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2-1-2013

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Why Did They Come Here? – *The Influences and Expectations of First-Year Students' College Experience*

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Received: November 7, 2012 Accepted: December 3, 2012 Online Published: January 25, 2013

doi:10.5539/hes.v3n1p50

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/hes.v3n1p50>

Abstract

Students' expectations and experiences with university life are influenced by a number of variables. Many universities develop programs or promote aspects of existing programs to market the university's image. This research was motivated by our desire to determine the relationships between first-year students' college expectations and experiences, their awareness of the university's programming and projected image, the influence of the programming and image on their decision to attend the institution, and the students' personal characteristics. Our survey of 351 first-year students revealed positive perceptions of their university expectations and experiences, a mixture of influences on their decision to attend the university, and correlations between program awareness and the influence on students' university attendance. We also uncovered a number of relationships between expectations, experience, and perceptions of influences with the personal characteristics of the students. Implications, directions for future research, and limitations are discussed.

Keywords: first year students, university programming, recruitment, retention, student development

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Issues

As students transition into their first-year experience in institutions of higher education they bring with them a range of expectations (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005). However, there may be a misalignment between the expectations of first-year students and the mission and visions of the university (Crisp et al., 2009). Messages that students receive about a post-secondary education experience may influence their decision to attend a specific university, while the reality of the time and effort commitments and financial implications of their academic choices may be underestimated or inconsistent with their expectations (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000).

As the competition for students between institutions of higher education increases there is a greater reliance on brand advertising and high profile programs that are intended to recruit and retain students (Elliot & Healy, 2001). Therefore, other aspects of the university communication and imaging, such as athletics, may be more influential on students in transition. The allure of students to a university based on its image, such as that created by a strong athletic program, may lead to a lack of alignment between first-year students' expectations and their experience. Lack of alignment could be a factor contributing to student attrition rates, inefficient use of funding and resources, and missed opportunities for student growth and development. The potential high stakes of student success and cost to universities provided us with the justification for exploring first-year students' expectations, experiences, and perceived influence to attend a university. Further, our research responds to the dearth of published empirical research on the relationships between students' personal characteristics and their expectations, experiences, and perceptions of influences to attend an institution.

Our research examined student knowledge of and perceived influence of university programming, which is continually evolving to respond to student demographic changes and market competition (Dill, 2007). We selected university- and state-sponsored programs as well as advertising campaigns because of their focus on encouraging, recruiting, and retaining potential first-year students. We also included a variety of other potential

influences, which included: social, financial, environment, occupation and relationship factors. Thus, the focus of our study was to better understand first-year students' expectations versus their experiences as well as their perceptions of the influence of advertising campaigns and university programs in their decision to attend. We use the lens of students in transition and student choice of university culture to explore these relationships.

Before we delve into our research project and findings, we lay the groundwork for our study by reviewing relevant literature about first-year students in transition, influences on students' expectations, and university programs that support first-year student success. We then present our methods and study results, followed by a discussion of our findings and their implications in relation to students in transition. We close with some ideas for future research that address the limitations of our study, and concluding remarks that frame our study in the realm of first-year student expectations and influences.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 *College as a Transitional Experience*

Our study is grounded in the work of Chickering (1993), who theorizes that student transition and subsequent development takes place along seven different "vectors." We find this framework particularly relevant, as it encapsulates the major variables and influences that affect first-year students. We also find Chickering's (1993) theory useful for explaining the multifaceted process of first-year students becoming part of a community. The process students becoming part of a higher education communities is influenced by many factors which are associated with students' reasons for selecting a particular institution to attend and the institutional structures supporting student transition to higher education life. These factors are influenced to variables related to faculty, curriculum, campus environment, and student community, all of which are also recognized as important components in Chickering's student growth vectors. It is important to keep these variables in mind when using the vector framework. For example, Chickering's first vector, "developing competence", includes student growth in intellectual and interpersonal competence which is likely influence by faculty, curriculum and campus environment. The second vector, "managing emotions", relates to students developing the ability to appropriately express feelings, which is related to campus environment, and student community. Chickering's third vector is associated with a student's dependency on others, as he contends that students can and should move from autonomy towards interdependence, again this is related to faculty, campus environment, and student community. Similarly, the fourth vector addresses student development of mature interpersonal relationships, including appreciation of differences and the ability to be intimate which is likely to be influenced most by the student community. The fifth vector is defined as "establishing identity" and is associated with students having a sense of self within social and cultural contexts, which can be greatly influenced by the curriculum. The sixth vector, "developing purpose" is instrumental to student ability to fulfill interpersonal and family commitments, which again is likely to be influenced by curriculum. The final vector is identified as "developing integrity" which is associated with student achievement of the ability to behave in a socially responsible manner which is going to be impacted greatly by campus environment, and student community.

According to Chickering (1993), students come to college with development along the vectors already taking place, which likely impacts their expectations and experiences. Further, students' prior experience, knowledge, and personal characteristics are related to their university experience perceptions. Regardless, there should be many opportunities for students to continue to explore development along these vectors. Taking Chickering's (1993) vector framework into consideration, university administrators, faculty and staff can create and implement programs that implicitly and explicitly foster first-year students.

Chickering's (1993) theory of student development recognizes transitions as a significant aspect of several of the vectors, e.g., vector three "dependency on others", while also positing that student induction into and identification with the institution is an essential part of their higher education experience, e.g., vector five "establishing identity." Using the notion that students are influenced by multiple factors, we determined there was justification for on-going examination of the first year experience and expectations, particularly given the dynamic nature of student populations. Since personal characteristics are likely to influence student development along these vectors, we determined there was also merit in examining the relationship between students' perceptions of their experience and their individual characteristics.

2.2 *First-Year Students Influences*

Research on first-generation students tends to be focused on the influences and expectations of incoming students based on the experiences of the student's family with post-secondary education (Coy-Ogan, 2009). A handful of empirical studies have been done on the background characteristics of first-generation college students at four-year universities (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; Inman & Mayes, 1999; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006),

and two reports detail the differences in factors influencing first-year students coming from first-generation college student backgrounds compared to those who had college-educated parents (Murphy & Hicks, 2006; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). First-generation student research has mainly examined variables such as risk of attrition, personality characteristics, familial relationships, academic preparation, first year performance, and cognitive development (Bui, 2002; Darin et al., 2006). These studies suggest that first-year students who come from families with post-secondary experience tend to have different expectations for their college experience than their first-generation peers. In contrast, a much smaller body of literature reports on first-generation first-year students' expectations of their university experiences.

2.3 First-Year Student Expectations and Experiences

Through our search of the literature we found a limited number of studies focused on first-year student expectations, and several were focused on specific groups of first-year students. For example, Smith and Wertlieb (2005) surveyed a cohort of 31 first-year pre-business majors to compare the students' expectations for their university experience with their actual first-year experiences. The motivation for the study was based on evidence indicating that little collaboration exists between K-12 schools and institutions of higher education, suggesting discontinuity between first-year student expectations and university experience. Smith and Wertlieb (2005) reported that student expectations were not aligned with their academic and social experiences in the first year, and that the misalignment is consistent with aspects of the "freshman myth," which includes unrealistic and unmet first-year student expectations (Stern, 1966). The discontinuity suggests that the transition of first-year students to university life is likely to be a dynamic situation, which is impacted by shifting student expectations and evolving university support structures (Krause & Coates, 2008).

There may be significant differences between student expectations and the experience that institutions are prepared to offer. Crisp et al. (2009) hypothesize that students' who have unrealistic expectations of their first-year experience, will experience misunderstandings between the information provided by the institution about its culture and will lack awareness of institutional expectations for first-year students', which are all indicators that can lead to misalignment of student expectations and their experience. Crisp et al. (2009) reported evidence of significant gaps between students' and their teachers' expectations of academic commitment, and use of resources. We contend that clear and explicit university communication of expectations for students will result in positive alignment between student expectations, faculty expectations of students, and students' university experiences.

College students' expectations about their university experience are varied. When students are asked to share their reasons for attending college or expectations for the future, responses typically include aspects of greater wealth, greater knowledge, and better career opportunities (Green & Hill, 2003; Schultz & Higbee, 2007). Specifically, students' desire to acquire greater wealth is one factor that has been shown to rise significantly in the last 30 years (Wyer, 2005). The shifting expectations of students for their university experience provide justification for continuing to monitor students' expectations and reasons for pursuing a post-secondary education.

Students also have expectations regarding their interactions with faculty members. Though it does not correspond with faculty member perceptions of their practices, first-year students have been found to hold expectations that faculty members will provide quick feedback to students about their work and that faculty members will be readily accessible to students (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews, & Nordström, 2009; Crisp et al., 2009). We embrace the perspective of Jackson and colleagues (2000) who contend that understanding freshman expectations is essential to predicting the adjustment capacities of these students. The alignment of university services and programs with first-year student learning anticipations and influences requires an understanding of the first-year student experience. Thus, there is justification for conducting research regarding first-year students' expectations and for the collection of empirical data to determine the supports necessary for student success.

2.4 University Programs for First-Year Students

The desire to pursue a college education develops early in a student's educational career and is a goal they tend to share widely. Venezia, Kirst and Antonio (2003) report survey results indicating 88% of 8th graders expect to seek out postsecondary education. Of the 88%, approximately 68% enroll in post-secondary institutions and only 29% of the students actually finish their degree (Bottoms & Young, 2008). These data make evident a substantial misalignment between students' expectations for post-secondary education and degree completion. There are several key factors that explain the discontinuity between student expectations and degree fulfillment, including: aspects of student academic preparation, student understanding of college expectancies and environments, and

student ability to adapt to new living and learning environments (Boroch & Hope, 2009).

The transition from high school to postsecondary education is widely recognized as a period of significant upheaval and change in a traditional student's life as it affects how students utilize their cognitive and affective strategies (Boroch & Hope, 2009). To improve this transition, universities typically provide support to facilitate student social connection, academic success, and connections to the institution (Bottoms & Young, 2008). Many of the programs are dedicated to assisting graduating high school seniors with their transition to postsecondary education. These transition programs generally utilize a variety of practices and structures targeting both academic and non-academic student needs (Bailey & Karp, 2003).

The Center for Student Success (2007) reports that effective first-year transition programs share several common features or practices. Included in the practices is a comprehensive support system that is integrated in both academic and student affairs services. Analysis of effective transition programs reveals the following factors as helpful in a student's transition to higher education: faculty and advisors involvement in closely monitoring student performance, student growth is addressed holistically, academic support mechanisms includes access to tutors, and cultural sensitivity permeates the curriculum, student support programs, and student services (Boroch & Hope, 2009).

Due to the complicated nature of the various student populations entering postsecondary education it becomes difficult to assess the merits and effectiveness of the varied transitional programs (Bailey & Karp, 2003). While these transition programs have been derived from a logical deduction of student attitudes and behaviors that are linked to successful college integration, there are gaps in research on the actual impact or success that these programs have on student transition (Venezia, et al, 2003). Given the lack of empirical research on programs for students in transition and the need for student support to align first-year student expectations with their university experience, there is justification for continuing to research the phenomenon by collecting an array of relevant data using a variety of lenses.

3. Methods

3.1 Project Goals and Research Questions

The goal of our research was to determine the influences on first-year students' choice to pursue additional education by attending a postsecondary institution and the relationship of their expectations to their first year experience. In particular, we were interested in comparing students' perceptions of how their first-year experience would play out with the reality of their experience. Guiding our investigation were the following research questions:

- What are the academic experiences and expectations of first-year students, and how do these vary based on personal characteristics?
- What are the influences on first-year students' decisions to attend the institution and how are these related to their personal characteristics?
- What awareness did first-year students have of university programs designed to support their academic experience and did the programs influence their decision to attend the institution, and were indications of influence related to personal characteristics?

3.2 Participants

Our sample was drawn from the population of university students attending a metropolitan research university in the western United States. We had 351 participants in our sample that met the criteria of being a first-year student which we defined as students who had completed less than 24 credits ($M=14.14$, $S=21.59$), or were 18 year of age ($M=19.65$, $S=4.54$). Our sample was drawn from the approximately 2000 first-year students entering the institution from high school. The students had an average ACT score of 24.70 ($S=13.47$) or SAT score of 1588.71 ($S=261.05$). Our participants were about 42% male and 58% female, with 23% from rural communities, 51 % from suburban communities, and 26% from urban communities. We had 51% of the participants indicate that their mother had attended college and 48% of their fathers had attended college. Slightly fewer than 50% of the participants were in-state students, and the remainder came from other states or countries to attend the university.

3.3 Measures

3.3.1 Demographics

We developed a demographics survey to collect a range of participant characteristics including: number of credits taken, age, ethnicity, location of home community, academic major, and parent/guardian educational

experience. The primary objectives for our demographics survey was to assure our sample was composed of first-year students and to determine the general characteristics of the students to provide a means of selecting groups for analysis.

3.3.2 Assessment of First-Year Students' Experiences and Expectations

We developed our assessment of first-year students' experiences and expectations using a combination of new items and adapting previously developed items from assessments referenced in the literature (Bui, 2002; Crisp et al., 2009; Pancer et al., 2000; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). All items from the literature were reported to have established reliability and validity. In addition to our assessment of first-year students' expectations and influences, we also created a set of items to assess student awareness of several institutional specific programs and the influence of these programs on first-year students' decision to attend the university. We vetted the instrument with a group of educational professionals that are familiar with the issues associated with first-year students and made warranted modifications based on their feedback.

We used four different, five-point Likert-type scales for our instrument. For one set of university experience questions we asked students to respond to items such as "I seek lifelong learning opportunities" on a scale that ranged from 1 being "Strongly Disagree" to 5 being "Strongly Agree." Similarly, our items assessing the participants' reasons for attending college asked them to respond on a scale that ranged from 1 representing "Not Important At All" to 5 representing "Extremely Important." We had two different stems that accompanied our institutional program list, one stem asked students to indicate the *level of awareness* of a program using a scale that ranged from 1 representing "No Awareness" to 5 representing "Very High Awareness." Our second stem asked students to consider the same list of institutional programs and indicate the *level of influence* the program had on their decision to attend the university using a scale that ranged from 1 representing "No Influence" to 5 representing "Very High Influence."

3.4 Data Collection

We determined it was important to collect data from the first-year students early in their first year before internal institutional factors began to influence their expectations and justification for seeking a post-secondary education. Therefore, shortly after the beginning of the Fall 2011 semester we contacted the instructors of several courses that are typically exclusive to first-year students. Once permission was obtained, we visited the courses and invited students to participate in our study on a volunteer basis, and collected data using paper copies of the survey instrument.

After we completed data collection and entry, we examined the data set for incomplete surveys and eliminated those with more than one missing entry. We perceived surveys with a single missing entry as acceptable (perhaps due to the participant overlooking the item), but surveys with more than one missing item were deemed unacceptable (as we interpreted this likely to be representative of a conscious decision to not fully participate in the study). Once data were entered and the data set was conditioned we examined the age and credits of our participants to determine if they met the first-year student criteria. To assure our data set was composed of first-year students, we used institutional criteria for freshman status which is 0-24 credits completed. We also applied a secondary criteria of 18 years of age to account for students who had taken some advance placement credits in high school before enrolling in the institution. Our final data set contained 351 participants.

4. Results

Prior to our analysis we want to provide recognition of the potential issues with multiple significance tests and the increased possibility of Type I error. However, we also recognize the possibility of inflating Type II error due to a Bonferroni correction. Therefore, we embrace the position of Perneger (1998) and others who recognize the paradox and argue that Bonferroni adjustments are unnecessary and may result in new issues in the process of trying to resolve potential problems.

4.1 Academic Expectations and Influences

Our first research question asked, *What are the academic experiences and expectations of first-year students, and how do these vary based on personal characteristics?* To answer this question, we first calculated the means and standard deviations of our university expectations and experience items (see Table 1), and then we conducted a t-test to determine if the responses were significantly different than 3, our value representing neutral. Our analysis revealed that our participants on average responded on the positive side of neutral in their experience with three exceptions. The above neutral responses indicate that the participants were in agreement with the statements with regard to their experiences and expectations. The exceptions included students engaging in informal inquiries into what it would be like to study at the institution, perceptions of faculty concern for

students, and the importance of the university's research mission. The students were neutral on seeking information about studying at the institution, but were below neutral in their instructors concern for their achievement. The participants' response to the importance of research was below neutral indicating that they likely disagreed with this statement.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of our participants' university expectations and experiences (N = 351)

Expectation and Experience Items	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>t (p)</i>
1. Working with other students in class time is important to my learning.	3.49 (.96)	9.61 (.00)
2. It is important for me that [the institution] focuses on social activities.	3.65 (.89)	13.66 (.00)
3. I am constantly working at making new friends.	3.54 (.93)	10.92 (.00)
4. I have activities outside of [the institution] that affect my ability to study.	3.47 (1.12)	7.79 (.00)
5. I have experienced a lot of social pressure at[the institution]	3.55 (.99)	10.42 (.00)
6. I have a clear picture of what university life is about.	3.61 (.82)	14.07 (.00)
7. I am easily adapting to campus life.	3.92 (.88)	19.43 (.00)
8. It is important for me that [the institution] focuses on athletics.	3.22 (1.11)	3.65 (.00)
9. I enjoy university life as a whole.	3.96 (.81)	22.07 (.00)
10. I did some informal inquiries and I found out what studying at [the institution] would be like.	3.00 (.88)	.00 (1.00)
11. I seek lifelong learning opportunities.	3.99 (.76)	24.30 (.00)
12. Job-preparation is a major part of why I am pursuing a higher education.	4.45 (.96)	39.23 (.00)
13. My college instructors are concerned about how well I am doing in their courses.	2.89 (1.08)	-1.84(.07)
14. It is important for me to attend [the institution] because of the focus on research.	2.86 (.87)	-3.08 (.00)

We continued to answer our first research question by analyzing the data for relationships between the students' personal characteristics and their expectations and experiences. We conducted a series of correlation analyses using variables such as age, ACT scores, number of credits in conjunction with the expectations and experience items. Our results revealed that age was negatively correlated with working to make new friends ($r = -.14, p < .01$) and positively correlated with the influence of outside activities ($r = .18, p < .01$), which indicated that as age increased so did the students experiences with outside influences impacting the ability to study, while concern with making new friends decreased. We found that ACT scores were also negatively correlated with making new friends ($r = -.14, p < .01$), negatively correlated with focusing on athletics ($r = -.12, p < .05$), but positively correlated with college instructor concern for their achievement ($r = .13, p < .01$). We found that the number of credits was negatively correlated with focusing on athletics ($r = -.15, p < .05$), and positively correlated with job-preparation ($r = .17, p < .01$).

We sustained our analysis by conducting ANOVA of our categorical data which included sex, ethnicity, in-state/out-of-state, home environment, and parental college completion. Our analysis revealed females answered significantly more positive than males for the importance of social activities $F(1,349) = 4.90, p < .05$, and interest in lifelong learning $F(1,349) = 4.88, p < .05$. We found males to be significantly higher than females with respect to focus on athletics $F(1,349) = 6.80, p < .01$ and for importance of research $F(1,349) = 6.03, p < .05$. See Table 2 for the means and standard deviations for the items in which female and male students differed.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for the measures for which males and females differed

Measure	Females	Males
	M (S)	M (S)
Importance of Social Activities	3.74 (.89)	3.53 (.87)
Interest in Life Long Learning	4.06 (.75)	3.88 (.77)
Focus on Athletics	3.08 (1.13)	3.40 (1.07)
Importance of Research	2.76 (.85)	2.99 (.88)

Our analysis revealed a difference in students' picture of university life by ethnicity $F(6,344) = 2.22, p < .05$, with Pacific Islanders and Hawaiians $M = 2.50 (S = .58)$ indicating a much lower level of agreement than the other ethnic groups $M = 3.61 (S = .80)$. Our analysis did not reveal any other differences based on ethnicity.

In our examination of in-state and out-of-state students and students by their home community setting we found several significant differences. Out-of-state students had more positive responses for the importance of social activities $F(1,349) = 6.98, p < .01$, for making new friends, $F(1,349) = 5.76, p < .01$, for focus on athletics $F(1,349) = 9.09, p < .01$, and for enjoyment of university life $F(1,349) = 5.58, p < .01$. Our in-state participants had higher positive scores for influence of outside activities on ability to study $F(1,349) = 11.42, p < .01$, and for seeking lifelong learning opportunities $F(1,349) = 5.14, p < .01$. See Table 3 for the means and standard deviations for the items in which in-state and out-of-state students differed. In terms of community type we found that students from rural communities, $M = 3.68 (S = .99)$ were less positive in their adaptation to campus life $F(1,349) = 4.18, p < .05$ than their peers from both suburban and urban settings $M = 4.00 (S = .84)$.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations for the measures for which in-state and out-of-state students differed

Measure	In-State	Out-of-State
	M (S)	M (S)
Importance of Social Activities	3.48 (.95)	3.83 (.80)
Making New Friends	3.41 (.92)	3.69 (.91)
Focus on Athletics	2.96 (1.14)	3.46 (1.04)
Enjoy University Life	3.81 (.84)	4.10 (.76)
Influence of Outside Activities	3.75 (1.10)	3.20 (1.08)
Lifelong Learning Opportunities	4.12 (.69)	3.86 (.79)

Our final analysis was based on mother and father completion of a college degree. Our analysis revealed that those who were first generation college students responded lower to the importance of working with other students in class $F(1,349) = 2.65, p < .05$ and to the importance of social activities $F(1,349) = 3.09, p < .05$. Our post-hoc analysis revealed the difference was between the first generation students and those who indicated that both parents had completed college degrees. See Table 4 for the means and standard deviations for the items in which first generation and both parents with degree students differed.

Table 4. Means and standard deviations for the measures for which first generation and both parents with degrees students differed

Measure	First Generation	Both Parents with Degrees
	M (S)	M (S)
Working with Other Students	3.34 (1.00)	3.66 (.92)
Importance of Social Activities	3.47 (.96)	3.78 (.83)

4.2 Influences and Personal Characteristics

Our second research question asked, *What are the influences on first-year students' decisions to attend the institution and how are these related to their personal characteristics?* We began answering this research question by calculating the means and standard deviations of our participants' responses to the influence questions and determining if the responses were significantly different than neutral – a value of 3 (see Table 5). Our analysis revealed the average responses for the influence tended to be positive for intrinsic motivators such as career and learning goals (with the exception of making more money), which were answered above neutral indicating that the participants tended to find these to be important influences. Extrinsic influences, such as parents and friends, were answered on average below neutral indicating that the students tended to find external motivators to be less important in their decision to attend the institution, again with the exception of making more money.

Table 5. Means, standard deviations, and t-tests with significance for influence on attending college

Influence	M (SD)	t (p)
15. To increase my social status.	2.33 (1.15)	-10.93 (.00)
16. My parents wanted me to go.	2.61 (1.26)	-5.83 (.00)
17. Most of my friends are going.	1.88 (1.06)	-19.80 (.00)
18. To get training for a specific career.	3.85 (1.17)	13.68 (.00)
19. To be able to make more money.	4.01 (1.05)	18.07 (.00)
20. To learn more about things that interest me.	4.10 (.98)	21.01 (.00)

We continued to answer our research question by analyzing the data for relationships between the students' personal characteristics and their expectations and experiences. We conducted a series of correlation analysis using variables such as age, ACT scores, number of credits in conjunction with the expectations and experience items. Our results revealed that age was negatively correlated with increasing social status ($r = -.11, p < .05$) and negatively correlated with parent influence ($r = -.11, p < .01$). We did not find significant correlations for ACT scores or number of credits.

We conducted ANOVA of our categorical data which included sex, ethnicity, in-state/out-of-state, home environment, and parental college completion. Our analysis revealed females $M = 4.22$ ($S = .98$) answered significantly more positive than males $M = 3.93$ ($S = .96$), $F(1,349) = 7.30, p < .01$, for the influence of the desire to learn more about things that interest them.

Our ANOVA by ethnicity revealed a significant difference for social status $F(6,343) = 2.52, p < .05$, with our post-hoc analysis showing a pair-wise difference between Asians $M = 3.38$ ($S = 1.50$), and whites $M = 2.26$ ($S = 1.12$), with Asians answering this item more positively. However, our ANOVA for home environment did not reveal any significant differences for students from rural, suburban and -urban environments. Similarly, our analysis for in-state and out-of-state students also revealed no significant differences.

Our final analysis of parental completion of college revealed a difference for getting training for a specific career $F(3,346) = 2.64, p < .05$. Our pair-wise analysis revealed a significant difference between those who indicated that only their mother had completed a college degree $M = 4.27$ ($S = .84$), and those who had both parents complete a degree $M = 3.67$ ($S = 1.12$), where those who indicated only their mother had completed a degree responding significantly more positive.

4.3 Awareness and Influence of Institutional Programs

Our third research question asked, *What awareness did first-year students have of university programs designed to support their academic experience and did the programs influence their decision to attend the institution, and were indications of influence related to personal characteristics?* We began answering this question by computing the correlations between student awareness of institutional program and their perceptions of the influence of the program on their decision to attend the university (see Table 6). Our analysis revealed significant positive correlations between awareness and influence for each of the listed programs, with the highest correlation for awareness occurring with influence of the same program. Thus, our analysis suggests as awareness of programs increase so does the influence of the program. To answer our research question, students

indicate that the more that they knew about a program the greater the program influenced their decision to attend the university.

Table 6. The correlations between participants' awareness of university programs and the perceived influence of the programs on their decision to attend the university

Awareness of the Program		Perceived Influence of the Program								
		University Social Program	Degree Completion Program	University Image Program	Academics and Research PR Program	College Recruitment Program	University Strategic Vision Goal	University Athletics	University Performing Arts	University Academic Mission
University Social Program		.62**	.20**	.39**	.33**	.31**	.44**	.16**	.23**	.21**
Degree Completion Program		.08	.43**	.16**	.10	.16**	.10	.16**	.17**	.25**
University Image PR Program		.34**	.29**	.58**	.44**	.36**	.46**	.12**	.30**	.25**
Academics and Research PR Program		.22**	.31**	.42**	.53**	.33**	.32**	.21**	.26**	.34**
College Recruitment Program		.25**	.13*	.29**	.27**	.62**	.24**	-.05	.15**	.07
University Strategic Vision Goal		.41**	.15**	.43**	.24**	.32**	.55**	.10	.24**	.22**
University Athletics		-.03	.12**	-.03	.00	.06	-.01	.42**	.12*	.15**
University Performing Arts		.10*	.20**	.15**	.13*	.16**	.10	.21**	.50**	.33**
University Academic Mission		.13*	.25**	.22**	.18**	.24**	.26**	.21**	.30**	.49**

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

In terms of the relationship to personal characteristics our correlational analysis between university program influence and age, ACT scores, and number of completed credits, revealed age to be negatively correlated with the influence of the degree completion program ($r = -.14, p < .01$), with the influence of athletics ($r = -.14, p < .01$), and with the influence of the university academic mission ($r = -.11, p < .05$). We found the number of completed credits to be negatively correlated with the influence of the university strategic vision ($r = -.13, p < .05$). Our analysis failed to expose any relationships between ACT scores and university program influences.

Our ANOVA analysis for sex and influence of university programs revealed males perceived significantly greater influence than females for university image or program $F(1,349) = 10.141, p < .01$, university strategic vision $F(1,349) = 14.40, p < .01$, and university academic mission $F(1,349) = 7.17, p < .01$. See Table 7 for the means and standard deviations for the items in which males and female students differed.

Table 7. Means and standard deviations for the items for which males and females differed

Measure	Females	Males
	M (S)	M (S)
University Image	1.21 (.64)	1.47 (.93)
Strategic Vision	1.17 (.57)	1.45 (.80)
Academic Mission	1.64 (1.14)	1.97 (1.23)

Our ANOVA analysis comparing in-state to out-of-state students revealed a significant difference for the university degree completion program $F(1,349) = 11.76, p < .01$, and for athletics $F(1,349) = 15.81, p < .01$. Our analysis revealed that in-state students were more influenced by the degree completion program, while out-of-state students expressed greater influence of athletics. See Table 8 for the means and standard deviations for the items in which in-state and out-of-state students differed.

Table 8. Means and standard deviations for the items for which in-state and out-of-state students differed

Measure	In-State	Out-of-State
	M (S)	M (S)
Degree Completion Program	1.80 (1.27)	1.27 (.68)
University Athletics	2.23 (1.37)	3.12 (1.54)

We found no significant difference for home environment, which indicates that students from rural, suburban and urban environments perceived influence of the university programs equally. Similarly, we found no significant differences in the students' perceptions of the influence of programs based on parental achievement of a degree.

5. Discussion

We set out to determine freshman expectations and experiences at the university level, the influences on their decision to attend the university including their awareness of programs designed to support their academic experience and the influence of these programs. Using Chickering's (1993) vectors for students' development as a framework, we sought to gain a deeper understanding of first-year student perceptions and ideas about university life. The justification for our project is the constantly shifting social and cultural conditions of the first year experience and how the institution, family, and students perceive the first year of university life should unfold. Further justification is provided by the potential high stakes associated with student retention and success with their college experience.

Our analysis revealed that for the most part first-year students' expectations and experiences were positive with the exception of perceptions of concern of their instructors and the university's focus on research. Overall, our participants were motivated by social and career expectations and experiences. These experiences and expectations are consistent with the developing purpose, interpersonal relationships, and interdependency vectors (Chickering, 1993). Thus, it appears that the overall structures in place at the university may be supportive of development along these vectors. However, more work may be needed to address issues related to instructor caring, as faculty are a major influence along several of Chickering's developmental vectors.

Based on our findings we have determined that a number of personal characteristics are correlated with first-year students' college expectations and experience. Our analysis uncovered some nuanced variations in experiences and expectations, such as downward shifts in the importance of social interactions with age and ACT scores. We speculate this is due to the more likely focus on academics by these student groups and less desire to emphasize social interactions as part of their university experiences. We also found that out-of-state students were more positive about social interactions, focus on athletics, and enjoyment of university life. We speculate this may be due to the likelihood of higher socio-economic status of students attending the university from out of state based on higher tuition they pay, their attention toward athletics as the "image" of the university, and their likely home support encouraging them to enjoy their college experience. Thus, our findings suggest that statements of first-year students' needs and experiences should be crafted based on the personal characteristics of the students being considered. We contend that blanket statements about the needs of first-year students should be used with

extreme caution and be supported by an array of research. Further, determining the commonalities of diverse groups of first-year students' experiences and expectations is an excellent direction for future research.

In terms of the students' perceived influences on their decisions to attend the university, students gravitated toward personal and intrinsic reasons such as "career" and "learning things that interest me". These findings provide justification for assuring that there are structures in place to support student development along Chickering's (1993) competence, identity, and purpose vectors. Our results indicate that students did not perceive external influence (e.g., friends and family pressure) to be a significant basis for their decision to attend the university. Again, we found variations in students' perceived influences on their decision to attend the university based on personal characteristics of the participants. For example, we found that females were more positively influenced by the desire to learn about things that interest them than males. Our results also indicate that ethnicity was a factor for the perceived influence of social status. Overall, we found more consistency in the responses of the first-year students' perceived influences to attend the university than their expectations and experiences for university life. We speculate that the consistency in perceived influences indicates that students are choosing to go to college more for personal reasons than extrinsic sources of influence. The potential for much more intrinsic influences on the decision to attend college suggests that programming and support structures may need to be adjusted to assure students development along multiple vectors (Chickering, 1993). Further exploration of the students' perceptions of external and internal influences on their justification for attending college, and the relationship to their personal and professional development are both worthy of on-going investigation.

Our last research question was based on students' awareness and the perceived impact of university based programs on their decision for attending the university. Our correlational analysis exposed the overlap in students' knowledge of the university program and the programs' impact on their decision to attend the university. We speculate that as students investigate which university to attend they focus on elements that are of primary attraction for them while absorbing other information in the process of following their topics of interest. With few exceptions and the unique distribution associated with university athletics, awareness of this one program was found to be correlated with the influence of most other programs. Our results also indicate the greater a student's knowledge of a program, the greater the perceived influence of the program on the student's decision to attend the university. Thus, it may be possible that unlike perceived influences on a student's decision to attend college in general, specific programs are likely to influence a student's decision to attend a specific institution. Interestingly, unlike expectations, experiences, and justifications for attending the university, we found little variation in the students responses based on personal characteristics. It is possible that we did not gather the demographic or personal information that would be linked to variations in awareness and influence. It is also possible that awareness and influence of university programs transcends the influence of personal characteristics. The influence of university programs on students decision to attend the institution, their awareness of the program, and the association with personal characteristics is an area the needs further investigation, particularly there is a need to compare influences between similar and different institutions.

Our research exposed some interesting links between first-year students' personal characteristics and their expectations of university life, their experience at the university, the perceived influences on their decision to attend college, and to a lesser extent, their awareness and the corresponding influence of supportive university programs. Our findings provide further justification for attending to the Chickering (1993) vector framework to support student development along multiple trajectories. Further, the potential variation in first-year students' expectations, experiences and influences suggests that universities need to consider a range of possible support mechanisms to assure diverse student populations achieve success. This may require universities to put forth effort to expose students to the most appropriate programs and support structures.

5.1 Limitations

The first limitation of our investigation was how we defined "first-year college student." As we shared previously, we considered any student to be a first-year student if the student is 18, or had completed less than 25 college-level credits, which is aligned with the definition of a traditional student. The challenge with our adoption of this definition is the possibility that students in our study could range from 18 years old to 58 years old and still be considered first-year students. The perceptions, expectations, and influences of younger students may be radically different than non-traditional students. Examining the differences in the positions of traditional and non-traditional first-year students is an excellent direction for future research.

Our second limitation is the possible sampling bias that we may have experienced by not gathering data from all freshmen on campus, or systematically sampling rather than convenient sampling. However, the classes we did

survey were predominantly comprised of freshmen with varying demographic backgrounds which should have provided us with a sample representative of the freshmen at the university. Similarly, our sample was drawn from the first-year students at one institution, and although it is anticipated they are likely to be similar to their peers at other institutions, the sample is limited. Repeating our study at other institutions is again an excellent direction for future research.

The third limitation of our study is the nature of our data collection. We gathered quantitative data using Likert-type scale items because of the size of the sample we were seeking for our project. However, as with any self-report data we were limited to the data provided and can only speculate as to why students answered the way that they did. Delving further into some of our findings with a combination of methodologies is likely to be a fruitful line for further investigation.

6. Conclusion

Through our research we found the answer to the title question, “Why did they come here?” varies and is related to the characteristics of the students. Students’ first-year experience is filled with an array of expectations, experiences and influences. Monitoring how students are responding to their first-year experience and determining if the students are aware of the programs in place to support their success requires on-going investigation. Further, the culture of an institution and the variations within first-year students are likely to lead to a wide diversity of first-year student viewpoints. Our research attended to the need to continue to explore the first-year student experience and gather and report empirical data to document their anticipations and perceptions of their university experience. We have also exposed a number of potentially fruitful lines of research that would certainly be worthwhile as topics for investigations exploring the evolving and shifting range of first-year student issues.

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