highlighting the distance and opportunities surrounding the college. Examples included how Weber is “located on 500 acres at the base of the Wasatch Mountains”, how there are “six different campus locations in northern Utah”, how *USA Today* ranks Ogden having the “5<sup>th</sup> best Main Street in America”, and how they are “30+ minutes away from pro sports, Salt Lake City, Moab, Park City, state and national parks”. The previous reference, however, is somewhat misleading. While Weber State is in fact just over 30 minutes away from Salt Lake City, Park City, and local professional sports teams in the Utah Jazz and Real Salt Lake Soccer Club, the nearest national park is in Capital Reef, 255 miles from campus, nearly four hours away. While Moab is even further in the southeast corner of the state, nearly four-and-a-half hours from Ogden.

A unique dimension of their statistical references came as they displayed multiple examples highlighting the safety of Ogden city. This was unique to Weber in that much of their strategy was to remove any barriers and alleviate any concerns potential students

would have about attending their institution. Ogden does not have an ideal location as other institutions, much of which is attributed to the economic make-up of their city, and the higher levels of crime compared to the state as a whole. With that in mind, recruiters displayed the statistics to students and often reiterated how safe they felt as they attended Weber State. Examples included *Forbes.com* ranking Ogden as the “2<sup>nd</sup> most livable city in America”, *RentCollegePads.com* ranking Weber State as the “12<sup>th</sup> safest campus in the nation”, and how they are the “number one safest college in the state of Utah.” One recruiter presented these statistics and followed up with the satirical statement, “the further south you go, the more ghetto it gets”.

Statistical references were also seen under the theme of financial value and affordability. Examples included being ranked the “number one return on investment in Utah” by *Payscale.com*, “32<sup>nd</sup> lowest student debt among public universities in the nation” by the *Student Loan Report*, being “40% below the national average for in-state tuition”, giving away “over \$90 million in scholarships and financial aid”, and having “only 43% of students graduating with student debt”.

**Brand Esteem.** Weber State was in a unique position in that they did not fall in the category of an institution located in a small town, yet they did not have the notoriety of schools such as Utah State or the University of Utah. This classification gave them the distinct ability to give fewer brand esteem references, yet stronger, more prominent brands to which they have a connection. Examples included alumni having connections to brands such as Skull Candy, American Express, and Nike. Multiple recruiters referenced their business school being certified by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the same organization endorsing Ivy League schools such as Yale, and

Harvard. Multiple recruiters also referenced how students in their automotive program were able to work on a Rolls-Royce donated to the college. Again, there were fewer references to brand esteem, however the references were more notable.

**Individual Esteem.** Messages coded under the theme of individual esteem were those in which recruiters looked to signify affiliations they had with people of significance. The most common example seen in each of the thirteen presentations was the reference to NBA superstar Damian Lillard of the Portland Trailblazers, which in many instances saw recruiters ask students “how many of you have heard of Damian Lillard?” Lillard is without question the biggest name to come out of Weber State University, and his popularity has helped elevate their institution on a national level. Director Teichert discussed this:

After Damian was picked up by the Portland Trailblazers we said, okay we're going to use his name. We took a life-sized cut out everywhere with us, and we were the most popular school for a long time. It was crazy. They love us up in Portland by the way, it's fascinating. So I don't think you can underestimate that factor. If anything, it's sort of this subtle message that comes across, that hey, we've put more people in the NBA, we have great coaches, come here.

Multiple recruiters referenced another player in the National Basketball Association, Joel Bolomboy, describing how bigger athletic names were attending Weber State, and this would only continue to increase in the future.

### **Fear Appeals**

Fear Appeals was the least used strategy by recruiters for message content, which could be attributed to recruiters trying to create a positive image of their institution in the 30 minutes they had with students. While it is coded as a shared narrative, each school delivered a message about an experience they had at a larger institution, and the dissatisfaction occurring from the lack of connectivity between themselves and the faculty. In one presentation an ambassador talked about transferring from a larger institution

because they felt more of a statistic than an actual student. Another recruiter talked about how larger schools were both more broadcasted and had higher tuition rates for students.

In one presentation a recruiter delivered the experience:

I remember going to another school and in class, the only interaction we had was by using our phones through this fancy software. So here I am in this auditorium of like 300 other students and we're all staring at our phones trying to figure out how to interact with the teacher. I seriously felt like we were all just lost in the shuffle.

## **Conclusion**

Weber State University delivers a message of simplicity and opportunity for any student interested in attending their institution. Much of this is driven by their open enrollment rates, their low cost of tuition, and their variety of academic programs. This can be a detriment to some students as they have a negative predisposition of it being "Just Weber". Director Teichert addressed this:

It's really a two-edged sword, on the one hand we're open enrollment, and so anyone can get in, it's a great easy message. On the flip side, that open enrollment message can have a little bit of backlash, because then people say, "Well you're just easy to get in to." And that's probably what some of the Davis County is coming back and saying. It's not that they have bad associations with Weber, but if anyone can get into it, it can't be that great.

Despite this stigma, Weber State has continued to grow instrumentally with the implementation of their concurrent enrollment program, as well as their influx of returning adult, and non-traditional students. This in turn has transformed Weber State from being simply a fallback institution, to the most logical, reasonable institution with notoriety and well within their budget. These opportunities see recruiters deliver the message to see how "just going to Weber can be just right for you".

## CHAPTER 7. THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH: “THE” BRAND

“Milk is milk is milk. It’s all white. There are primary differences, like skim to whole. But then in each of those categories, you’ve got your store brand, and then you’ve got the other brand, and there’s usually a price difference. When most people choose the cheaper value, they don’t see the benefit of the higher cost. We are the more valuable brand to choose.”

--Mateo Remsburg, Assistant Vice President of Admissions

“We’re not looking for well-rounded students at the University of Utah, we’re looking for well-rounded people.”

--Brian Best, In-state Admissions Counselor

### History

Two years after pioneer settlers entered the Salt Lake Valley, leader Brigham Young created a Board of Regents for the state of Utah. One year later in November of 1850, the Board of Regents established the University of Deseret, a public institution held in the homes of local residents. Initial courses were primarily focused on hard sciences, and admissions were open to men only. Economic hardship forced the school to close in 1852 for a period of 16 years, where it reopened at a centralized location in downtown Salt Lake City. The University of Deseret slowly grew enrollment for roughly three decades, until 1892, when the Legislature recognized the school as Utah’s primary institution, thus changing the name to the University of Utah. State and federal changes shortly followed as Utah was officially recognized as a State by the federal government. This in turn assisted the development of the University of Utah as Congress granted 60 acres of land on the east bench of the valley to be utilized for a brick and mortar campus, completed in 1900.

The University of Utah maintained its reputation as the flagship university of the state throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while other comparable institutions such as Utah State University and Brigham Young University developed around them. Throughout the 1940’s and 50’s, the University of Utah looked to distinguish itself in specific fields, most notably

the field of medicine. Prominent researchers such as Willem Koff, Louis Goodman, and Homer Warner built this identity through distinguished biomedical research. The University later partnered with Primary Children's Hospital in 1977 establishing a world-renowned reputation for pediatrics. Breakthroughs continued in cancer research, cardiology, and molecular genetics, which cemented the University of Utah as a premier institution worldwide.

Another fundamental element shaping the identity of the school is the development of their athletic program. Historically, the University of Utah has the most recognized athletic program in the state, playing in multiple Final Fours in men's basketball, and having a stellar women's gymnastics and co-ed downhill skiing program winning a combined 19 national championships since 1982. They also have some of the most recognized athletic alumni from their institution, with names such as Tom Chambers, Andre Miller, Andrew Bogut, and Alex Smith being former athletes. A turning point for their program came in 2010 when they were invited to be a member of the Pac-12 Conference, joining other well-known schools as members of the "Power 5" conferences (ACC, Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-12, SEC). This distinction put them more in the focus of national media and recognizes them as the only school from the state of Utah in a Power 5 conference.

Their athletic program also dealt with political controversies in recent years as their nickname and mascot have come under fire. In 2005, the NCAA declared a policy banning any institutions whose mascots or nicknames depict any "hostile" or "abusive" American Indian mascots, nicknames, and imagery. Institutions such as St. John's (N.Y), Louisiana Monroe, Arkansas State, North Dakota, and the University of Illinois removed or changed any negative connections they had with American Indians. The University of Utah was one

of four schools, (Florida State, Central Michigan, Mississippi College) who successfully appealed the ruling and were granted permission to keep their controversial nickname and mascot. The Utes are recognized today represented by “Swoop” the hawk as their mascot.

Currently, the University of Utah is a four-year public university located in Salt Lake City, offering Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctorate degrees. As of fall, 2017, it is the third largest university in the state of Utah (Brigham Young University, Utah Valley University) with nearly 32,000 students enrolled at its main campus (StepUp, 2017). It recognizes itself as Utah’s primary flagship university, and the only school in Utah accepted as a pure R-1 institution. In 1988, it was adopted as a space-grant institution, one of three Utah schools in that program (Brigham Young University, Utah State University).

### **Institutional Identity**

The identity of the University of Utah is rooted in its historical heritage as the original source of higher education in the state of Utah. This blends into the superlative message that they are the “premier” and “best” university in the state students will have the opportunity to attend in the fall. One of the first statements a student reads about the University of Utah as they open the student guidebook given to them in the presentations, is that they are the “Best Buy School of 2017”. The guidebook continues on referencing multiple statistics and statements with the word “best” as the descriptive adjective, such as “Learn from the best”, and having the “Best university buildings around the world”. In multiple observed presentations recruiters used the adjective “best” to describe various aspects of their institution ranging from academia, to athletics, to clubs and organizations, to off-campus student life. In one presentation a recruiter referenced the utopian characteristics of the Salt Lake Valley with the ultimatum, “We have the best location. No



one else can say that." In another presentation, a recruiter offered a similar statement saying, "Between the mountains and the city life, you really do get the best of both worlds here." Multiple recruiters made the statement, "We have the best snow in the entire world in Salt Lake City."

Being the best has its drawbacks in the sense that not every student receiving the recruiting materials or observing the presentations will be able to attend the University of Utah. Out of all the public institutions in the state, the University of Utah has the lowest acceptance rate at 76% (College Simply Report, 2017). A theme of academic rigor is implanted in their standards as a stand-alone R-1 institution, not open for anyone to attend. Assistant Vice-President of Admissions, Mateo Remsburg addressed this:

We've got a great offering, but we're not the best place for everyone. We distinguish ourselves at the U, because if you look at the academic standards to be admitted, the U has the most rigorous. And if you look at the other institutions in the state, everyone else offers associate degrees, and the U doesn't. I've been in some presentations where students have different preferences about what they want in a college, and sometimes I'll just have to say, "The U is not the place for you." Which is fine. Not everyone wants to go to an R-1 school.

As meticulous the academic standards may be at the University of Utah, the overwhelming message recruiters delivered to their students was not one of cynical doubt in being admitted, but one more of a utopian goal they can accomplish if they "imagine" themselves being a student. This message partially answers RQ1a: What are the intended persuasive message strategies designed by admissions offices for target audiences of perspective students? The word "Imagine" is a staple and seen on nearly every page of the guidebook. On the cover of the guidebook the phrase "ImagineU" is superimposed over a panoramic image of their campus. The following page gives the greeting "Welcome to ImagineU" with the explanatory phrase saying, "One thousand five hundred and thirty four

(sic) acres of you can achieve anything. Here there are no ceilings for your ideas, no walls for your dreams.” Assistant Vice-President Remsburg talked about how the University of Utah’s imagine message portrays the institution as a destination.

From a marketing perspective, what we’re trying to say is “here are all the opportunities that you have to succeed”. We have a lot to offer students from ways to get involved, to academics, the variety of programs, the quality of programs, the opportunities to do research. What we try to focus on is refining our message to help students see how we differentiate from other schools, and help them see what it is that we have to offer that the other schools don’t. And then from that point, help them imagine themselves being students at the University of Utah.

ImagineU is the tagline sent by both recruiters in their presentations, and through calls to action to prospective students in the guidebook. Examples from the guidebook asked students to “Imagine more than a college town. Imagine a full-fledged college city”, to “Imagine a tier-one teaching and research university”, to “Imagine engaged learning that will prepare you for your future”, and to “Imagine good times. Followed by more.” At the top of the guidebook reads the header, “Imagine. Do.” All of these promote prospective students to envision themselves at a top-tier institution with the best options in many areas available to them when they attend.

### **Categorical Message Content**

At the beginning of each presentation, students were given guidebooks with the above mentioned “ImagineU” scattered throughout the text. As students read these messages, recruiters then initiated the delivery of their presentations, which featured a short two-minute video entitled “ImagineU” followed by their outlining of what they would be covering in that session. Out of the five observed institutions, two adhered to the most inflexible script in their delivery of messages: The University of Utah, and Utah State. They were strict in the sense of minimal interaction between the recruiters and the student

audience. Their unsociable delivery created a challenge only recruiters from the University of Utah faced; an overabundance of students attending their presentations. Because the University of Utah is the flagship institution, they were often viewed as a legitimate option a majority of students looked to be admitted to in the fall. This was seen in the overwhelming number of high school juniors and seniors who attended their sessions.

The College Day events are coordinated with geographic location, in that each high school has a “host” school, or a school where the majority of their graduating seniors attend each year. For example, schools in Cache County recognized Utah State University as their host institution, whereas, schools in Washington County recognized Dixie State University as their host institution. Recruiters from the “host” institution were always placed in the largest room possible at their corresponding high school largely because a vast majority of students would attend their presentations. In some situations, high school counselors broke students up into designated segments and instructed students to attend their corresponding sessions, allowing recruiters from host institutions to not be overwhelmed with an oversized audience.

While host institutions were given the largest capacity room at their designated high school, in every observed presentation, the University of Utah was given the next largest capacity room in the high school to accommodate the number of students expressing interest. This is attributed to the assumption that they are the flagship university for the state, and in turn, the most popular and well-known option available to students. In each of the 15 observed presentations, the University of Utah exceeded their capacity with students, oftentimes turning them away because of the lack of space for their attendance.

Because of the abundance of students in their College Day sessions, combined with the rigid design of their presentations, University of Utah recruiters faced the challenge of keeping students focused and alert for the entire 35-minute session. This in turn reduced the amount of interaction they were able to have with their audience because of the sheer size of potential students who were in attendance. At times, recruiters gave a public disclaimer to students asking them to be attentive and quiet throughout the duration of the presentation.

Taking both the challenges of large audiences and the rigidity of the presentation design, recruiters from the University of Utah still presented a systematic delivery of information to their students about why attending their school would be a viable option. Essentially, asking that students “imagine” themselves on campus, enjoying the college life, and appreciating all the “best” amenities only students attending the University of Utah had at their disposal. At the beginning of the presentations, recruiters followed a sequence of topics such as location, campus, learning, involvement, and admissions. These five topics were coded and categorized into the five themes of message content. The content was also delivered in three categories with theoretical application: narrative, reputational esteem, and fear appeals. The University of Utah was unique in that reputational esteem was the dominant category of message form, while narrative was the dominant category for the remaining four participating institutions.

### **Reputational Esteem**

The University of Utah was exclusive in that the majority of the coded messages found from observance promoted the idea of reputational esteem to accentuate the value of their institution to their audience. This reference was done assuming students recognized

the distinction of the reference, public figure or brand having a connection to their institution. This category is segmented into the sub-categories of statistical, individual, and brand esteem. There could be a relationship between the use of this category and the overall status of the institution itself. It is a flagship, R-1 university, a member of the Pac-12 athletic conference, and proudly recognized as one of the top healthcare institutions in the entire world. Those traits make a connection with having an elite mentality, and could relate to why reputational esteem was the most coded category of message content for this institution.

**Statistical esteem.** Quantitative references were present in all 15 observed presentations, the student guidebook, and correspondence through digital messages to future students. Many of these statistical references were in relation to the university being one of the “best” institutions in that particular category. Some of the most common examples seen in all three channels were how the University of Utah was ranked “number one in quality, nationally”. Another example many recruiters used in the transition from opening their presentation to academic appreciation was how the University of Utah had the number one video game design program in the entire country. This was also a claim made on the first page of the student guidebook.

Other examples of statistical esteem came as each recruiter discussed how the University of Utah has over 600 clubs on campus, more than any other school in the state. Also, how their scholarship office awards over \$7 million each year, again, a statistic no other institution can match. All seven observed recruiters referenced their on-campus library, holding 3.7 million books, the largest in the state. In other presentations, some

recruiters brought up perks that students would have in the library by showcasing their ovarian-designed furniture:

We have these things in the library called “womb chairs” and oh my gosh, they’re like the most comfortable thing you will ever sit in in your entire life. They just suck you in. They are \$5,000 each, and they are well worth every penny. It doesn’t matter how you sit in them, they’re just comfortable. Hence the name. Also, hence why they cost, \$5,000.

Students also received an abundance of messages in the guidebooks, with statistical references on each page supporting the legitimacy of the institution in many facets. The opening page lists how they are the “#10 Pharmacy School”, a “Top 100 University 13 years in a row”, and named one of the “50 most green universities in America.” Other examples from the booklet include how they are “#5 for Return on Investment”, the “15<sup>th</sup> Best Entrepreneur program in the country”, have received “more than \$459 million in research funding”, and voted the “#3 Best City for Young Professionals”. It is assumed that the University of Utah is able to list more statistical esteem references in their persuasive messages than other school simply because of their national notoriety in specific fields, as well as from their historical background.

**Brand Esteem.** The University of Utah relied more than any of the five participating institutions on references to affiliations they had with prominent organizations and brands to strengthen their position in the students’ minds. One of the most commonly mentioned referenced how the institution was a member of the Pac-12 athletic conference. This prestige was expounded upon as recruiters referenced alternate Pac-12 schools such as UCLA, USC, the University of Oregon, and Arizona State University as comparable institutions. In multiple presentations, a recruiter made the statement, “We’re pretty much held to the same standards as Stanford is, we’re just that good.” While this statement may

be valid in regards to NCAA regulations, it does not hold true in the classroom as the University of Utah's admissions rate is 76% of applicants, while Stanford University is just under 5% (College Simply Report, 2017).

Brand esteem messages were also a large part of the University of Utah's presentation on student life. In each of the 15 observations recruiters referenced outdoor recreation opportunities such as Brighton, Alta, Snowbird, and Park City ski resorts. Four recruiters followed up these statements with reminders that the 2002 Winter Olympic Games were held at some of these resorts. Their recruiting script then contrasted with references to the city life of Salt Lake City and how students enjoyed going to City Creek Shopping Center, The Gateway, or watching the Utah Jazz play at the Vivint Smart Home Arena. Near the end of their presentations, recruiters transitioned to talk about student housing options, to which each one referenced specific on-campus housing units built to house athletes at the 2002 Winter Olympic Games.

Brand esteem messages were also recognized as recruiters discussed career options students potentially had available to them once they graduated. Their presentation transitioned to a slide which recruiters read verbatim telling students about how University of Utah graduates had been hired at large companies such as Goldman-Sachs, Intermountain Healthcare, EA Sports, L3 Technologies, and Adobe. The final corporation was often referenced with the recently built headquarters in Utah County, and how the University of Utah had a strong relationship with them, which in turn caused them to be constantly hiring alumni from their graduating classes.

One of the most interesting references of brand esteem came in a presentation in Cache Valley as a recruiter talked about their student athletic club, the "Mighty Utah

Student Section” or “Muss”. She told students how the MUSS was sponsored by the restaurant chain, Red Robin. To which one student asked, “Who are they?”. There are no Red Robin franchises in Cache Valley, therefore Brand Esteem did not have the same effect with this particular audience. This interaction reflects the rigid nature of their presentations, and in some cases not recognizing the audience to which they were speaking.

**Individual Esteem.** Messages coded under the theme of individual esteem were those in which recruiters looked to signify affiliations they had with people of significance. The identity of the University of Utah is one of value and merit, being the flagship institution of the state. Therefore, they recognized more popular figures having an affiliation with their institution than smaller schools such as Dixie State University, or Weber State University.

Examples of these messages were only recorded in the observed presentations as both their guidebooks and digital communication did not have any type of these messages. All seven recruiters in each of the 15 observed presentations delivered multiple examples of this type of message. Examples include recruiters discussing well-known musicians who had performed in concerts on their campus such as the Foo Fighters, Justin Timberlake, Keisha, Wiz Khalifa, Scotty McCreery, and Kid Cuddy. In some presentations recruiters referenced notable athletic figures who had previously attended their institution. Examples of these figures made in multiple presentations include current NBA basketball players Kyle Kuzma, and Andrew Bogut, as well as NFL quarterback Alex Smith.

## **Narratives**



The University of Utah distinguished itself from the five participants by using fewer narrative messages in their observed presentations. However, this is in contradiction to the intent of the presentations as a whole, with their admissions office as Assistant Vice-President Remsburg discussed his experience with the persuasive mode of Pathos being more influential than the alternate modes of rhetoric:

What I've found in my career is that students are going to remember the story more than they're going to remember facts like us having 34,000 students. They might remember keywords like "big" and "opportunity", but the story is what creates that emotional response with them. The story draws them in. So again, it's the notion that, what kind of emotional response or emotional connection can we make with them in our presentations?

The University of Utah's approach partially answers RQ1a: What are the intended persuasive message strategies designed by admissions offices for target audiences of perspective students? VP Remsburg has been the director of in-state recruiting for this institution for the previous nine years and discussed how they want their recruiters to share as many personal experiences with their audience as they can. He said, "Everything is an experience, and we want them to talk about their experience here at the University of Utah as much as they can."

The intended strategy of narratives and storytelling did somewhat contradict what messages were delivered to students in their individual presentations, which also partially answers RQ1b: What are the actual persuasive messages delivered to target audiences of perspective students both interpersonally, and digitally? As previously discussed, the University of Utah heavily relied on messages of reputational esteem. Despite this incongruity, recruiters did still deliver narratives to students which added a dynamic dimension to their overall presentations. As referenced in previous chapters, narratives were coded into two sub-categories: shared narratives, or common narratives delivered by

recruiters from all five institutions, and exclusive narratives, personalized narratives about their institution which were unique to their school and could not be replicated, oftentimes because of the specificity of variables such as location, or campus branding.

In their presentations, recruiters from the University of Utah delivered multiple narratives linked to the theme of academic resilience. Some narratives were partially coded under the category of brand esteem because of the content. Each of the seven recruiters told the narrative of a young girl wanting to become a marine biologist, taking college courses at a school in California, then transferring back to the University of Utah to become the only marine biologist major in their history. They supplemented this narrative with the ImagineU message of advantageous opportunities the institution provides for students. Other examples of academic resilience narratives came as recruiters recounted stories about the library on campus. One recruiter saying, “we have study rooms totally encased in glass so you can write on the walls and erase them however you want. I saw this when I went to the U, and was blown away.” Another recruiter told a meta-narrative about how their library was so large “that on my first day of the semester a graduate student warned me to place a trail of cookies behind me like Hansel and Gretel, just so I wouldn’t get lost.” Five of the seven recruiters accentuated the size of their library with the narrative:

So you guys have seen the movie “Monster’s Inc.” right? You know how they have that huge warehouse with millions of doors in it, and how there’s this giant machine that grabs the doors and brings them to the monsters? Well our library is just like that. The first time I used it I submitted a name to the front computer, and it sent these machines down among the 3.7 million books and got it out just like in Monster’s Inc. It was so cool!

Recruiters told additional narratives under the code of engaging student life. In multiple presentations, recruiters talked about a campus event called PlazaFest where campus clubs and organizations come to recruit students. Five of the seven recruiters

talked about “awesome” and “fun” bi-monthly events called “Crimson Nights”; on-campus student socials held from 9pm-2am every other Wednesday. Another recruiter told the narrative of how their school holds a “real-life battleship” competition, where students get in kayaks and attempt to submerge one another.

### **Fear Appeals**

One similarity the University of Utah shared with the alternate four participating institutions was how fear appeals messages were the least used strategy. A key difference between the University of Utah’s approach and the remaining four was the scale to which they were being compared. Each of the four institutions used fear appeals messages under the theme of academic resilience, often rehearsing narratives about experiences they had attending larger institutions around the state, which in turn reduced them to being labeled as a statistic, and not an individual student. The University of Utah cannot share this position in that they are one of the largest institutions in the state, and could potentially be the unnamed university each of the other institutions were referencing.

While the University of Utah could not feasibly use fear appeals messages to compare their institutions to fellow in-state schools such as Utah State University, or Brigham Young University, they did use a similar comparative approach to schools outside the state of Utah, which are essentially their most formidable competitors. This was done by explaining to students how if they wanted academic prestige by attending a “big-name” university, going out of state would not be worth the return on their investment. Multiple recruiters referenced the amount of debt out-of-state students tallied as they moved their freshman year. Other recruiters referred to the disappointment they would potentially experience based off the acceptance rates of more distinguished schools. One recruiter

named a specific institution and used a fear appeals approach with no substantive evidence saying, “If you got to a school like Boston College, you will be absolutely miserable.” Again, the fear appeals approach was similar, the scale to which it was executed was magnified based off the tier of their own institution.

## **Conclusion**

The overall mantra of the University of Utah is that students have the capability to accomplish anything that they want to, as long as they can imagine those possibilities in their own minds. Whether students want to study in Antarctica, or create their own major, the messages sent to them are contingent on where they are focusing their own attention, and whether they can imagine themselves accomplishing these tasks. Vice-President Remsburg discussed how this “ImagineU” message separates them from the rest of the institutions in the state:

People can have a signature experience at the University of Utah. Everyone has their own niche, but we’re really the only school that can say, we are 15 minutes from 90 miles of hiking and mountain biking trails, and we’re 15 minutes from the largest metropolitan place in Utah. Very few institutions in the country can even say that. We have the best of both worlds. We provide a unique opportunity for all types of students, and we want to help them envision that opportunity.

Complementing the “ImagineU” forecast is also the paramount message that the University of Utah is second to none and one of the “best” opportunities students will ever have available to them in their own lives. Comparable to the other in-state institutions, and fellow participants of this study, they can easily make this claim and match any prestigious claim or fact. However, many of those claims are in comparison to larger out-of-state institutions such as Stanford, Arizona State University or UCLA. Which, if 70% of the student body are drawn from the state of Utah, are those comparisons truly necessary?

## **CHAPTER 8. SOUTHERN UTAH UNIVERSITY: THE CUSTOM FIT**

“Every day we ask ourselves how can we provide a more personalized approach to each of our prospective students? That is the challenge.”

--Brandon Wright, Assistant Vice-President for Enrollment Management

“Be a cannonballer.”

--Joshua Wolfe, In-State Admissions Advisor

## **History**

In 1897, a small town in southwest Utah was identified as the new location of a regional institution for the freshly recognized state of Utah. Cedar City, a small town less than 1,000 people constructed a makeshift hall housing what would be known as the Branch Normal School, an institution supervised by a larger parent institution, the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. Sixteen years later, political lobbyists reformed the direction of the school, replacing the University of Utah with Utah State University as the governing body. This change also prompted administration to rename the institution to Branch Agricultural College (BAC), largely because of the agricultural footings of Utah State.

For forty years, the BAC acted as a full subsidiary regional campus for its parent institution in Logan. However, continuous growth prompted another name change to the College of Southern Utah in 1953. A large portion of the institutional expansion came through the partnership with Zion National Park, promoting the growth of an outdoor recreation program, giving students a scenic hands-on lab sponsored by the federal government. Another contributing factor was the creation of the Utah Shakespeare Festival in 1961, a campus-sponsored annual commemoration of the works of William Shakespeare. The festival grew to become a bedrock event in Cedar City, and shaped the institution to being well-known for their theater and performing arts programs, often dubbing the slogan “College of the Arts” alongside their name.

One of the biggest changes came in 1969 when the institution detached themselves from Utah State University and became its own full functioning liberal arts college known as Southern Utah State College. There is some discord from surrounding institutions regarding the institution's growth, much of which is centered around the ethical questions of political influence. Throughout the 1970's and 80's, the population of Cedar City hovered under 10,000 people, with an even smaller quantity of enrolled students. However, the budgetary allotment was substantially inflated per capita than the surrounding institutions, much of which can be attributed to members of the state Legislature and Board of Regents, such as Dixie Leavitt, Haze Hunter, and future Utah state governor Mike Leavitt having an affinity for Southern Utah State College.

In what is seen as a heroic act for the citizens of Cedar City, and a controversial moment in Utah higher education history for supporters of the surrounding institutions, Governor Norman Bangerter signed a last-second, midnight legislation in February 1991, changing Southern Utah State College to what it is known now as Southern Utah University. The "midnight miracle" is notoriously regarded because of the failure to comply with state rules and regulations for the advancement of a university. One month prior, then Weber State College became a four-year university following years of preparation and continued compliance with state legislation. Southern Utah, however had not appeared on the ballot until the final week, and utilized the momentum from political endorsers to bypass the arduous route to becoming a university.

Since the status elevation, Southern Utah University has continued to grow in student enrollment matched by state funding. Academically, SUU focused on being a healthy, outdoor institution, which was seen by their continued development of outdoor

and environmental education programs, as well as in health sciences. The “Thunderbirds” have also elevated their athletic program becoming an NCAA affiliate in 1991, and a member of the Big Sky conference in 2012, sponsoring 17 NCAA sanctioned sports, which is remarkable for an institution located in a town of less than 30,000 people.

Currently, Southern Utah University is a four-year public university offering Associate, Bachelor’s, and Master’s degrees. As of fall 2017, it is the second smallest university in the state of Utah, with an enrollment just over 10,000 students (SUU-ER, 2017). While Southern Utah draws structural comparisons to Weber State University, it differs in that it is not an open-enrollment institution, with an admissions rate of 78% (College Simply Report). Despite similar admissions rates as the University of Utah, a flagship, R-1 institution, Southern Utah University places a heavy emphasis on pedagogy, and often relays this in their broadcast prominence of having a personalized approach with their students.

### **Institutional Identity**

While each school has their own niche they promote through their literature and presentations, the identity of Southern Utah University is not as distinct. It is one of the youngest universities in the state, therefore coinciding with its dearth of academic esteem. It uses the mantra of having a “traditional” college town. However, when one-third of the city’s population are college students, that diminishes the impact. Those residential numbers also influence the monopoly on local students, as there are only two high schools within a 50 mile radius. Additionally, while Cedar City is in southwest Utah, 47 miles north of picturesque St. George, it is over 3,000 feet higher in elevation, which puts them in the



same climate as Utah State, thus hampering their ability to market a warm weather, outdoor lifestyle for students.

Another variable influencing their identity crisis can be how they have often played the role of being the “little brother” institution latching on to assistance from larger, more authoritative schools. Nearly half of its history was being administered by larger schools in northern Utah until it chartered its independence in the late 1960’s. That same pattern was seen in the 1980’s and 90’s as it jumped on the coattails of momentum by Weber State University’s identity change by the Utah State Legislation.

While these moments can be viewed as a detriment to a brand, Southern Utah University spins their own messages to students as to what they represent both in and out of the classroom, one of the keys being how SUU is one of the most personal institutions available. Assistant Vice-President of Admissions Brandon Wright talked about how vital their tailoring has been in shaping their character:

It’s all about the personalization. And students knowing that is crucial. Here’s why. Weber State is a great school. Utah State’s a great school. The U is a great school. All of these schools are good schools, but let’s take Utah Valley University for instance. Once again I am not knocking them in any way, shape, or form, but here’s one of the biggest differences. If you call UVU, you will talk to a machine. You call us, you will talk to a real person. Whether it’s financial aid, whether it’s advising, whether it’s admissions, faculty, it does not matter. You talk to a real living person from the very beginning. No one else at any of the other schools can say that. We can.

Customer flexibility and personalization is recognized as one of the five coded themes of content, with each school delivering messages of “personability” and optimal interpersonal interactions. However, SUU brandished that theme as their distinguishable difference, in that they are the most personalized institutional opportunity for students expressing interest. One example is the faculty-to-student ratio. While each school

recognizes the quantitative proportion their classrooms provide, SUU does in fact have one of the lowest ratios at 19:1 (SUU-ER, 2017). This ratio draws from the fact that enrollment at SUU is slightly over 10,000 students, the second smallest population in Utah, reinforcing the personal nature of the classroom experience.

Personalization is the axiom SUU markets to students in both their literature and their presentations. Similar to “imagine” for the University of Utah, and “destination” for Dixie State, “personalization” is the most dominant expression supplementing the persuasive messages to future students. This message partially answers RQ1a: What are the intended persuasive message strategies designed by admissions offices for target audiences of perspective students? Vice-President Wright discussed how this rebranding was one of his main concentrations when first hired at SUU and is something they focus on implementing in their strategic messages:

When I first got here we weren't very customer-centric. But since then, it's gone up. It's a personalization thing. So not only are they getting a very good personalization when we're out on the road talking to them. When they call us, when they come in for a tour, it's personalized. It used to be group, now it's one-on-one. We also do really extensive training in the summer with our recruiters and ambassadors. We have them tell us why they came here. What was the reason why they came. What was the difference that made them choose to come to us. And people love that. And they make it personalized, and when someone hears that, they can really relate to that.

The intended strategy of personalization does coincide with what messages were delivered to students in their individual presentations, which also partially answers RQ1b: What are the actual persuasive messages delivered to target audiences of perspective students both interpersonally, and digitally? Each of the six recruiters in the 15 observed presentations presented a message about personalizing an education for prospective students through academics, student life, and career opportunities. Common phrases such

as “right fit”, “personal connection”, and “cater to you” were heavily saturated throughout the dialogue and delivered to students ensuring they understood how adaptive faculty, staff, and administration would be for them if they attended their institution the following fall.

Personalization is the distinctive mantra of SUU, however their institutional identity is also framed in that of academic prestige, similar to larger institutions such as Utah State University, Brigham Young University, or the University of Utah. While Southern Utah University may not compete academically with the previously mentioned institutions, much of their dialogue focused on their various accolades and national rankings. In each of the observed presentations, recruiters discussed either how SUU was voted one of the “Best Colleges” by the Princeton Review, or how they were ranked by U.S. News World Report as one of the “Best in the West” for multiple years in each category. Oftentimes these references were supplemented with narratives on how their graduates were just as qualified and respected as graduates from the R-1 and private universities in the region.

This prestige could also be linked to additional factors such as admissions standards, and tuition cost. As stated previously, SUU has the second lowest acceptance rate for public schools in the state of Utah. Coinciding with that factor is the cost of tuition: SUU has the second highest cost of tuition of all public institutions in the state of Utah. This is in contrast to the academic tier to which they sit. While both SUU and Weber State have nearly identical histories as far as the development of their institutions as a whole, there is a near \$1,000 difference in their tuition prices for in-state students. Throughout the 1990’s and 2000’s, SUU saw significant rises in tuition cost under Presidents Gerald Sherratt and Steven Bennion. However, both application and admissions rates did not have a positive

correlation with those increased costs. SUU looked to be recognized as an elevated option for students to attend, and not a typical open admissions institution. Their distinction was also rooted in the development of the theater arts programs, and the partnership with the Utah Shakespeare Festival, giving off the impression that they were somewhat of a liberal arts institution, or as some administration referred to them as the “Harvard of the West”.

While these tactics were strategic in their design, their effect did not have the intended outcome, as throughout the late 2000’s, admissions numbers steadily declined and smaller schools such as Dixie State University surpassed them in total headcount. This in turn led to the hiring of President Scott Wyatt from Snow College in 2013, who altered the institutional mission and agenda from one of seclusion to a more outdoor lifestyle custom-fit for all potential students. Currently, an additional key message SUU broadcasts to potential students is how they are the “University of the Parks”, referencing their ideal geographic location to Zion, Bryce Canyon, Capitol Reef, and Arches National Parks. This was often seen as one of the opening statements in the observed presentations by multiple recruiters as they painted a picture of how aesthetically pleasing the backdrop of their institution was for their students.

Both messages relating to the outdoor lifestyle, and the optimal personalization were axioms Southern Utah recruiters utilized in their presentations, and would often dovetail these themes with other delivered messages about their school. While the presentation featured messages coded under the five key themes for message content, those messages oftentimes were delivered through the lens of students at Southern Utah University enjoying a prestigious university tailored to them resting in the shadow of some of the most picturesque environments they will ever witness.

## Categorical Message Content

Observed presentations were graded on a level of flexibility for the script of their presentations. Flexibility is the level of dyadic interaction between students and presenters. Some institutions were more rigorous and strict on their script, while others were more malleable and exchanged more dialogue. SUU was one of three schools categorized as flexible in their interactions, thus resulting in more dialogue in their deliveries. SUU used supplementary visual aids through Prezi, and had a predetermined format for their deliveries, however they were not bound by this supplement, as in every observed presentation recruiters often deviated from the predetermined course and adjusted their message based off audience participation. Examples included recruiters opening their presentations by asking students “what do you want to know about Southern Utah University?”, or “what are some questions you have about going to SUU?”. In one observation a recruiter made the statement that their presentation would hinge on whatever direction the students wanted to take them saying, “We can go anywhere you want. So tell us, what are the most important things you’re wondering about.” Vice-President Wright talked about the unique structure of their presentations:

We feed off the audience. Right from the start we ask them a few questions about what they’d like to know about. And then once a kid or two starts asking a question, and they feel more comfortable, they start asking more questions, and then we start getting a lot more questions, and it turns out to be much more productive. It's not just, let's just sit there and spew it for 30 minutes, it's much more productive.

This format was supported by their use of Prezi as their digital supplement, as they were not bound by a slide-by-slide format and could adjust their message based on how the audience directed them through discussion. This type of presentation style aligns with the theme of personalization SUU markets as their core message, and also partially answers

RQ1b: What are the actual persuasive messages delivered to target audiences of perspective students both interpersonally, and digitally? Vice-President Wright reiterated the importance of a personalized message in his discussion:

We've invested in a better presentation, both in technology and in delivery. We invested in a ton of videos. Invested in higher quality videos. That sent the message to students like, "Oh my gosh, look at this school. Look at what it has to offer. Look at all the great things that are there." Also, because they used to be doing Power Points from one slide to the next. Making a presentation that is interactive. Our presentations are all personalized to the groups we are talking to. It's completely interactive. So when our recruiters are on the road, it's personalized to whoever is being shown it, a lot of which is based on how the audience responds.

As recruiters from SUU personalized their presentations in their delivery, they were also very clear about the points of information they wanted their students to grasp by the end of the presentation, which they outlined from the very beginning: affordability, location, student life, academia, and hands-on learning. The content was then delivered in three different categories for message content with theoretical application: narrative, reputational esteem, and fear appeals.

### **Narratives**

The most common category of message content came as recruiters used personal stories or narratives as persuasive messages. Results also showed narratives being coded into two sub-categories: shared narratives, or common narratives that were delivered by recruiters from all five institutions, and exclusive narratives, personalized narratives about their institution which were unique to their school and could not be replicated, oftentimes because of the specificity of variables such as location, or campus branding. This section discusses the exclusive narratives used by SUU, while common narratives will be addressed in chapter 10.

Observed presentations from SUU were the most flexible of the five participating institutions, which in turn gave recruiters a more fluid direction for them to interject their own personalized narratives either predetermined or extemporaneous. Vice-President Wright discussed the value narratives bring to presentations and how relevant those approaches are to the students, saying, “Our presentations are all about storytelling. It's all about how can I make a connection with that prospective student, and how can I tell a story that's fun and unique, that will make that connection with them?”

In the 15 observed presentations, all six recruiters from SUU delivered multiple narratives linked to the theme of optimal location, which coincided with their branding of being the “University of the Parks”. Each recruiter told a personal story about taking a day trip to Zion National Park, directly east of Cedar City, and how no other institution had that privilege. Oftentimes these were supplemented with experiences of hiking Angel’s Landing, one of “the most breathtaking outdoor experiences in Southern Utah”. Some recruiters told the story of how some of their academic labs were held in the outdoors, again reiterating the optimal location of SUU. One example was a recruiter discussing how his professor sent an e-mail stating that their lab would be held in the “red rocks of LaVerkin”, 25 miles south of Cedar City, where they then spent all night collecting insects for their biology lab.

Another dimension of their optimal location narratives came as recruiters discussed the various options surrounding Cedar City, and how they were the gateway to enjoying those benefits. This occurred as presenters described a nearby location and corresponding distance, and then expounded on an experience they had because of the optimization of Cedar City’s location. Common examples related to Las Vegas being 2½ hours south, and how they enjoyed driving down for weekend trips. Other examples included taking quick

trips to Los Angeles, Phoenix, and Moab. One ambassador told the narrative of how after class she and her roommates would take a short drive to Navajo Lake to wakeboard. She said, “We do this all the time. And sometimes when we’re bored we go up to Cascade Falls. It’s so pretty there.”

Another facet of SUU’s narratives were those told with the theme of engaging student life. Each of the six recruiters described the school tradition of freshmen students walking under the arches of the clock tower surrounded by faculty and staff, following which, they complete this walk again on the day of graduation their senior year. Three of the recruiters told the narrative of an opposing football coach at Portland State University calling the residents of Cedar City the “Whos from Whoville”. One recruiter described the situation:

He has the audacity to call us something like that. So you know what we did? We made these huge signs of The Grinch and brought them all to the game. It was the biggest crowd of “Whos” to ever go to a football game. And after it was over, I mean, after we beat them, we all joined hands and started singing “Fah-Who Foraze”. It was literally the highlight of my entire college experience being there with everyone.

The final theme of narratives used by SUU presenters were those of customer flexibility and personalization, which again coincides with the fundamental message of SUU being a personalized experience for all students. Much of the content in these narratives drove the idea that while SUU was a rising university recognized outside the state, they still had a “small-town” feel exemplified by the personalized approach of their professors. In each of these transitions, recruiters told personalized narratives of how specific professors impacted their own lives. One recruiter said, “I once had a professor call me into her office and say ‘I want to write a letter of recommendation just for you.’” Another recruiter discussed how she was once studying in the library during finals week and saw her



business professor walking around the library giving out candy to students who looked overwhelmed. An ambassador told the narrative of how her professor bought her donuts for her birthday, saying, “He knew my name and my birthday. That’s how much they care about you.”

In some presentations, these narratives were supplemented with an emotional video showcasing professors reading detailed letters from students about how their personalized nature led them to having success in the classroom. Once they finished reading the letters, the student author then walked in to the room and had an intimate embrace with the professor thanking them for their diligence and personal care during their time at SUU. The video would conclude with the hashtag, #mySUUstory, followed by the call to action, “Share your story” next to the official school logo. This video was shown in eight of the observed presentations, and was also embedded in an email sent to prospective students.

### **Reputational Esteem**

Not as common as the use of narratives, messages coded under the form of reputational esteem were used in many instances to accentuate the value of their institution to their target audience. This was done assuming students recognized the prominence of the statistical reference, or the public figure/brand having a connection to their institution. This strategy distinguished the sub-categories of statistical, individual, and brand esteem. Messages presented both interpersonally and digitally were coded into all three categories; statistical, and brand esteem, and individual esteem.

**Statistical Esteem.** The majority of statistical references presented were done through the themes of both academic resilience, and financial value and affordability. Each

of these references were done in both their interpersonal presentations, and their digital communication to prospective students. Examples included how they were given a Distinction for Excellence by the U.S. President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll for six consecutive years. Also, how that same organization ranked them as a "Caring Campus" for seven consecutive years, with students at SUU logging over 200,000 hours of community service. In their presentations, recruiters often referenced the acceptance rate into medical school being 95% in 2016 and 100% in 2017.

Financially, similar examples included references to awards given to them being ranked as one of 40 schools recognized by the *U.S. News World Report* as one of the "Best of the West" in regards to financial value. Also how they were "ranked third among all public higher education institutions in the West for having the lowest student debt average" with 98% of graduates owing less than \$16,000 in student loan debt; the national average being just over \$25,000. Multiple recruiters referenced how SUU was one of the Top 100 Best College Buys, and ranked number one for the state of Utah.

**Brand Esteem.** SUU's approach to brand esteem was very similar to the approach given by Dixie State University in that both institutions are located in smaller populated towns in southwest Utah, with nearly identically small student body populations. This institutional reputation played a vital role in the tier of notoriety they referenced having an affiliation with their institution. While larger schools such as the University of Utah or Utah State University had partnerships with more well-known brands and organizations, Southern Utah University recognized less notorious and sometimes equal-level brands to gain esteem in the eyes of potential students.

Some examples included recruiters referencing how they had a partnership with Skywest, which was a revolving door for potential interns graduating from their Aviation Management program. In many presentations, recruiters often referenced competing institutions in the state. Each of the six recruiters referenced how more students from SUU were accepted into medical school at the University of Utah than students graduating from the University of Utah itself. Four recruiters referenced “The Scream”, an on-campus dance held each Halloween, saying that it was almost as big as “The Howl” hosted by Utah State University. Two recruiters also referenced how SUU won the Big Sky Title that year in football, beating Weber State University for the title. This statistic was a bit misleading as SUU actually tied for first place in the Big Sky conference, and would later be humiliated at home to Weber State in the first round of the Division 1-A national playoffs.

One of the largest scale brand esteem references came as ambassadors in each of the 15 observed presentations discussed how SUU was ranked number one in an online poll as the “most outdoorsy school in the country”. As they explained this accolade, they rhetorically asked students, “Do you know who number two was? Stanford. That’s right, we beat Stanford. More like demolished them at this poll.”

**Individual Esteem.** Similar to Dixie State, SUU had a very minimal approach to individual esteem, rarely recognizing individuals with personal connections to their institution. Much of this could be because of the lack of popularity in alumni. The only recognized example of this message came in six of the observed presentations as recruiters referenced Keala Settle, more commonly referred to as “The bearded lady from “The Greatest Showman”” being a recent graduate from SUU’s Theater program.

### **Fear Appeals**

Fear Appeals was the least used strategy for message content, which could be attributed to recruiters trying to create a positive image of their institution in the 30 minutes they had with students. Recruiters from SUU used the least amount of fear appeals messages in their presentations, with the only coded theme being that of customer flexibility and personalization.

While it is coded as a shared narrative, each school delivered a message about an experience they had at a larger institution, and the dissatisfaction occurring from the lack of connectivity between themselves and the faculty. One example from SUU came as a recruiter opened with the disclaimer that they were from a smaller town, and that the first college they attended out of high school misled them on their “personalized approach”. He referenced how he felt “betrayed” and how “they were not what I thought they would be.” These points were supplemented with the idea that schools with a larger student body have difficulty relating to students on personal levels.

## **Conclusion**

Southern Utah University is a unique institution in that they do not have a distinct calling card for them to market to audiences of perspective students. Utah State University is the “true college-town” of the state, the University of Utah the flagship R-1, Weber State University the reliable university for non-traditional students, and Dixie State the institution of the outdoors with an ideal location. While each of these schools market their corresponding concepts, SUU does not have a singular trait only applicable to students holding a diploma stamped with the Thunderbird crest. This in turn could relate to their focus on being the most personalized institution, outshining the rest of the participating

universities on this characteristic. Vice-President Wright reiterated this idea repeatedly in his interview:

We're always challenging our recruiters asking them "can you find something in common with every student that you meet with?" And the answer is yes. And if they can find some way to make that connection and bridge that gap, then they start building personal connections with them. Our tours and presentations are all about personalized storytelling. It's about how we can make a personalized connection.

That personalization also coincides with the idea of recruiters asking students to take a leap of faith on their institution, and trust the positive outcomes of being an SUU student. The alternate four institutions have utilized their core messages for the last three decades and have seen success in marketing those messages to students. Whereas, SUU has adjusted their persuasive approach in the last five years and have yet seen this message develop into a trademark advantage. One recruiter epitomized this idea in his presentation using the metaphorical comparison of standing on the diving board of higher education. "Be a cannonballer" he said. "Take a chance on something different and see what happens."

## **CHAPTER 9. DIXIE STATE UNIVERSITY: LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION**

"Picture heaven in your brain. That's St. George."

--Bryce Dahlberg, In-state recruiter

"We have something no one else has. Our destination highlights where we're located. Which, if you really look at it, places Dixie State in the most unique market position compared to other universities. The fact that we are located in a completely separate climate makes us unlike anyone else."

--Brett Schwartz, Director of New Student Programs

"I give you my word as a Dixie recruiter, that if this isn't the best presentation you guys will see today, you can come back here into the auditorium, and punch me right in the throat."

--Cierra Potter, In-state recruiter

## **History**

At its inception in 1911, the St. George Stake Academy began as a small 25-faculty institution offering merged courses for both high school and first year college students. Curriculum surpassed entry level courses, as the academy adopted first and second year college courses. From that point, it began the first of many institutional identity changes, transitioning from St. George Stake Academy, to Dixie Academy, to Dixie Normal College in 1916.

The term "Dixie" is an unusual choice of wording for an institution located in a state having no affiliation with the disbanded Confederate States of America. "Dixie", or "Dixieland", is more notably recognized as a nickname for the Southern United States, referencing states geographically below the Pennsylvania-Maryland border. This definition was made popular by a song written by Jack Yellen and George Cobb titled, "Are you from Dixie?" with the line, "Any place below the Mason-Dixon line" in its chorus.

The term "Dixie" in relation to Utah traces back to the original residents of southwestern Utah, some of whom migrated from traditional southern states such as North Carolina, and Mississippi. St. George, established in 1857, is in the very southwest tip of Utah. This geographic location emulated the warm weather patterns from their native soil,

which in turn caused them to grow cotton, tobacco, and other semi-tropical plants. These similar cultural characteristics helped coin the name “Utah’s Dixie” embedded in their heritage. In 1967, music instructor, and director of the musical chapter “Program Bureau” Rione DiFiore, altered the words to Yellen and Cobb’s song to say, “If you’re from Santa Clara, Washington, or St. George fine, anywhere below the Iron County line” in the chorus.

Growth in St. George was slow, and this affected the institution in its early years. Influence from the Great Depression pushed the state Legislature to remove funding in 1933. This rift pushed local residents to financially support the institution, until it was officially admitted to Utah’s public school offerings of higher education as Dixie Junior College in 1935. Twenty years later, Dixie felt a rebranding was in order from their original “Flyer” nickname to a now controversial public figure, the Confederate Rebel. In 1960, the Confederate flag was adopted as a school symbol, and Rodney the Rebel, a Confederate soldier was displayed as the school mascot. Both of these actions came in connection to a larger institution 125 miles to the south, the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, making identical moves with their own brand. With that elevation, Dixie changed its name yet again in 1970, to Dixie College.

For the next thirty years, Dixie maintained its student population and saw success as a junior college, primarily in the athletic fields, winning conference championships nearly every year, and National Titles in Men’s Basketball, Football, Softball, and Women’s Soccer. Athletic success influenced the growth of the institution as well, when enrollment numbers surpassed comparable junior colleges surrounding them. In 2000, Dixie elevated its status to a four-year institution, and changed its name to Dixie State College. This change also influenced Dixie to advance athletically in 2005, moving from the National Junior College

Athletic Association (NJCAA), to being a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II institution. Being an NCAA member also pushed Dixie State to drop Rodney the Rebel as its mascot, and abandon any ties to Confederate paraphernalia.

In 2007, Dixie State was approached by the University of Utah proposing an academic merger to convert the institution to be a regional satellite campus in southern Utah. However, controversial leadership actions, followed by the termination of their school's President by the Board of Regents caused dissension between the two schools and the proposal would be later dropped. In 2008, appointed interim President Stephen Nadauld, former President of Weber State University, helped rebuild the institution's position, and pushed for academic growth. This growth was seen in 2013, as the school changed its name to its current official title, Dixie State University. In 2016, Dixie State rebranded its nickname to Trailblazers.

Currently, Dixie State University is recognized by the Board of Regents as a four-year, open-enrollment institution offering certificates, Associate, Bachelor's and most recently, Master's degrees, with its Master's of Accounting program unveiling in the fall of 2018. Dixie State is one of three state Universities that are open enrollment, (Weber State University, Utah Valley University), and is primarily pedagogical in its emphasis, rather than research. As of fall 2017, there are 9,673 students enrolled at Dixie State University (DSU-ER, 2017).

### **Institutional Identity**



Identifying Dixie State University's brand has been an arduous task over the course of its history. On the surface this is linked to the advancing of academic standards and curriculum. Other institutions around the state followed a similar course in their development (Southern Utah University, Weber State University). However, the stress on Dixie State's image renovation was compounded by its ties to controversial connections to the Confederacy, and racially-charged nicknames, mascots, and symbols. A number of schools have dealt with controversial nicknames, mascots and symbols, causing changes to be more aligned with political correctness. However, an institutional identity expands beyond the images and words on team jerseys or end zones, in to elements such as teaching, research, or many other benefits having high regard to the outside world (Temple, 2006).

Other benefits can be spread across a spectrum of foci and are subjectively displayed by differentiating public relations offices. In recent history, Dixie State looked to shift the focus away from the negativity surrounding its historical identity crisis, and utilize the distinct traits that separate it from its competition; the most notable being its location. Admissions Director Brett Schwartz discussed how this is fundamental to their recruiting message:

No one else in the state has what we have as far as our destination. And if you're able to leverage that, and carefully, because that's not the main reason why students come to college, you'll see success. You see more and more Universities trying to leverage this. They've established themselves more academically than they have as a destination. And that is what we have had from the very beginning, that nobody else can replicate no matter how hard they try.

Dixie State does have a location unlike the other four observed institutions. It is located in the southwest corner of the state, 11 miles from the Utah-Arizona border. The

geographic landscape is surrounded by scenic red rock formations illustrating the desert backdrop of southern Utah. This also influenced the school's visual brand, with the official logo being the letters DSU with a plateau line of rocks layered through each letter. The letters are also two different shades of red, to again illustrate the red rock panorama.

From a prospective student perspective, the locational images are some of the initial schematic messages they received as they went to a recruiting session. In the 13 observed presentations, students were given a tri-fold handout when they first entered the room. The cover of the handout displays a simple image with two college-aged individuals kayaking on Sand Hollow reservoir with red rock islands jutting out of the water around them, with the words "active learning. active life", their current slogan at the bottom of the page. Students were then shown a promotional video, a randomly assembled montage of half-second clips relating to the institution. Forty-one percent of the video clips were related to geographic location promotions.

Both students in the presentation and potential students were delivered messages implying the beneficial location of Dixie State. The previously mentioned theme was seen on the extended booklet mailed out to potential students, showing two people standing on top of a large red rock plateau with their bicycles next to them. Images scattered throughout the booklet showcase the surrounding landscape, and are often accompanied by phrases such as "The best education under the sun" and a place where "adventure awaits." The center of the booklet features a two-page mural image of a red rock canyon with a rock climber attached to the face of the cliff. At the top of the image it reads, "This is St. George. No photoshop required." Below the image are infographs about the locational

benefits such as “300 days of sunshine annually,” “Average annual temperature of 77 degrees”, and “0 inches of average annual snowfall”.

One of the drawbacks of promoting an outdoor extracurricular experience is the detrimental position Dixie State is placed in relation to higher education as a whole. Former Public Relations Director Chris Taylor discussed how these messages often miscommunicate the identity Dixie State portrays:

One of the biggest problems Dixie has dealt with is how people don’t take them serious. St. George gives off the impression of a vacation spot, not really an academic setting. And it didn’t help being a junior college. If a kid wanted to go sow his wild oats, he went to Dixie. When he wanted to grow up, he left. And that’s been a battle they dealt with, and continue to deal with for years.

Recruiters addressed this objection in the first interactions they had with students. In each of the observed presentations, the first statement each recruiter asked their audience was what they had heard about Dixie State. Each time one or more students would reply that it was a “party school.” Following this response, the recruiter would say, “Raise your hand if you have heard Dixie is a party school”. In every presentation the majority of the students’ hands would raise. The recruiter then said, “Raise your hands if you’ve heard anything else about Dixie State”. Following this, no students raised their hands. At this point the recruiter would open with a disclaimer that Dixie State is more than just a party school and they would use the next 25-30 minutes to present what else they had to offer as a whole. Director Schwartz talked about this difficulty in his interview:

The location has been a benefit, but for years we have always been trademarked with the stigma that we’re “just” a party school. And that scares people off. Especially parents. Every presentation we have to overcome that objection and help them see that we have so much more to offer.

Optimal location was the most distinguishable trait Dixie State recruiters utilized in their presentations, and would often dovetail this theme with other delivered messages

about their school. While the presentation featured messages coded under the five key themes for message content, those messages oftentimes were delivered through the lens of students at Dixie State University enjoying an active learning experience while participating in an active lifestyle.

### **Categorical Message Content**

Observed presentations were graded on a level of flexibility for the script of their presentations. Flexibility were the levels of dyadic interaction between students and presenters. Some institutions were more rigorous and strict on their script, while others were more malleable and exchanged more dialogue. Dixie State was one of three schools classified as flexible in their interactions, thus resulting in more dialogue in their deliveries. Dixie State used supplementary visual aids through Power Point, and had a predetermined format for their deliveries, however they were not bound by this supplement, as in every observed presentation recruiters often deviated from the predetermined course and adjusted their message based off audience participation. Examples of this included recruiters asking students what academic programs they were interested in hearing about, then transitioning to discussing specific programs from the corresponding answers. An additional example came in three observed presentations as students asked about the location of St. George, to which the recruiters changed the traditional structure of their presentation by talking about both student life and location before academics.

Additionally, presentations by Dixie State were subjectively the most entertaining observations, stemming from the use of current popular music playing as students walked in, to the usage of humor both scripted and ad-libbed. Every observed recruiter delivered a disclaimer at the beginning of their presentation regarding how this would be the “best”

presentation they would see all day both from an informative position, and from an entertainment position. Some recruiters cynically promised actions of violent repercussions if they did not deliver on that statement, which generated amusement from the audience. Director Schwartz talked about how their overall mission as presenters is two-fold: to inform, and entertain:

It has to be both. And it has to be spot on for both. We have to provide information, and we have to do it in an engaging and interactive format. Otherwise, we just can't compete. There are some universities in this state who are going to grow and succeed to matter what they say or do (in their presentations). It's not going to matter. We can't afford to screw up our presentations. We can't afford to not be engaging and entertaining, and articulate. That's just the standard we have to live up to.

As recruiters from Dixie State used humor and entertaining techniques in their delivery, they were also very clear about the points of information they wanted their students to grasp by the end of the presentation, which they outlined from the very beginning: affordability, location, student life, academia, and hands-on learning. The content was then delivered in three different categories for message content with theoretical application: narrative, reputational esteem, and fear appeals.

## **Narratives**

The most common category of message content came as recruiters used personal stories or narratives. Results also showed narratives being coded into two sub-categories: shared narratives, or common narratives that were delivered by recruiters from all five institutions, and exclusive narratives, personalized narratives about their institution which were unique to their school and could not be replicated, oftentimes because of the specificity of variables such as location, or campus branding. This section will discuss the

exclusive narratives used by Utah State, while common narratives will be addressed in chapter 10.

Observed presentations from Dixie State were very fluid in their design and gave recruiters avenues to which they could interject their own individual narratives either predetermined or extemporaneous. This narrative agenda gave recruiters the ability to personalize their presentations based on the interjections from the audience. Director Schwartz talked about the value narratives bring to presentations and how relevant those approaches are to the students, saying, “Real life experiences are crucial. They make things more memorable. It makes people want more, to learn more. We want to do more than just be talking heads regurgitating facts and information. Those don’t make the presentation become alive.”

Real life experiences were heavily utilized in their delivery as recruiters presented exclusive narratives highlighting features of their institution, as well as the exclusivity of their optimal location. A distinguishing trait of narratives told by Dixie State recruiters was that they were recognized in all five themes of message content: financial value and affordability, academic resilience, engaging student life, optimal location, and customer flexibility and personalization.

Dixie State recruiters delivered more narratives regarding financial value and affordability than the other four institutions. This could relate to Dixie State having the lowest annual tuition of the five participants, therefore more focus was placed on the financial appeal. In multiple presentations a recruiter referenced how a student from an undisclosed high school applied for a scholarship having only a 2.9 G.P.A. and 21 ACT score being exhilarated as she found out she received an academic scholarship. Another recruiter

told the narrative of one of his friends receiving a departmental scholarship for writing a short essay saying, “Hi, my name’s Matt, and I like art.” The most common narrative came as all observed recruiters talked about a former Dixie State Ambassador receiving a surplus of financial aid:

We had this ambassador who we call Johnny Thunder, who literally sat at a computer for three days and filled out as many scholarship applications that he could possibly find. When he came to Dixie, he was given \$36,000 in financial aid. He made more money than me as a recruiter. He paid his tuition, he paid for his apartment, he even bought a car.

Engaging student life was also one of the most prevalent themes utilized by recruiters with their narratives, many of which related to specific traditions unique to their institution, a strategy employed by all five participants. A narrative observed in each of the 13 observations was the 100-year old tradition of going up to the red rock hill west of the campus and whitewashing a giant letter “D” into the rocks. Another common narrative referenced a campus event called “The Great Race”, a ten-leg relay across the campus with legs ranging from mile runs, to crawling through a 50-yard mud pit. One recruiter talked about emerging traditions in the beginning of her presentation, while showing students an image of a large buffalo statue on campus.

This is Brooks the Bison. And one of the coolest traditions we have for students is on the first day of fall semester your freshman year, you all get in line and go rub his nose. And then when you graduate, you walk past him as we go down to Convocation and everyone gets to slap his butt. I mean, what’s cooler than that?!”

Optimal location is the trademark of Dixie State, and because of that, many narratives were recited about experiences the outdoor lifestyle students made available to them. A common narrative shared by students related to an experience hiking Angel’s Landing, a world-renowned hike in Zion National Park, 45 minutes northeast of St. George.

Another recruiter shared the story with multiple groups of students how he enjoyed how St. George was the midpoint between Salt Lake and Los Angeles. This geographic relationship gave him the flexibility to either go home and see his family in Ogden, or take a “quick trip” down to the beach in California. He then jokingly referenced how the relationship with his Mother began to dwindle as he chose between the beach and spending time with her on his weekends. One of the most unique narratives told by recruiters related to a student organization trademarked by Dixie State’s location. Every participating school delivered information about student clubs and organizations they had available, often referencing specific clubs that were unique to their institution. Dixie State had a specific club no other school could match stemming from their location, which they then showcased to their audience:

So like my first week of college my friend and I join what’s called the Two-a-Day Club, which basically is an outdoor club that goes snowboarding and wakeboarding in the same day. So like in February, we go up to Brian Head ski resort and snowboard all day, and then in the afternoon, we drive down to Sand Hollow, and we wrap up the night wakeboarding. Tell me that is not the coolest thing you’ve ever heard in your entire life.

As seen by the other participants, personalized narratives, specifically unique narratives about their educational experiences at Dixie State were utilized by recruiters and delivered to students substantially more than any other persuasive strategy.

### **Reputational Esteem**

While it was not as common as the use of narratives, recruiters used the form of reputational esteem in many instances to accentuate the value of their institution to their target audience. This was done assuming students recognized the prominence of the statistical reference, or the public figure/brand having a connection to their institution. This strategy distinguished the sub-categories of statistical, individual, and brand esteem.



Messages presented both interpersonally and digitally were coded into all three categories; statistical, and brand esteem, and individual esteem. This approach was unique to Dixie State University in that of the five participating institutions, Dixie State is the least notably recognized institution, largely stemming from its historical development.

**Statistical esteem.** Recruiters from Dixie State presented data signifying statistical esteem rarely in their presentations, with one of the only recognized statistics being the recitation of Dixie State having the number one ranked intramural program in the entire state. This would often lead to a narrative about their intramural teams competing against larger out-of-state universities such as Arizona State, or the University of Oregon in sports such as co-ed flag football, or five-on-five basketball.

While this reference is the only observed use of statistical esteem in their presentations, the student guidebook delivered to potential students inquiring on the future students webpage featured a prevalent amount of this strategy. Some examples from the guidebook related to financial aid, stating that Dixie is “Utah’s #1 most affordable university”, that they are “Top 10 in the nation for most affordable in-state tuition and fees”, and that they are ranked “15<sup>th</sup> in the nation for lowest student loan debt for public 4-year colleges and universities.”

Other examples of statistical esteem extended into the optimal location theme with statistics such as St. George being voted the “#1 best city in Utah”, ranked “47<sup>th</sup> by TIME magazine’s list of Best Places to live in the U.S.”, and ranked by Forbes magazine as “#22 on their list of Best Places for Business & Careers”. These statistics were supplemented by the above-mentioned statistic that there are on average 300 days of sunshine in St. George.

Academic Resilience was another theme referencing statistical relevance for esteem. Examples of this include how “75% of Dixie State math majors placed above the 87<sup>th</sup> percentile on the national Major Field test for Mathematics”, that “The overall business school ranks in the 89<sup>th</sup> percentile in the Major Field Test” that the “placement rate of Graduates in the English Education emphasis was 100%”, and that their nursing program was ranked “#20 in the entire nation.

**Brand Esteem.** Dixie State University was unique in that their development as a four-year University was still in its infancy, which showed a relationship with the unfledged notoriety of their institutional reputation. They were not nearly as recognized as the University of Utah, who have received national recognition in multiple areas as well as through distinguished alumni. Director Schwartz acknowledged this making a metaphorical reference saying, “It’s like we’re one of the little kids who has just been invited to sit at the big kids’ table, but we have nothing relevant to bring to the topic of conversation.”

This inexperience was seen in their persuasive references of brand esteem. Other institutions had the ability to reference larger brands such as Nike, Apple, the NFL, and other significant organizations, Dixie State referenced how their graduates were currently serving internships with Zion National Park, the KSL Broadcast Group, Intermountain Healthcare, the State Bank of Southern Utah, PrinterLogic, and Cherry Creek Radio, many of which are local businesses in southern Utah. The two most recognized brands came as recruiters referenced in their presentations how criminal justice students were able to work with the FBI on the Boston Marathon bombings, and how Dixie State had a Media Studies professor who had won over 30 Emmy Awards.

**Individual Esteem.** The undeveloped network of Dixie State University also influenced their presentation of individual esteem; references to their institution having a relationship with a specific person with some type of celebrity status. In all 13 of the observed presentations recruiters referenced lesser known musical groups such as Portugal the Man, Macklemore, and Andy Grammar being invited guests to perform at DixieFest, a large outdoor concert held during the spring semester. In 10 of the 13 presentations recruiters referenced tenured faculty member Wayne Provost, who owns the patents to the insulin pump, as well as the resealable carton top found on cereal boxes. Individual Esteem was the least common strategy of the three categories, and this could be an effect of Dixie State not having nearly as recognizable reputation as the alternate four participating institutions.

### **Fear Appeals**

Fear Appeals was the least used strategy by recruiters for messages content, which could be attributed to recruiters trying to create a positive image of their institution in the 30 minutes they had with students. The two most notable uses of fear appeals from Dixie State recruiters came in relation to the themes of customer flexibility and personalization, and optimal location.

Regardless of the size of the university, each recruiter looked to exemplify how their school was more personable than comparable schools surrounding them. Dixie State did this by initially referencing their 20:1 faculty to student ratio, a statistic also found in both guidebooks. This action dovetailed into recruiters telling horror stories about visiting larger alternative universities and having little or no interaction with their professors. One Dixie State recruiter relayed the following narrative:

One time I visited my buddy who goes to a much larger institution in the state, who I won't say their actual name. He takes me to class, and there's like 1200 people in this auditorium. And we're going to like the very top of the auditorium, and I kind of feel like I'm sitting in the nosebleeds at a Jazz game. "Alright, row 52, these are good seats!" So then the professor gets up and speaks into a microphone for an hour and half, and like nobody is paying attention. Kids are on Netflix. There is one guy who I kid you not has his pillow out and is out cold. My buddy looks at me and says, "This is what it's like every single day."

This approach framed large research-intensive institutions as distant, superficial organizations that would impede the personal growth of a student in their academic careers, and reinforced the interpersonal nature of Dixie State University.

Additional points were made about the optimal location in relation to the level of protection students felt while going to school. The guidebook and Power Point made statistical references how St. George is ranked the "5<sup>th</sup> safest metro area in the West" and one of the "Top 50 safest campuses in the U.S.". Recruiters reiterated these statistics in their presentation. Multiple recruiters recounted experiences they felt at other institutions both in-state and out-of-state, discussing how they always felt they had to lock their doors behind them, and that they never felt safe. One recruiter talked about how they thought about getting a concealed weapons permit, and that when they got to Dixie, they never dealt with any of these emotional insecurities.

## **Conclusion**

Dixie State University had a unique approach with their recruiting strategies in that the design of their presentations was both informative, and entertaining. Director Schwartz reiterated this in his interview:

I think that it's very important to have a well-designed presentation that's professional, that's interactive, that's engaging. However, we don't rely on our presentation software for that. We have a much higher standard for our

presenters and make sure they have the ability to interact with students socially.

Specific demographics such as age were not taken into consideration for this study, however recruiters from Dixie State portrayed a more youthful impression than other institutions. This was largely seen by the unique dialogue and slang intermittent in their presentations. Recruiters used vernacular such as “We’re dope”, “Our school is super sick”, and “Academically, we kill it.” In some instances, recruiters made cynical, derogatory, or threatening statements to students which oftentimes were used for comedic effect. One recruiter said, “We have a 100% acceptance rate, which is much better than the amount of rejections you’ll receive from the ladies.” Another recruiter opened her presentation saying, “If you talk in this presentation, I will come up and kick you in the head and kill you. Look at these legs. They can do damage.” Statements such as these were exceptionally informal, and dichotomous to the professional approach of the remaining four institutions. However, they did receive the most positive response from students through laughter and feedback during the presentation.

Recruiters presented the many benefits for students attending Dixie State, however the most unique advantage they discussed was the optimal location of their institution. They preached about how an “active learning, active life” would lead them to enjoy their college experience, and how St. George, Utah was one of the only locations that could provide that for them. One recruiter epitomized the position of Dixie State University saying, “I don’t know if Dixie is for everyone. If you hate warm weather and very attractive people, then you might want to look somewhere else.”

## CHAPTER 10. INSITUTIONAL COMPARISON

### Introduction

Higher education recruiting in the state of Utah is a unique experience in that high school students receive more personal connections with affiliated recruiters than they would in the surrounding states. Utah does not follow the “traditional methods” of bussing students to a large, centralized meeting point where hundreds of institutions line up in a warehouse delivering 15-second pitches, resembling street preachers standing on a soapbox rehearsing their institutional doctrines which often fall on deaf ears. Rather, Utah reaches out to students on a more personal level, through both presentations at their local high schools, to follow up visits, and application assistance.

Another unique dimension of higher education in Utah are the parallel connections interwoven throughout the institutions, both public and private. The average cost of tuition is both comparable and modest, with Utah having the third-lowest annual tuition cost nationwide. Additionally, admissions rates are substantially more flexible for students, with three public universities being open-enrollment, and the lowest admissions rate belonging to Brigham Young University at 53 percent; a significant difference in comparison to large, private institutions on a national scale. Because of these similarities, much of the content of messages recruiters deliver are comparable in nature. Utah State Director Katie Nielsen discussed how these similarities were evident in their approaches to prospective students, stating, “If you look at our base message, we’re all kind of saying the same thing. We want to be different, yet we’re giving the same facts and figures to the prospective students.” Director Scott Teichert supported this but from a stigmatic perspective, saying:

I think that sometimes there is this peer pressure as far as recruiting goes in Utah. There's a peer pressure to "Keep up with the Joneses". Once an institution throws out, "Hey, we're doing undergraduate research." Then all of a sudden you see four other billboards coming up from every other institution saying, "Well we have undergraduate research too." And that "keeping up with the Joneses" mentality is hard to break because we're trying to define ourselves, but we're all saying the same things.

One of the main functions of a college recruiter is to illustrate what separates their affiliated institution from the rest, outlining their distinct qualities to students with the end goal being that students select their institution to attend in the fall. However, that exclusivity in some ways is diluted because of the similar messages delivered to students in their presentations. The focus of this chapter discusses the similarities between the participating institutions, as well as consider the distinguishable differences between the participating narratives. As referred in the previous institutional chapters, this will be an extension of the observed shared narratives. Additionally, this chapter will compare and contrast the different presenting styles each institution utilized in their delivery; primarily by focusing on the resolving of potential objections they faced, as well as their subjective nature of their overall strategy for students.

### **Shared Narratives**

As noted in chapter four, the most dominant category of message form used by recruiters was the use of narrative messages. Narrative form is divided into two subcategories: (a) shared narratives, similar stories told by recruiters from different institutions which shared the same logistical constructs, (b) exclusive narratives, independent stories delivered by recruiters about experiences unique to themselves and their corresponding institution. All five admissions directors emphasized the value of narratives as a whole, combined with the idea of personalized or exclusive narratives,

unique to their corresponding recruiter and institution. However, there were multiple narratives delivered to students that were nearly identical in their construct, with minor variations for divisional purposes. In some instances, the narratives were so indistinguishable that a recruiter from institution A could be transplanted into a presentation for institution B, and their corresponding narrative would align perfectly with the strategic presentation.

The most common example of a shared narrative came through the theme of customer flexibility and personalization, as 94 percent of the presentations included a recruiter or ambassador sharing a personal connection with their professor from an academic position. The “personal professor narrative” stories opened with the presenter talking about the personalized nature of their campus, followed in many instances by a statistical reference to the faculty/student ratio. While the enrollment numbers of the participating institutions varies from 10,000 to 32,000 students, the range of reported ratios was 19 to 23 students to one professor. These quantitative statements supported the idea of a personalized institution, dichotomous to a mainstream, auditorium feel that much of higher education illustrates.

Following the statistical reference, presenters transitioned to a narrative about an experience they had with their corresponding professors, many of which opened with them revealing a struggle they had in the classroom, and the professor going above and beyond their responsibilities to reach out to the student and make a personal connection with them. Examples included the student missing class, struggling on a particular exam, or reaching out to the professor for help on a specific assignment. An ambassador from Southern Utah University gave the following example:

Right when I went to college I thought that I would just be on my own and wouldn't have anyone to help me. And it was funny how like the third week of the semester I started falling behind in my Math class. So I stopped going. Two days later, my friend said he went to class, and the professor asked where I was. Later, he got my phone number and texted me and asked how he could help me if I was having a hard time. This blew me away. Later in the semester, I texted him late one night because I was having a hard time prepping for a



test, and the guy went out of his way to help me at like 11:00. This changed my perspective about his class, and college entirely. I love that about SUU.

While this narrative attempted to distinguish SUU as the only institution where these types of interactions would occur, this same narrative was shared by presenters from each participating institution, with minor variations adapted to their brand. A similar example was recorded by representatives from four of the five participating institutions sharing the narrative of themselves or an associate attending a larger institution and dealing with a processed relationship with their professor. In many instances, presenters illustrated the context of being in a large auditorium filled with hundreds of disengaged students, and the corresponding professor or teaching assistant stumbling through their lecture without making any eye contact, or engaging with the students. This in turn solidified their testimony of students not experiencing these types of situations if they attend their respective institution.

Another common shared narrative came in the theme of engaging student life. While each institution looked to distinguish themselves, the construct of their presentations were often similar in their design. That being the opening segment focusing on the rationality of the institution or the mode of logos, while the latter segment converging on the student life opportunities, or the mode of pathos. In the engaging student life theme, shared narratives often referenced the various student clubs and organizations showcased to students during the first week of the fall semester. In the “club week narrative”, presenters listed some of the most intriguing and unusual clubs available to the students, ranging from the snowboarding/wakeboarding club to the My Little Ponies/Bronies club. In many presentations, recruiters followed the listing of these clubs with the statement that if

students wished to start their own club, they could do so with the support of two or three friends and an advisor. An ambassador from Utah State explained this:

All you need to do is find five other people who like the same thing, and boom, you've got your own club. I knew this kid who literally started a club called the Bryan club, for people who were named Bryan that wanted to get together. He found like five other Bryans, and now they're like one of the most popular clubs on campus. They even let people in who aren't named Bryan.

Recruiters from all five institutions referenced these campus-wide events in their presentations, and painted the picture of a network of unique people brought together by a common bond, which the potential students could also associate with once they came to campus.

Following these discussions, presenters often dovetailed into other shared narratives about student life such as extracurricular dance activities held during the school year, to specific concerts held on campus. A unique shared narrative was categorized as the "true nickname night narrative" where presenters discussed one of their school traditions of kissing a fellow student at a specific place on campus also at a specific time. Whether it was True Aggie Night standing on top of the block A near the north entrance of Utah State University, True Wildcat Night at the base of the clock tower on Weber State University, or True T-Bird Night surrounding a statue outside their basketball stadium, each school described this identical event at a different location. A recruiter from Dixie State related the following experience:

So we have what's called True Trailblazer Night, which is held at midnight on the Saturday night of Homecoming in the fall, or on what we call D-Day in the spring. And that's where everyone gets in the fountain and just makes out. And when they're done, everyone is called a True Trailblazer. The one time I did it, I kissed this guy named Jeff, and he totally sucked, and I'm not proud of who made me a True Trailblazer. But at least I am.

Another less commonly shared narrative was used under the theme of optimal location, where presenters highlighted an appealing extracurricular activity within a short distance from their campus. The construct of the narrative began with them introducing a local activity or feature within a short distance from their campus. They then transitioned to a narrative about being on campus looking for a break from their academic responsibilities, then utilizing the close proximity of this feature which only increased their appreciation for their overall college experience. A recruiter from the University of Utah described this:

We literally have anything you want all around us. Whether it's the mountain trails behind our campus, or downtown city life. We have the best of both worlds within 15 minutes. I remember being in the library studying once and one of my buddies asked if I wanted to go mountain biking on the trails behind campus. 15 minutes later I'm covered in dirt biking on trails overlooking the entire valley. The next day, same thing. I'm in my apartment studying, and my friend asked if I wanted to go to the Jazz game. 15 minutes later, boom, we're at Energy Solutions Arena watching a professional team. This is yet another reason why I loved my experience at the U.

Shared narratives are unique in the sense that while each institution attempted to distinguish themselves from the rest of the pack, they in many ways relied on the same narrative structure to promote their institution to their audience. Each institution is singular in the construct of their offices, background of recruiters, and focus of approach, yet the pattern of nearly identical narratives was a noticeable anomaly throughout this study. Director Brett Schwartz argued that many of the shared narratives stemmed from the strategy implemented by Dixie State University nine years earlier:

We had a guy working with us who was all about storytelling, and he preached this to us all the time, and we kind of bought into what he was preaching that stories sell. And so we started telling these stories to kids, and I think that other institutions bought into it. As biased as this statement is, I have always felt that we have the absolute best presenters. We've seen that by other institutions coming in and observing us, asking us how we are so effective at

generating interest for our school. A lot of that is because we tell fascinating stories to kids. And honestly, I think a lot of stories all the other schools are telling, those similar stories we've all heard, those come from our presentations. They're really just our stories, tweaked to fit their school.

There is no evidence to support his claim to the origin of these stories, which is a micro-comparison to the unknown background of folklore and archaic narratives passed down through generations. Regardless of the derivation, shared narratives provided a large quantity of content under multiple themes for each of the participating institutions.

### **Comparison and Contrast**

While the five participating institutions shared generalized narratives, this does not categorize them as similar in their institutional identities. Each institution has its own brand, specific majors, and audience they target in their approach. This in turn categorizes them in a tier-system of relevance to students in the state of Utah. Utah State Director Katie Nielsen addressed this in her interview:

We had a marketing company come in and do a series of focus groups to see where people saw Utah State. They asked them, "If you had to list all the schools in the state of Utah and put them in levels, where do we fit? Where do students put us?" And across the board, it was kind of like in our own niche. You've got BYU and Utah as number one. Utah State is number two. And they have a number three that's like Weber, SUU, UVU.

This assessment could be validated by a quantitative comparison of the number of applicants each institution receives each year, the number of students attending each institution's presentations during the College Day events, or even layering them in a system based on the amount of funding they receive from state legislation. Regardless of the approach, Director Nielsen's claims are that there is a tier-system of institutions in the state of Utah. The first tier represented by the flagship university, the University of Utah, the second tier being the space/land-grant institution, Utah State University, the third tier

being Weber State, and Southern Utah University, and the fourth tier being Dixie State University. Despite being recognized by the state at the same level as Weber State, and SUU, Dixie State has only been a state university for six years, much more recent than the previously mentioned. Additionally, they will be offering their first Master's program this fall, whereas Weber State and SUU have had Master's programs in motion since the early 1990's.

While this tier system separates the institutions by their focus and strategies, there were however, further similarities each institution shared in their approach, as well as distinguishable differences detaching them into their own niche. In addition to shared narratives, another common feature of each presenter was the addressing of potential objections from interactions with each student. No institution is immaculate in their construct, despite the biased pitches delivered to audiences by their respective recruiters. With all of the positive traits characterizing each institution, there are potential drawbacks each school faces and must address.

For the lower-tier schools, (Dixie State, Weber State, SUU), each objection was intrinsically different. The primary objective Dixie State faced is that of being stereotyped as a "party school", or an institution not placing academics as a primary focus. As discussed in their chapter, presenters addressed this objection at the very beginning of their presentations, with in many situations, it being the first interaction they had with students. Recruiters had a unique approach to handling this objection in which rather than defend Dixie State's academic integrity, they would reverse positions and ask the students if that is what they were primarily focusing on for their college experience. Students were often caught off-guard with these responses, to which recruiters responded with the statement,

“You will find whatever you are looking for at college. If you’re looking for parties, you’ll find them. If you’re looking for academics, you’ll find them. If you’re looking for an engaged student life, you’ll find it. It’s all about what you’re looking for”. This statement put the onus on the student and was a seamless transition into the remainder of their presentation.

While they are separated by a mere 51 miles, the objections for Dixie State and Southern Utah University are inherently different, with the primary objection being that Cedar City, where SUU is located, is a small town far away from many modern luxuries, which could in turn promote a stagnant student life and college experience. While this objection was not addressed in each observed presentation as it was in presentations by Dixie State, it was brought up a number of times from investigating students proposing questions to the recruiters. Their response was uniquely different in that they never addressed it head on and resolved the concern with a persuasive statement. Rather, they often responded with statements such as “If 80% of our student body comes from outside Cedar City, we must be doing something right” or, “We’re pulling kids away from Salt Lake City all the time, so come experience it yourself.” Again, as discussed in their corresponding chapter, SUU recruiters were strong advocates for the “SUU experience”, and promoted students to have their own experience confirm their claims. One of the most interesting interactions in a presentation came when a student asked, “What do you guys do for fun in Cedar City?” To which the recruiter responded, “We do all sorts of stuff, like go to Zion, or go to Sand Hollow reservoir, or go out to watch a play at Tuacahn amphitheater.” Following this statement, the student made the rhetorical remark, “So you pretty much just go down to St. George (Dixie).”

While the objections SUU and Dixie State faced were dichotomous in nature, Weber State encountered an alternate objection in relation to their location, that being the safety of Ogden in general. While Utah does not rank as a high-crime state (KSL, 2018), Ogden has a reputation for being an area with a higher concentration of domestic abuse, vandalism, and homicide in comparison with the rest of the state. This was addressed in each of the 13 presentations, and was often one of the first points recruiters made to students. Their resolution attempt was different in that they used statistical esteem references from third-party sources to validate the safety and security Ogden provided for students. Often, they presented these statistics to students and supplemented them with statements such as “Ogden isn’t what it used to be anymore”, or “Ogden has really changed over the last ten years”. In many situations, they then promoted students to visit campus and see for themselves.

While both Utah State and the University of Utah are structurally different in their institutional makeup, their objections were nearly identical; that being the price of tuition. The University of Utah and Utah State have the top two highest tuitions in the state of Utah for public institutions. While college tuition in Utah is significantly lower than surrounding states or nationwide, students do recognize the difference between tuition at Utah State University and Dixie State University. With that objection, recruiters addressed this specifically in their presentations in a subjective manner, promoting the “value” that a degree from their school holds in the real world. Assistant Vice-President Mateo Remsburg addressed this:

One of the key things we really try and focus on is the value proposition. We know we’re the most expensive school in the state. And we’ve known that for the past several years, at least as long as I’ve been here. But what we want

students to see is the value of a price difference. While most people choose the cheaper value, they don't see what's the benefit of the higher cost.

It can be argued that a degree from the University of Utah, or Utah State University carries more weight in the professional world, which could be validated by the prominence and national recognition both institutions have received throughout their histories. This idea was the approach both institutions took when addressing their narrative, arguing that the value of their degree would compensate for the amount of money students would spend on tuition at their respective schools. This logos approach promoted their institution as the most "valuable" alternative for students to select.

The term "value" at its core is ambiguous, which was another comparable trait each institution shared in their approach to students. While value to a Utah State recruiter connotes the worth of the signed diploma they receive once they graduate, value to a Dixie State recruiter denotes the cost of tuition, lowest in the state of Utah for four-year public institutions. Subjectivity then, is an intrinsic theme of the recruiting process as each institution crafts a persuasive message sometimes validated by partial sources for credibility. For example, Ogden has a higher than average crime rate in the state of Utah compared to the colleges in their corresponding locations, however a tangential source such as *RentCollegePads.com*, ranks it as the 12<sup>th</sup> safest school in the country. The University of Utah has the highest tuition for public institutions in the state, however a non-cited source recognizes them as "#5 for Return on Investment".

One of the best points exemplifying the idea of an ambiguous distinction is the "rock wall" assertion, which recruiters made in 67 of the 71 observed presentations. The "rock wall" assertion is a shared statement where recruiters discussed content coded under the theme of engaging student life. In these sections of their presentations, recruiters



highlighted some of the exciting features available on their campus, such as outdoor recreation facilities, Olympic-sized swimming pools, or multi-functional gymnasiums. From this point they also stated how they have an indoor climbing rock wall available to students. The key point was the subjective nature in which they presented their rock wall. Recruiters did not say how they simply had a man-made rock wall to climb on their campus, but that their rock wall had some distinguishable feature separating it from the rest of the “common” rock walls at the other institutions.

For example, recruiters from the University of Utah declared how their rock wall was the second highest rock wall in the entire state. Recruiters from Dixie State discussed how their rock wall was “one of” the largest in Southern Utah, while SUU recruiters described how their rock wall was used in competition for the Utah Summer Games. Weber State recruiters stated how their rock wall was part of a “brand new, state of the art exercise facility recently opened on campus”, while the rock wall at Utah State was used to train their students in their top of the line Education and Recreation Management programs. The “rock wall” assertion reinforces the nature of presenting a generalized or common piece of information in a way that aids the distinctive appeal of their respective position.

Ambiguous distinction then, is a premise embedded in the strategies of the institutions as their approach focuses on accentuating their strengths from any possible perspective, including supplemental evidence from third-parties validating their claims. This institutional bias then creates a conundrum in that there is no ultimate source objectively ranking these institutions in a true-tier system, rather, the institutions have the freedom and the fluidity to rank themselves, and deliver persuasive messages to their

audience, attempting to motivate them to take action and apply for admission. While the angle differs on which point of content they address, the partiality remains the same as each institution crafts a mold for students that paints their institution in the best possible light.

Ambiguous distinction also plays a role in a recruiter's presentation style to students at the Higher Education Day events. As discussed previously, recruiters varied in their style when presenting to students. Of the five observed institutions, two adhered to the most inflexible script in their delivery of messages: The University of Utah, and Utah State University. They were strict in the sense that there was minimal interaction between the recruiters and the student audience, and that their presentations were governed by a supplementary Power Point which kept them on track in their delivery. The Power Point did not hamper their ability to deliver a well-executed presentation, however it left them little room for deviation if any students wanted to interact with questions about their institution.

In contrast, the three participants on the lower tiers, (Weber State, SUU, Dixie State) were more flexible in their interactions, thus resulting in more dialogue in their deliveries. They often used supplementary visual aids such as Prezi, or Power Point, which in turn had a predetermined format for their deliveries; however, they were not bound by these supplements, as in each observed presentation recruiters deviated from the predetermined script and adjusted their message based off audience participation.

There is no objective measure to determine which style is more effective, as audience demographics and persuasive strategies could have separate effects upon the targeted audience. For example, a student with a high index score is less likely to be

persuaded to attend an institution because of warm weather and an engaging outdoor recreation program. Despite that discrepancy, it could be argued that the lower-tier institutions had a greater persuasive impact on their audience because of the abundance of interaction and disclosure.

While this hypothetical tier system is not the standard scale to which each institution is measured, it does provide context for the distinction of each school in their particular style of delivering persuasive messages. Chapter eleven will continue the discussion to understand why these varying styles may be effective, dependent on both the tier of the institution, and the corresponding student they primarily target in their approach. It will also address theoretical applications in the field of communication and their relevancy in the context of higher education recruitment strategies in the state of Utah.

## **Conclusion**

One of the primary purposes of an admissions office is to make an impression in a potential student's mind about their affiliate institution. In many presentations, recruiters often looked to identify what separated them from the surrounding competitors. While their intention may be for dissimilarity, their tactics often shared commonality. One of the most recognized were the constructs of shared narratives, or communal stories recounted by recruiters from all of the participating institutions. In addition, there emerged the idea of ambiguous distinction, where a non-objective source affirms the value an institution has in order to elevate it to a level of excellence in the student's mind.

From a micro-position the comparison and contrast of the participating institutions helped shape the direction of the final chapter, which discusses the application of the

various higher education recruiting strategies from a broader perspective in the college selection process, as well as breaks down the dichotomous styles implemented by the corresponding institutions, and the target audience of students receiving their persuasive messages. In addition, theoretical applications from the coded themes will be identified. Finally, I will discuss both the limitations, and application of future studies surrounding the idea of persuasive strategies in higher education recruiting contexts.

## CHAPTER 11. DISCUSSION

The results of this study give perspective on both the content, and the implementation of persuasive strategies by higher education institutions in the state of Utah. More importantly, the results reveal the influence of the narrative paradigm as a recruitment tool, and the motivation behind using that template to prospective students. This study originally took a grounded theory approach to understand both the messages and the strategies of specific recruiting offices. This analysis was done by taking hands-on content delivered to current high school students, and critically analyzing the theoretical backdrop to which the strategies could be placed. The emergent themes from the coding process answer these questions, as well as provide theory-driven explanations for the persuasive approaches used by the participating institutions.

The primary focus of this chapter discusses the application of the various higher education recruiting strategies from a broader perspective in the college selection process, as well as breaks down the dichotomous styles implemented by the corresponding institutions, and the target audience of students receiving their persuasive messages. In addition, it recognizes the theoretical applications from the coded themes, as well as inserts findings into the gap in current academic research. Finally, it discusses both the limitations, and application of future studies surrounding the idea of persuasive strategies in higher education recruiting contexts.

### **College Selection Process**

Myriad factors surround prospective students as they focus their pursuit of a degree beyond their secondary education, with researchers debating the various incentives driving a student to select a specific institution. In this discussion the disunion exists as

multiple researchers (Avery & Hoxby, 2004; Long, 2004; Manski & Wise, 1983, Olaniyan & Okemakinde, 2008) argue that potential students are rational beings, relying on economic, or logos factors when making their decision on where to attend. In contrast, alternative researchers (Alvarez & Romani, 2017; Bourdieu, 1986; Terenzini, Cabrera, & Bernal, 2001) promote the idea of socio-economic status being more influential upon a student as they make their selection; more specifically, how an individual's network can reinforce ideals and sway their opinion in regards to where they will attend the following semester.

While both claims have validity, Perna's model (2006) helps better understand the situated context for college choice, namely organizing the factors heavily affecting their perspective toward higher education. A driving force behind this study utilized an exclusive layer of Perna's model, specifically targeting content controlled by prospective admissions offices, such as their recruitment strategies and the institutional characteristics broadcast to potential students.

The content of the potential higher education destinations is where these results fit in relation to the previously mentioned studies. While previous research focuses on the generalized macro-perspective of human behavior in higher education contexts, this study channels to a micro-perspective of higher education in the state of Utah; specifically, four-year universities targeting a niche market of students in specific geographic locations. While that appears a very narrow approach in comparison to higher education as a whole, this study provides a starting point for future research and the understanding of persuasive strategies in this context for the following reasons.

First, Utah institutions reinforce assumptions of human capital theory in that humans make rational decisions about where to invest their time attending college,

weighing the overall costs with the expected lifetime value of the degree they will receive (Paulson, 2001). This focus on rational actors was seen in their presentations with their heavy emphasis on the logicity of attending their specific institution. Essentially all five of the coded themes of message content, (financial value and affordability, academic resilience, engaging student life, optimal location, customer flexibility and personalization) were rational in their design, delivering messages on how their institution was the most rational and logical choice for students to make in their selection process. Regardless of the validity of their claim, recruiters from the participating institutions looked to paint the most coherent picture possible, in hopes that students would see the rationality of their institution as the ideal choice, and fill out the corresponding admissions application.

Second, while Perna's model focused on the marketability of the respective institutions, suggesting the promotion of distinct factors separating their institution from alternative options, all five of the participating institutions delivered very similar, and in some cases nearly identical messages in their presentations. Each of the schools delivered messages about how they were the "safest", or the "most personalized", or how they would have "academic experiences catered to them". While each of these ultimatums promote the singularity of the endorsing institution, they are in turn diluted because of the communal nature of these messages. It is not objectively possible for each institution to give students the most personalized experience they will ever have in higher education. Therefore, the partiality of these messages somewhat decreases their validity and could, in turn, create a generalized stigma in a potential student's mind.

Finally, a disconnect exists between educational persuasive research and the value placed on the contextual relationship between a college recruiter and a prospective

student. Results of this study indicate how the state of Utah provides the context to understand this relationship and its effect on potential students, which in turn could reinforce claims of the Human Capital Theory, or the Socio-Economic Status approach in the effectiveness of persuasive tactics in higher education. High school students in Utah are exposed to a more intimate, dyadic relationship with higher education recruiters. This in turn alters the context in which students receive messages about potential college destinations. Rather than being handed an informative pamphlet in a large auditorium and listening to a 15-second summary of targeted points of interest, students in Utah are exposed to 30 minutes of persuasive messages in a conversational setting, which in turn gives them a more comprehensive viewing point of that specific institution. While SES research promotes the idea of a student's network being more influential upon their decisions, future research in this specific context could shed light on the impact college recruiters have in both their delivery, and execution of their persuasive tactics. This idea reiterates Waldeck's (2007) findings that value exists in the personal relationship between a prospective student and a higher education employee promoting their respective school.

These alternate perspectives then raise the question of which party has a greater impact on the student in regards to where they will attend college: recruiters from affiliate institutions, or the student's surrounding social network? While recruiters may be the most prevalent source of information about a college admissions process, they spend a fraction of the time with potential students. This disconnect then raises the question as to which model of human behavior is more valid, specifically in regards to persuasion in the higher education context? Under assumptions of the HCT, humans are economically engineered, looking to make the best rational and logical decision for both their own well-being and the



well-being of society as a whole. If this is true, recruiters then have more power over the student because of the breadth and depth of their knowledge of pursuing a future in higher education. In contrast, if the assumptions of the SES model are valid, it devalues the impact of a college recruiter, as the potential student's surrounding network is more influential upon their behavior. Because of this disconnect in current research, these questions have yet to be addressed, and admissions offices focus more on the content of their presentations and the styles of their delivery, rather than which target audience they should be addressing.

### **Recruiting Presentations**

As previously discussed in depth, there is a dichotomy of presentation styles for the participating institutions. Additionally, those institutions could be listed in a hypothetical hierarchy of tiers based on enrollment numbers, tuition costs, endowment size, and brand recognition. From observation, there is a relationship between institutions on higher tiers and the level of interaction the corresponding recruiters had with the prospective students. Recruiters from both the University of Utah and Utah State (which might be rated as higher in this hierarchy) were more inflexible in their delivery, with few dyadic interactions occurring in their presentations. In contrast, recruiters from Dixie State, Southern Utah, and Weber State University were considerably more malleable in their presentations, and often altered their corresponding messages based off student feedback and responses.

These contrasting styles could have a relationship with the value each institution places on their corresponding enrollment numbers, and standards to which admissions offices are held to by administration. Both the University of Utah and Utah State University have high enrollment numbers, and have annually increased their student body

populations over the last five years (Utah-ER, 2018; USU-ER, 2018). Because of this, their focus is not to accumulate as many admissions applications as possible. In essence, the drive is more about quality, than it is about quantity with these institutions. Both University of Utah Assistant Vice-President Remsburg and Utah State University Admissions Director Nielsen supported this idea in their strategies. Said Remsburg, “The University of Utah is not for everyone.” Director Nielsen supported this with the statement, “We want to see if Utah State is the right fit for students.”

That approach reinforces the lack of interaction seen in their presentations to potential students. While their deliveries were not rigid, or mechanical in design, recruiters rarely altered the trajectory of their presentations from student interactions. Much of this could be attributed to a lack of significance for increasing enrollment numbers. Admissions offices could make the assumption that because of the notoriety of their institutional brand, enrollment numbers will continually increase, therefore the quality of their presentations may not be a priority. Any positive deliveries they portray to students will be positive, but not having prime attention each recruiting cycle.

This attitude could also play a role in the attention they give to out-of-state enrollment numbers, and the attendance at national recruiting fairs. Because of their historical backgrounds and current publicity, both institutions are largely recognized outside the state of Utah by non-resident students. Additionally, the admission of one non-resident student equates to the value of three resident students. Therefore, from an economic position, administration at the University of Utah or Utah State University may place a higher priority on swaying a potential student from the state of Washington, than a student from a high school in Salt Lake City. Essentially, students in the state of Utah may

already be funneling into their system, therefore why spend more time, effort, and strategy on them? They have already built the figurative field of higher education dreams, the students will in turn come on their own.

In contrast, enrollment numbers at Dixie State, Southern Utah, and Weber State University are comparably smaller, which in turn could have a relationship with the design of their recruiting presentations. As reiterated by Dixie State Admissions Director Brett Schwartz, “We need to be both informative, and entertaining to prospective students.” If the previously mentioned assumptions for the higher-tier institutions are in fact valid, this leaves a smaller portion of students available for the remaining institutions, which promotes the idea that they are more likely to place higher value upon their respective strategies. Much of state legislative funding is contingent upon admissions numbers, therefore, individual students carry more weight to the respective admissions offices. This in turn could relate to the personalized attention they give prospective students, often “selling them” on the potential opportunities their institution will provide for them.

This “sales” idea then transitions to the subjectivity of the content in their presentations. Added pressure from administration to accumulate more students could have a relationship with the various angles through which recruiters make their respective claims. Objectively, Dixie State may have the lowest annual tuition of any institution in the state, however recruiters from Southern Utah University subjectively claim they are ranked the “best value” by a specific third-party source. Weber State University may have a 22:1 faculty-to-student ratio, however that takes into consideration the multitude of intimate class sizes offered to graduate students which somewhat skews the highlighted ratio. Recruiters from these lower tiers may have an accumulation of pressure to gather as many

students as possible which in turn could cause them to: a) deliver more personalized, interactive presentations with their target audiences, and b) skew the content in a biased manner that places their institution in the best light.

### **Theoretical Application**

The results of this study provide evidence of admissions offices placing high value on the effectiveness of the narrative paradigm in persuasive approaches. At their core, narratives are naturally engineered to help humans create meaning and understand the world surrounding them (Fisher, 1984). Specifically, humans are able to critically analyze and understand complex issues through narratives which have high levels of both fidelity and probability. The transition a student makes from receiving their high school diploma to being enrolled at a large, higher education institution can be a multifaceted process, thus narratives used by institutional recruiters could ease that transition and help them process the next step they will be taking.

Burns (2015) discussed how stories themselves help form observations about the college selection process in general, despite the process being an arduous task in the student's mind. At the onset of attending college, multiple responsibilities such as tuition cost, location, and academic rigor are presented to a student, which in turn could cause added stress in their lives (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Recruiters have the ability to help students cope with these new variables through the use of storytelling. Rather than focusing their attention on enrolling in general education courses not applicable to their majors, recruiters shift the message through narratives, relaying specific personal relationships they developed with individual professors at their university, which in turn

alleviates the stress of the entire college process. Narratives reduce the overload of tension potential students feel about attending their institution.

For higher levels of coping and reduction, stories must then have equally high levels of both coherence, and fidelity. Fisher (1987) discussed how the interpretation of stories hinges on these principles. Coherence relates to the structure of a story, and whether the plot, characters, details, and facts are probable and rational. While fidelity focuses less on the structure, and more on the reliability and accuracy of the narrative. Elements such as high relevance, consistency of values, and impressions of transcendence influence a narrative's fidelity. Narratives used by recruiters, both shared and explicit, had both coherence and fidelity in their presentation. Common variables such as the realistic surroundings of being in a college classroom, or genuine characters exemplified by their professors assisted in the comprehension of the narrative itself. Narratives delivered in this manner can affect the decision-making process, and in turn promote a call to action from within (Garner, Sterk, & Adams, 1998, Rosteck, 1992). Under this assumption, if recruiters from Weber State University deliver multiple stories about the open-enrollment policy, and how comfortable their admissions process was, it could in turn promote a student to apply for admissions to their institution with the expectation that they, too, will find this process relatively easy.

Another dimension of narrative comprehension comes through regulatory fit, where stories simply "feel right". Researchers discussed how this peripheral message makes sense to us simply because it aligns with our pre-dispositions for long-term success, as well as connects with our anticipated expectations (Aaker & Lee, 2006; Vaughn et al., 2008). If a story makes emotional sense to someone, it could then promote them to pursue a logical

course of action because the information they are exposed to “feels” right in their minds. This approach suggests the nature of a narrative must then be coherent in the rhetorical modes of both logos and pathos. For example, the University of Utah admissions office told narratives about the rigorous nature of their research professors, and how there was a certain type of student that “fit” with those types of faculty. This exemplifies both the logical reasoning of attending their institution by working with the best and the brightest faculty academia has to offer, as well as promotes the regulatory fit aspect of “feeling right” for the prospective student, because they would emotionally enjoy such an experience.

The first two assumptions of the narrative paradigm argue that all humans are naturally storytellers, and that the decision making process and communication itself are based on good reasons in a human’s mind. That “reasoning” is reinforced by the act of rehearsing narratives. Fisher suggests that we make sense of the world around us, and that our motivation can be triggered by a connection with a story that has high levels of both coherence and fidelity, as well as has regulatory fit. If Fisher’s assumptions about the narrative paradigm are valid, this could then alter the perspective of admissions offices around the state of Utah and in higher education altogether. Under the assumptions of the narrative paradigm, a student is more prone to the behavioral act of applying for admission to an institution, if they are motivated by a narrative with high coherence and fidelity. If these assumptions are then accurate, a student is more likely to respond to a personalized narrative about a recruiter having success at an institution themselves, than hearing a list of accolades and statistical validation from third-party sources about an institution’s success.

The final assumption of the narrative paradigm argues that we experience a world filled with stories and that we must choose among them to make sense of our surroundings. From a transcendent perspective, this is essentially what each potential student faced as a participant of the Utah Higher Education Day events. For two hours they were delivered a barrage of various stories from recruiters about their respective institutions. Some of the narratives were unique and exclusive, while others were commonly shared in their construct. A student attending three presentations from three separate schools could have heard a variety of stories, and at the completion of the event would probably assign value to the stories and corresponding recruiters. This could in turn motivate them to find a connection with that particular institution and develop a professional and academic relationship with that entity. This act itself reiterates Fisher's assumptions that we are exposed to a multitude of stories in every situation, and we in turn make sense of the world by attaching ourselves to specific narratives. Students then, can make sense of the college application process by making a connection to the rehearsed narratives by recruiters that are the most coherent in their mind.

One of the ways a narrative could have an impact on students stems back to the original modes of rhetoric constructed by Aristotle. In many instances only one of the rhetorical modes was present in the construct of the narratives. For example, many narratives delivered under the theme of financial value and affordability centered around the logos mode of lower tuition prices. Recruiters described a financial context to the student, to which they then rationalized why their specific institution made logical sense in regards to financial stability. In contrast, many narratives delivered under the theme of engaging student life often centered around the pathos mode of enjoyable experiences.

Recruiters discussed specific clubs and organizations they could be part of, often laced with the jargon of “fun”, “entertaining”, and “exciting”, promoting the emotional experience they would have.

There were however, coded themes where narratives were delivered using both rhetorical modes of logos and pathos. As previously mentioned, recruiters delivered narratives about both the academic esteem of their faculty, combined with the personalized, intimate relationship they developed with them over the course of the semester. This was also recognized in the theme of optimal location. For example, recruiters from Dixie State delivered narratives about the climate of their location, combined with personalized activities they enjoyed because of the climate. Therefore, in a student’s mind, they would logically understand the advantages to appreciating warm weather in the winter months, and would emotionally attach themselves to wakeboarding at the lake after class.

While this study did not analyze the persuasive effects of the individual narratives delivered by college recruiters, it does raise the question as to what specific types of narratives will have the greatest effect on students. For a narrative to make the most sense to us, it must “fit” within our schema. Under this assumption, admissions offices from the participating institutions could then shift their focus to modify the narratives delivered in their presentations. All five participating institutions understood the influence narratives have on their designated audience, as they often discussed the worth of personalized stories created by the corresponding recruiter. While this may seem a valuable point to reinforce to their recruiters, research supports narratives with both high coherence and fidelity, as well as regulatory fit will have a greater impact on a student’s behavior to the



admissions process. Admissions directors could then shift their focus from instructing their recruiters to come up with personalized stories from their own lives that they can share with potential students, to asking whether the delivered narratives have fidelity, are coherent, and create a regulatory fit in their cognitive understanding.

### **Questionable Practices**

Overall, recruiters from the participating institutions were very professional in their demeanor and conduct with their student audience. This coincides with the idea that as representatives of a specific institution, they are looking to deliver the most favorable impression on their target audience. There were however, infrequent moments where representatives neglected that mindset and made unorthodox comments that did not align with the identity and brand of the corresponding institution. These moments oftentimes could be classified as impromptu uses of humor or sarcasm by the recruiter, in an attempt to gain favor in the eyes of the students. While this tactic could be successful on some students observing the presentations, not all students would necessarily comprehend the humor. This misunderstanding could then unintentionally create a negative connection in the student's mind with that corresponding institution.

As discussed in Chapter 9, representatives from Dixie State University exemplified the most common uses of questionable practices. For example, in three presentations, a recruiter made the statement, "We have a 100% acceptance rate, which is much better than the amount of rejections you'll receive from the ladies." Another recruiter from Dixie State opened her presentation saying, "If you talk in this presentation, I will come up and kick you in the head and kill you. Look at these legs. They can do damage." Both of these comments created a stir of laughter from the audience, however, the connotative

description of those statements are derogatory towards a student's romantic relationships, and violent in nature.

Another example included a recruiter from Weber State University discussing the safe nature of Ogden city, giving statistical validation about the local crime rates. This was then followed by the satirical statement, "the further south you go, the more ghetto it gets." This could be a reference to the increasing crime rates in Salt Lake, Utah, and Delta county, however it also connotates the diversity in those corresponding counties and racist implications could be interpreted by potential students listening to the presentations.

One of the most questionable observed practices came at Davis High School by a representative from the University of Utah. Davis is one of the largest high schools in the state, and located 23 miles north of the University of Utah. Because of this, there was an abundance of students entering the library where the presentation was being held. As the crowd of students began to increase, the recruiter sternly repeated the disclaimer, "We're standing room only here, and if you don't want to be here, that's fine. Leave and make room for someone who does." This was then followed by the mandate, "If you're here, don't talk. This is a presentation, not an interaction."

The University of Utah is in fact a selective institution, this was reiterated by Assistant Vice-President Remsburg stating previously that the U is not necessarily for everyone. The strict nature of these statements immediately placed a stigma over the audience throughout the presentation, and there was very little if any reaction from the students as the recruiter delivered her 35-minute presentation to them.

While these statements were sparse in their concentration, they were nonetheless apparent, and could have potentially led to a negative reaction for some potential students.

The ultimate goal of a recruiter is to gain as favorable an impression with the student audience in hopes their efforts could lead to a behavioral course of action in applying for admission. Questionable practices such as these could, however, lead to an opposite effect on some audience members and deter them from having any connection to that particular institution.

An interesting questionable practice came through the observation of recruiters from SUU promoting the engaging student life opportunities by highlighting the recent success of their football team. In multiple presentations, recruiters recounted semi-false narratives of how their football team had openly won the Big Sky Football conference championship that year and defeated their conference rival Weber State University in Ogden. While these statements have validity to them, it is a slant on the actual truth, as the Big Sky conference title was shared by both SUU and Weber State. In addition, Weber State soundly defeated SUU in the D-III playoffs in Cedar City, which no recruiter was proud to admit to their student audience.

This then raises the question as to the ethical nature of rehearsing narratives to promote behavioral action: Is it morally incorrect to tell a narrative that is not true in order to create a relationship between the student and the institution? From a more transcendent perspective, is it unethical to rehearse a narrative that is untrue in order to stimulate a relationship between two parties? While Fisher's research does discuss the nature, construct, and assumptions of narratives, there is a gap in understanding the ethical obligation of storytellers, at least in the realm of the narrative paradigm and the field of communication.

As previously discussed, the narrative paradigm is similar to the theory of rhetoric, in that the social proofs of logos and pathos are often utilized for the functionality of a narrative. The logos of a narrative is essentially the coherence and the fidelity of a narrative's structure, while the pathos of a narrative is related to the regulatory fit. While these modes of rhetoric share a connection with the narrative paradigm, the third mode, that of ethos, does not. Ethos is an examination of the moral character and history of the individual delivering the message to the audience. That moral character is what is being called into question in this particular situation.

Despite the fact that a narrative logically makes sense in the listener's mind, and "feels right" to them on an emotional level, is there an asterisk next to its validity if it is in fact not true at all? In this context, there were a number of shared narratives delivered by recruiters about experiences they had actually lived through in their time at their respective colleges. While this study does not question the narratives shared by the recruiters in their presentations, there is no means to discover whether the shared narratives they were telling actually occurred, or whether they were fraudulent experiences passed down through their admissions offices with the end goal being to promote a student to apply for admission. This idea promotes understanding the ethical boundaries not addressed in the narrative paradigm, which could promote future research on this particular topic.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Because this research is preliminary in its design there are a number of recognized limitations. First, the perspective is very parochial, which in turn limits the claims one could make about higher education persuasive strategies in general. The five participating

institutions are all four-year, public universities in the state of Utah, therefore their scope of the market in higher education is very narrow. Future studies could replicate this approach to validate if these codes and themes are also evident in presentations delivered by recruiters representing two-year institutions such as Snow College, or private universities, such as Brigham Young University.

In addition, this approach could be done on institutions around the country who have a more personalized approach to higher education recruiting. As previously mentioned, states with larger student populations such as California, Oregon, and Washington have a very processed system for their respective colleges. However, states such as Arizona and Wyoming have seen the success of the Utah Higher Education Day events and have promoted this approach. This in turn sets the context for recruiters to have a more intimate, personalized discussion with potential students. Because of these adoptions, this study could be replicated in alternate states.

Another limitation is the qualitative nature of this study. While qualitative research brings a unique perspective in the realm of social sciences, it does have limitations in understanding the cause and effect of human behavior. For example, the intent of this study compared the strategies and delivered content of respective admissions offices to potential students. Because of that focus, it is difficult to understand the effectiveness of those presentations on the enrollment numbers. Future research could bring quantitative measures into consideration to understand the cause and effect of enrollment number trends of the respective institutions.

This idea relates to the limitation of approaching higher education research from an isolated field of study. While this research primarily focuses on concepts and ideas in the

field of interpersonal communication, the scope of higher education has a larger range of focus itself. Research in additional fields such as psychology, marketing, or business could understand data from a different perspective, thus reinforcing the pursuit of pure empirical knowledge. Future studies could research which variables students find the most influential in their overall college selection process. From a marketing perspective, conducting a conjoint analysis with varying traits could then help recruiting offices understand which points of interest students find the most valuable in their own lives. This in turn could help them construct narratives around these variables to deliver to students in their persuasive recruiting presentations.

## **Conclusion**

When I was originally hired as a regional recruiter, our admissions office was in complete disarray following the resignation of the admissions director and his two regional recruiters. Going into the 2010 recruiting cycle we faced an uphill battle of trying to understand how we could be effective in our rhetoric and completely shift the enrollment trends of our institution which had slowly declined for the previous five years. In one of our first meetings together, our office agreed that we were figuratively at ground zero, and that through trial and error we would be able to fine-tune our approach to impact the lives of prospective students across the state. While we understood the general idea of going to individual high schools and selling an institution, we did not fully comprehend how we would evolve as experienced recruiters.

I use this narrative to show the similarities between my time as a recruiter and my experience writing this dissertation. Going into this project from a grounded theory approach, I was at a similar ground zero; understanding the ideas, and the contexts I would

be analyzing, but not fully comprehending what would emerge from the received data. While the trajectory of this dissertation may have been ambiguous in its design, my intent was similar to our admissions office in the summer of 2010; to make an impact. Not necessarily on the lives of a prospective student, but more in the realm of academia altogether, specifically in the fields of interpersonal communication and higher education. While this impact is not as germane as Burke's Pentad, or Thibaut and Kelly's Social Exchange Theory, I feel it is an impact nonetheless, and is a benefit for the following reasons:

First, it examines a crucial tributary for higher education from a communication perspective, one that is at the ground level of all institutions; admissions offices. Dixie State Director Brett Schwartz underscores this idea with the statement, "Everyone on campus needs to understand that without us, there are no classes, there are no grades to be handed out, there is no research. Without the students that we recruit, higher education just does not function, end of story." While this statement can be seen rather flippant to a diminutive number of large, brand-name institutions, there are hundreds of smaller institutions who are reliant upon the success of their admissions offices and affiliated recruiters.

The third layer of Perna's (2006) model of student college choice illustrated the variables placed in the higher education context: marketing and recruitment, location, and institutional characteristics. While the final two variables are somewhat out of an institution's control, the variable of marketing and recruitment is adaptable, and can be modified for improvement. This study then promotes the value of the field of communication and illustrates the idea of understanding a concept from an alternate perspective, one which can improve our understanding of the everyday world. In this

instance, this study promotes the idea of communication principles existing in higher education recruiting, and understanding the value of those principles at work.

Second, this study analyzed the concept of persuasion in a very specific context; higher education recruitment. While the act of persuasion is mature in its construct, its application to higher education recruiting is rather contemporary, as seen by the limited amount of conducted research. One may argue that this lapse exists from the lack of pressure for admissions offices to recruit students. However, with the recent influx of for-profit, as well as online, non-profit institutions, traditional brick-and-mortar colleges have seen a desaturation of target students (Kinser & Levy, 2007). This in turn promotes the idea that admissions offices should focus their attention on being more effective at persuading students to come to their institution, rather than make the foregone conclusion they will already be applying to attend in the fall.

Third, this is the pilot study for many branches of research to evolve in the field of communication studies. As discussed in the previous section, there are multiple variables that were not taken into consideration for this study that could be examined in the future. This study took both a theoretical, and figurative ground approach to give a foundation for the next steps in this process. Additional research can be done to validate these findings, as well as look at them from different perspectives, all of which promotes the critical idea of observing a phenomena and understanding its function. This study is the preliminary analysis for several projects in the future. Some examples could be to conduct interviews with panel groups of prospective students inquiring to the impressions recruiters had on them in the college application process. Also, a conjoint analysis could be conducted to understand which themes of message content is a student more focused on, which could in



turn promote the idea of which narratives a recruiter should focus their attention on presenting.

Fourth, this study can be applied in a real-world setting by admissions offices in the future. During this study, an anonymous admissions director approached me and said, “In two or three years, the two of us need to go to lunch so we can discuss what you found here, and what changes we can make in our office.” While this study is not the ultimate analysis of higher education recruiting to be used as a standard to which recruiters should gauge their performance, it can give particular insight on the trends, patterns, and behaviors of current institutions, which in turn could promote the adaptation of more effective recruiting approaches in the future. Additionally, branch studies stemming from this dissertation could provide more specific insight for institutions to utilize in their strategic planning.

Finally, this study promotes the impact that narratives have on individuals. As Fisher contrived, narratives are inherent traits built inside the schema of human beings (1984, 1985). Narratives also have the power to influence individuals and persuade them on a personal level (Slater & Rouner, 2002). With those thoughts in mind, this study exemplified the utilization of narratives from a persuasive perception in higher education. The prevalence of narratives delivered by recruiters from all five of the participating institutions reinforces Fisher’s arguments that we are all naturally storytellers. Whether intended or not, this paradigm emerged from the data and gave validity to Fisher’s ideas in the specific context of higher education recruiting. With this awareness, admissions offices could use this to advance their recruiting tactics and implement narratives with high coherence and fidelity, as well as help students feel that attending their specific institution

is the best “fit” overall. Narratives are powerful, and constructing strategic narratives could be an asset to admissions offices around the country.

At the beginning of my first day on the Utah Higher Education Day event tour, I stood outside a classroom of roughly 35 students, unsure of what message I would deliver to them about why they should attend our institution. At the time I had never before presented to this type of audience, and I was unclear what messages would be most effective to get them to fill out an admissions application. Moments before I went in to present, an older, more seasoned recruiter from another institution recognized my tension and offered his own advice, “Tell them your story. That’s what they’ll remember. Stories stick. They’re the things that stand out in a student’s mind. Tell your story and you’ll do just fine.”

That message shaped the trajectory of my career as a recruiter, and as a professor, as from that point forward I focused on the construct and delivery of narratives to whatever audience I am presenting. Stories stick. They are the memorable messages we hold on to, that we contemplate over and over in our minds, and in some cases influence the decisions we make. For prospective students, a good story told by a recruiter could be the deciding factor on whether or not they take their next big steps into higher education.

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## **APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ADMISSIONS DIRECTORS**

1. How would you define your institution's position?
2. What are the main selling points of your institution?
3. Do you have a campus theme or mantra associated with your campus brand?
4. What is your target audience in the state of Utah?
5. What Customer Relations Management software do you have in place to communicate with potential students?
6. From the point of initial contact, how frequent do you communicate with a student through your CRM software?
7. Who on campus do you use in person, or by proxy, as figures communicating with the student through your CRM software?
8. What promotional material do you physically mail out to prospective students?
9. With what frequency do you mail out the promotional materials to prospective students?
10. What promotional video supplements do you show prospective students in your presentations?
11. How many types of print media do you deliver to prospective students?
12. What are the demographic characteristics of your admissions office?
13. What is the frequency to which your admissions officers/recruiters communicate with prospective students?
14. What are the demographic characteristics of your student ambassadors?
15. What is the frequency to which your student ambassadors communicate with prospective students?
16. What promotional material do you use as incentives to give to prospective students, either through campus tours, the Post High School Tour, or College Day events?
17. A student shows interest in your institution, what is the communication process like for them starting as a prospective student, and ending with them fully enrolled?
18. How personal is your admissions office, and institution as a whole towards the individual students you come in contact with?

19. How much emphasis do you put on making a personal connection with prospective students?
20. Were there any institutions who you looked at to model your own recruiting materials after? If so, who are they?

## APPENDIX B. CODEBOOK FOR GATHERED DATA

This codebook is separated into two segments to process the data. First there are five separate themes coded for message content. These are the central premises guiding the persuasive approach a recruiter is focusing on in that particular part of their presentation. The five premises are: (1) financial value and affordability, (2) academic resilience, (3) engaging student life, (4) optimal location, and (5) customer flexibility and personalization. The second segment of the codebook identifies three categories of message delivery. The three categories are: (1) narrative, (2) reputational esteem, and (3) fear appeals.

The coding process follows two phases: First, read the transcription of the observed presentations and identify where coded can be coded under one of the five premises of message content. Next, address the transcription of the observed presentation a second time and identify where data can be coded under one of the three categories of message delivery. Once both steps have been completed, the coded data can then be analyzed.

### Five premises of message content

**Code:** Financial Value and Affordability

**Brief Definition:** The monetary advantage an institution gives to a student by attending their university.

**Full Definition:** Content under the theme of financial value and affordability relates to the monetary advantages potential/current students enjoy by having an affiliation with their institution. Because cost is an integral part of the college selection process, representatives will reference the financial benefits their students receive. These are oftentimes associated with the price of tuition for resident students, scholarship and/or financial aid opportunities, as well as potential monetary advantages they may receive following graduation.

#### Guidelines when to use the code:

- References to the cost of tuition price for resident students.
- References comparing their tuition cost with other in-state institutions.
- References comparing a university's tuition cost with attending college outside the state of Utah.
- References to scholarship opportunities available to students.
- References explaining the index score to students, and the associated scholarships available to them if they meet the designated criteria.
- References to financial advantages students will receive by simply being enrolled at their institution. (i.e. transportation, dining, entertainment, and athletics)
- References to monetary advantages they may receive following graduation.
- Specific references to the monetary value a degree from their school holds in the professional world.



**Guidelines when not to use the code:**

- References to financial opportunities available to students in Utah as a whole, not specifically to their institution.
- References to scholarship opportunities that do not have a direct connection to the institution. (i.e. national scholarships, private funding, state, and local scholarships)
- References to the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).
- References to the associated advantages students receive when they graduate from an institution, that are not explicitly monetary.

**Examples from the content:**

- “Plain and simple, we have the lowest tuition. No other four-year school can say that.”
- “You have to put money in, to get money out. We are the best return on investment you will get. And that makes us the most affordable college in the state of Utah.”
- “We have nationally accredited programs that will guarantee you a job right out of the gate once you graduate. We are worth spending your money on.”
- “If you attend our institution, and graduate from this specific college, you are guaranteed to make more money.”

**Code:** Academic Resilience

**Brief Definition:** The message of intellectual development opportunities available for students through a university’s educational programs.

**Full Definition:** Content under the theme of academic resilience relates to the attributed merit an institution has received through their academic efforts. Academia is the root of attending college, therefore it is one of the key points representatives discuss with students in their presentations. Content under this theme has specific connections to academic advantages, opportunities, and benefits a student will receive by attending their institution.

**Guidelines when to use the code:**

- References to the quantity of programs offered to students.
- References to the quality of programs offered to students.
- References to the acceptance rate of their institution; either open, or selective.
- References to having students calculate their academic index score.
- References to academic opportunities a student may receive by attending their institution.
- References to the academic standards a student must achieve in order to be accepted to their institution.
- References to research opportunities available to undergraduate students.
- References to academic awards or recognition their institution has received from third-party sources.
- References comparing the academic standards of their institution with other reputable institutions either in-state or nationwide.

**Guidelines when not to use the code:**

- References to having students calculate their academic index score for financial incentives.
- References negating the academic value of a comparable institution either in-state or out-of-state.
- References to research opportunities available to future graduate students.

**Examples from the content:**

- “We have over 225 degrees here on our campus. No one else can give you those kind of options.”
- “We are growing so fast, that we average four new programs every single year. If your degree is not at our campus, it will be here by the time you need it to be.”
- “We have the 2<sup>nd</sup> oldest undergraduate research program in the entire country, second only to MIT. We are kind of a big deal.”
- “We are held to the same academic standards as schools like Stanford, USC, and UCLA.”
- “We are a Top 25 research institution in the country.”

**Code: Engaging Student Life**

**Brief Definition:** The activities and opportunities given to students once they become fully enrolled at a university.

**Full Definition:** Content under the theme of engaging student life relates to the extra-curricular activities students are privy to at their institution. The college lifestyle is oftentimes framed as more than just an academic experience in a student’s life. Because of this duality, recruiters describe the various advantages to students both on and off their particular campus. Content under this theme highlights those distinct experiences as an incentive to apply for admission to their institution.

**Guidelines when to use the code:**

- References to student-run clubs and or college-sponsored organizations available for students to join.
- References to intramural or club sports programs students can participate in throughout the year.
- References to school traditions, or institution-unique activities available to students.
- References to events held on campus from outside individuals/groups not specifically affiliated with the institution. (i.e. nationally-recognized musical group holding a concert on campus)

**Guidelines when not to use the code:**

- References to off-campus activities, primarily because of the specificity of the institution’s location.

- References to activities associated with academic programs. (i.e. students being involved in DECA, a club often affiliated with specific academic departments)

**Examples from the content:**

- “There are over 250 clubs on campus, and if we don’t have your club, you can start one.”
- “There are plenty of student organizations you can join, from student government, to Ambassadors, to the student alumni association, there are plenty of associations you can join.”
- “We have the Howl. Which is the largest dance party west of the Mississippi. You all have heard of it. And it is honestly, the biggest dance that you will ever go to in your life. It is awesome.”
- “Our intramural program is the best and the largest in the state. There are over 40 different activities you can be involved in, which is awesome.”

**Code: Optimal Location**

**Brief Definition:** The message presenting an advantage a university has based on their distinct geographic location.

**Full Definition:** Content under the theme of optimal location relates to the opportunities available to students primarily because of the distinct location of their university. While institutions share similar traits such as tuition cost, and academic programs, location is a distinct element representatives can pitch to potential students. Content under this theme highlights the optimization of where their institution is located, and how that can be an advantage in an enrolled student’s life.

**Guidelines when to use the code:**

- References to recreational activities available to students located in areas surrounding the institution.
- References to commercial activities located in areas surrounding the institution.
- References to scenic landscapes surrounding the campus.
- References to optimal security aspects of the local city/county in which the institution is located.
- References to iconic landmarks either affiliated with, or surrounding the institution.
- References to preferable weather patterns of the geographic location unique to the institution.

**Guidelines when not to use the code:**

- References to activities students participate in that do not have a direct tie to the geographic location.
- References to locational activities that are not specific to the corresponding institution. (i.e. intramural programs competing in national tournaments in California)

- References to extra-curricular activities held on campus, primarily sponsored by the institution itself.

**Examples from the content:**

- “We have so many outdoor trails right behind our campus available to use anytime.”
- “If you want to go hiking, it’s five minutes away. If you want to go downtown to see the Utah Jazz play, or go shopping, that’s five minutes away too.”
- “There are literally three lakes within 15 minutes of campus.”
- “We are voted the 12<sup>th</sup> safest college in the United States.”
- “We have over 10 ski resorts within two hours.”

**Code:** Customer Flexibility and Personalization

**Brief Definition:** The personalized advantages that both potential students, and current students enjoy from a university.

**Full Definition:** Content under the theme of customer flexibility and personalization relates to the aspect of institutions being customer-centric and focused on the development of interpersonal relationships with potential and enrolled students. In some instances, flexibility is the uncomplicated nature of the admissions process, as well as the versatility of various programs students may be admitted. Personalization often refers to the informal relationships oftentimes illustrated by their faculty, staff, and administration. Both elements frame their institution as less rigid than traditional higher education may appear.

**Guidelines when to use the code:**

- References to admissions rates by open-enrollment institutions.
- References to admissions rates by selective-enrollment institutions.
- References to personal relationships developed with professors at the institution.
- References to average class sizes at their affiliated institution.
- References to personalized degree options available to students.
- References to kinesthetic learning, or students having a “hands-on” experience in a non-traditional educational setting.
- References to academic and/or career growth through personal relationships.

**Guidelines when not to use the code:**

- References to non-academic personalized experiences. (i.e. a club advisor was very personable)
- References to select or limited elements of their institutional experience. (i.e. limited entry into a specific graduate program)
- References to quantity of majors offered to current students.

**Examples from the content:**

- “We have a 100% acceptance rate. Everyone who applies is admitted.”
- “The average class size at our institution is 21 to 1.”

- “My professor got to know my name by the second day of class. I never felt like another number when I was going to his class.”
- “I love the fact that my professors took me out to the desert to study tortoises. The classroom was out in the middle of nowhere.”

### **Three categories of message delivery**

#### **Code: Narrative Approaches**

**Brief Definition:** Messages constructed under a storyline promoting various themes of a university.

**Full Definition:** Content under the theme of narrative approaches relates to the aspect of descriptive accounts told by representatives to potential students. Narratives are oftentimes related to one or more categorical themes. Narrative form is divided into two subcategories: (a) shared narratives, similar stories told by recruiters from different institutions which shared the same logistical constructs, (b) exclusive narratives, independent stories delivered by recruiters about experiences unique to themselves and their corresponding institution.

#### **Guidelines when to use the code:**

- References to personal narratives using multiple elements of basic story structure: characters, arcs, conflicts, premises, contexts.
- References to personal experiences iterated under a chronological composition.
- References to narratives exemplifying one or more of the previously-mentioned themes.
- References to experiences that are generic in design, yet have similar variables inserted into specific points of the narrative.
- References to personal experiences from their own college career, many of which result in an overarching lesson.

#### **Guidelines when not to use the code:**

- References to college experiences that have only one of the elements of basic story structure: characters, arcs, conflicts, premises, contexts.
- References to personal experiences not iterated under a chronological composition.
- References to statistical validation of any dimension of their institution.
- References to hypothetical situations that did not literally occur, but were still stated to reinforce a point by the representative.

#### **Examples from the content:**

- “Every semester we have what’s called Plaza Fest where all of our clubs come and give you the chance to join. We have like 600 clubs there for you guys to choose from. There’s the Dungeon’s and Dragons Club, the My Little Pony

Bronies Club, we even have the Doritos, Cupcakes, and Mt. Dew Club. There's literally a club for everyone on our campus."

- "I remember one of the biggest games of the year was when we played Nevada. We had like the whole student section screaming "I believe that we will win!" Over and over again. It was nuts. Did you know that we've recorded the second loudest decibel level in the entire country? Second to only the Cameron Crazies from Duke. I honestly feel that we willed our team to win that night. Being part of the Hurd is something you will find nowhere else."
- "On my first day of class, my professor put his cell phone on the board and said, "If you need to call me for any reason, please do not hesitate to do so." And I remember the night before our mid-term, I called him up at like 11:00 at night, and said, "I need your help with this Professor!", and he very sweetly walked me through the issues and made sure I understood the content of the test. The next day I passed, and it was all because he let me call him and get help. This is what Professors at Dixie State will do for you."

#### **Code:** Reputational Esteem Approaches

**Brief Definition:** Messages constructed under the premise that third-party sources validate the prestige of the institution.

**Full Definition:** Content under the theme of reputational esteem approaches relates to the use of prestigious elements to accentuate the value of a particular institution. This is done under the assumption that students understand the status of the associated statistic, individual, or brand, and this in turn elevates the institution's position in the student's mind, which then potentially leads them to express greater interest in becoming admitted the following fall.

#### **Guidelines when to use the code:**

- References to statistical accounts reinforcing the reputation of the affiliated institution.
- References to associations with notable individuals having an affiliation with their institution, primarily prominent alumni both in academia or athletics.
- References to associations with specific brands, corporations, or institutions that have an affiliation with their institution.
- References to accolades or awards their institution has received from third parties.
- References to quantitative measures distinguishing their institution from alternate institutions.
- References to official statements made by individuals or corporations reinforcing the esteem of the institution.

#### **Guidelines when not to use the code:**

- References to self-reported accolades or awards their institution has received.

- References to feedback from current students reinforcing the esteem of the institution.
- References to affiliations with specific statistics, individuals, or brands that do not have any affiliation with the institution.
- References to qualitative phrases praising the appeal of the institution.

**Examples from the content:**

- “The band Portugal. The Man will be coming to our campus next week. Have you heard of them?”
- “Some of our students have been recruited to work at well-known companies such as Goldman-Sachs, IHC, Adobe, L-3, the Utah Jazz, and EA Sports to name a few.”
- “We have had a number of players drafted in the NBA and NFL in the last few years. Namely, Andrew Bogut, Alex Smith, Kyle Kuzma, they are all graduates of our institution.”
- “We have students from all 50 states and 88 different countries.”
- “98% of our graduates owe less than \$16,000 in student loan debt with the national average being just over \$25,000.”

**Code: Fear Appeals Approaches**

**Brief Definition:** Messages referencing hypothetical or literal situations students will face if they decide not to attend their institution.

**Full Definition:** Content under the theme of fear appeals relates to the aspect of theoretical distress a student will face if they attend an alternative institution. This supports the idea that the main message they were delivering to their audience in these messages was the prospect of being placed in an uncomfortable situation. Both the susceptibility and the severity of the threat were posed as high levels to the students because of the commonality of these situations.

**Guidelines when to use the code:**

- References to primary experiences at alternative institutions placing the individual in a situation not coinciding with their personal norms.
- References to secondary experiences at alternative institutions placing the individual in a situation not coinciding with their personal norms.
- References to hypothetical experiences a student might face if they were to attend another institution in the state of Utah.
- References to hypothetical experiences a student might face if they were to attend another institution outside the state of Utah.
- References to struggles students face at alternative institutions primarily due to the higher cost of tuition.
- References to struggles students face at alternative institutions primarily due to the lack of personalized attention they received.

**Guidelines when not to use the code:**

- References to experiences at an alternative institution where susceptibility is low.
- References to experiences at an alternative institution where severity is low.
- References to experiences at an alternative institution that are negative in construct, and are biased in design. (i.e. If you go to this institution you are going to hate life)
- References to negative views about an institution itself.

**Examples from the content:**

- “My sister got a bunch of student loans just to pay her tuition, and now she’s 50K in debt, and living in my parent’s basement.”
- “I remember transferring to a larger institution, and immediately I felt like more of a number than an actual person. It was a completely different college experience.”
- “My buddy goes to another much larger school and he tells me horror stories about how he never talks to his professor. He’s literally in an auditorium with 1200 other students, and if he wants to meet with his teacher’s assistants, he stands in line like he’s at Disneyland for like three hours. It’s ridiculous.”



## APPENDIX C. IRB APPROVAL

### ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST



Institutional Review Board  
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair  
Baton Rouge, LA 70803  
P: 225.578.8692  
F: 225.578.5983  
[irb@lsu.edu](mailto:irb@lsu.edu) | [lsu.edu/irb](http://lsu.edu/irb)

**TO:** Loretta Pecchioni  
Communication Studies

**FROM:** Dennis Landin  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

**DATE:** March 18, 2016

**RE:** **IRB# E9841**

**TITLE:** Sell Yourself: Building a Foundational Structure Around an Institution's Position in the College Application Process

**New Protocol/Modification/Continuation:** New Protocol

**Review Date:** 3/15/2016

**Approved**       X       **Disapproved**                     

**Approval Date:** 3/18/16      **Approval Expiration Date:** 3/17/19

**Exemption Category/Paragraph:** 2b

**Signed Consent Waived?:** No

**Re-Review frequency:** (three years unless otherwise stated)

**LSU Proposal Number** (if applicable):

**Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal:** (if applicable):

**By:** Dennis Landin, Chairman 

#### PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –

##### Continuing approval is **CONDITIONAL** on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects\*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. **SPECIAL NOTE:**      **When emailing more than one recipient, make sure you use bcc.**  
                                 **Approvals will automatically be closed by the IRB on the expiration date unless the PI requests a continuation.**

*\*All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at <http://www.lsu.edu/irb>*

## **VITA**

Brock Thomas Adams, born in Logan, Utah, received his undergraduate degree from Dixie State University in 2009. Following which, he was hired as the Assistant Director of Admissions for Dixie State and recruited students to enroll for a period of five years. During this time he received a master's degree in Professional Communication from Southern Utah University. His interest in both the field of communication, as well as pedagogy sparked his interest to further his education. In 2015 he enrolled as a graduate student at Louisiana State University in the Department of Communication Studies. Currently, Brock is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Professional Sales at Weber State University. He will plan on graduating from LSU in August of 2018 with a Ph.D. in Interpersonal Communication.