"Making it Stick: Effectiveness of University Marketing and Retention:

A Case Study of Marketing Strategies Used by WTAMU"

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Abstract

The perceptions of students at West Texas A&M University (WTAMU) were investigated. The research questions aimed to discover which marketing and retention strategies were most effective in attracting the students to WT and then persuading them to stay here. Interviews were done with WTAMU Communications and Admissions staff to determine WT's current strategies. Surveys were completed by 104 participants, and a focus group was conducted with six participants. The results indicated that strategies with a focus on developing personal relationships are most effective. The findings support the existing literature on the subject, reaffirming that personal contact is the most effective means of recruitment.

Key words: university, college, marketing, uses and gratification theory, retention

"Making it Stick: Effectiveness of University Marketing and Retention:

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Public universities may be funded by the state, but their advertising goals closely

resemble the for-profit institutions for which they educate students to work. The

challenge of higher education, however, is more than that of a car dealer, a jewelry store,

and many real estate agencies. The product, in this case, is a city, a campus, classes,

homework, and an experience, and it can cost more than many cars, rings, and houses do.

Recruitment of quality students to a university is clearly a difficult business. Jim Black,

associate provost for enrollment services at the University of North Carolina at

Greensboro, explains the dilemma: "Unfortunately, I have yet to confirm a single

defining action or strategy significant enough to yield dramatic recruitment results that

are sustainable over time" (2004, Marketing institutions, "Don't Panic, Don't

Oversimplify", para. 2). Universities are facing the problem of having to compete on the

same level as for-profit institutions and corporations, while on a limited budget.

However, the market for the consumers of higher education is rapidly changing their

behavior and are making the move towards a more for-profit marketing approach "all the

more necessary" (Farrell, 2006, para. 3). Furthermore, the volatile nature of the student

market requires constant reassessment of the wants and needs of the consumers.

According to Bonnie Rose, vice president for academic affairs at Niagara University,

"There's a sea change going on in terms of what students are looking for in colleges and

how they are researching and making their decisions. We are really scrambling to

understand the students and respond to them in this dynamic environment" (Farrell, 2006, para. 4).

Through this project, I sought to answer two research questions:

RQ 1: Which University marketing strategies are most effective in bringing students to West Texas A&M University (WTAMU)?

RQ2: Which University retention strategies are most effective in keeping students enrolled at WTAMU?

The study sought to discover the reasons for students' choices to attend WTAMU. Another goal was to help WTAMU spend its shrinking marketing budget more effectively and efficiently, in order to maximize the efforts that are found to be most effective, and spend less time on those that aren't. In addition, the study identified why students remain at WTAMU, and how well retention strategies are working. The findings of my study could improve the marketing and retention efforts of the university, which in the long term serves the larger community. The knowledge has helped provide a better understanding of why students attend WTAMU, what the University should continue to do, or stop doing, and, in turn, provided the data to support my recommendations for WT's future marketing strategies.

Literature Review

University marketing strategy has an inherent dilemma: should current and potential students be treated as customers, searching for the best product for the money, or as potential members of the university community, searching for the best fit, for both themselves and the university? College choice is a "complicated" process that researchers attempt to understand and reign in every year, with little success (Anctil, 2008, p. 92).

Most universities, without a strategic plan, attempt to persuade students of their quality

and desirability, while paying little attention to the students' underlying needs and the

people that are most influential on their decision to attend college (Hesel, 2004). Present

research suggests that students can be considered as either a consumer or a learner.

Competition is seen as both a boon and a bane in the educational institution market, with

some academics understanding the competitiveness of advertising in general, and others

suggesting that this foray into the public market has, in turn, negatively impacted

university performance (Thacker, 2005). Overwhelmingly, the faces behind that

"organizational brand" are understood to be the most important part of any marketing

plan, from faculty and staff to current students and alumni. Colleges must embrace the

utility of their own people, literature suggests, for them to have any viable marketing

strategy (Powell, 2009).

<div align="center">**Students as Consumers**</div>

Everyone is a consumer. Modern-day marketing and advertising strategy tell us

so. For-profit, non-profit, government-funded, public, and private institutions of all kinds

are in competition with one another, competing for the attention of potential customers,

whether they want to or not. Universities today not only have to compete with one

another, but also with the car, beverage, clothing, and computer companies that they feed

employees to (Hesel, 2004). Their strategies must also address their many publics. There

are not just potential consumers and consumers of a university education. There are

potential students, current students, alumni, potential donors, current donors, potential

and current faculty and staff, in addition to executive board members and other

universities. The number of stakeholders that must be taken into account for university

marketing is almost overwhelming (Heslop & Nadeau, 2010). When simply considering

university website design and content, Dr. Neil Weaver, Vice President of Institutional

Advancement at WTAMU, pointed out how difficult it is to direct and shape the site,

considering how many purposes it must serve for so many people (N. Weaver, personal

communication, February 1, 2011).

It can been argued that due to the competitive nature of today's market, students

simply must be treated as consumers, or universities risk losing their target market, which

happens to be the target market of thousands of other institutions, companies, and

organizations as well. "In order to develop an effective brand or to understand one's

brand positioning, the views of target customers concerning expected benefits or

outcomes of use must be determined and positively affected" (Heslop & Nadeau, 2010, p.

87). The school selection decision process is a difficult and complicated one, but there

have been some inroads made in trying to better understand it. Maslow's Hierarchy of

Needs has been used to help explain the reasons students choose their particular school.

Schools all try to differentiate themselves based on what needs they meet for the student,

whether that be social needs, esteem needs, or self-actualization (Kotler & Fox, 1995).

Fulfilling those needs, and therefore treating the student as a consumer with needs to be

met, further emphasizes the university marketing model in which the school is the

business, the education is the product, and the students are the consumers. Whether or not

this is the ideal method has yet to be determined, but both sides continue to argue

fervently on the subject. However, whether students are 'consumers' or not, the simple

fact remains that student satisfaction with their university of choice will impact any

reputation, brand, or image that a marketing department tries to concoct (Wright, Palmer,

Eidson & Griswold, 2011). Whatever decision a university makes regarding the role of its

students, the truth is that all marketing strategy, cost decisions, and program changes

ought to have an empirical foundation in order to be applied effectively (Hesel, 2004).

Competition for Business

Similar to the way the label 'consumer' is looked down upon in the university

setting, with regards to students, 'marketing' carries a similar connotation. Many

universities are of the belief that marketing their assets is contradictory to the principles

of higher education, namely, the "contestability of knowledge" (Greatrix, 2011, "The

customer is often wrong", para. 1). The notion that the customer holds the power is alien

to higher education, only recently considered a legitimate perspective when considering

students. While some oppose this model (Greatrix, 2011), others believe that although

marketing an education is still a relatively new phenomenon, "we in academe exist in a

competitive environment" (Weisbuch, 2007, para. 9), meaning that although change may

not be desired, it is inevitable. In order to compete for students' attention, universities

must understand that they exist in a corporate world, one to which they supply ready

employees, managers, and CEO's.

"In this increasingly competitive situation it is likely that those institutions

practicing effective marketing will be more likely to prosper" (Nicholls et al, 1995, as

quoted in Heslop & Nadeau, 2010, p. 86). Simply implementing any marketing plan

won't work for a University. Since higher education functions on a different set of rules

from corporations (Pampaloni, 2010), they must be particular in the way they market

themselves, to whom, and with what purpose in mind. Greatrix (2010) articulates several

of the ways in which higher education differs from other businesses:

- Higher education is usually a one-time purchase, with little chance for repeat

  business (with the exception of students pursuing graduate degrees)

- The ultimate purchasing decision is weighed on heavily by outside influences

  (parents, teachers, friends, etc.)

- Purchasers (students) have little knowledge of the product and usually cannot test

  it prior to purchase

- The customer makes an impact on the product "by helping to shape it" (2010),

  which is one reason why universities are selective in their admissions

Recognizing these key differences can be crucial for ultimately setting a university apart

from the crowd, and can ensure that the right message is being sent to the right people.

Educational Disconnect

There is a school of thought that the movement towards a marketing-centric

university environment is detrimental to education as a whole. With the rise of college

and university 'rankings' in the *Princeton Review* and *U.S. News and World Report*,

colleges are fighting for top spots, numbers, and endorsements in order to grab the

attention of name-brand driven students. An obsession with measurement has created an

environment that values comfort, popularity, and prestige above quality, tradition, and

finding a college that is the right fit for each student (Thacker, 2005). Students are taught

to seek out the highest ranked, most well-known schools, instead of searching for the best

program of study, or even the faculty that they want to work with.

Thacker (2005) argues that education is not a product, but a process, and the

student is not a customer, but rather a learner. Greatrix (2011) expands on this point:

What the student as consumer concept fails to capture is the essence of what really makes   a high quality education for students. The essential ingredients of outstanding staff and   genuine student involvement are key. They are just not adequately recognised in this   model. Treating students merely as consumers or failing to recognise the importance of   quality service are both problematic for universities. ("The customer is often wrong",   para.2) Institutions should not lose sight of their organizational mission. Instead of being a passive recipient of the effects of the market on their decisions, colleges must be smart about the market and keep their mission in mind, always, while paying attention to the rest of the world, its trends, fads, and establishments that will effect its processes (Zemsky, Wegner, & Massy, 2005). This is how universities should avoid disconnecting with their purpose, while maintaining their image and place in the competitive market of today. They must be able to recognize that "educational innovations undertaken for their own sake, in the hope of boosting visibility and market demand, can soon become liabilities" (Hesel, 2004, para. 11). New for the sake of new is neither profitable nor effective. A focus on the educational purpose is necessary in order to stay in the game, while not forgetting why you're there in the first place.

The Importance of People

Paper will fade, and postcards will be thrown away. People, however, can form lasting relationships with potential new members of a community. These relationships will likely influence those potential members for the rest of their lives, perhaps intentionally or otherwise. One lesson colleges can take away from today's market is that because people are so overwhelmed with advertising and appeals for their loyalty, human

compassion and understanding can go a long way. During the college decision process, specifically, it's been found that interpersonal influences are the most important to students for their decision (Pampaloni, 2010). Although parents play a very important role, teachers, counselors, friends, and family can be equally or more influential in the process as well. This development is a clear indicator to admissions and marketing directors around the world: use people to get people.

Most of the time, people are better marketers than any million-dollar campaign. The sharing of unique individual perspectives that people present is a more "durable and persuasive" technique than any mailing could try to be (Powell, 2009, para. 3). Marketing through current customers or employees is not a new concept, but one that is under-utilized in higher education today. Since "higher education institutions face many of the same challenges as for-profit operations…the marketing strategies used by these companies [is] a viable strategy for colleges and universities (Arnett, Wittmann, & Wilson, 2003, as quoted in Vander Schee, 2010, p. 136).Vander Schee (2010) suggests utilizing relationship marketing with enrollment counselors that can provide a personal relationship for potential students. This method, he believes, will build more relationships, and ultimately, a larger enrollment. Through utilizing the people that are already on the inside, as well as the language used on the inside, by the people who already have used the 'product', universities can maximize funds and effectively communicate their message and identity to potential students In the end, value is built over time "but a focus on quality and distinction, the setting of substantive objectives, the use of sound empirical evidence to guide important decisions, the integration of efforts, and consistency over the long haul can produce remarkable change" (Hesel, 2004).

WTAMU Marketing and Retention Strategy

Through interviews with the WT Vice President of Institutional Advancement, Dr. Neal Weaver, and Director of Admissions, Shawn Thomas, and a review of WT marketing materials, the overall WT strategy was explained. During his interview, Dr. Weaver primarily focused on some of the phenomena encountered in WT admissions, recruiting strategies outside of the Amarillo area, and issues with retention strategy on campus (N. Weaver, personal communication, February 1, 2011). Initially, he pointed out that there are a disproportionate number of applicants to WT coming from the suburbs to the northwest of Dallas/Fort Worth. He wonders where this phenomenon started, and what they can do to capture whatever is drawing those students to WT. Outside of Amarillo, the primary recruitment strategies include direct mailings and emails to potential students, recruitment at college fairs (followed up by mailings), and purchasing names (in order to mail them material). Weaver also stressed the importance of spending marketing dollars efficiently, especially with impending budget cuts hanging over everyone's heads (2011). In terms of recruitment, the campus tour experience is also a vital part of marketing strategy, one which Weaver believes could use significant improvement. He also acknowledged that there is a large amount of recruiting done within departments and colleges; efforts that he hopes are coordinated through the Marketing and Communications office, but are not always necessarily done so (2011). He also explained that there is little on-campus marketing or advertising for on-campus housing, meal plans, and the university bookstore.

Shawn Thomas explained the WTAMU recruitment process in further detail. First, WT generates leads for potential students (S. Thomas, personal communication,

February 8, 2011). This might be through purchasing names or gathering emails at a

recruitment event. Next, Admissions sends the student a postcard and introduces them to

their PURL (personal URL) that will serve to connect them personally with the WTAMU

communication stream. At this point, there are 6 touch points, one postcard and five

emails, for the student to make contact with WT and let them know that they are

interested in potentially applying (2011). This brings the student into the Inquiry Stage,

where they inform the university that they in fact are interested. When they are entered in

the communication flow, they then receive WT's core mailings, emphasizing the

different aspects of the university (honors program, athletics, student organizations, etc.).

Finally, the recruitment process moves into the fifth stage, to the WT student call center.

At this point, current students call potential recruits and assess their level of interest, and

whether or not WT should continue to pursue those students (2011). In terms of

effectiveness, Thomas explained that it is extraordinarily difficult to assess the

effectiveness of mailings, due to the complicated nature of college decisions. He believes

that if more students visit campus during their decision process, they will be more likely

to attend WT. Ultimately, Mr. Thomas wants to know the student point of view during

the admission process.

Uses and Gratification Theory

Mass communication theory has evolved over time, from "hypodermic needle"

theories, to the powerful and limited effects models of today. Uses and gratification

theory falls in the middle of these two archetypes, under the limited effects banner.

Instead of asking about what the media does to people, it asks what people do with media

(Larson, 2007). Its perspective acknowledges that media users are more powerful than the

previous passive/direct effects models believed. Instead of passively receiving information, users pick and choose their media to fill their own needs. It also implies that media compete against one another for user's gratifications, meaning that the user has more power than the media. On the whole, Uses and Gratification theory is a "subtradition of media effects research" (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 3). Users are seen as active participants in media through this theory, fulfilling individual desires and needs by picking and choosing information sources. Generally, four basic needs are identified as the most common:

1. Surveillance – a need to keep track of our surrounding environment

2. Curiosity – a desire to discover and learn things that have previously been unknown

3. Diversion – a relief from boredom

4. Personal Identity – a need to discover who we are and what we stand for (Larson, 2000)

Ultimately, "knowing how people are using media to gratify needs can help us plan targeted persuasion" (2000). Through the application of uses and gratification theory, investigators can ascertain the motivations for a media user's habits and choices.

Method

Survey Participants

After receiving approval from the university's Institutional Review Board, I distributed an online survey. The study's sample comprised of 104 West Texas A&M University students, with ages ranging from 18 to 52, and an average of 22 years old. Each participant indicated that they were a student of WTAMU through the confirmation

of their age and consent to the conditions of the survey, and through the provision of their

WTAMU Student ID number. Although 104 students started the survey, only 84 (75%)

completed the entire survey; the average question completion rate was around 80%. The

respondent group was 62% female and 38% male. The overwhelming majority of

students indicated that they were white, with 13 identifying as being of Hispanic origin.

Participants were recruited online via Facebook, WTClass (the university's course

management system), and email. They were asked to take the survey at their

convenience. By completing and returning the survey, the participant acknowledged

his/her consent to be a part of the study and accepted all potential risks. The surveys were

administered online via Qualtrics software. Participants completed the survey on a

voluntary basis. All surveys were administered in English.

Focus Group Participants

The focus group participants also indicated that they were students of WTAMU.

The ages ranged from 18-24. The participants were 6 West Texas A&M University

students, with 2 males and 4 females present. Three were from Texas, two from

neighboring states, and one from New York. The participants agreed to be a part of the

focus group on a voluntary basis. The session was audio recorded by an iPhone recording

device. The participants were given verbal confirmation by the focus group leader that

their voices would not be attached to any names or identifying information, and that the

recordings of this focus group would be kept in strict confidentiality on the researcher's

home computer and subsequently destroyed following the research. The participants also

signed a release waiver, indicating that they understood the risks of being recorded, and

that neither their names nor their identifying information would accompany the

recordings or be reported in the research (see Appendix C).

Surveys

Demographic variables. Participants reported their age, gender, major of study

hometown, race/ethnicity, and employment status. They provided their Student ID

numbers as well, in order for the researcher's advisor to use them to look up accurate

GPA's. They also reported the distance of the hometown from WT, the degree they were

working on, what year of the degree they were in, what WTAMU college their degree

was in, and whether or not they were a first-generation college student.

WTAMU. The respondents were asked a total possible twelve questions relating

to their college application process, their decision to attend WT, their involvement at WT

and their evaluation of WT as a whole. When asked how they heard about WTAMU, the

participants marked all applicable media out of a list of 20 possibilities. Several Yes/No

questions asked about the student's involvement on campus, if they owned WT spirit

material, and their plans to transfer from WTAMU, if any. Students were also able to

indicate which types of campus organizations they preferred, how many they were

involved with, and what First Year Experience events they attended as a freshman, by

checking all answers that applied from relevant lists of answer choices. Three of the most

important questions were answered using a Likert Scale of 1-11. The first asked about the

factors that were influential on the student's decision to attend WTAMU, and the

participant ranked each of twelve factors from 1-11, with 1 as 'Not at all influential', 6 as

'Neutral', and 11 as 'Very Influential'. The factors included Location, Academic

Programs, Campus Life, Residential Halls, Professors, Employment Opportunities,

Student Center Activities, Friends at WTAMU, Family at WTAMU, Athletic Programs,

Financial Aid, and Cost of Tuition. The students were later asked to rank these factors

(with the exception of 'Family at WTAMU') on a scale from 1-11 in terms of their

expectations of WTAMU, with 1 as 'Did not meet my expectations', 6 as 'Met my

expectations/Neutral', and 11 as 'Exceeded my expectations'. Finally, participants ranked

each of these factors again; based on how likely they were to recommend WTAMU to

potential students, with 1 as 'Not at all likely', 6 as 'Neutral', and 11 as 'Very likely'. A

copy of the survey questions can be found in Appendix A.

Focus Group Protocol

Eleven questions were asked of the focus group, regarding the participants'

experiences at WTAMU. Each participant was given a chance to answer the questions,

with topics ranging from their decision-making process in coming to WT, to their

satisfaction and involvement with the WTAMU campus (see Appendix B).

Data Treatment

Quantitative data was analyzed using Qualtrics and SPSS software programs.

Qualitative data was thematically analyzed by grouping similar answers to questions

asked during the focus group.

Validity

Validity was ensured in several ways. First, the faculty advisor for this project

reviewed and corrected the entire report and checked for any analytical errors. Second,

the results of both the qualitative and quantitative research were triangulated for the

discussion and end analysis.

Results

Survey

Descriptive statistics

Demographics. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 52 years (*M*=21.89, *SD*=5.84). Of those that answered, 82.5% of the students were from the United States were from Texas, another 8% were from surrounding states, and the remaining students were from various U.S. states. Only three students were of foreign birth. About 70% of the respondents had home towns in the western region of Texas (with zip codes beginning with 79XXX), and 73% lived less than 300 miles from WT, with the average distance being 428 miles, and the median being 105. The respondent group was 62% female and 38% male. All but 5% of the students were working on their undergraduate degrees at WT, with the other 5% being graduate students. The average GPA of respondents was 3.56. Sixty percent of the students were upperclassmen. About one fourth of the students were first-generation college students (*SD*=3.45). The overwhelming majority of students indicated that they were white, with 13 identifying as being of Hispanic origin. Three fourths of the students were employed (*SD*=0.43), at an average of 25 hours per week (*SD*=11.30)

College Choice/Marketing. Respondents were asked to identify how they heard about WT, by identifying all choices that applied from a list of 20. Overwhelmingly the top responses identified people as being the primary source through which students had heard of WT (see Table 1). Thirty-eight percent indicated that they had already heard about WT. Students named Cost of Tuition as their number one influential factor in deciding to come to WT (*M*=9.43 *SD*=1.97). Following in influence were Academic Programs (*M*=8.22, *SD*=2.25), and Location (*M*=8.14, *SD*=3.14). Athletic Programs

bottomed out the list with an average of 3.97 (*SD*=3.12). Most students applied to two or

less colleges, other than WT (=66%), while about 20% applied to 3-4 other colleges.

Respondents were almost split down the middle when asked whether WT was their first

choice or not (M=1.44, SD=0.50).

| Answer		Response	%
College Search Engine		8	9%
WTAMU Mailing to your home		15	17%
Internet Search		7	8%
WTAMU.edu		10	11%
Friend		32	36%
Family member		36	40%
WTAMU Alumni		20	22%
Current WTAMU Student		24	27%
Newspaper		4	4%
Magazine		2	2%
Billboard Advertisement		4	4%
Television Advertisement		4	4%
Radio Advertisement		1	1%
Attended WTAMU Sporting Event		6	7%
Attended WTAMU-sponsored Event (Homecoming parade, etc.)		4	4%
Discover WT		4	4%
College Fair		2	2%
UIL Event hosted by WTAMU		9	10%
I already knew about WTAMU		34	38%
Other		14	16%

Table 1. "How did you first hear about West Texas A&M University? (Check all that apply)"

Experience Evaluation/Retention.. The respondents were asked whether or not

they had plans to transfer from WT in the future, and if yes, where they planned to

transfer to. Eighty-four percent did not plan to transfer, but of the 13 that did, 8 planned

to transfer to Texas Tech University. When asked to rank how their expectations of WT

had been met (or not), on a scale of 1-11, Professors and Friends topped the list (*M*=8.92

SD=1.99; *M*=8.92 *SD*=1.99) (See figure 1). Professors had a lowest ranked value of 3,

while the lowest for Friends at WT was a 2.

Following on the list was Academic Programs (*M*=8.33 *SD*=2.49), and Campus Life

(*M*=7.95, *SD*=2.39). Residential Halls came in last with a 5.99 average (*SD*=2.52).

Eighty-five percent of students were involved in an on-campus organization (*M*=1.15,

SD=0.36), with most being involved in 1-2 organizations, and the majority of the

remainder in 3-4 (*M*=2.68, *SD*=0.85). Respondents chose Academic (65%), Service

(55%), and Social (47%) as the top three types of organizations they prefer.
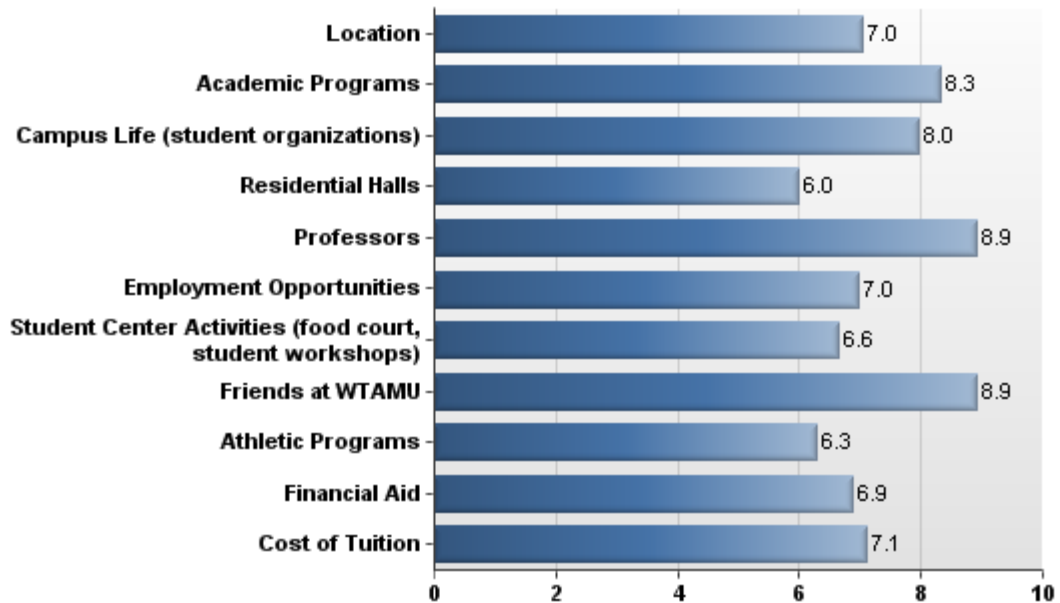
Figure 1. "Since becoming a student, which aspects of WTAMU did or did not meet your expectations?"

      In terms of the events relating to the First-Year Experience, New Student

Orientation was attended by 93% of the respondents, and Convocation by 82%, dropping

off to 46% for Buff Branding. Ninety percent owned WT clothes, accessories, or spirit

material. Ultimately, when asked how likely they were to recommend WT, ranking each

of 11 factors on a scale of 1-11, Professors, Friends, and Academic Programs rose to the

top of the list once again (*M*=9.37, *SD*=1.85; *M*=9.09, *SD*=1.71; *M*=8.73, *SD*=1.92).

      Correlations. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed

to assess the relationship between respondent GPA and their rating of how influential

Family was on their decision to attend WT. There was a correlation between the two

variables, r = -.294, n = 87, p = .006. An additional correlation was computed between

the number of organizations the respondent was involved in and his/her likelihood to

recommend WT based on Campus Life (Student Organizations). There was a correlation

between the two, r = .258, n = 73, p = .028. A final correlation was computed between

the distance of the respondent's hometown from WT and the amount of influence

Location had on their decision to attend WT. There was a correlation between the two, r

= -.328, n = 82, p = .003. There was a strong, negative correlation between GPA and the

influence of Family on the respondent's decision. There also was a strong, positive

correlation between a student's involvement on campus and his/her likelihood to

recommend WT. Finally, there was a strong, negative correlation between the distance of

the respondent's home and the influence of Location on their decision to attend WT.

Focus Group

      Marketing. When asked about how they ended up at WT, there were three

themes among the participants' answers: people, cost, and WT's environment. Several of

the participants had been influenced by someone they knew, whether it be a coach, family

member, college representative, or current WT students. For others, it was people that

they met through WT that influenced them. One participant mentioned how the culture of

the area was different and that "people are polite" in Canyon, which was refreshing after

her experiences in Colorado. Each participant mentioned that he/she was attracted by the

relative smallness of the University. It was also one of the aspects of the university they

liked the most. Additionally, the friends that the participants made after arriving at WT

convinced them even more that WT was the school for them, because they loved the

people they met here.

Cost was also another influential factor for the participants. Most of them

mentioned that it was a determining factor in their decision-making process. Some of

them based their entire college decision on that factor alone. Two of the participants,

freshmen this year, mentioned the 'Freshman Commitment' that guaranteed them a set

amount of financial aid, and influenced them greatly in their choices. Others mentioned

the potential for scholarships that WT seemed to offer, and another came simply because

of the amount of financial aid they received.

The most interesting factor in the participants' decisions was the "feel" of WT.

One participant mentioned that it was the "mood" of WT, and how he felt when he was

here that helped to convince him. Others liked the location and what the panhandle

offered. It was "far enough" away from home but not too far. Others chose Canyon to

avoid going to school in a big city, because they preferred the small town atmosphere.

Again, the "culture" of the area and of WT came into play for the participants and their

ultimate decisions to attend WT.

Retention. The focus group participants overwhelmingly agreed that people were

their favorite part of their experience at WTAMU. Aspects of this included friends,

community members, the fact that at WT students are "not just a number", and the small

town community feeling that comes with Canyon and WT. When asked about their

involvement in student organizations and the benefits from those organizations, the most-

named benefit was networking, connections, and meeting new people.

When asked to evaluate their experiences at WTAMU critically, there were

several areas that commonly were said to need improvement. The first area had to do

with the functioning and infrastructure of several departments on campus. Participants

complained of a lack of communication throughout campus, in terms of advertising

events, communication between departments, and overall campus connectedness. Others

were also concerned with the lack of safety lighting at night, and a general lack of

security (University Police Department) later at night, on campus. Concerns were also

raised about communication from Parking Services to the students, a potential need to

revise the color-coding of parking, and just the general lack of parking on campus during

the fall semester, especially for those who live on campus. Finally, everyone in the focus

group agreed that their IDS (Interdisciplinary Studies) class that was mandated as a

freshman was a "joke", "pointless", and "not taken seriously".

Additionally, another theme of discussion had to do with engagement in

University life, both on and off campus. The participants agreed that the general lack of

school spirit "outside of football games" is disappointing and they wished it was

different. Also, the participants pointed out that the town of Canyon does not seem very

supportive of WT and University life as a whole. The group also reached a consensus

concerning advising for undergraduate students. Several of them agreed that the advisors

at the Advising Center were unable to help them understand which classes they needed,

and felt that they would rather have advising housed within their department, with

professors who are familiar with the classes and the program as a whole. They felt that

the advisors weren't able to connect with them and truly advise them on their course

selection.

Discussion

WTAMU students are primarily seeking to satisfy two of the four needs identified

in Uses and Gratification theory: curiosity and personal identity. In marketing terms,

since the primary means through which most people found out about WT was people, it

follows that their use of WT media, such as the webpage, was motivated by a desire to

learn new information. After finding out about WT, it makes sense that they would look

to the primary WT media source, via the internet. Students choose to seek out WT in

order to satisfy their need for more information about the university that their

friend/family member/ teacher/coach told them about. Thus, their curiosity about WT is

what drew them to WT's media and information sources. WT's actions should follow

with an understanding of this motivation, and seek to satisfy this need through providing

accurate information that potential students find relevant.

The other need that students and potential students seek to fulfill through WT's

media is the need for personal identity. Several students pointed out that their favorite

part of WT was the general campus experience, the community feeling, and the size of

the university. Becoming a part of the WT family is like becoming a member of a unique

community. It follows that students are looking forward to becoming a part of that

community, and use WT media in order to achieve that goal and include themselves in

that identity. Since the connection with a university is more personal than a connection

with a regular product or brand name, and usually consists of several relationships, strengthened over time, the university ought to take advantage of this bond and attempt to strengthen that connection via available media channels, such as apparel and spirit accessories.

Uses and gratification theory establishes that media users are actively seeking media sources to satisfy their needs. The data shows that students value personal relationships (with professors and friends, specifically) above other parts of their WT experience. What follows is that WT would benefit from utilizing their personnel resources in establishing and maintaining the WT identity, while ensuring that the curiosity of the students is met. Whether or not a student will pursue more information from WT would appear to depend on whether or not the information is readily available, and then whether or not there is an opportunity to connect on a personal level with the university.

Limitations

These results are to be taken with caution, due to the small size of the test group (n=104) and focus group (n=6). Additionally, the participant's similar demographic and geographic conditions are another factor to consider in interpretation of these results. Almost all the participants were white, and the majority was from the West Texas area. Additionally, the average GPA of the respondents was unusually high for an average WT student, and the number of perfect GPA's was out of the ordinary. Also, in order to more accurately assess the effects of WT media, a sample control group of non-students, WT alumni, and students from nearby colleges could have been utilized.

Finally, the time for distributing the survey came out to only about one month, limiting the amount and type of people that took it.

Recommendations

Based on these results, the application of uses and gratifications theory in the discussion following, and a thematic analysis of the research as whole, I have compiled specific recommendations for WTAMU's marketing and retention strategies.

Marketing

The cost of tuition was clearly ranked as the most influential factor on a potential student's decision to attend WTAMU. I would argue that it probably was the deciding factor for many people, when comparing WT to other schools. Therefore, I recommend that the scholarship opportunities at WT and relatively low cost of tuition be kept on the forefront of the WT marketing campaign. Although some say that low cost implies poor quality, it is clear that students value the cost of their education, and would rather pay less than more.

Students found about WT through the people they knew, not the magazines or the billboards they read. This finding reaffirms Pampaloni's claim that interpersonal relationships are the most influential factor in students' college choice (2010). I recommend that WT capitalizes on these relationships and ensures that its own students, faculty, and staff are informed about WT, so that they, in turn, may inform potential students. Through ensuring the comfort and happiness of current community members, and focusing efforts on retention, WT can arm its most effective marketers with the attitude and information they need to recruit potential students. Informing them and

satisfying their need for curiosity will then help them satisfy their need for personal

identity, and help them become a part of the university identity.

Retention

Professors and friends ranked highest in exceeding students' expectations. They

also were ranked the highest when students were asked to identify how likely they were

to recommend WT based on certain factors. Clearly, interpersonal relationships with WT

community members are influential factors that have kept students at WT. Encouraging

the development of professor-student relationships and facilitating an amicable

environment for students to make friends in should be a key strategy in WT's retention

plan.

Students value academic and service organizations, as well as the quality of

academic programs on campus. Capitalizing on these priorities is a direction that WT can

take its retention strategy. Marketing student organizations and other academic programs

(such as minors or double majors) within the campus, to students already enrolled, could

help inform students of the many academic opportunities available to them.

Ultimately, after reviewing the data, it is obvious that remembering "where we

come from" should be core in WT's overall strategy. WT's small size, low cost, and

family-like community has been an attractive quality for potential students, and should

continue to play a vital role in the WT marketing plan. Establishing WT's identity as an

institution that relates personally to its students, doesn't cost an outrageous amount, and

understands where its students come from, will prove to be the most effective marketing

strategy that WT could adopt, after all is said and done.

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Appendix A

Dear Student,
I am interested in learning more about your experiences as a student with West
Texas A&M University. Your answers to the accompanying survey will help us
understand more about the student experience at WTAMU and how we can help
improve it.

It will take approximately 10 minutes of your time to complete this survey. Once you have completed the survey, please return it to the person distributing the surveys.

Experimental Procedure: This research project involves participating in a brief survey which should take about 10 minutes to complete. You will be asked to provide your WT ID# so that your overall GPA can be accessed, but this information will remain confidential and not linked to your name. <mark>Your class and university standing will not be affected by providing your Buff ID.</mark>

Risks or Discomforts: By signing this form, you indicate you understand that you will be at minimal risk during this procedure and that you are 18 years of age or older.

Benefits: You understand that this research is not designed to benefit you personally, but will help the offices involved with WTAMU Marketing, Recruitment, and Retention better understand the student experience with WTAMU.

Opportunity to Ask Questions: You understand that you are free to ask questions, or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. Your participation or lack of participation in this study will not affect your grade in any WTAMU or Amarillo College class.

Confidentiality: All information conducted during this research will remain confidential and will not be linked to a specific name. Research reports or publications will report data in aggregate form, without identifying a specific individual. <mark>By providing your Buff ID you are giving permission for my academic advisor to collect information about your GPA which will not be linked to your name in the completed research report.</mark>

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_____ _____
Signature of the Participant   Date

Buff ID # _____

1. How did you first hear about West Texas A&M University? (Check all that apply)

____ College Search Engine	____ Television Advertisement
____ WTAMU Mailing to your home	____ Radio Advertisement
____ Internet Search	____ Attended WTAMU Sporting Event
____ WTAMU.edu	____ Attended WTAMU-sponsored Event (Homecoming parade, etc.)
____ Friend	
____ Family member	
____ WTAMU Alumni	____ Discover WT
____ Current WTAMU Student	____ College Fair
____ Newspaper	____ UIL Event hosted by WTAMU
____ Magazine	____ I already knew about WTAMU
____ Billboard Advertisement	

2.   Rank each of the factors below regarding how influential each factor was **on your decision to attend WTAMU.** (circle one number for each factor)

3. How many other colleges or universities did you apply to besides WTAMU? (circle one)

	Not at all Influential					Neutral				Very Influential	
Location	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Academic Programs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Campus Life (student orgs)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Residential Halls	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Professors	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Employment Opportunities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Student Center Activities (food court, student workshops)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Friends at WTAMU	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Family at WTAMU	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Athletic Programs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Financial Aid	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Cost of Tuition	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11

None   1-2   3-4   5-6   7-8   9 or more   I don't remember

4. Was WTAMU your first choice for your college education? (circle one)

        Yes   No   I don't remember

5. Do you have any plans to transfer from WT to another college or university in the future?

        Yes   No   I'm not sure

    a. If you answered yes, which college or university do you plan to transfer to?
        _____

6. Since becoming a student, which aspects of WTAMU did or did not meet your expectations? (circle one number for each aspect)

7. Are you involved with a WTAMU student organization (including off-campus religious-based organizations)?

	Did not meet my expectations				Met my expectations/Neutral					Exceeded my expectations	
Location	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Academic Programs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Campus Life	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Residential Halls	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Professors	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Employment Opportunities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Food Choices (on campus)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Friendliness of Staff	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Athletic Programs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Financial Aid	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Cost of Tuition	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11

       Yes   No

    a. If you answered yes, how many organizations are you involved in?

    None   1-2   3-4   5-6   7-8   9 or more   I don't remember

8. Which type of student organization do you prefer? (Check all that apply)

    ____ Service   ____ Common Interest

    ____ Social   ____ Religious

    ____ Greek   ____ Academic

____ Athletic   ____ Other (please specify)

_____

9. As a first-year student, which of the following events did you attend? (Check all that apply)
    ____ Freshman Cookout at the
         President's House
    ____ Freshman Convocation
    ____ Buff Branding
    ____ New Student Orientation
    ____ Organization Fair/iWeek
    ____ Fraternity/Sorority Rush

(something went wrong with formatting here, I can't delete the large space)

10. Do you own any WTAMU clothing, accessories, spirit material (foam finger, plastic football)?
       Yes   No   I'm not sure

11. How likely are you to recommend WTAMU to potential students based on the following factors? (circle one number for each factor)

	Not at all likely				Neutral				Very likely		
Location	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Academic Programs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Campus Life	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Residential Halls	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Professors	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Employment Opportunities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Food Choices (on campus)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Friendliness of Staff	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Athletic Programs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Financial Aid	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Tuition Costs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11

Demographic Information:

1. Gender: _____Male   _____Female

2. Age: _____

3. What degree are you working on at WTAMU?
   Bachelors   Masters   Doctorate

4. For your degree, which year are you currently in?
   _____ First-year   _____Second-year   _____Third-Year   _____Fourth Year _____Other

5. What WTAMU college is your degree in (circle one)?

    Undecided
    College of Agriculture, Science, and Engineering
    College of Business
    College of Education and Social Sciences
    College of Fine Arts and Humanities
    College of Nursing and Health Sciences
    Graduate School

6. Are you from the United States of America?
  _____Yes _____No

   a. If you answered no, where are you from?
   City: _____ Country:_____

7. Hometown: _____ State: _____ Zip code: _____ Country: _____

8. What is the approximate distance (in miles) of your hometown from WTAMU? _____

9. Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?
   No
   Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano
   Yes, Puerto Rican
   Yes, Cuban
   Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin
     Please specify: _____

10. What is your race?
   White
   Black, African-American, or Negro
   American Indian
   Asian Indian
   Japanese
   Chinese
   Korean
   Filipino
   Vietnamese
   Native Hawaiian
   Guamanian or Chamorro
   Samoan
   Other

11. Employment Status: _____Not employed _____Employed (_____hours per week)

12. Are you a first-generation college student (the first person in your family to go to college)?
   Yes   No   I'm not sure

13. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Appendix B

Focus Group/Interview Protocol

1. How did you hear about WT?

2. What (or who) brought you to WT?

3. What is your favorite part about WT?

4. What is your least favorite part about WT?

5. Was WT your final choice for college?

   a. If not, why not?

   b. If so, why so? Why did you choose to stay?

6. How was your first-year experience? What was the most memorable part?

7. What student services do you use most on campus?

8. What organizations are you involved in campus, if any?

9. How much time do you spend on campus?

10. What would have made your decision to come to WT easier? What do you wish was different about WT?

11. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix C

VIDEOTAPE RELEASE

I voluntarily agree to be videotaped during the focus group being conducted Katie Gustainis. I understand that the digital files will be used only for her study of marketing and retention strategies used by WTAMU and only those who are involved directly in the present research will have access to them. These tapes will be identified by focus group number. The tapes will be kept for one year following the completion of the research project and will be stored on her personal computer. After the one year period the digital files will be erased or destroyed. Neither your grades in the classes in which you are enrolled at WTAMU or Amarillo College, nor your standing with your respective university will be affected by your participation or non-participation in this research project. By providing your WTAMU Buff ID, you are giving permission for my academic advisor to collect information about your GPA which will not be linked to your name in the completed research report.

_____   _____

Signature of Research Subject   Date

_____   _____

Please print your name   Buff ID #

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