

# Higher Education: How Freshmen And First-Year Journalism And Mass Communication Students At HBCUs And PWUs Used The Internet In Their Decision

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## ABSTRACT

*This study set out to explore how the Internet was used by Journalism and Mass Communications Program students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Predominately White Universities in their college choice and if these institutions were able to provide the information the respondents were looking for in their search. The study found students that attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities still report the availability of financial aid and other funding as a major reason they make their college choice. The study also found Journalism and Mass Communications units as a whole may not be providing this information to students that are using the Internet to research their future college opportunities.*

**Keywords:** Historically Black Colleges and Universities; Predominately White Universities; Journalism and Mass Communications Programs

## INTRODUCTION

Newly freed slaves and other people of color after the American Civil War were thrust into a society that had deprived them of the basic tenants of education. These individuals had little, if any reading skills. The southern states moved immediately to establish a system of segregation and exclusion, basically making it illegal for Blacks to share educational opportunities in the same facilities with Whites. Justiz et al. (1994) found that Justin Morrill, a congressman from Vermont championed legislation in 1862 for each state to have land set aside to establish agriculture and vocational/mechanical arts. The rights for Blacks to receive these opportunities were minimal or nonexistent. Therefore, because of the educational segregation of the Southern states, a subsequent Morrill Land Grant Act, enacted in 1890, established 16 Black colleges to serve the same purpose for the African-American population. The Morrill Act was the start of litigation regarding African-Americans in the American educational system that is still being adjudicated in 2012.

Roebuck & Murty (1993) explain that Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's), as designated by the United States Department of Education, are black academic institutions established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and still is, the education of black Americans. All HBCUs must be accredited or working towards accreditation in their states and can be junior colleges or have programs that work toward a bachelor's degree.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities have had the ability to recruit students since the 1860s by stressing a sense of inclusion and family through their mission statements and community outreach. There was little to no competition for African-American students from predominantly white institutions until integration was fully implemented a hundred years later in the 1960s. There are studies now that challenge the "need" for these HBCU institutions in 2011 and beyond in America. African-Americans can now enroll in any college or university they can qualify academically and afford to pay tuition. There are many different reasons that African-Americans look for today to make their college choice – other than the tradition of HBCUs. High school guidance counselors and

pastors at the local church no longer are the primary focus of information for students looking to learn more about colleges. Technology allows prospective students to look deeper into a college and specifically, a program in which they are interested in pursuing than the brochure in the guidance office can contain.

High school students that are considering enrolling in Predominately White Universities (PWU's) are also relying on more than the traditional college informational materials. "Discussions with recent high school graduates also reveal that, because it requires less interaction with people, many enjoy the privacy of searching online and using online forms and achieving instant answers to questions using Web navigation and FAQ links" (Mentz & Whiteside, 2003).

### **HBCUs and PWIs– COMPETING ON EQUAL GROUND FOR STUDENTS**

Students considering HBCUs and PWIs are similar in that they all are trying to find the best opportunity for a successful college choice. This study is primarily interested in how freshmen or first-year journalism and mass communications students (N=431) used the Internet to aid in their decision to apply for their current school's unit. African-Americans may also be interested in such things as minority ratios within a school or program. They can look up this information on the Internet; specifically on each college's website and additionally on other informational sites. HBCUs now need to compete for these students. Regardless of the color of the student or the status of the college, the ability to pay for tuition and fees is at the top of the list of concerns for the prospective and enrolled student. Will these same students be able to stay enrolled at these units due to costs? Retention is a problem at most colleges and universities. Could some of these issues be a result of or lack of financial aid, grants and scholarship information available to students? Could it be that students, after entering the school, feel as though they are not a good fit? "The 'egocentric' nature of institutional Web sites assumes the prospective student understands the institution's organizational structure-a shaky assumption at best" (Mentz & Whiteside, 2003).

This study asked the students questions on their Internet usage, how they use the Internet, their impression of their selected college and department's websites in regard to financial aid and scholarship funds available. In analyzing the data, the study examined if there were any perceivable or discernable differences in how students at HBCUs and students at PWI schools viewed the information they were provided via the websites. The study's respondents were composed of students from five HBCUs: Albany State University, Howard University, Shaw University, Virginia State University and Xavier of Louisiana. The PWI in this study was the University of Kansas.

### **METHODS AND MEASURES**

The universities in this study were randomly selected from lists from the United States Department of Education and the Journalism and Mass Communication Directory, published annually by the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC).

All 49 HBCUs with any concentration, unit, department or school of mass communications or journalism were included in the pool of possible schools. The University of Kansas was chosen due to its large "first journalism course" number of students. Administrators and faculty at all 50 schools were first contacted in March 2011 by emails, when available and by phone calls to the schools. A second contact was attempted in April 2011. A third attempt was made in May 2011 and schools that replied to the inquiries were sent letters and emails regarding the scope of the project. In August 2011, the administrators and faculty were to choose courses at their institutions that would contain primarily freshmen but also could include first-time journalism students. This stipulation was added after being informed many of the institutions did not admit freshmen into the JMC programs.

### **STUDENT PROFILES AND IRB PROTECTION**

The faculty of the courses chosen would provide the students in their classes the link to the 25-question Survey Monkey instrument. The survey was provided to 450 students within the 6 universities. There were a total of 431 completed responses for the survey. The respondents included 53.9% freshmen, 25.3% sophomores, 16.4% juniors and 4.2% transfer students. Also in this number were 1.6% of transfer students that have earned associate degrees elsewhere. The students were all made aware of Institutional Review Board (IRB) ethical procedures and

were given the opportunity to opt into expanding on the survey's questionnaire by giving their direct quotes to be used in the study. Over 20 of the students chose to make statements and to have them used as part of the official study. Student comments were then randomly selected and used to give texture and richness to general survey responses.

The questions were standardized and summed into an index, which was considered appropriate given the distinctiveness of the affective and continuance elements. Each measure in the study was analyzed separately as well.

The first sets of independent variables derive from the respondents' type of Internet usage and access. These include background information such as: home access, parents' usage and school/mobile device access of the respondents. Home access was measured by the question, "Was there a computer with Internet access in your home while you were in high school?" (No = 1.9%; No: I used computer at school = 1.6%; Yes = 96.5%). The "yes" answers were further defined as by some of the respondents: (Yes: 1 tower for family use = 14.2%; Yes: 1 laptop for my use = 4.9%; and Yes: multiple computers = 54.7%). The study also wanted to explore the question as to the respondents' parents' computer skills. The question asked was, "Are your parents or guardians Internet users?" (No = 5.9%; Yes = 94.1%). This response shows how the last two generations of American society has become heavy computer and Internet users. In contrast and equally important, the 5.9% of students that responded with "no" had similar answers. Natilie Garretson, a freshman at the University of Kansas, wrote, "My dad does not use the computer." Albany State University freshman, Nicole Billingslea, wrote, "One parent. The other does not use the Internet." Ms. Billingslea's comment is interesting because she also responded in the survey as having multiple computers within her household.

Two questions asked in the survey asked respondents about their current computer and mobile device ownership. "Do you own a computer at your school?" (No = 3.3%; Yes = 96.7%). Some of the respondents that answered "yes" went into more detail (Yes: a PC Tower = 4.7%; Yes: an iMac or MacPro = 17.4%; Yes: a PC laptop = 45.6%; and Yes: a MacBook = 32.6%). Three respondents answered (Yes: it was required by my school = 0.7%) The answers to this were comparable and consistent with both HBCU and PWI respondents.

A second set of independent variables were derived from the respondents' view of the JMC units' websites and information found on these pages. These views included the perceptions of website usability, financial aid and scholarship funding.

The data were further examined to see if they fit assumptions of multiple regression. The only response that had outliers was the question, "What is your major?" (Journalism = 67.6%; Mass Communications = 18.6%; Communications = 6.1%; Undecided 7.7%). There were 71 respondents that chose "other". The majority of these students were a part of the "Media and Society" course taught at the University of Kansas. The course is open to all majors. Out of the 71 "others", 26 of them actually were considered to be in the journalism school, but self-identified as "strategic communication" students. Therefore they were added into the study. The remaining 45 students were not used. The questions' values were not changed by the substitution of these altered variables and since the outlying values did not represent coding errors, the original variables were left in the model.

**RQ1: How often and active are the JMC prospective students on the Internet and what are they doing there?**

According to a Pew Study, Jones (2001), one-fifth (20%) of today's college students began using computers between the ages of 5 and 8. By the time they were 16 to 18 years old all of today's current college students had begun using computers – and the Internet was a common place in the world in which they lived.

This study used as the dependent variable the Internet user and is operationally defined by measuring the amount of time the respondent was actively using the Internet. Two survey questions were used to test this variable: "I primarily use the Internet for" (Social Media = 56.2%; Gaming = 1.4%; News and Information = 14%; Entertainment and Sports = 7.9%; and School Work = 20.5%), "How would you rate your Internet usage per day?" (Low: 1-2 hours = 12.6%; Moderate: 3-5 hours = 70.2%; High: 6 or more = 17.2%). These measures represent the time the respondents commit to using the Internet each day and to what purpose.

The respondents of the study gave varied comments on how they used the Internet in their search. Phelicia Berry, a junior from Albany State University, considers herself a high Internet user and says she uses the Internet primarily for social media. Ms. Berry uses both Facebook and MySpace, but rarely used the Internet in making her school choice decision. University of Kansas freshman, Yinjing Lu, says she is a high Internet user too and states, “The internet is really important for me to do my homework, searching news and information, playing online game, talking to my friends, and chatting with my parents from long distance.” Howard University freshman, Kellee Jordan, considers herself a moderate Internet user and says she primarily uses it for news and information.

### **COLLEGE CHOICE: A NEW AND DIVERSIFIED APPLICANT POOL**

Swann & Henderson (1998) found that during the past two decades, colleges and universities in the United States witnessed an increasing diversity of college applicants. The applicant pool changed from what might be described as a batch of plain vanilla cookies to something more resembling a trail mix. More change is inevitable. By the year 2020, the U.S. Bureau of the Census projects that the nation's population will be older and include fewer persons of European heritage.

The desegregation movement of the 1960s resulted in a national realization that major sectors of society were disenfranchised and that special efforts were needed to remedy inequities. Snyder & Hoffman (1998) discussed how Upward Bound; Step-to-College; the Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA); and similar programs were initiated to recruit, support, and provide remediation for promising students with poor preparation. Reaching out to students in elementary through high school, affirmative action programs successfully helped minority students prepare for postsecondary study.

These programs have provided for a generation of students in 2012 that now have stronger foundations in all academic disciplines. Colleges and universities have to recognize the expanded pool and not only look for African-Americans and other minorities for the sake of diversity, but also because the numbers of Whites that will be applying for these institutions are diminishing.

### **FACTORS IN MAKING THE COLLEGE DECISION**

This study examined how the use of the Internet may have been a factor in the decision the respondents had in selecting their schools. There have been many studies relating to college choice. The most referenced study, Hossler & Gallagher (1987) explores and expands on what they call the three-phase model. Predisposition is the earliest stage of the college choice process--is the stage in which some students develop aspirations for college attendance. Those that make it a goal to go to college begin to look for an avenue that helps them achieve this goal. The second stage of the college choice model is the search phase. It is during this phase that a student gains information regarding the possible college choices they may have that are not only have their desired major but also ones that are good fits socially and maybe more importantly, financially. Later in this study we will examine the financial question the respondents reported on the survey. The third phase of college choice model is the choice. This is simply when the student determines they have all the information they need to make the selection and they can eliminate all other possible institutions. Hossler et al. (1989) state it is important to note that a student may opt out of the college choice process at any stage of this three-phase model. Kao & Tienda (1998) discuss how the literature related to African American student aspirations for college attendance presents conflicting information. Some studies contend that African American students aspire to college attendance at rates similar to their White peers while other studies have shown that White students aspire to college attendance at higher rates than African American students. This study had the privilege of examining how African-American and White Americans at 6 different institutions, studying the same major, all made the decision to attend journalism schools.

The variable examined for this study is financial aid and scholarship fund availability in the decision making process. This study, in looking to examine how the respondents found the information they needed to complete the three-phase model, focuses on the use of the Internet as a tool in their searches.

**RQ2: How often do students looking to enroll in a specific journalism/mass communication unit visit that program's specific site?**

To examine this topic the survey asked two questions, first, “Did you visit your University’s website prior to applying?” (No = 6.5%, Yes = 31.9%). Again, drilling deeper for the “yes” responses (Yes: 1-5 time = 28.6%, Yes: More than 5 time = 27.9% and Yes: I was on there every week or so = 17.0%). The second question asked, “Did you visit the department/major’s website prior to applying?” (No = 27.5%, Yes: 1-5 times = 66.1%, Yes: I was on there every week = 7.8%). These measures represent the amount of time the respondents committed to considering the school and the unit’s web pages prior to applying to the school.

By simply examining these two responses it is clear that 93.5% of the respondents visited the University’s website, yet only 27.5% of the respondents took the opportunity to view and explore their individual unit’s website for further information. The numbers for this question regarding visiting the University’s website are similar for HBCU and PWI students (HBCU = 91.4%, PWI = 94.6%). The numbers for the HCUU and PWI student that visited their unit’s websites are different (HBCU = 63.2%, PWI = 77.2%). Austin Fisher, a freshman at the University of Kansas, says that he visited both the University’s and the department’s websites 1-5 times prior to making his decision. Another freshman at the University of Kansas, Nicole Hawkins, went even further, stating “I was on both the University’s and department’s sites every week or so.” Meagan Walker, a junior, first time journalism student, at Xavier of Louisiana, says she visited the University’s website 1-5 times but never visited the department’s website prior to applying and entering the school.

Why is there a disconnect from site to site? Why are the students not finding easier links to the departments? Is it a matter of website usability?

#### **USABILITY: WHAT MAKES A WEBPAGE USER FRIENDLY?**

Usability. In his book, “Designing Web Usability”, Jakob Nielsen states, “The Web is the ultimate customer empowering environment. He or she that clicks the mouse gets to decide everything” (Nielsen, 2000). If a site is not immediately interesting or the audience is not impressed that first impression is lasting. “It is so easy to go elsewhere; all the competitors in the world are but a mouse click away” (Nielsen, 2000). It seems as though JMC units need to do a better job of promoting and strategically placing their web pages in concert with the design of the University’s templates. This may not be possible and they may not have the flexibility to do this but it is a topic they could use and can point to the results of this study. Pooch & Lefond (2001) studied college bound high school students and found that virtually all of them relied upon the Web when applying to colleges or universities. According to Feeney (2009) more and more students are looking at colleges based on the Internet, and more and more admissions offices are looking at the Internet as a tool.

#### **COLLEGE CHOICE: SHOW ME THE MONEY – ON YOUR SITE**

Most colleges and universities are struggling to find money to fund departments, hire the best professors and to improve and solidify their infrastructures. The challenge is massive. HBCUs historically provide education to students that are not able to pay the full cost of college. Students that traditionally attend HBCUs come from low-income families and HBCUs have missions that require the institutions to provide the ability for the students to attend. Brown & Freeman (2004) state that in short, both student opportunity and HBCU enrollments depend upon financial aid packages. This is not to imply that White students’ families do not face financial hardship. In fact, President Barack Obama, in his 2012 State of the Union Address, stressed the importance of the help that all Americans are now facing.

*When kids do graduate, the most daunting challenge can be the cost of college. At a time when Americans owe more in tuition debt than credit card debt, this Congress needs to stop the interest rates on student loans from doubling in July. Extend the tuition tax credit we started that saves millions of middle-class families thousands of dollars, and give more young people the chance to earn their way through college by doubling the number of work-study jobs in the next five years. Of course, it’s not enough for us to increase student aid. We can’t just keep subsidizing skyrocketing tuition; we’ll run out of money. States also need to do their part, by making higher education a higher priority in their budgets. And colleges and universities have to do their part by working to keep costs down. (President Barack Obama State of the Union Address 2012)*



**RQ3: Is financial aid and scholarships important to a student's choice of college?**

This question was by far the most telling of the difference between the HBCU and PWI students. The respondents to this survey were asked, "Was financial aid important in your decision to attend your institution?" Let's look first at the overall results (No = 43.3%, Yes = 56.7%). This number combines the responses from both the HBCU and the PWI students. As you drill further down, you see the gap of the two groups. When you examine solely the PWI respondents you see (No = 47.7%, Yes = 52.3%). However, the numbers for only HBCU students tells the story of their socio-economic backgrounds (No = 27%, Yes = 73%). Sade Mckoy, a freshman at Howard University, said that financial aid was very important, but she was aware of any departmental scholarships she may have been qualified to apply for which would help her in making plans for paying for college. William Askew, a freshman at Albany State University regarding financial need, seconds this view. Mr. Askew said he was interested in knowing about financial aid but was not aware of any help within his department. Even though a majority of the PWI students responded that financial aid was not the determinant factor in their college choice, there are some respondents where this was indeed important. Taylor Foltz, a transfer student at the University of Kansas, also stated financial aid was a part of his decision, yet he was not able to find this information easily on the department's website.

**RQ4: Are journalism/mass communication units providing effective information on their sites about financial aid and scholarships?**

This study found that all the JMC units are not doing a good job of providing prospective students with enough information on these topics. The survey asked, "Please rate the experience you had in accessing and understanding financial aid and department scholarships." In regards to financial aid, a composite result was (Helpful = 21.5%; Somewhat helpful = 43.7%; Difficult = 12.1%; Somewhat difficult = 7.3%; N/A = 15.4%). In response to scholarships, a composite result was (Helpful = 14.1%; Somewhat helpful = 36.4%; Difficult = 16.7%; Somewhat difficult = 7.5%; and N/A = 25.4%).

These numbers are not favorable for JMC units interested in marketing their funding assistance programs for prospective students. When looking at the rankings, HBCU and PWI students consider their units 65.2% favorable in providing financial aid information. The same group rates the units 50.5% favorably regarding scholarship funding information on their websites. When you examine HBCU respondents the numbers are mixed in relation to the total group. HBCU respondents reported 66.4% favorability for financial aid information but only 42.7% favorability in regards to scholarship information. A good example of this is Albany State University freshman, Demetrius Allen, who thought the school was helpful in providing financial aid information, but did not know about scholarships and put N/A for that category.

**DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study set out to explore how the Internet was used by JMC students at HBCUs and PWIs in their college choice and if these institutions were able to provide the information the respondents were looking for in their search. The study found students that attend HBCUs still report the availability of financial aid and other funding as a major reason they make their college choice. The study also found JMC units as a whole may not be providing this information to students that are using the Internet to research their future college opportunities.

This study had several limitations. One was use of the survey to measure students that self-report and not being able to have more face-to-face interviews and focus groups to allow for more expansive responses. The other was having a small, but representative sample. Future research should include more schools and a possible longitudinal study over a two or three year college choice cycle with high school students prior to their decisions.

The strength of this study is that it can be used universally for other disciplines, two-year colleges, junior colleges and major universities.

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**NOTES**



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