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Initial Student Impressions and Affinity Towards the Institution

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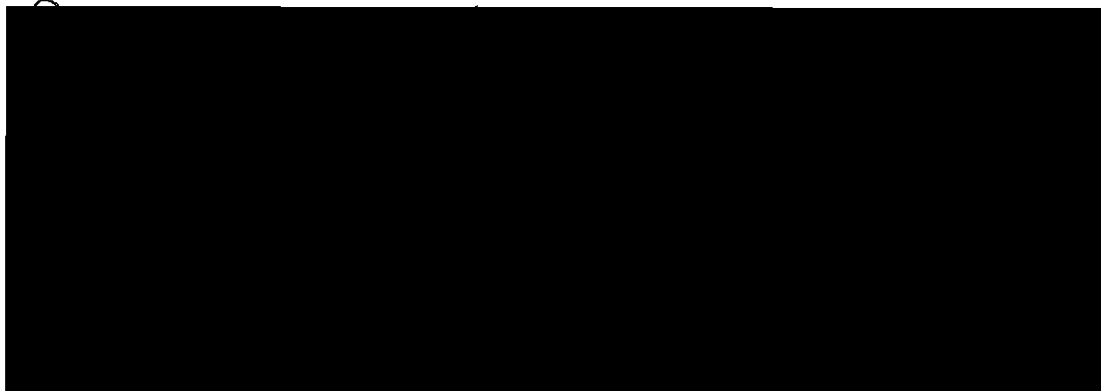
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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
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Initial Student Impressions and Affinity towards the Institution

Andy Doto

Eastern Illinois University

Abstract

This study attempted to explore the relationship between the university affinity and initial impressions of undergraduate students at a mid-size, Midwestern university. A quantitative study was employed after acquiring data using Berquam's (2013) Relationship Quality Student Affinity instrument, which measured a student's commitment and pride, as well as their initial impressions towards the university. Results from the Chi Square test for independence showed evidence that initial impressions were related to university affinity, aligning with prior research. Other results from the study indicated that initial impressions and university affinity were also related to university choice rank. Recommendations were made for the university to invest in ways to improve the school's standings in rankings as well as increase marketing to the public and prospective students to encourage external prestige.

Key words: *university affinity, initial impressions, Relationship Quality Student Affinity instrument, university choice rank*

Acknowledgements

Throughout the course of my time at EIU, my success wouldn't have been possible without the people in my life encouraging and challenging me. It is impossible to fully and properly articulate how grateful I am to have met these people and to have them a part of my life.

To Lou, thank you for being that presence in challenging me to do better. You helped all of us understand how important it is keep plugging away, one day at a time. We appreciate your positivity throughout the process.

To Dr. Gillespie, it was an honor to work alongside you. You challenged my thinking and helped me to reach higher, and I really appreciate how much you understand my thought processes. Your genuine and candid support and belief in me gave me the strength to carry on. I can't say thank you enough. I look forward to keeping in touch with you in the future!

To Dr. Kniess, thank you a million times over for being the guiding light throughout this process. Even in the times when my strength, courage, and perseverance had waned to its lowest points, you were still there to believe in me and help me through. For that, I am forever in your debt. I know that we will stay friends and that you'll always be my coach!

To my brothers and sisters in the CSA cohort, I wouldn't have made it through without you. It warms my heart to know that I've been supported and surrounded by the best in the world. Especially to Sean Sheptoski, Jorge El-Azar, Eric Swinehart, Nick

Wright, Cait East, Stacy Rowan, Maddie Smart, and Laura Trombly: I love you all to the moon and back, from the bottom of my heart.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The undergraduate experience is a transformative one for many students (Astin, 1984; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kohlberg, 1971). Much of that experience can be attributed to activities and opportunities that students partake in outside of the classroom environment (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 1995). During this time, students also develop a connection to the institution, the people at the institution, and the values that the institution holds. Since the development of these connections can lead to alumni giving back by donating financially or by encouraging others to attend, it is important for universities to find ways to build support from the alumni base (Volkwein & Parmley, 1999).

Alumni support is important to universities because it provides the university with another stream of resources, including financial support (Taylor & Martin, 1995). Alumni support is a phenomenon that is influenced by experiences that students have while still enrolled as a student and the overall satisfaction of the undergraduate experience (Kameen, 2006; Monks, 2003). Studies have shown that rewarding college experiences make it more likely that an alumnus will support the university (Vanderbout, 2011; Monks, 2003; Thomas and Smart, 2005). For example, Clotfelter (2003) looked at students from private institutions and found that if alumni were satisfied with their experience, or if students believed that someone took a genuine interest in them, then they were more likely to donate.

Alumni support, specifically donations, is becoming an increasingly important issue in higher education. Financially speaking, higher education institutions are

struggling to find ways to make ends meet and give their students the best experience possible. As reported by Mitchell, Palacios, and Leachman (2014), higher education funding is still below the level of funding that existed before the recession. An article in the Chronicle of Higher Education called *25 Years of Declining State Support for Public Colleges* (2014) showed the decrease in funding for many higher education institutions for the last 25 years. In fact, there are even states that are continuing to reduce funding (Mitchell et al, 2014). Every state in the U.S. is spending less per student than they did before the recession, with the exception of Alaska and North Dakota. Higher education institutions have to make do with what they have, but the reality of the funding environment has compromised the quality of the services that universities and colleges provide (Mitchell et al, 2014). In an article by Suzanne Mettler (2014), Mettler states that “As resources have become stretched thin at public institutions, class sizes have swelled, more classes are taught online or by adjuncts and fewer in person by full-time professors, and colleges offer less academic support for students” (para. 14). Therefore, alumni donations can be the key to supplementing government funding in order to provide the best experience for students (Mitchell et al, 2014).

A solid body of research exists supporting that the undergraduate experience plays a key role in an alumnus’ likelihood of donating (Taylor & Martin, 1995; Vanderbilt, 2011; Thomas & Smart, 2005; Kameen, 2006). In a study that explored the undergraduate experience by segmenting it into different categories such as teaching quality, quality of facilities, and student services opportunities, Berquam (2013) researched specifically what kinds of experiences that undergraduate students have that influence overall satisfaction and commitment to the university, which she calls

university affinity. One of the factors that were examined was the initial impression of the school that the student had before entering as a student. Initial impressions are described as the attitude that a student has about their school before they officially attend. The findings suggest that initial impressions play a key role in the development of university affinity. The following study builds off of Berquam's (2013) analysis, but it will feature a study done at a different institution and it will focus more on the influence of pre-existing attitudes and perceptions, or initial impressions of the institution.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between the affinity and initial impressions that students have towards a mid-sized, rural Mid-western university. In addition, the study also delved into determining the relationship between university affinity, initial impressions, university choice rank, and academic program. This study sheds some light on the impact that some predetermined factors have on university affinity, if at all. The study gathered data from undergraduate students via a survey. The survey determined the level of affinity participants had towards the university. Initial impressions of the institution were measured by the survey, as well as the university choice rank and academic program. Then, Chi Square tests of independence analyses were conducted on the data to determine if any of the variables showed evidence of a relationship to university affinity. The findings may help student affairs administrators understand more clearly how the institution is perceived by incoming students, and possibly how that may help or hinder affinity.

Research Questions

Due to the decreasing support from the government in terms of funding, understanding the affinity will allow universities to better tailor their efforts to encouraging supportive attitudes in their alumni. The following research questions were developed as a result and served as the basis for this study:

1. What is the relationship between university affinity and initial impressions of the university?
2. What is the relationship between university choice rank, academic program, university affinity, and initial impressions of the university?

Significance of the Study

This study is important because developing alumni that are supportive of the university can be very useful in the future success of the institution. As public higher education institutions are facing times where financial support from the government is dwindling, alumni support will be increasingly important (McLendon, Hearn, & Mokher, 2009; Mettler, 2014; Mitchell, Palacios, & Leachman, 2014). By better understanding the affinity levels of students, a university can address it and develop strategies for fostering more supportive attitudes. Furthermore, by understanding factors that influence affinity, a university can implement methods to impact affinity. Lastly, it is also important for a university to understand the impressions that undergraduate students have before they begin as students at the institution. If negative impressions exist in the minds of incoming students, then in order to increase affinity, the university will benefit by working to overturn those impressions. For example, one way of addressing an issue in initial impressions about the university that students may have is to increase

communication between the time of admission and the date of enrollment. If admitted students are being reminded about impactful events or projects going on at the university, initial impressions could potentially be improved as a result.

Limitations of the Study

The population surveyed were undergraduate students at a public, mid-sized, Mid-western, masters degree-granting institution. Therefore, the findings are not be generalizable to institutions of different sizes and classifications. In addition, this study only included undergraduate students, so students at the graduate level will not be surveyed. The study used an electronic survey for data collection. In and of itself, self-reported data is flawed, because it depends on the truthfulness of the respondents (Austin et al., 1998; Fan et al., 2006).

Definitions of Key Terms

Alumni. An individual that has completed degree requirements from the university and has graduated.

University Affinity. One's level of commitment and pride for the institution (Berquam, 2013).

Initial Impressions of the University. One's attitude towards the university before starting the undergraduate experience.

University Choice Rank. The rank of the school chosen to attend after searching university options (For example, a student enrolled at a university that was his/her second or third choice).

Academic Program. A student's chosen field of coursework (For example: Elementary Education, Psychology, Mathematics, etc.).

Summary

This chapter provided an introduction of the proposed study, providing clarity into why the study can be beneficial. Chapter two will provide a detailed background of the literature that exists around the topic of university affinity, alumni giving, and initial impressions. Chapter three will explain the methodology driving the study, including details on data collection and data analysis.

CHAPTER II**Review of Literature**

For higher education institutions, understanding the student body and how their attitudes towards the institution can be important to advance the college or university. If institutions can understand how affinity develops and what factors influence it, they can create and implement programs or events that encourage affinity development. Affinity, or commitment and pride, (Berquam, 2013) can be improved in a multitude of ways, such as increasing student satisfaction, perception of teaching quality, and perception of and institution's reputation. (Hennig-Thurau, Langer, & Hansen, 2001; Helgesen & Nettet, 2007; Brown & Mazzarol, 2008). Marketing and branding, according to Moore (2001) can also influence affinity. Affinity can be important to the future success of an institution because committed and loyal alumni are more likely to provide support, financially and otherwise (Mercatoris, 2009; Tsao & Coll, 2004; Holmes, 2009; Vanderbout, 2010).

In this chapter, a review of the literature will be provided that explores the relationship between experiences and attitudes of students and the development of affinity, and how it influences a student's willingness to donate as an alumni. In 2013,

Berquam introduced university affinity as a topic. Affinity is defined as “commitment and pride for the institution” (Berquam, 2013, p. 21). Another researcher defined loyalty as “the relationship to the institution that is defined through the students’ undergraduate experiences that result in the betterment of the university” (Mercatoris, 2006, p. 10).

Since the main focus of the present study is initial impressions of students and affinity, a body of literature revolving around initial impressions and prestige will be presented in this chapter to provide a better understanding. Following that overview, an explanation of the decline in government funding in recent times will highlight the importance of alumni giving. Alumni support has been proposed by researchers as a means to help higher education institutions compensate for the lack of funding. Therefore, the conclusion of this chapter will describe the importance of affinity in producing attitudes of giving towards an alma mater.

Student Loyalty and University Affinity

Student loyalty as a concept has been a recent topic of focus (Hennig-Thurau, Langer, & Hansen, 2001). In the 2001 study, Hennig-Thurau, Langer, & Hansen connected the concepts of relationship marketing and customer loyalty to the higher education setting. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2001) stated that student loyalty is important for higher education institutions for many reasons. First of all, private institutions are completely dependent on tuition, so retaining students is key to that institution’s financial success. Furthermore, private institutions benefit by having a good relationship with students because maintaining the relationship with students is more cost-effective than gaining new students (Hennig-Thurau et al, 2001). In addition, student loyalty can also influence the quality of teaching at an institution. More engaged students will influence

the instructor to be more engaged, which creates a classroom environment that stimulates learning (Hennig-Thurau et al, 2001; Rodie and Kleine, 2000). The relationship between an institution and loyal students can benefit the institution after students leave as well, with the potential of loyal students giving financial donations, spreading positive word-of-mouth, or supporting other ways such as providing internship opportunities to current students (Hennig-Thurau et al, 2001).

In the study by Hennig-Thurau, Langer, and Hansen (2001), the researchers surveyed students from different higher education institutions in Germany. They developed a questionnaire to measure student loyalty, as well as constructs that the researchers expected to contribute to student loyalty. The questionnaire was based on a model called the Relationship Quality-Based Student Loyalty (RQSL) model. The results of the quantitative analysis showed that each construct played a role in student loyalty, with two being especially key: student's perception of teaching quality and emotional commitment to the institution (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001).

A study conducted in Norway by Helgesen and Nettet (2007) also delved into student loyalty. The researchers claimed that student loyalty has been a topic that had been increasingly important in recent years, due to several factors. For example, due to increased competition in higher education, it is just as critical for institutions to retain students as it is to recruit and attract them (Tinto, 1975; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Elliott & Healy, 2001). In addition, student loyalty was positively related to teaching quality, due to active participation and committed behavior (Rodie & Kleine, 2000). The study set out to answer two simple questions: "(1) Are students' perceived image of the university college and their perceived image of their specific academic program different concepts?"

(2) Are student satisfaction, image of the university college and image of the academic program all drivers of student loyalty, and if so, which one has the highest degree of association with student loyalty?" (Helgesen & Nettet, p. 39). In order to collect data, they utilized a survey that measured student loyalty, student satisfaction, and perceptions of the image of the university and academic program. Helgesen and Nettet (2007) concluded that student satisfaction and the image of the university were directly related to student loyalty. They also confirmed that students view the image of the university and the image of the academic program to be different concepts.

Helgesen and Nettet (2007) produced another study that explored student loyalty and the relationship to student satisfaction and students' perception of the reputation of the institution. It was proposed that student satisfaction and an overall positive perception of the reputation of the institution are associated with student loyalty. The researchers stated that performance of institutions were being emphasized more when government funding is dispersed, so pressure is on institutions to produce student credits and degrees. As a result, it is in the institution's best interest to invest in opportunities for students that impact their satisfaction and loyalty, because satisfied and loyal students are more likely to matriculate (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007). The researchers designed a questionnaire that was distributed to undergraduate students at a university college in Norway that measured loyalty, perception of reputation, and satisfaction. The results showed that satisfaction and loyalty were both significantly associated with student loyalty.

Viänden and Barlow (2014) examined personal and institutional characteristics or factors that impacted a student's expression of loyalty towards their undergraduate

institution. The researchers translated the questionnaire from the existing Relationship Quality-Based Student Loyalty model from Hennig-Thurau, Langer, and Hansen (2001). The German model was the most-cited model pertaining to student loyalty in existence (Viänden & Barlow, 2014). The instrument that was adapted from the German version was called the Student University Loyalty Instrument. The SULI was distributed to undergraduate students at three masters comprehensive universities in the Midwestern United States. Results strongly indicated that college choice rank and initial impressions are highly predictive of student loyalty. The researchers concluded that the more committed a student is initially, the more favorably a student will perceive the university, which will foster loyalty (Viänden & Barlow, 2014).

University affinity is a concept that was introduced by Berquam in a 2013 study. Berquam defined university affinity as an individual's level of pride and commitment (Berquam, 2013). Adapting the Student University Loyalty Instrument from Viänden and Barlow (2014), Berquam measured the university affinity of the undergraduate student population at a large Midwestern university. In addition, the students' university experiences (variables such as teaching quality, student services opportunities, quality of facilities, initial impressions, etc.) were analyzed in order to determine their predictive value. The results showed that the association between university affinity and student services opportunities, the quality of student services staff, student impressions, and extracurricular involvement was significant. Student impressions referred to the initial impressions that a student had about the institution before deciding to attend. The value of extracurricular opportunities and its relationship to affinity has been demonstrated by

the literature (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001; Berquam, 2013; Brown & Mazzarol, 2008; Viänden, 2015).

Initial Impressions and Prestige/Rankings

Initial impressions refer to the attitudes and opinions that students have before they enroll at a particular university. Prior research has displayed that initial impressions play a role in the development of student loyalty and university affinity (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001; Berquam, 2013). As a result, a high emphasis on prestige has been established in the higher education market. Prestige is defined as the external ranking of a higher education institution (O'Meara, 2007). The *US News and World Report Rankings* provide the public with a standardized ranking system of the higher education institutions from around the world. Schools look at these rankings and strive to climb the rankings in order to achieve prestige, which in turn attracts students (O'Meara, 2007). The job market and businesses also place an emphasis on the prestige of schools. One study showed that professionals in the fields of law and business were more likely to acquire higher-level positions if they had a degree from a prestigious institution (Useem & Karabel, 1986). Another study attempted to determine whether or not earnings from a job could be impacted by the prestige of the school from which the employee obtained a degree. In this study, multiple measures of college quality were utilized. In each case, the impact of college quality on the earnings of graduates was positive and significant (Zhang, 2005).

Furthermore, in two separate studies, Helgesen and Nettet (2007) found that the perceived image of the university and perceived reputation of the university that students held were associated with student loyalty. A study conducted at four Australian

institutions of higher education by Brown and Mazzarol (2008) also found that student loyalty could be predicted by perceived image of the university. In a 2013 study at a large Midwestern-American university, Berquam discovered that initial impressions were strongly associated with university affinity, or commitment and pride towards the university. Research by Moore (2010) indicated that colleges and universities can favorably influence students' attitudes by marketing and branding their image, ultimately resulting in the development of affinity toward the institution (Helgesen & Nasset, 2007; Berquam, 2013; Brown & Mazzarol, 2008).

Alumni Giving

Alumni giving has been a topic that has been researched fairly extensively (Mercatoris, 2009; Tsao & Coll, 2004; Holmes, 2009; Vanderbout, 2010). It is very important, especially to private institutions (Holmes, 2009). The main focus of research based around alumni giving has been around understanding the reasons and tendencies that exist for alumni that give support to their alma mater. Through quantitative and qualitative research, it has been shown that experiences that students have while they are undergraduates influence how much commitment they will have towards the institution. In a study of journalism alumni, those who have expressed satisfaction with their journalism education were found to donate more (Tsao & Coll, 2004). In a study conducted by Mercatoris (2006), the findings showed that donors to the university felt a sense of pride and loyalty. The donors had a high degree of bonding towards the school. However, non-donors did not exhibit this sense of pride and bonding to the school. In a qualitative study by Vanderbout (2010), the researcher interviewed donors and non-donors of a university. In the study, donors displayed a high degree of attachment

towards the school. Non-donors were described as having positive feelings about the school, but the sense of attachment was not present. It was suggested that loyalty to the school was key for donors that donated. It appears as if this phenomenon has not changed much over time, because in a study by Leslie and Ramey (1988), they found that alumni donations resulted from a positive psychological connection to the school.

A strong body of literature exists which generally supports the notion that alumni that feel connected, bonded, or attached to the school are more likely to donate (Mercatoris, 2009; Tsao & Coll, 2004; Holmes, 2009; Vanderbout, 2010). As long as affinity towards the school develops, then alumni are in a favorable position from a fundraising perspective. Moreover, research has supported that overall satisfaction with the undergraduate experience is a predictor for alumni donation as well (Tsao & Coll, 2004; Mercatoris, 2006). However, a lesser-explored aspect is the impact of satisfaction on the development of affinity. Vanderbout (2010) concluded that overall satisfaction with the undergraduate experience impacted the loyalty in alumni. Berquam (2013) explored this topic in her study. One of the conclusions from that study showed the initial impressions of the university that students had impacted the student's level of university affinity.

Decline of State Support

In recent times, financial support for public institutions has diminished significantly (McLendon, Hearn, & Mokher, 2009; Mettler, 2014; Mitchell, Palacios, & Leachman, 2014). A 2014 article published in the Chronicle of Higher Education called *25 Years of Declining State Support for Public Colleges* demonstrated that funding for public higher education institutions had been decreasing for the past 25 years; 577 out of

the 622 institutions included in the data experienced a decline in funding from 1987-2012. Mettler (2014) also stated that despite the fact that public universities and community colleges enroll around 73 percent of all college students, state governments have decreased financial support for them by an average of 26 percent. Mitchell et al (2014) also stated that 48 states in the nation are spending less than they did before the 2008 recession, the exceptions being North Dakota and Alaska. As a result, higher education institutions have had to increase tuition as well as decrease spending, which can jeopardize the quality and outcomes for students (Mitchell et al, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

Theory may help to provide a framework to better understand the phenomenon of university affinity and initial impressions. Astin's Input-Environment-Output Model was developed in order to assist higher education institutions in assessment and evaluation. The model posits that in order to properly assess effectiveness in higher education, the institution must consider three types of information: Input, Environment, and Output (Astin, 1993). Input "refers to those personal qualities the student brings initially to the education program (including the student's initial level of developed talent at the time of entry)" (Astin, 1993, p. 18). According to Astin (1993), input also includes attitudinal characteristics, such as political ideology, career choice, motivations for pursuing a higher education, and even the reasons for selecting a particular institution. Environment "refers to the student's actual experiences during the educational program" (Astin, 1993, p. 18). Examples of environment include the educational experiences, curriculum, faculty, extra and co-curricular opportunities, etc. (Astin, 1993). Outputs "refer to the 'talents' we are trying to develop in our educational program" (Astin, 1993, p. 18).

Examples of output can include the grade point average, course satisfaction, and degree completion. The I-E-O Model is relevant to the present study, if one considers affinity as an output. Initial impressions, if considered an input, can have a double effect on outcomes; input can impact outcomes directly and indirectly impacts outcomes through the environment (Thurmond & Popkess-Vawter, 2001).

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the research regarding student loyalty, university affinity, prestige and initial impressions, and alumni giving and the recent decline in state support for higher education. The purpose of this overview was to provide an empirical context and knowledge base for the present study. Chapter three will explore the methodology of the present study, delving into details of data collection and analysis.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The following study used a quantitative approach to answering the research questions. Data was collected via an online survey distributed through email. The survey was administered to the undergraduate student population (about 7500 students). Since the questions of the study explored evidence of relationships, a Chi Square approach was necessary.

Design of the Study

This study implemented a quantitative approach to research. Data was collected via survey, and was analyzed using a Chi Square test for independence test. A Chi Square test for independence technique allows a researcher to determine if the distribution of data for two variables is independent of each other. For the first research question, a Chi Square test for independence was conducted in order to view the relationship between university affinity and initial impressions. For the second research question, a Chi Square test for independence was used to determine any evidence of a relationship between university choice rank, academic program, and initial impressions of university affinity.

Participants

The participants for this study were undergraduate students. The study yielded 512 participants. A survey was created and distributed electronically to the email accounts of all undergraduate students. The survey was created using the Qualtrics program. Undergraduate students of all backgrounds and ages were included.

Site

The site of the study was a mid-sized, rural Midwestern university. The university offers 50 undergraduate degree programs, 29 graduate degree programs, and 10 post-baccalaureate programs. The university's enrollment as of 2015 was 7,202. The survey that was distributed for this study was sent participants through campus email addresses.

Instrument

The instrument that was used in this study was developed by Lori Berquam (2013) in order to examine university affinity and the relationship that existed between several other factors. It was called the Relationship Quality of Student Affinity (RQSA). This instrument was based off a scale that was used for institutions in Germany. The original scale was called the Relationship Quality-based Student Loyalty (RQSL). It was developed in order to measure the loyalty that one had towards an institution (Berquam, 2013).

The RQSL scale was adopted and modified to apply to universities in the United States by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. They removed culturally specific items and they renamed the instrument Student University Loyalty Instrument (SULI), and it was tested for validity and reliability (Viänden and Barlow, 2014). For the purposes of that study, Berquam (2013) modified the SULI instrument slightly, creating the RQSA instrument. For the purposes of this study, portions of the RQSA were used. The perceived learning gains, institutional fit, satisfaction, initial impressions and subscales and demographic section were used. In the original study in which the RQSA was used, the RQSA was tested for internal consistency; factorial analysis found it to be acceptable at $\alpha = .91$ (Berquam, 2013). The initial impressions subscale will be modified

slightly to include more aspects of prestige and reputation. Slight modifications do not impact the validity of the instrument (Litwin, 1995).

Data Collection

Data was collected electronically with a survey, administered via email to all undergraduate students. An email was sent to potential participants inviting them to take part in a survey measuring university affinity and initial impressions of the university. The survey was created using the online program Qualtrics, and the data was stored on Qualtrics as well.

Treatment of Data

Once the data was collected, it was input into SPSS, a statistics program. In order to assist with data analysis, incomplete responses were used. Descriptive statistics was run to further understand the data. For analysis, Chi Square tests for independence were employed to answer the research questions. In order to run the Chi Square tests for independence, means for each subscale of the survey were generated. The perceived learning gains, institutional fit, and satisfaction subscale means were then averaged to create the university affinity score, per Berquam (2013). From the initial impressions and university affinity mean scores, categories were then created in order to run Chi Square test for independence analyses. For initial impressions, means that existed between 1.000 to 1.999 were categorized as good impressions. Means that existed between 2.000 to 3.999 were categorized as neutral. Means that existed between 4.000 to 5.000 were categorized as poor impressions. For university affinity, means that existed between 1.000 to 1.999 were categorized as affinity. Means that existed between 2.000 to 3.999

were categorized as neutral. Means that existed between 4.000 to 5.000 were categorized as detached.

Demographics

Tables 1-3 describe the demographic information for the 512 participants that completed the survey. The following demographic was self-reported by the participants, and the participants were given the option to not answer to the demographic questions in the survey.

Table 1 displays the age of the participants of the survey. The majority of the participants fell within the age range of 20-21 (n=196; 38.3 %). A total of 144 participants (28.1%) fell within the age range of 18-19 (28.1%). A total of 107 participants (20.9%) fell within the age range of 22-23. A total of 65 participants (12.7%) fell within the age range of 24 or older.

Table 1 Age of Participants

Age	<u>N</u>	%
18-19	144	28.1
20-21	196	38.3
22-23	107	20.9
24 or older	65	12.7
Total	512	100.0

Table 2 displays the racial identity of the participants that completed the survey. The majority of the respondents (n=407; 79.5%) indicated that they identified as White. A total of 39 participants (7.6%) identified as African American. A total of 9 participants (1.9%) identified as Asian. A total of 19 participants (3.7%) identified as Hispanic. One

participant (0.2%) identified as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. A total of 26 participants (5.1%) identified as having 2 or more races. A total of 11 participants (2.1%) preferred not to answer.

Table 2 Racial Identity of Participants

Racial Identity	<u>n</u>	%
African American	39	7.6
Asian	9	1.9
Hispanic	19	3.7
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1	0.2
White	407	79.5
2 or more	26	5.1
Prefer not to answer	11	2.1
Total	512	100.0

Table 3 displays the academic colleges in which the participants' majors are housed. The College that was most represented in the participants was the College of Sciences (n=171; 33.4%). Lumpkin College of Business and Applied Sciences (n=114; 22.3%) was the second-most represented college. Each of the four major colleges was represented, as well as the School of Continuing Education (n = 18; 3.5%) and Undeclared majors (n = 9; 1.8%).

Table 3 Academic Colleges

Academic Colleges	<u>n</u>	%
College of Arts and Humanities	96	18.8
Lumpkin College of Business and Applied Sciences	114	22.3
College of Education and Professional Studies	104	20.3
College of Sciences	171	33.4
School of Continuing Education	18	3.5
Undeclared Major	9	1.8
Total	512	100.0

Summary

In this chapter, the methodology of the study was provided. The origin of the instrument was explained, as well as the site and population that were examined. A total of 512 participants completed the survey. In order to analyze the data, Chi Square tests for independence were used. In Chapter four, the results will be presented.

CHAPTER IV

Results

In this chapter, the demographics of the survey respondents and the results pertaining to the research questions will be provided. The data was collected using a modified survey from a study by Berquam (2013), called the Relationship Quality Student Affinity Instrument, or RQSA. The information that was sought after by the survey was driven by the research questions, asking to determine the relationship between university affinity and initial impressions, as well as the relationship between university affinity, initial impressions, university choice rank, and academic program.

Participants were asked to complete a survey via an email that was sent to their student email address. The survey was sent to the undergraduate population at a Midwestern university with an undergraduate enrollment of 7,202. A total of 555 participants opened the survey, with 512 completing the Qualtrics™ survey in its entirety, yielding a 7.1% response rate. Upon obtaining the results, the data was analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences™ (SPSS) version 24 as the analysis tool.

RQ#1: What is the relationship between the university affinity and initial impressions of the institution?

For this research question, the researcher attempted to determine whether or not the scores of university affinity and initial impressions were independent of each other. The researcher hypothesized that university affinity scores and initial impressions scores were not independent of each other. In order to determine independence, a Chi Square test for independence analysis was employed. The Chi Square test for independence is a statistical test that refers to the relationship between two variables. The null hypothesis

of the Chi Square test for independence states that the two variables are independent of each other. In other words, independence indicates that one case of category in one variable has no impact or relationship to the probability of that case falling in any particular category of the second variable.

In this analysis, all of the participants ($n=512$) were used, and the data can also be viewed in Table 4. The majority (59.0%) of the participants experienced affinity ($n = 302$). In terms of participants that were neutral in their affinity, they consisted 40.6% of participants ($n = 208$). Participants that did not experience any affinity, in other words were detached, consisted of 0.4% of the total participants ($n=2$).

A large portion of the participants had good initial impressions of the institution before they enrolled, consisting of 43.2% of the total participants ($n = 221$). The majority of participants had neutral initial impressions of the institution ($n = 288$), representing 56.3% of the total participants. Three participants had a poor initial impression of the institution, consisting of 0.6% of the total participants.

Overall, the relationship between university affinity and initial impressions was significant, ($\chi^2 = 135.244$; $df = 4$; $p < 0.05$), and as a result, the null hypothesis that initial impressions and university affinity are independent of each other is rejected. This suggests that the likelihood of a participant showing university affinity was impacted by their initial impressions. As demonstrated by the conditional distribution of the initial impressions on university affinity in Table 4, 87.8% of participants that had good impressions of the university also displayed affinity for their school, and 0% were detached. In addition, 61.8% of participants that had neutral impressions of their school were also neutral in their affinity, again demonstrating the strong relationship. Another

important observation was that 37.5% of participants that had neutral initial impressions also showed affinity, which suggests that the environment played a role in helping the students develop affinity. This draws a parallel between the theoretical framework of Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Output Model, which will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

These results indicate that students' initial impression of the university has a profound impact whether they experience affinity, particularly that students with good initial impressions of the university are overwhelmingly more likely to experience affinity for their university.

Table 4 Initial Impressions by University Affinity

		Initial Impressions					
		Good Impressions		Neutral Impressions		Poor Impressions	Total
University	Affinity	Count	194	108	0	302	
	Affinity	Column	87.8%	37.5%	0.0%	59.0%	
	Neutral	Count	27	178	3	208	
	Neutral	Column	12.2%	61.8%	100.0%	40.6%	
	Detachment	Count	0	2	0	2	
	Detachment	Column	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%	0.4%	
Total		Count	221	288	3	512	
		Column	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

RQ#2: What is the relationship between university choice rank, academic program, university affinity, and initial impressions of the university?

For this research question, the researcher attempted to determine if the scores for university affinity and initial impressions were independent from the responses of how the university ranked during the participants' search for a college. In addition, the researcher also attempted to determine if the scores for university affinity and initial impressions were independent of academic program as well. Using a Chi Square test for independence for each relationship, the relationship between the variables—if any—was determined, with the null hypothesis stating that each relationship shows independence.

The first relationship explored by this research question was the impact of initial impressions on university choice rank, and the results are presented in Table 5. The researcher hypothesized that university choice rank depended on the initial impressions. In this analysis, each participant (n=512) was used. Most of the participants ranked their university as their first choice (n=253), which represented 49.4% of all participants. The second largest group of participants ranked their university as their second choice (n=150), representing 29.3% of all participants. The participants that ranked their university as their third choice (n=56) represented 10.9% of all participants. The participants that ranked their university as their fourth choice (n=14) represented 2.7% of all participants. The participants that ranked their university as their fifth or lower choice (n=13) represented 2.5% of all participants. The final group consisted of participants that did not have their institution on their list (n=26), which represented 5.1% of all participants.

Upon examination of the Chi Square test for independence, the relationship between university choice rank and initial impressions was significant, ($\chi^2=161.072$ df =10, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis that states that university choice rank and initial impressions are independent is rejected. Based on the conditional distribution of university choice rank on initial impressions in Table 5, 63.8% of participants that had good initial impressions of the university also ranked the university as their first choice of higher education institution. This means that students with good impressions are considerably more likely to have ranked the university as their first choice. As the observed initial impressions decrease, so do the university choice rankings, as 27.6% of participants with good impressions ranked their school as their second choice, and 5.9% of participants with good impressions ranked their school as their third choice. The same relationship is observed for participants that had neutral impressions of the university, as 38.9% of participants that were neutral in their impressions ranked the university as their first choice. Meanwhile, 30.9% of participants with neutral impressions ranked the university as their second choice, followed by 14.9% as their third choice. These results suggest that the better impressions that students have about the institution, the higher they would have ranked the institution in their choices of schools, which was what the researcher had expected.

The second relationship explored by this research question was the relationship between initial impressions and the academic college in which the participants' major was housed. The researcher hypothesized that initial impressions and academic college were not independent of each other. However, the Chi Square test for independence showed that the relationship was not statistically significant. Because the p-value (0.375)

was greater than 0.05, the Chi Square test for independence tells the researcher that the observed distribution is due to chance, meaning initial impressions and academic program are independent of each other.

The next relationship explored by this research question was the impact of university choice rank on university affinity. The researcher hypothesized that university affinity was dependent on university choice rank. Once again, all participants (n=512) were used and the results can be seen in Table 6.

Upon examination of the Chi Square test for independence, the relationship of university choice rank on university affinity was significant ($\chi^2 = 38.754$; $df = 10$; $p < 0.05$). The null hypothesis that states that university choice rank and university affinity are independent of each other is rejected: a respondent's affinity depends on their initial ranking of their school. Using Table 6, the conditional distribution of university affinity on initial choice ranking shows that 67.2% of the participants that ranked the university as their first choice also experienced affinity. As the ranking decreases, so does the percentage of participants with affinity. This suggests that students that rank the university as their first choice are more likely to develop and experience affinity. These results indicate that the higher the university is ranked, the more likely students are to experience affinity toward their institution, which is what was initially hypothesized. Considering the strong relationship between initial impressions and university choice rank, as well as the relationship between initial impressions and affinity, it is not surprising to observe a positive relationship between university choice rank and affinity.

Table 5 Initial Impressions by University Choice Rank

		Initial Impressions				
		Good	Neutral	Poor	Total	
		Impressions	Impressions	Impressions		
University	1st	Count	141	112	0	253
Choice Rank		Column	63.8%	38.9%	0.0%	49.4%
	2nd	Count	61	89	0	150
		Column	27.6%	30.9%	0.0%	29.3%
	3rd	Count	13	43	0	56
		Column	5.9%	14.9%	0.0%	10.9%
	4th	Count	1	13	0	14
		Column	0.5%	4.5%	0.0%	2.7%
	5th or	Count	0	10	3	13
	lower	Column	0.0%	3.5%	100.0%	2.5%
	It was not	Count	5	21	0	26
	on my list	Column	2.3%	7.3%	0.0%	5.1%
Total		Count	221	288	3	512
		Column	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 6 University Choice Rank by University Affinity

		University Choice Rank							
		1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5 th or lower	It was not on my list	Total	
University	Affinity	Count	170	88	29	5	0	10	302
		Column	67.2%	58.7%	51.8%	35.7%	0.0%	38.5%	59.0%
	Neutral	Count	83	61	26	9	13	16	208
		Column	32.8%	40.7%	46.4%	64.3%	100.0%	61.5%	
	Detached	Count	0	1	1	0	0	0	2
		Column	0.0%	0.7%	1.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%
Total		Count	253	150	56	14	13	28	512
		Column	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The final relationship explored by this research question was the impact that the academic college in which the participant's major was in had on university affinity. For this analysis, the undeclared majors and the general studies majors were excluded due to the fact that these participants had no particular experience in, or connection to, a certain college, which would limit the impact the environment would have on the development of affinity. Even though the Chi Square test for independence showed that the relationship was not statistically significant at the $p = 0.05$ level, the obtained p -value(0.066), is significant at the $p = 0.10$ level, indicating a moderately significant relationship. For three of the four academic colleges, the exception being the College of Business and Applied Sciences, over 60% of the participants experienced affinity. The implications of this relationship will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

Summary

In summary, the results pertaining to the first research question indicated that initial impressions are related to university affinity, which affirms the researcher's hypothesis and is consistent with prior research. The Chi Square test for independence showed evidence of a relationship, as the p value was less than 0.05, which allowed the researcher to reject the null hypothesis that initial impressions and university affinity were independent of each other. The conditional distribution showed a very strong positive relationship, especially indicating the likelihood that a student with good impressions will experience affinity. The second research question examined the relationship between university choice rank, academic program, university affinity, and initial impressions. The Chi Square tests for independence results allowed the researcher to make conclusions about relationships of the impact of initial impressions on university choice rank, and university affinity on university choice rank. In both cases, a positive relationship was observed, in that the higher the university was ranked by the participant, the more likely good initial impressions and affinity were experienced.

Chapter four answered the research questions presented in Chapter one. Chapter five will draw conclusions based on the findings as well as connect the findings to the literature discussed in Chapter two.

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

This chapter will present the findings and interpretations of the study. The relationships between initial impressions, university affinity, university choice rank, and academic program examined by the two research questions will be explored in this chapter. Connections with prior literature will be drawn to the findings, and limitations of the study will be discussed. This chapter will also include some recommendations based on the findings, and suggestions for future research will also be provided.

Discussion

The overall findings of the study give a better understanding of the state of affinity in the student body at the research site. In terms of the relationship between initial impressions and university affinity, the findings of the present study are congruent with past research.

RQ#1: What is the relationship between the university affinity and initial impressions of the institution?

The findings of the study indicated that the distribution of university affinity and initial impressions were not due to chance. There was a strong relationship between the two variables, and the vast majority of participants that had good impressions also experienced affinity. This suggests that the initial impressions that students had about the institution before they enrolled in classes could play an integral role in the development of affinity towards their university, which affirms recent evidence in literature (Helgesen & Nasset, 2007; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001; Berquam, 2013). This result has

implications for universities, as long as developing committed and loyal alumni is an objective.

The hypothesis for the research question was that initial impressions and university affinity were not independent of each other, and as such, the hypothesis was supported. The data explored by this research question draws an interesting parallel between initial impressions, university affinity, and Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Output Model. In Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Output Model, the output is an outcome, which is mediated by the environment and input, which are pre-existing characteristics of a subject such as attitude. If one considers the initial impressions that a student has an input, with their affinity towards the university as an output, then the findings of the present study serve as evidence that initial impressions indeed serve as a foundation for affinity. By observing the data from the broadest view, the majority of the participants (56.3%) were neutral in their initial impressions of the university. However, the majority of participants (59.0%) experienced affinity, as opposed to feeling neutral or detached. More specifically, 37.5% of participants that had neutral impressions also experienced affinity, suggesting the environment impacting the student in their development of affinity. The sequential nature of these results suggests that the environment, such as the experiences and relationships impacting the participant, has a mediating effect on affinity. The data appears to support that the environment will impact the outcome, or in the case of this present study, that the environment influences affinity.

RQ#2: What is the relationship between university choice rank, academic program, university affinity, and initial impressions of the university?

The second research question explored the relationship between initial impressions, university affinity, university choice rank, and academic program. Through the two Chi Square analyses of initial impressions on university choice rank and then initial impressions on academic program, the results indicated that there was no evidence for a relationship between initial impressions and academic program. But, the results did indicate that university choice rank was dependent on initial impressions. As expected, the amount of total participants that had good impressions decreased as the university choice rank decreased as well. Since initial impressions of the university should theoretically dictate where the university ranks in a student's list, there is no surprise that there is evidence of a relationship. On the other hand, the researcher hypothesized that there would be evidence of a relationship between initial impressions and the academic program. Since past research indicates that the perception of the image of the academic program is distinguishable from the image of the university (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007), the researcher hypothesized that there would be a finding in the present study that confirmed prior findings. However, the findings of the Chi Square test for independence did not produce evidence of a relationship. This suggests each academic program at the university consisted of participants from across the spectrum of initial impressions. Therefore, the academic programs at the university do not have a polarizing impact, or in other words, there is not an academic program at the university that contains a high amount of students that had good initial impressions in comparison to the rest. This can be considered a positive sign, as it represents a good balance between academic programs

at the university, in terms of how they are viewed by the incoming students. On the other hand, it could be seen as a negative sign, as there is no evidence to suggest that there is a signature program that attracts students with good initial impressions.

The second research question employed another set of Chi Square analyses: university choice rank by university affinity and academic program by university affinity. The results showed that university affinity was dependent on university choice rank. This particular relationship does not come as a surprise, because there was a strong relationship observed between initial impressions and university choice rank, and that a very strong relationship exists between initial impressions and university affinity. Therefore, the link between university affinity and university choice rank can be expected when observed in conjunction with the other analyses in the present study. Despite the fact that no statistical significance was found in the Chi Square test for independence of academic program on university affinity at the 0.05 level, the relationship was significant at the 0.10 level. This suggests that university affinity may in fact be dependent on the academic program. In three out of the four academic colleges, over 60% of participants experienced affinity, with the exception of the Lumpkin College of Business and Applied Sciences. Since university affinity is an amalgamation of the institutional fit, satisfaction, and perceived learning gains subscales, further research is recommended in order to further understand a potential relationship, in that only 47.4% of participants in the Lumpkin College of Business and Applied Sciences experienced affinity.

Limitations

Throughout the conducting of the present study, several limitations existed that must be discussed. First and foremost, the present study predicates its findings on the

truthfulness of the participants because the data is self-reported (Austin et al., 1998; Fan et al., 2006). Because of how important self-reported data is to the validity of the present study, it is important to mention it as the primary limitation. In addition, the method of collection can also be considered a limitation as well. The survey was developed through online system, and was then sent via email to all undergraduate students at the university. Since this study attempted to measure the affinity of participants, or commitment and pride towards the university, it is within reason to suggest that an individual that is more committed and loyal is more likely to respond to an email asking for participation. In this case, the responses would not be truly representative of the entire undergraduate population.

Another limitation to consider is the current events that took place at the university throughout the time period that the study was conducted. Throughout the course of the study, there were concerns about the future of the university due to the lack of funding from the state government. There had been a budget impasse in the state in which the university is located, and since the university is public, the institution was negatively impacted by the lack of state appropriations. The significance of this event is that there had been many rallies that had taken place on campus, and in the capitol of the state. These rallies were meant to galvanize the student body and all of those affected by the operations of the university to demonstrate to the state government how vital the institution is for the future of the state and its people. This has relevance for the present study because the rallying and subsequent solidarity could have caused a temporary sense of pride in students, which could have skewed the data.

Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals and Practice

Based on the findings of the present study, the following recommendations have been made for student affairs professionals and future practice:

1. Increase the marketing of the university with an emphasis on external

prestige. The results of the study, as well as past research, indicate that the initial impressions are related to university affinity. Therefore, it is key for the institution to foster good initial impressions regarding the university in the public eye, so that incoming students view the school favorably. The results signaled that the majority of the participants of the study were neutral in their initial impressions. One suggestion that may assist in this area is to evaluate how the university markets itself to the public and prospective students. If prospective students and the general public receive communication about awards, successes, and rankings that the university accomplishes, then the public may be more apt to have better initial impressions of the university.

2. Consider investing in initiatives and programs that bring attention.

Existing literature has displayed evidence that the perceived prestige of an institution tangibly matters (Useem & Karabel, 1986; Zhang, 2005). Along with increasing the marketing and branding, it is suggested that the university invest in ways that increase the external prestige of the institution. For example, the *US News and World Report* has a proprietary higher education institution ranking system that is widely used. Investing attention and resources to improve the rankings of the university will assist in improving the prestige of the institution, thereby improving the initial impressions of

prospective students. In addition to improving rankings, it can also be suggested to invest in initiatives and programs that differentiate the university. For example, if an academic program can create an innovative experience that a student cannot get at a similar school, it may attract students that have a better initial impression as a result.

3. **Evaluate what experiences are contributing to the development of affinity.** Even though the present study has shown that the initial impressions are related to affinity, the study also shows evidence that the environment is impacting affinity. Among the participants that showed affinity based on their score, 35.8% of them had only neutral initial impressions of the university. The university should invest time and resources in evaluating specific elements of the environment that impact these students. Once those elements are identified, those elements should be made more salient and accessible in order to develop more affinity in the student body.

Suggestions for Further Research

1. **Replicate study to contribute to the validity and reliability.** The present study produced findings that are consistent with prior research, but it is recommended to continue research to increase the amount of literature in this area. The instrument that was implemented in this study is based on an often-cited instrument, but more data can add to its credibility.
2. **Evaluate university affinity and initial impressions in relation to different variables.** It is recommended to replicate the study and employ similar Chi Square analyses to different variables. For example, it would be

beneficial to run tests for independence based on demographic characteristics, such as race or transfer/native status. By identifying potential relationships, the university can be more intentional in its efforts with certain groups of students.

3. **Add a qualitative component to the present study.** This study accomplishes the goal of identifying potential relationships between variables. While this information is valuable, more considerable recommendations can be made with qualitative information. Not only can qualitative information bring more meaning to the data, it can bring a depth of understanding that isn't as easily accomplished with quantitative data.

Summary

Chapter five discussed the findings of the study based on the data and the implications that resulted. The study attempted to determine if there was any evidence of a relationship between the initial impressions, university affinity, university choice rank, and academic program of undergraduate students at a mid-sized midwestern university. Chapter five presented the results based on the two research questions posed by the researcher.

The first research question employed a Chi Square test for independence in an analysis of initial impressions by university affinity. The results indicated that there was evidence of a relationship between initial impressions and university affinity, which was consistent with prior research. The second question called for four different Chi Square tests for independence: initial impressions by university choice rank, initial impressions by academic program, university affinity by university choice rank, and university

affinity by academic program. The results produced evidence for two relationships: initial impressions by university choice rank and university affinity by university choice rank.

Based on the findings of the study, recommendations were made for student affairs professionals and overall practice, as well as suggestions for further research. It was recommended that the university invest in vehicles that would increase its external prestige, and then bolster its marketing efforts to increase public awareness of its successes. It was also recommended for the university to evaluate which elements of its environment are successfully impacting the affinity of students. Suggestions for replication in further research to increase validity and reliability were made, along with the inclusion of qualitative measures to add to the depth of the information gathered on the topic.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent

Thank you for participating in a survey research project entitled “Initial Student Impressions and Affinity towards the Institution,” which is being conducted by Andrew Doto, a graduate student at Eastern Illinois University. The purpose of this research is to determine a relationship between student commitment and pride for their school and their initial impressions of their school. This survey is anonymous; the survey results will not be connected to your identity. The only individuals that will have access to the survey results will be Andrew Doto and the faculty members advising the research project. Your participation is voluntary, and there is no foreseeable risk in taking this survey. You may choose not to take the survey, or to stop responding at any time. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your completion of the survey serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older. The survey should take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Andrew Doto at (217) 581-7678 or addoto@eiu.edu. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at (217) 581-2125. If you are interested in being entered into a drawing to win one of two \$25 Starbucks gift card, input your email address into the last question of the survey. A winner will be randomly selected using a random number generator. You will be contacted via the email you provide if you are selected.

Appendix B

Instrument

The following questions will be answered on a 5 point Likert scale:

Strongly Agree (1); Agree (2); Neutral (3); Disagree (4); Strongly Disagree (5)

Perceived Learning Gains

The following items ask you to reflect on how much your university has influenced your learning.

1. My university is helping me figure out who I am as a person
2. My university is helping me to be the best student I can be academically
3. My university is helping me explore potential career interests
4. My university is assisting me in becoming a more involved citizen
5. My university is assisting me in developing more self-confidence
6. My university is helping prepare me to become a more effective leader
7. My university has made me aware of diversity issues

Satisfaction

The following items assess your overall satisfaction with your university.

8. I am satisfied with my social life at my university
9. I have had a positive experience at my university
10. This university was the right choice for me
11. I am challenged as a student at my university

Institutional Fit

The following items ask you to reflect on how well you think you fit at your university.

12. I feel I fit in here at this university
13. I never feel marginalized or discriminated against at this university
14. I feel like I belong at my university
15. I feel connected to my university

16. I care about my university
17. I am proud to be a student at my university
18. I get defensive whenever people say something negative about my university
19. I would recommend my university to others
20. I would choose my university again if I could do it over
21. It is important to me to graduate from my university
22. I am interested in remaining connected with my university after I graduate
23. I plan to volunteer at my university at some point in the future
24. I plan on contributing financially to my university at some point in the future

Initial Impressions about the University

The following items ask you to reflect on your initial impressions of this university before you made the decision to attend.

25. I felt that a degree from this university would provide job opportunities
26. I felt this university would provide strong research opportunities for students
27. This university offered the academic programs I was interested in
28. I have always wanted to be a Panther
29. I knew the university had a good reputation
30. I was excited to apply to this university
31. I was excited to share my acceptance to this university with others
32. I felt like others around me wanted to attend this university as well
33. I felt as if the academic program that I am apart of at EIU has a good reputation
34. I wanted to attend this university because of its reputation

Demographics

The following items ask you to share some information about yourself.

33. In what rank was this university on your list of possible choices before you enrolled?
(1st) (2nd) (3rd) (4th) (5th or lower) (It was not on my list)

34. Classification (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior)

What is your major? Select from drop down

35. Resident Status (In-state, Out-of-state)

36. Sex (Female, Male, Prefer to not indicate)

37. Age (18-19) (20-21) (22-23) (24 or older)

38. Race

a. African American

b. American Indian

c. Asian

d. Hispanic

e. Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

f. 2 or more Races

g. White

h. Prefer not to indicate

39. Do you parents have a college degree? (Y/N)

40. Have any of your family members graduated from Eastern Illinois University? (Y/N)

41. Do you currently live on-campus, off-campus, or at home? (On/Off/Home)

42. Are you a transfer student at Eastern Illinois University?

43. What semester was your first semester at Eastern Illinois University (Ex. Fall 2014 or Spring 2013)?

44. If you are interested in entering a drawing to win one of two \$25 Starbucks gift cards, please enter your email address