AN EXPLORATION OF COLLEGE ATTITUDES AMONG SIOUX FALLS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Kristin Duesterhoeft

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APPROVED:

Mariela Nuñez-Janes, Committee Chair
Christina Wasson, Committee Member
Amy Fann, Committee Member
Lisa Henry, Chair of the Department of Anthropology
David Holdeman, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences
Victor Prybutok, Vice Provost of the Toulouse Graduate School

Since the recession of 2008, there has been an increased scrutiny of higher education, with little research done on how this affects high school students’ college search process. This study seeks to understand how college perceptions are formed and how they affect the college decision process of high school students in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. In order to gain a holistic perspective of this process, this study utilized a mixed method approach of analyzing public data, conducting interviews with community members and students, conducting a focus group with high school guidance counselors, and administering a survey to high school students. This study found that students in this area form their perceptions of college in three distinct phases and that these phases affect a student’s college priorities. Special attention was given to how academics, cost and location contributed to a student’s overall college decision. These findings can be used to assist faculty and staff at higher education institutions in creating effective messaging and programming that relate to this group of students.
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CHAPTER 1
DESCRIPTION OF APPLIED THESIS PROJECT

1.1 Introduction

In today’s public discourse it is difficult to escape news and commentary about higher education. Much of the public debate is about its effectiveness, increasingly high costs, high student loan debt, and the inability of college graduates to find jobs. Many higher education institutions are affected by the scrutiny and pressures brought by this public debate, including small private colleges. This study focused on the concerns of one private university located in the Upper Midwest to better understand what high school students’ views were about college. It supplied an anthropological lens in which to view the current situation and to identify ways to connect with local students.

1.2 Description of the Client

Augustana University is a private, Christian, liberal arts university located in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Founded in 1856, Augustana has been educating students in a variety of disciplines such as nursing, education, business, and many more for over 150 years. The current enrollment is approximately 1,800 students from across the United States and the world.

Augustana recently created a five year strategic plan. One area of focus was increasing enrollment to 2,000 students. An opportunity market for them is the city where they are located: Sioux Falls. Sioux Falls has a population of approximately 170,000 and is growing rapidly. However, enrollment of Sioux Falls students at Augustana has stagnated or, in some
years, declined. Since students from this area have traditionally comprised a large proportion of the student body, the decrease in students has been a concern.

Although I no longer work at Augustana, I was the Assistant Director of Admission at the university when I started to work on my thesis. In June 2015, I started working at a local advertising agency, Lawrence & Schiller, as a consumer insights coordinator. Since I had already made substantial progress on my thesis and had a positive relationship with my former supervisor, we both agreed that it would be mutually beneficial for me to continue with this project.

While I was at Augustana I saw firsthand the effect enrollment had on the institution as a whole. I also saw the mounting concern about reaching out to students in the surrounding community. I met with Nancy Davidson, Vice President of Enrollment, and Adam Heinitz, Director of Admission, to identify whether this was an area where the college could benefit from additional information. They agreed that insights gathered from this research could not only help the admission office, but also student affairs and the marketing department. Therefore, part of my responsibility in this project was to ensure that the approach was holistic and would be useful to a variety of campus entities.

1.3 Description of the Project

In order to better understand the typical Sioux Falls student, I partnered with Augustana to explore this topic. In the spring of 2015, I met with Ms. Davidson and Mr. Heinitz to identify key areas that would be of interest to them. We identified three primary research questions:

- What is impacting and shaping Sioux Falls high school students’ perception of college?
- What are their attitudes towards colleges in South Dakota?
- When looking at colleges, what are students’ highest priorities in their college search? (ex. cost, distance)

These research questions were examined and analyzed using theories from anthropology as well as other disciplines. College perceptions and search processes were analyzed through the lens of multiplex identities and how these different identities can influence whether a student pursues higher education as well as the type of college they choose (Bourdieu 1987; Foley 1991; Narayan 1993). This project has contributed to the discipline of anthropology by adding research on college choice from the student’s perspective. Prior literature has offered limited information from the student’s perspective especially from this geographical area and after the recession of 2008.

The focus on the student’s point of view in this study provided unique and beneficial information for higher education faculty and administrators of institutions. It is common for there to be many differing opinions from various groups on campus on the best way to attract students. A voice that is usually missing is that of the high school college student. While there has been extensive research conducted on how students choose a college in general, there is no research from a student’s perspective in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. This study sought to fill this gap by providing a better understanding of the student’s point of view about college by asking broad questions about a student’s college search and perceptions of college. The findings from this study will help to provide clarity to Augustana’s administration in how to create effective and appealing messaging and programming for Sioux Falls area high school students.
Throughout this research I was able to identify that students’ perceptions of colleges are formed in three distinct phases which influence their priorities as well as what they think of certain colleges. I recommended to Augustana that when connecting with area students, it’s important to reach out during all phases of the perception formation process. Sioux Falls high school students also indicated that there were a variety of factors that were important when choosing a college – two of which were cost and location. It is recommended that Augustana address both of these areas, especially early in the perception formation process, so that Augustana is not removed from a student’s college decision set early.

The goal of this research was to gain a better understanding of the Sioux Falls high school student and to provide clarity in how to communicate with this student. Within the university there are many differing opinions from a variety of constituents on the best way to attract local students. A difficulty is that there is little outside research for them to access. The research about the college search process after the 2008 recession is limited, especially when focused on private, liberal arts colleges in the Upper Midwest. By better understanding the situation in Sioux Falls as well as listening to the student’s perspective, more direction can be provided in the development of future strategic goals relevant to the recruitment of students in Sioux Falls.
CHAPTER 2

CONTEXT OF WORK

Obtaining a postsecondary education has become increasingly critical in American society, as employers require their employees to have more specific skills, experience, and credentials. In the last 40 years alone, the number of jobs that require a postsecondary education has doubled, making it imperative that students pursue some form of postsecondary schooling (Carnevale and La Nasa 2010; Huelsman and Cunningham 2013). However, a student’s perception of college and their priorities when choosing a college are impacted by the student’s cultural background. While it is important to understand the research on the college search process, it is with the combination of theories from anthropology and the anthropology of education that a more complete understanding emerges. Two ways researchers have sought to understand the college search process are through examining factors that hinder students from pursuing college and ways in which a student’s identity influences their college decisions. By fully understanding these two approaches and how they each influence a student’s college choice, I was able to better understand how students in Sioux Falls, South Dakota made their college decisions.

While much research has been done on the college search process in general, there is limited information from the student’s perspective and even less focused on the Upper Midwest. Most research focuses on broad educational trends or on sub-groups of students. The conversation surrounding college has also changed significantly since the recession of 2008, yet there is little research on how this event changed students’ opinions of college. Therefore, my
research can provide a deeper understanding of what students in the Upper Midwest think about college, in addition to how the increased scrutiny of college caused by the recession has influenced students’ college perceptions. One way to help frame this analysis is through the lens of educational anthropology.

The anthropology of education seeks to better understand how knowledge is transmitted to a cultural group. This understanding is pertinent to my study since I sought to understand how students learn about colleges and what impacts their perceptions of college. Depending on a student’s cultural background, they will form differing opinions about whether to pursue college, their perceptions of college, and their priorities in the college search (Foley 1991; Bourdieu 1977). By knowing how students form opinions on postsecondary education, I was able to more completely analyze and understand the findings from my research.

Educational research has also examined whether and how students decide to pursue postsecondary education. Postsecondary schooling refers to any type of formal education a student pursues after he or she graduates from high school. This includes technical schools, community colleges, and four-year public or private colleges or universities. One reason for so many different types of schools, is to allow students to matriculate at an institution that can specifically meet their goals for their future. Since the founding of the United States, popular determination has been one of its founding ideas, often manifesting itself in the form of education (Noftsinger and Newbold Jr. 2007). In the twentieth century it has generated the belief that everyone in society should receive some type of postsecondary education (Kinzie et al. 2004). Because of this, students from all backgrounds are considering pursuing their postsecondary degree and are typically encouraged to do so by their high schools.
Don Hossler and Karen Gallagher (1987) break down the college choice process for traditional college going students into three distinct phases: predisposition, search, and choice. Predisposition refers to a developmental stage where students begin to develop thoughts and opinions about college which leads to the decision of whether or not they want to pursue postsecondary education. This is influenced by many factors such as socioeconomic status, parental involvement, interactions with higher education institutions, and high school involvement, among others. The second stage, search, is when students gather information from different postsecondary institutions to learn what their college options are. In the third stage, choice, students evaluate their choice set and make a final decision.

While understanding the college choice process is useful, it does not fully explain all aspects influencing college choice since it is primarily focused on traditional college going students. To better understand the whole process, college access must also be examined. Many studies have shown how access to higher education is not equal, which means the process of college choice only explains part of the college search (Bergerson 2009). A large number of students would not be taken into account if considering only the college choice model. By looking at the factors which influence access to higher education, one can gain a holistic view of the college search process and why students choose to attend, or not attend, college.

One of the most commonly discussed influencers for college choice and college access is a family’s income or socioeconomic status (SES). The influence of SES can be seen in students from all backgrounds. For instance in 2008, 91% of high school students in the highest income group enrolled in college while only 52% enrolled from the lowest income group (National 2008). This disparity in incomes is amplified when layered with race and ethnicity. For example,
this difference can especially be seen in low-income African American and Latino populations where college attendance is significantly lower (Swail and Perna 2002). This is in spite of the fact that pursuing higher education can decrease the chances of poverty for both the student and family as well as provide more opportunities for well-paying jobs. In order to understand why these disparities exist, a closer look at each SES group is needed.

Many of Patricia McDonough’s works have examined this disparity. In Choosing Colleges: How Social Class and Schools Structure Opportunity, McDonough (1997) studied twelve female high school students from California who all attended different high schools and came from different backgrounds. She found that connected with cultural capital is the idea of entitlement, in that students believe they are entitled to a certain type of college education based on their family and high school’s background. Students often develop college plans based on what their family’s goals and high school influences are. For instance the students from high-income backgrounds who attended expensive college prep high schools felt they were entitled to the best education available (preferably private 4-year college). This contrasted with the students from a low SES background who went to a public high school and felt they were entitled to a community college education.

In addition to a student’s high school environment, their parents’ educational expectations were one of the greatest influencers on a student’s college search across all SES backgrounds (Bergerson 2009). Alberto F. Cabrera and Steven M. La Nasa found in their longitudinal study of low-income students that the most notable effects of parent involvement were seen in those who had the lowest socioeconomic status (Cabrera and La Nasa 2001). A study conducted by Michelle Knight, Nadjwa E.L. Norton, Courtney B. Bentley, and Iris R. Dixon
examined the effect that family stories have on African American and Latino students as they navigated the college admission process (Knight et al. 2004). They found that many of the stories these students associated with college were oftentimes from family members who were not their parents. However, in many African American families, the educational attainment of the student’s mother is significantly related to the educational attainment of the student (Freeman 1999). As this shows, family involvement in the college search is also closely tied to a students’ ethnic or cultural background.

In Laura W. Perna’s study of the differences of the college search process for African American, Latino and Caucasian students, she noticed differences in the influence that a student’s ethnicity had on their college choice (Perna 2000). For instance the educational expectations of parents had less of an effect with Latino students than it did with Caucasian and African American students. Differences across ethnic groups was also seen with financial aid. She found that receiving loans reduced the probability of African Americans enrolling in college while it had little to no effect on the other ethnic groups. Possible explanations for this are inadequate knowledge about financial aid availability, an aversion to borrowing money, or a belief that future earnings will not be enough to repay loans. Perna also examined the importance of social and cultural capital for these groups. She found that for African American and Latino students, social and cultural capital is as important as a student’s academic record for enrolling in a four-year college. This capital can manifest itself in test scores, extracurricular programs, access to information about colleges and educational expectations.

In addition to ethnicity, geographic location also plays a role on a student’s college search. In Clifford Adelman’s article “The Relationship between Urbanicity and Educational
Outcomes”, he examines the role that geography plays in whether a student pursues a postsecondary education (Adelman 2002). When taken all together, students from urban and suburban areas attend postsecondary schools at a relatively high rate as compared to their rural peers. The reasons for this include more access to colleges for urban and suburban students in terms of public transportation as well as different activities available to students while in high school. Those who are at most of a disadvantage are rural students from low-SES backgrounds. These findings are similar to those of Patricia M. McDonough and Karen A. McClafferty in their work with two rural counties in California (McDonough and McClafferty 2001). One other obstacle they observed which was preventing rural students from attending four-year institutions was the perception of affordability and lack of financial resources.

While it is important to consider factors related specifically to the student, it is also important to note the effect that K-12 schools have on a student’s college choice. When schools focus on a college going culture, this encourages students to consider postsecondary options from a young age. In one school Jaffe-Walter and Lee studied, teachers and other administrators spoke almost constantly about attending college; they created a school culture around this idea (Jaffe-Walter and Lee 2011). In McDonough’s study of twelve high school students in California, she saw that the organizational environment in the school played a large role in the types of schools students were considering (McDonough 1997). By creating college-going environments for students, with both encouraging personnel and a positive school culture, students are more likely to consider postsecondary options.

In addition to encouraging a college-going culture in the K-12 schools, counselors and teachers are essential to connecting students with information about colleges and financial
opportunities. For many high-income students, they receive college guidance from their parents, their well-resourced school, or private college counselors (McDonough 1997; McDonough 1994; Bergerson 2009). In another of Patricia McDonough’s articles, “Buying and Selling Higher Education” she examines the role private college counselors play in a student’s college choice (McDonough 1994). It has become increasingly common for students from higher incomes to hire private college counselors who help with everything from test preparation to deciphering financial aid packages. In many ways they have replaced the traditional role of a high school guidance counselor. McDonough argues that parents hire these private counselors in order to help their children navigate the complicated college search process and to increase their cultural capital by attending a prestigious college. It is their hope that their students would be able to find the “right” college for them which will then lead to a well-paying job.

For low-income students, this guidance is found in other areas. Edward St. John found in his analysis of financial resources for low-income students that many students attributed their scholarship successes to teachers and counselors who helped them through a difficult and confusing process (St. John 2006). In their study of Latinas and their college going process, Kenneth Gonzales, Carla Stoner, and Jennifer Jovel found that students who had access to college counselors tended to apply to more selective colleges while students who attended community colleges reported having very little or no access to college counselors (Gonzales, Stoner, and Jovel 2003).

While it is important to understand the individual factors which hinder or help a student’s college choice, it is also important to see how the combination of these factors create
a student’s identity which further effects their college choice. One way to understand this is through the anthropological idea of multiplex identities. Anthropologist Kirin Narayan (1993) explains how every person is composed of multiple cultural identities which influence their decisions. These identities can be affected by education, gender, sexual orientation, class, or race, among many other factors. Often these cultural identities have communities which are associated with them which also have significant influence. High school students are connected with multiple cultural identities and communities which influence whether they pursue college or not as well as the type of institution where they eventually matriculate. Each of these cultural identities has its own unique history and is constantly being transformed (Hall 1989). The unique cultural identities can influence whether a student is predisposed to attend college as well as the type of school he or she may consider. This theoretical framework is especially useful when examining the reason students from underrepresented populations choose whether or not to attend college.

Doug Foley examines similar ideas within an anthropological framework. Through his work with Mexicano youth in Texas, he was able to study the different ways in which students did or did not succeed in high school (Foley 1991). While previous theories postulated that a student’s success was based on his or her ethnic history and its relationship to mainstream culture, Foley asserted that this was just part of the explanation. He found that while a student’s ethnic history is important, there are in-class differences which contribute to school success and cultural assimilation. Only Mexicano students from a middle-class background were able to use mainstream communicative patterns and fully succeed in school in his study. Therefore, while a student’s ethnic identity and history is important to their school success, this
does not fully explain how or why a student may be successful in school. In order to fully understand this, it is important to look at all identities a student holds and the cultural capital of each.

Pierre Bourdieu’s work on cultural capital and habitus adds a more complete understanding to multiplex identities. According to Bourdieu (1977), many educational expectations are partly based on an “unconscious assessments of what is realistic” (p. 1202). These unconscious assessments are influenced by cultural factors such as a family’s approach to higher education, socioeconomic status, ethnicity and cultural background, and gender among others. All of this creates habitus which is an embodiment of one’s culture (Bourdieu 1987). Oftentimes a student gains the habitus of their parents, which is then perpetuated through their educational choices and opportunities. When this is combined with cultural capital, a more complete picture is presented. Patricia McDonough has used this theory of Bourdieu’s extensively and summarizes it as “the property that middle and upper class families transmit to their offspring which substitutes for or supplements the transmission of economic capital as a means of maintaining class status and privilege across generations.” (McDonough 1997 p. 8). While this may be beneficial to students from middle and upper class families, it can prove to be an obstacle to students from low-income families who do not possess this cultural capital.

While relying on the theory of cultural capital is useful, there is a danger that it can be viewed incorrectly as little better than assimilationist with the assumption that the role of college access is to assimilate students into the mainstream culture (Hagedorn, Serra and Tierney 2002). One of the most important aspects from Bourdieu’s theory is that academic standards need to be framed in ways that are culturally meaningful to those being educated
(Hagedorn, Serra and Tierney 2002). By further examining these cultural influencers, one can better understand the complete college search process.

An alternative framework to cultural capital can be found in critical race theory which argues that disadvantaged communities are full of “cultural knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts...that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged” (Yosso 2005, p. 69). If using Bourdieu’s theory, it can be assumed that students from underrepresented backgrounds are lacking the capital needed for social mobility. Schools often work from this assumption and structure their institutions with the belief that many of their students are deficient in some way (Yosso 2005). Yosso argues that instead it is important to see Communities of Color as possessing great cultural wealth in the areas of aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital. By recognizing and harnessing these areas of capital, schools can ensure greater success for their students at the K-12 as well as the postsecondary level.

The college search process is made up of many different factors, thus it is important to understand factors which may hinder a student’s college choice as well as how these factors manifest themselves in a student’s identity. On a personal level, students’ college choice is often influenced by factors which include attributes a student’s socioeconomic status, family encouragement and expectations, ethnic background and geographic location. In addition to personal factors, a student’s college choice is influenced by their high school and whether it has a college going culture with supportive staff. Using the theoretical frameworks of multiplex identities and cultural capital, one can see how a student’s multiple identities can affect their
postsecondary education. Only by examining how all these areas are related to each other can one fully understand the college search process.

This project seeks to use this previous research as a foundation to more holistically understand the attitudes Sioux Falls high school students have towards college. It seeks to understand how Sioux Falls students’ identities influence their perception and priorities towards college. This project will provide a more nuanced understanding of the students’ point of view and the different factors that influence their decisions. It also examines the effect that the surrounding community and school structure has on the student. By doing this, it will provide college administrators insight into what students want from an institution of higher education and will allow them to create programs and messaging specifically designed for them.
CHAPTER 3
PROJECT DESIGN

3.1 Overview

To begin the study, I focused on understanding broad trends in the Sioux Falls education landscape, before focusing specifically on what is affecting high school students’ college attitudes. In order to investigate the latter, I used a mixed method approach to examine the topic from multiple data sources. Data was gathered from public records of Sioux Falls enrollment trends, conducting a focus group with high school guidance counselors, community leader and student interviews and a student survey. The project was designed collaboratively by Dr. Mariela Nuñez-Janes, Ms. Davidson, Mr. Heinitz and myself while the specific data collection instruments were designed by myself and reviewed by the preceding individuals. I analyzed the data while Dr. Nuñez-Janes provided feedback and overall direction throughout analysis.

3.2 Participant Recruitment

Several categories of research participants were recruited, using multiple methods. Table 1 summarizes these groups of participants. The first group recruited were adults in the community who were familiar with different aspects of the Sioux Falls school system and the college search process. Through Augustana, I became familiar with different college access programs in the area and reached out via email to individuals in Upward Bound as well as a mentoring program through Lutheran Social Services. Both of these individuals worked within
the Sioux Falls education system for multiple years and primarily interacted with first
generation college students. The other adult I interviewed was a former employee of the Sioux
Falls school district who had recently started working at Augustana. She had worked as an
educator and an administrator in the school system for many years and had worked first hand
with many high school students. Since she was currently working at Augustana, her email
address was provided to me by Ms. Davidson.

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Table 1. Participants and data collection methods

In addition to interviewing members of the community, I also conducted a focus group
with Sioux Falls high school guidance counselors. Augustana gave me the contact information of
a local guidance counselor who was chairperson for the Sioux Falls guidance counselors. I
emailed this individual and she announced the focus group at their monthly meeting. In total I
had six guidance counselors participate from four of the local high schools. The three largest
high schools were represented in addition to an alternative high school focused on hands-on
education. There were two men and four women who participated. Overall I felt that the
participants were accurately representative of the area high schools.

I also gathered responses from local high school students via an online survey and semi-
structured interviews. Being that most of these individuals would be under the age of eighteen,
I was limited in my recruitment of these students. For the survey I opted to use a list of student email addresses provided by Augustana. This survey was sent to students in grades ten through twelve who lived within a twenty mile radius of Sioux Falls. The total list was approximately 800 students. In order to increase response rates, the email was sent through Augustana’s email system with email copy that I drafted. The email was sent three times and generated 99 completed responses. While the sample was not completely representative of the Sioux Falls student body, it did have students from multiple backgrounds (Appendix B). Respondents were 68% female and 32% male with 7% being sophomores, 35% being juniors and 58% being seniors. There were also fourteen area high schools represented with the majority of responses coming from the largest high schools. Although 87% of respondents were Caucasian, there were 3% of respondents who identified with being African American, 3% who identified as Hispanic, 1% who identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 6% who identified with two or more races.

At the conclusion of the survey I invited students to participate in an interview for an additional incentive. There were twenty-four students who indicated that they would be willing to participate in an interview. The selection of these students was semi-random since I wanted to ensure I interviewed students of different genders, ages and high schools. I started by emailing ten students and asked them to participate in a thirty minute interview either in person or via phone. If the student did not respond to the first email I sent a follow up email. I continued this process until I emailed everyone on the list. Overall six students agreed to be interviewed. Five respondents were female and one was male. Five local high schools were represented with one student being a sophomore, two being juniors, and three being seniors.
The students’ ethnic backgrounds were a similar breakdown to the survey respondents. Since anonymity was a part of the agreement for these student interviews, pseudonyms were used. Brief summaries of each student can be found in Appendix A.

3.3 Data Collection

In order to truly understand all components influencing a student’s perception of college, I used a mixed method approach by examining public education data, conducting a focus group with high school guidance counselors, interviews with adult community members and high school students, and a student survey. Each of these methods provided data that helped to provide a comprehensive view of my research questions.

One of the first methods used was analyzing public education data to understand what the overall enrollment trends were in Sioux Falls. I used information from the South Dakota Department of Education website which records the number of students at each K-12 school in South Dakota as well as demographic information such as race/ethnicity, gender and percentage of free and reduced lunch. This information is available to the public free of charge.

Another method I used was to send an online survey to Sioux Falls high school students. The survey was administered through Survey Monkey. In order to ensure informed consent, I began the survey by explaining the purpose of the study and required an electronic signature from a parent or guardian if the student was under the age of eighteen. The survey consisted of thirty-four questions and was designed to take students five to seven minutes to complete. The survey was designed to capture information about the students’ demographics, family members who had attended college, their perceptions of South Dakota colleges, interaction
with colleges and priorities when selecting a college. While it is typical in anthropological research for surveys to be conducted after interviews, this was not possible in this situation since my survey was the tool I used to recruit student interviewees. Therefore, I used my knowledge from working in higher education for six years to create the survey questions. The purpose of the survey was to understand broad trends from high school students in Sioux Falls.

Concurrently I was conducting interviews with community members. These interviews were designed to better understand an outsider’s perspective of what students’ attitudes towards college are and how they have changed over the past few years. The topics mirrored the student survey in that the respondents were asked what their opinion was of students’ perception and priorities of college. The interviews lasted thirty to forty-five minutes. Two were conducted at the interviewee’s place of work and one was at a local coffee shop. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

I conducted one focus group with high school guidance counselors from Sioux Falls. The goal of the focus group was to hear from people who were directly working with students every day and helping them through the college process. They are able to see trends in how students think about college as well as how these have changed over time. The topics explored were student trends, the college search process, what students think of college and their college priorities. The focus group lasted one hour and was hosted on Augustana’s campus. Focus group participants received an Augustana coffee mug as an incentive. The event was audio recorded and later transcribed.

My final method of data collection was student interviews. These were semi-structured interviews that allowed me to hear firsthand what students thought about college. The
interview topics consisted of exploring students’ post-graduation plans, how these plans were formed, their priorities and finally the background of their family. These interviews lasted twenty to forty minutes and were each conducted in one sitting. Three interviews took place in person at local coffee shops and three were conducted via phone. An incentive was mailed to each participant after I received their informed consent. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed.

3.4 Analysis

The data was analyzed with direction from Dr. Nuñez-Janes in addition to using *Analyzing & Interpreting Ethnographic Data* (LeCompte and Schensul 1999) and *Research Methods in Anthropology* (Bernard 2006) as references. Analysis was centered on identifying patterns in the data to build a comprehensive picture of students’ attitudes towards college. All transcripts from the interviews and focus group were first analyzed through closed coding which used codes that were drawn from the research questions. These broad topics included factors affecting perception of college, attitudes towards South Dakota colleges, and college priorities with sub-codes of society, high school, other people, family, campus visit, colleges, first association, Augustana, South Dakota State University, University of Sioux Falls, University of South Dakota, cost, academic, campus life, Sioux Falls, and location. Transcripts were then read again through open coding where additional codes were identified – some of which related to the research questions and others which did not. Additional sub-codes to the primary research questions included outcomes, relationships, type of college, campus, and independence. Additional primary codes included Sioux Falls trends, barriers to college, current
perception of college, gathering information and reasons to attend. The survey data were then combined with the coded transcripts to triangulate the data. Finally the analyzed public data were included to better understand larger patterns. All analysis was conducted by hand on paper and Microsoft Word.

3.5 Incentives

The only costs associated with the project were the incentives for focus group participants, student interviews and the student survey. Augustana University provided all the incentives. Focus group participants received an Augustana University coffee mug while the student interviewees each received a $10 gift card to Target. In order to encourage survey participation one participant was randomly awarded a $20 Target gift card.

3.6 Timeline

The timeline in Table 2 was included in the original proposal given to Augustana University. Throughout the timeline I was in communication with Ms. Davidson about the project and timing of the research. The presentation of deliverables was coordinated with Ms. Davidson in order to ensure that staff and faculty from the college would be available.

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Table 2. Project timeline
3.7 Description of Deliverables

As outlined in the project proposal, the deliverables to Augustana would be a presentation to Ms. Davidson and Mr. Heinitz in addition to any other individuals they selected, and a written report given to Ms. Davidson and Mr. Heinitz. The presentation was delivered on April 13, 2016. It covered the research goals, methodology, findings and recommendations. It was first presented to Ms. Davidson, Mr. Heinitz and the full admission staff. The second presentation took place on April 16, 2016. It was made to Ms. Davidson in addition to the Vice President of Advancement, one faculty member, and four members of Augustans’s Board of Trustees. Both presentations were well received and sparked an engaged discussion about how this information could be applied to recruiting Sioux Falls students. The PowerPoint presentation was made into a PDF file that was given to Ms. Davidson after the presentation (Appendix G). The written report for the client was an abridged version of this thesis and was shared with Ms. Davidson and forwarded to other members of Augustana’s administration in May 2016.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.1 The Gap These Findings Help Fill

These findings help to provide a more complete understanding of the college decision process for Sioux Falls high school students. Their focus on the student’s point of view helps provide clarity for faculty and administrators of institutions of higher education who wish to attract these students to their campuses. Oftentimes assumptions are made about what these students want and how they feel about certain colleges. While there has been research conducted on how students choose a college in general, no research that I am aware of has been conducted about students specifically in the Upper Midwest or in Sioux Falls, South Dakota and their college decision process.

4.2 How the Findings Fill the Gap

The goal of this study was to assist Augustana’s admission office and administration in creating more effective messaging and programming that would be appealing and responsive to Sioux Falls high school students. This study sought to better understand the student’s point of view about college by asking broad questions about a student’s first association with college and their family influence. It sought to combine all the areas of influence for a student as well as to understand how this manifests itself in a student’s college priorities. Therefore, the broad overarching research question was: What are Sioux Falls high school students’ attitudes
towards college? The findings of this study are divided into three parts which correspond to the research questions:

- What is impacting and shaping Sioux Falls high school students’ perception of college?
- What are their attitudes towards colleges in South Dakota?
- When looking at colleges, what are students’ highest priorities in their college search? (ex. cost, distance)

These areas build upon each other and it is essential to understand each separately as well as how they are connected to each other.

4.3 Current Landscape

Before focusing solely on Sioux Falls high school students, it is important to understand the environment in which these students are living and the public discourse surrounding them. Since the recession in 2008, there has been an increased focus on the rising cost of higher education, the low employment rate for college graduates and the increasing amount of student loan debt. Just by conducting a brief google search on “high cost of college”, articles appear such one from Forbes published in July 2015 entitled “Sorry, But ‘College is Too Expensive’ Is Not a Myth” or an article in Newsweek from May 2015 titled “Millennial College Graduates: Young, Educated, Jobless” (Lindsay 2015; Goodman 2015). Articles such as these have been a prominent aspect of the public discourse on higher education for nearly eight years and students and parents have taken notice.

In my focus group with high school guidance counselors, this was a topic of importance. Participants made comments such as “parents, especially based upon our nation and state and
city’s need for skilled workers and the shift in where the money is at for future employment, they’re becoming much more financially savvy about their investment in education and outcome of education” and “In the last 3 years, as the tech schools have had good careers, there is a shift in our parents’ attitudes towards tech schools. They were maybe stuck with ‘vo-tech’ and maybe it’s not a good paying job because that’s what they grew up with… I think what’s helped the last few years is the influx of money. Come here, we’ll pay for school”. The public discourse around higher education has caused students and parents to look at college differently. Tuition cost and the outcome of education have become much more important. With this more students and families are considering technical schools and community colleges as a viable way to pursue education. What is noticeable in this is that in the past while some students may have only been focused on four-year institutions, they are now also considering two-year colleges. Therefore, not only are four-year colleges and universities competing with each other, but they are also competing with postsecondary institutions that have typically not been competition.

4.3.1 Sioux Falls K-12 School Enrollment

Not only has the discussion around higher education changed, but the city of Sioux Falls has changed quite dramatically over the course of the last decade. According to the South Dakota Department of Education, from 2010 to 2015, the Sioux Falls area K-12 school enrollment grew by 14.0% (Figure 1). When this is examined more closely, additional trends begin to emerge. For example during this time period, the number of students who identified as white or Caucasian grew by 7.1%. In comparison, the number of students from diverse
backgrounds grew by 41.7%. As of Fall 2015, students of color comprised 24.7% of the student body compared to only 19.9% in 2010.

This change in Sioux Falls demographics was discussed in my guidance counselors focus group and community member interviews. According to one focus group member, “The very obvious and large shift has been with the ELL [English Language Learner] students. Our diversity is much, much greater, but so are our populations when it comes to socioeconomics. Both extremes to be honest. If you would talk to us sixteen years ago, we’d say we have a strong middle class and a few extremes. Now there are more of the extremes. It is a significant difference.” A similar sentiment was echoed by one of my community member interviewees who had previously worked in the Sioux Fall school system for twenty years. She said, “The Sioux Falls community changed significantly towards greater diversity and towards greater socioeconomic need... It was a little slower at first, but the last seven to eight years it’s been progressing. Years ago... the highest level of free and reduced lunch in a building would be like 35% and as I left, there were schools that were 100% at poverty... And we went from maybe a handful of languages in the early days, to as I left, if you looked at the dialects we were in the mid-seventies as for the different types of languages being spoken by our kids”. Within the Sioux Falls school district
there is not only a diversity in ethnicities, but also in socioeconomic status and in languages spoken at home. This impacts all students. They are interacting daily and making friends with students who have different backgrounds from their own. For many Sioux Falls students, diversity is the norm and is something that is expected when they continue on to college.

The reason this change in demographics is noticeable is because traditionally this area had been predominantly Caucasian. The Sioux Falls trend in increased diversity is one which does not match Augustana’s current enrollment. When looking at domestic enrollment, approximately 93% of the student body is Caucasian. If increasing the number of students from Sioux Falls is a priority, one aspect to focus on should be having systems in place to support and recruit students from diverse backgrounds.

4.4 College Perceptions

It is important to understand the environment a student grows up in since perceptions of college begin to be formed at a very young age. The survey asked students when they first knew they were going to attend college. 56% of students decided in elementary school or before that they would attend college (Figure 2). So for many students, they knew for the majority of their
lives that they would attend college and processed information accordingly. However, there is still a significant amount of students who decide in middle school or later and will process information about college differently. This group may not have as many perceptions formed about specific college since they had not decided to attend as early as other students. It is possible that many of these students maybe do not have the college support at home or may be first generation college students (Bergerson 2009; Hagedon and Tierney 2002).

Regardless of when students decide whether or not to attend college, their perceptions are formed in three distinct phases (Figure 3). These three phases mirror the findings from Don Hossler and Karen Gallagher which say a student has three phases of college choice: predisposition, search, and choice (1987). Through my research I found that college perceptions are formed through a similar process which will be discussed throughout the next three sections. The first phase of forming perceptions is developing feelings towards college. This phase is primarily subconscious and is when students are receiving information about college, but are not actively processing or seeking out information. The second phase is gathering information. This phase is when students actively start to seek out information about colleges and to develop their postsecondary interests. The final phase is evaluating perceptions. This happens during a student’s junior or senior year of high school when they start evaluating...
whether all their perceptions so far are correct or not. This ultimately leads to a final college decision.

4.4.1 Feelings towards College

The first phase that students go through is developing feelings about college. This phase begins at birth and is influenced by family members and visits to a college campus that are not organized through the admission office.

One of the primary factors which influence students during this phase, and continues throughout all the phases, is their family. Family affects a student’s overall feelings towards college as well as thoughts towards specific colleges, especially later on in the decision process. This was something that came up during the interviews with students and community members. Sally, one of the high school seniors I interviewed, said, “I guess since I had two parents who went to college it’s one of those things I have to do whether you like it or not.” This sentiment was echoed in my community member interviews. One interviewee stated, “The main influence to think about college at all is if there is a role model in the family. Someone who has gone. And then as to which institution they pick, family really drives and is a key player. It’s as much as where mom, dad, older sister or brother went.” If an older family member has attended college a student has started to receive some sort of information about what to expect. In some cases, it goes so far as to even dictate the exact college a student is considering. A guidance counselor stated, “Some are just SDSU students. They don’t have a choice. In some families that runs deep.” While the family’s influence begins at a somewhat passive level, students seek out information from family members as time progresses. Matt, a
high school junior, stated, “I defer to my brother a lot because it’s easy and he’ll be honest with me.” By always being associated with college, family members then turn into guides as students come closer to making their college decision.

Another important influence during this time is visits to college campuses. According to the survey, four out of five respondents had visited a college campus for a non-admission related event. Most students visit for an event for school or athletics, followed by music events (Figure 4). These events are important because for many students they set the expectation of what college should be about for them.

As Sally stated, “Iowa State was first and I loved it because it was college and then I compared everything to that.”

By understanding what college is like and removing the unfamiliarity makes college seem more realistic and achievable. This is especially important for students who are first generation and perhaps are not introduced to college in other ways. As a community member noted, “They don’t need to come to a class, they need to be invited for an activity, maybe to participate in some type of activity, maybe they eat in the huddle, maybe they eat in the commons, maybe they go to a basketball game, so they feel the confidence that they’ve been on a campus. It’s
okay, there are nice people there.” By creating the opportunity for students to be on a campus and to see themselves in that space, it allows for them to start imagining how it can be possible.

4.4.2 Gathering Information

In the gathering information stage, students are still being influenced by the factors in the previous stage, yet they begin to actively search out information about college and to make conscious decisions that will influence their collegiate future. This phase typically begins at the beginning of high school and continues through to high school graduation. Gathering information includes high school classes, high school staff, and communication from colleges and universities.

When entering high school, it is the first time that most students are able to choose their own classes. Because of this they are able to choose classes that help determine their interests in future majors and careers. As the student Tanya, a high school sophomore stated, “I want to go into the medical field and I wanted to be a vet for the longest time, but I've kind of been changing as I've been taking more classes and I just want to go into that medical field.” Although Tanya has not finalized what exactly she wants to do, she is starting to actively narrow down her academic interests and hence also her college choices. Another way high school classes start to change perceptions of a college is through dual credit classes. These are classes that students can take for both high school and college credits. Through this program they start to gain exposure to certain colleges via high school classes. As one of the guidance counselors stated, “Through dual credit, they get exposure to USD, SDSU, DSU and then they’re like this is affordable and I’ve already taken a few classes at USD. When I graduate, I’ll go on to USD
because it’s more comfortable. So that has something to do with it as well.” By taking these classes, students start to interact with colleges in a more direct way which either makes these colleges part of a student’s college decision set or not.

Another primary influencer during this time is high school staff. High school staff can influence students in both passive and active ways. A passive way that high school staff influence students is just by sharing the college they attended. As a guidance counselor stated, “I’d say there is now more diversity of teachers. It used to be just USD and SDSU, but now we’re getting a broad range of teachers from all kinds of different areas. That demonstrates it enough. It’s another aspect they don’t stop and think oh look where they went. They see it enough though, so it’s in their mind.” Another way staff influences students is more direct and it is by guiding students through the college application process and giving them advice on different types of colleges. While not all students access their guidance counselors, many do. Carrie, who is a high school junior and first generation college student said it was through her counselor where she found most of her college information. She stated, “Basically mostly my counselor, she helps me so much with everything. Without her I wouldn’t know half the stuff I know.” One group of students that counselors can have a profound effect on are first generation students. This important connection is something that Sioux Falls guidance counselors have noticed. As one said, “That’s why I think it’s so important in our role to connect with students in a large group, so that it is a safe person to talk to and now I’ll go into the office and talk to them because I don’t have a clue and I’m first generation.” By being a trusted college resources, high school staff have a significant influence on how students perceive college.
While high schools have a large influence on students’ college perceptions during this time, colleges also start to affect them by reaching out to students. In the survey I asked students about their opinions for certain types of college communication (Figure 5). The two types of communication that Sioux Falls students regarded most positively were emails and direct mail, with radio having the most negative assessment.

These communications were something that was brought up in my student interviews and focus group. Oftentimes in the beginning of the college search process, these communications from colleges are exciting and flattering. As one guidance counselor stated, “I think for some kids it’s very prideful. They’ll talk about how much they get. Oooh Duke wants me. I think if it’s a prestigious school they’re interested in, then they’re excited about it. If they’re getting mail from schools where they know they’re not going, then they’re super annoyed.” This sentiment carried over in the student interviews. They also mentioned that as their college search progressed they would only pay attention to communication that had
information specifically related to their interests or if it was somehow personalized to them.

The senior Annie summed it up well when describing the situations where she would look at college mail. She said, “Only if it’s from schools I’m interested in. There is one I get from Washington and they go straight in the garbage. And I’m like that’s a waste of paper and I don’t know how you got my address. If it’s personalized, I’ll look at it.” This same sentiment was echoed whether a student was talking about mail, email or phone calls and may be why broad communications such as radio and billboards ranked so low.

Another type of communication that had a large influence on students was a college’s website. Many mentioned that this was one of their main sources of information used to learn more about colleges. As Carrie, a junior, said, “I look around and the first thing I look at is the days and what activities they have during the days I can go... I look at activities and then what their majors are and what they’re most known for. And then I look for their after they graduate job rates. When I get out of college I want a job right away. And then I just kind of go on the website to see what else they have to offer like the cost and how many kids are there and basic information.” These types of searches came up in multiple interviews. Not only are students gathering information on the college, but they are trying to determine what it would be like to be a student there. College websites give students a chance to dream about being a college student without having to visit the campus. Therefore, it is important that colleges have modern and useful websites so that they do not cause students to have a negative perception of the institution.
4.4.3 Evaluating Perceptions

The final phase in shaping a student’s perception occurs during a student’s junior and senior year and is really marked by students evaluating whether their perceptions of certain colleges are true. The two main factors that influence a student during this phase are friends who are in college and college admission visits.

While friends who have attended college have always been an influence on high school students, this influence is changing. It used to be that once a student graduated high school, they were physically gone and interacted with high school students infrequently. However, with the increased use of social media, students are able to stay connected for a longer period of time and on a more intimate level. This is something that was mentioned by the guidance counselors. One said, “We don’t talk enough about social media and how that effects them. The majority of kids know other kids who are in college now or tech school and they stay way connected. So it’s not social media by the schools, but by their friends...It’s not like they graduate and are gone anymore.” What this means is that not only are high school students connected to their friends immediately after high school graduation, but they are able to see what their friends’ college experiences are like. For colleges this means that there needs to be a continued focus on retention. As one guidance counselor said, “So really continuing with that first year and then making that experience last is really important for students who do end up here who are from Sioux Falls and getting them to stay. And then also consistency. I think students look for that. They want to hear year after year that kids are happy at Augustana or anywhere else. If they know a friend went somewhere all four years, that’s really going to mean a lot.”
This connection with current college students was also echoed in my student interviews. A junior, Matt, stated, “For most schools I’m interested in, I know people there, so I can just ask them as well. Kids who have gone to my school that have ended up there.” Not only are older students just associated with the colleges they chose to attend, but they are also now acting as a source of information. This source of information is critical because not only are they gathering basic facts about the college, but students are changing their college choices based on this. Sally, a senior who is going to be staying in Sioux Falls for college, stated, “I had a friend who had graduated and she lived in the dorms and I don’t think she went home for the first couple months of schools, so it’s like hmmm maybe you can disappear even if you live in Sioux Falls.” In this instance, Sally evaluated and changed her previous perception based on the information she gathered from her friend.

Another way that students evaluate their perceptions of college is by visiting the college campus in person. What we can see in Figure 6 is that many students go on their first campus visit somewhere between their junior and senior year. There are typically multiple activities which comprise a campus visit. They all build off of each other to demonstrate to the prospective student what it would be like to be a college student at that institution.
This perception of the college begins to develop immediately when the student enters campus and begins their tour. The first thing students typically notice is the aesthetics of the campus and the facilities. This is important because it serves as a way for students to envision themselves in this space and what it would be like to be a student at this college. As one guidance counselor stated,

I’ve had students say, I like the campus, but I can’t imagine myself living in that dorm for nine months out of the year. Whether we’d like to say that or not. That’s their home for nine months. So if it’s really rundown and they’re looking and saying, ok can I envision myself here? That’s really outdated and I can go here and I have the same relational experience and it’s more updated... Especially for the initial contact of a student coming in. I think a beautiful campus makes a difference. They also feel oh man this is nice. And then they get to the deeper stuff.

Another large influence on the tour is the student tour guide. The high school student is testing out whether the tour guide is someone who they can relate to and who represents the college well. If this student is unknowledgeable or does not take the time to try and relate to the prospective student, this will negatively affect the high school student’s perception of the college. However, it can also have a profoundly positive affect. This had a large impact on the student Annie who brought up the tour guides multiple times in our interview. She said, “When I went and visited USF and they talked to us, they seemed really real... People were making jokes and they seemed really friendly and down to earth.” The campus tour serves as a way for high school students to begin to envision being at this college – both physically and socially.

Another important aspect of the college visit is the admission counselor. This individual often serves as an extension of the college and as a guide through the admission process. They are also seen as a source of information about the college. Matt really enjoyed his interactions with an admission counselor from one of his top choices and it helped to create a positive
perception of this college. He stated, “I met with the St. John’s admission counselor and that was just really a good experience. I felt so good and just explaining everything about the college and it seemed like a good fit for me.” Admission counselors help high school students determine whether the college would allow them to be successful and serve as a point person for any questions the student may have.

All of these pieces combined comprise the college admission visit. While there may be specific aspects of the visit which stood out to the student, it is truly a culmination. Ruby, a senior who had recently visited a college, stated, “Me and my mom went. It was actually amazing... I actually met with one of the sign language professors and then I met with one of the students there. She gave me a tour around the campus and information about everything around there. I also met with Thad and I can’t remember her name but someone else there. Someone for like FAFSA. Oh gosh I think I was there for over two hours. I loved all of it.” This quote illustrates how all these different aspects contributed to the visit. These visits are important because ultimately students are evaluating whether or not what they already know about the college is true. It can help reinforce previously held thoughts or change them. Sally who is a senior from Sioux Falls, was initially completely against attending college in the city, however after she visited campus, her mind started to change. Sally said, “It was a school I told my parents, no, I don’t want to go here. It’s too close, it’s four miles down the street. Why would you even suggest it? It’s one of those things where I was like ok I should tour it. So I toured it last February and I actually just really liked it.” This visit was a starting point in changing her mind towards the college and she ultimately decided that it was where she wanted to matriculate.
4.4.4. Current Perceptions

Perceptions towards post-secondary education are formed in three different phases. First students start to develop overall feelings about the institution of college and in some cases specific colleges. This is primarily influenced by the buzz surrounding college, family, and early campus visits. When students enter high school, they start to take a more active role in forming their perceptions. They begin to actively search out information about colleges and academic interests. This is influenced by high school classes, high school staff and communications from colleges and universities. Finally towards the end of high school, students are evaluating these perceptions by seeking out the “real” experiences whether this is talking to friends who are in college or visiting the colleges themselves. All of these culminate in a student’s overall perception of college.

In order to better understand what these current perceptions of college are, I asked students in the survey to list the first three words that come to mind when they think of college (Figure 7). The words shared by students fell into many buckets, but the four which received
the most mentions were related to academics (22%), outcomes/future (15%), finances (13%), and campus life (9%). Similar topics were mentioned during my interviews with students.

When talking about academics, students tended to mention the class structure as well having the opportunity to choose classes that are specifically aligned with their interests. This transfers over to outcomes/future in that many students associate this ability to pursue their passions with the increased likelihood of finding a job they love once they graduate. College plays an integral part in this process. Tanya, a sophomore, has heard this from many adults in her life, including her parents. She said, “When they talk about their jobs today, college played a big role in how the rest of your life is going to go. They try to always tell you that.”

For many students, college is perceived as the gateway to the rest of their lives. Part of this college experience is campus life. This topic came up multiple times in times in the interviews especially relating to meeting new people and living in a dormitory. This is an important aspect for many students, even if they are staying in Sioux Falls. Sally, a senior who will attend college in Sioux Falls, shared with me what comes to mind when she thinks about college. She stated, “I think the prospect of meeting new people. Leaving some behind and keeping up with those who are important to you. I’m so excited to meet new people. I think it’s going to be good. I’ll live in the dorms.” These ideas of meeting new people, pursuing your passions and starting to set the course for the rest of your life, are deeply held perceptions of college by Sioux Falls high school students.
The comments from the interviews and survey about the perception of college all revolve around the idea that the college is a time to experience independence and to pursue personalized opportunities. These ideas continued to manifest themselves when students were asked the reasons why they wanted to attend college (Figure 8). The top reasons relate to allowing the student to become their own person and to find a job. While parents and friends definitely have an influence on forming college perceptions, they do not rank high in the reasons students give to attend college. This indicates while these are important factors, many students view this decision as personal and one that stems from desires to improve their own life.

![Figure 8. Reasons to attend college](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To grow as a person</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To find a job</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To learn more about the world</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To have fun</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My parents want me to attend</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My friends are going to college</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.5 College Priorities

As a student progresses through the college admission process, their perceptions of college begin to manifest themselves in their priorities for choosing a college. The student survey explored this topic (Figure 9). For most students, the top priority when choosing a
college is that it has their major or area of study. This corresponds to students’ perceptions of college in that they want to attend an institution which will allow them to pursue their passions and then find a job. The second top priority is cost, followed distantly by academic reputation.

Figure 9. Most important factors when choosing a college

4.5.1 Academics

These priority areas were also discussed in my student interviews. One area that came up frequently was that of academics. In fact 93% of students indicated in the survey that they already had a major or career goal in mind. While students may have an idea of what they would like to study, this is something that is constantly changing. When I asked Carrie, who is a junior planning to graduate a year early, if she knew what she wanted to study, she was very
confident. She told me, “If they would have a good art program or something that would get me along in the lines of either being in the art major business or the psychologist business. Something with good programs like that.” As is evident by this quote, she is looking for very specific programs, yet each are very different. Her interests vary from art to psychology to business. This was a trend that came up in many of my interviews. While students are still deciding what they want to study, they want to make sure that whichever college they choose will allow them the possibility to pursue their current choices.

In addition to prioritizing colleges that have their major, students also are considering the class sizes and relationships with professors when looking at colleges for academics. Many students envision having at least one professor who will guide them through their career discovery process. Most students believed this would take the form of small class sizes regardless of whether they were considering large or small colleges. One thing that was not mentioned as often as I expected was that of job placement rate. When students did mention it, most comments were in passing and indicated that this was not the most important factor when deciding between colleges.

4.5.2 Cost

Another area that was repeatedly brought up as a primary priority when choosing a college was cost. According to our survey most students and their families

![Figure 10. How much are you and your family expecting to pay per year for college?](image-url)
expected to pay on average $19,000 per year for college (Figure 10). The survey also indicated that 89% of students expected to receive some type of scholarship with academic scholarships being the type that most students expect to earn. For many students, the perception that they will be able to afford the college is something that must first be considered before looking at other attributes. When I was speaking to Sioux Falls senior Annie about this, she told me “The only thing that stands out is some of the scholarship emails or letters that I get. Or saying what I’ll get. That’s a big part if I’ll be able to afford it. That’s interesting to see if I’d even have the chance of going.” For Annie she does not even consider a college if she was not able to afford it. However once students realized that there was a possibility of affording a college, cost decreased in importance. Many students mentioned that while the cost of the college is something to take into consideration, there are other factors that would trump it such as the academic programs or campus life. What many students said is that the primary concern they have with the high cost of college is being in debt for years after they graduate. This sentiment was mentioned in many of my interviews, but I thought Carrie put it well when she stated “It’s not my most important thing because you can still pay off loans, but it is a big factor because you don’t want to be stuck with debt for the rest of your life.” For many students, while cost is an important factor, there are other things that will trump it such as academics, campus life or location.

4.5.3 Location

Location was one factor that Augustana University was particularly interested in, especially in regards to what students think of attending college in Sioux Falls. They particularly
wanted to know what students thought of Sioux Falls, why they would choose to stay and why they would decide to leave. In order to understand broad trends, I asked in the survey what the ideal distance would be to travel for college (Figure 11). Most students said it would be between sixty and 120 miles, or about one to two hours. What is important to note is that the two largest public universities in South Dakota (University of South Dakota and South Dakota State University) fall within this radius. Location was also something we discussed in my interviews. Most said that they did not necessarily want to stay in Sioux Falls, but they still wanted to stay close to home. When I asked them elaborate more on what this meant to them, they said that this meant attending college anywhere from three to five hours from home. The main criteria was that it was within driving distance. Matt, a junior, had begun to look at colleges in Minneapolis, Minnesota and St. Cloud, Minnesota and for him distance was an important factor. He said, “Distance from home is something that’s important. I don’t want something that is necessarily in Sioux Falls, but is accessible for holidays or if I need to come home for a weekend or something like that.” This sentiment of not wanting to stay in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distance Range</th>
<th>Percentage of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 30 miles</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-60 miles</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61-120 miles</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>121-300 miles</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 300 miles</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Figure 11. Ideal distance to travel for college](image-url)
Sioux Falls came up in multiple interviews. In fact, only 7% of survey respondents wanted to stay within a thirty mile radius of Sioux Falls.

Students’ views of attending college in Sioux Falls was primarily negative. When students did mention the benefits of staying in Sioux Falls, it was only after they had decided to stay there. For example, Sally had recently decided that she wanted to attend college in Sioux Falls. She described this decision as “First, Augustana the distance really bothered me. I wanted to go farther away. But the older I get the more I realized it’s not necessary to get away because you can be in Sioux Falls and be yourself and travel if you want and you aren’t spending a lot of gas money...We’re growing as a city and the more time I take to get adventurous and see what he city has, it makes it seems more appealing.” She is using the positives to justify staying in the area; these positive attributes were not top of mind though when she was initially thinking of Sioux Falls. The most common reason students give for wanting to stay in Sioux Falls is because of family reasons. Annie, who initially looked at colleges five hours away, had recently changed her mind and decided to stay closer to home. The reason she gave was because it was too risky to move away from family. She said, “I’ve actually looked at colleges up in Minnesota, but decided I think I need to stay by my family. I’m really close to them, so I think it’d be kind of risky.” For Annie, and many other students, staying in Sioux Falls was more seen as a safe alternative instead of an exciting city with many opportunities for college students.

Overall it was much more common for students to want to leave Sioux Falls. Matt, who is looking to leave the area said, “I like Sioux Falls, but it’s just since I’ve been here my whole life it’s fun to explore a new place. I know this town so well, it’s fun to explore someplace else.” For
him staying in Sioux Falls was not exciting. When Sioux Falls students think of college they associate it with being independent and pursuing unique opportunities and Sioux Falls does not represent that. For them, Sioux Falls is a known entity and does not correlate with their current perceptions of college. They do not believe that they can achieve the freedom, independence, or opportunities to discover their own passions by attending college in the same town where they were raised.

4.6 Area Colleges

Knowing that students are interested in traveling to attend college, it is important to better understand their thoughts on specific colleges in the area. In the survey I asked students to name the first three colleges that came to their minds (Figure 12). One thing to note from this list is how varied these colleges are. While there are some local colleges that are mentioned more frequently, there are others from across the United States that are represented. There is also great variety in terms of types of colleges. It is relatively evenly split between different colleges with 28% being in-state public institutions, 27% out-of-state public institutions, 25% in-state private institutions and 20% out-of-state private institutions. This shows that not only are colleges competing to be top of mind with others within their own category and location, but they are also competing with colleges that are structured differently and which are located across the country. This makes it even more critical to understand what exactly students think of specific colleges in the area.
To better understand students' perceptions of specific colleges, I asked survey participants to rank six different colleges on five criteria. The institutions chosen were Augustana University, University of South Dakota (USD), South Dakota State University (SDSU), University of Sioux Falls (USF), Southeast Technical Institute (Southeast Tech.), and University of Minnesota Twin Cities (U of M). These colleges were chosen in partnership with Augustana as they represent a variety of college types and primary competitors. Each college was then ranked one to five on affordability, academic reputation, fun campus, job/grad school acceptance rate, and selective admission process. When each of these scores was averaged, it showed an overview of the perception of each college (Figure 13). The U of M had the highest overall ranking with an average score of 3.88 and Southeast Tech saw the lowest with a 3.24.

When the colleges were examined individually there were different trends that began to emerge. The U of M had the highest overall average ranking of all the colleges tested. They ranked especially high on academic reputation, job/grad school placement rate and fun campus
with 78%-85% of students ranking them above average in these three categories (Appendix F).

The category where they ranked the lowest was in affordability and this was still fairly evenly split with 31% of students ranking them above average in this category and 30% ranking them below average.

Similarly to Augustana, USF is also a small, private, Christian, liberal arts college located in Sioux Falls approximately four blocks from Augustana; yet their average scores were noticeably different with USF scoring an overall average of 3.26 and Augustana scoring an average of 3.58. The two areas where USF scored the highest was academic reputation and job/grad school placement rate with 56% of students giving them an above average ranking of a four or five (Appendix F). They received the lowest ratings on fun campus with 38% of students ranking USF below average in this category.

Based on enrollment data supplied by Augustana University, the two colleges that Augustana loses the most students to are USD and SDSU. While these are both public colleges,
they have a strong presence in the state and both are located approximately sixty miles from Sioux Falls. The scores for these two colleges were very similar, with USD receiving an overall average of 3.57 and SDSU a 3.64 (Appendix F). Their breakdown is also very comparable with both colleges ranking very high for affordability (SDSU hand 86% above average and USD had 83% above average). USD had a higher academic reputation with 56% of students ranking this above average compared to 39% for SDSU. However, SDSU ranked higher on fun campus with 74% of students ranking this above average and 63% of students ranking USD above average for this category.

4.6.1 Augustana University

Augustana’s ranking among all these colleges was in the middle with an overall average of 3.58. Augustana ranked extremely high for academic reputation with 91% of students ranking Augustana above average (Figure 14). This was the highest ranking for any college. It also ranked very high on job/grad school placement rate with 79% of students ranking them above average in this. The two areas where Augustana ranked lowest were on fun campus and affordability. With fun campus 45% of students ranked this above average which was lower than its two primary competitors (USD and SDSU). For affordability, it ranked lowest among all the colleges with only 16% ranking it above average and 46% ranking it below average.

When Augustana was mentioned in my interviews and focus group, there was a similar dichotomy. Many mentioned how the university had a strong academic reputation and that the faculty and staff cared about the students. Ruby, a senior who was leaning toward Augustana, was impressed by the staff. She said, “They’re very interactive with the community. They reach
out to you. They’re very friendly, very just amazing. They’re just so sociable. You can talk to them and they listen to you and they try to accommodate you in any way they can and they’re still professional.” Ruby also mentioned that the biggest drawback to Augustana was its high price tag.

However, the personalized attention she received was enough to overcome this. For other students though this perception of unaffordability eliminates Augustana from the consideration set before they can learn about other attributes which may prove more important to them. Christy, a junior, stated, “I looked into Augustana and everything, but private schools cost a lot more money. I’d go to one, but the money thing.” Even though Christy was open to the idea of attending Augustana, her perception was that it was too expensive, so she eliminated it early in the decision process. This perception of high cost is prevalent throughout the community and was mentioned in the focus group. A guidance counselor stated, “The biasness I’ve heard for Augie and USF, its cost. For freshman year they can handle it and after that its cost and they leave. Not because they want
to leave, they love the school, but they have to.” High cost also becomes associated with issues of retention. While it is not known whether finances are truly the reason why students decide to leave Augustana, they are the reason being shared throughout the community.
CHAPTER 5
IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Overview

How Sioux Falls high school students form perceptions and the effect these perceptions have on their college decision has implications for Augustana’s admission office, as well as other departments on campus, such as student life and marketing. This chapter presents my recommendations to Augustana’s Board of Trustees and the departments of Admissions, Marketing, and Communications.

As I shared in my presentation to Augustana’s admissions staff and Board of Trustees, students’ perceptions of college are influenced by a variety of factors and this starts at a young age. These perceptions then influence the types of colleges a student considers as well as which attributes are most important to their college decision. Because this decision process is so varied, it is important to approach it from multiple angles.

The first recommendation is to (1) stay connected to the changing student demographics of Sioux Falls and make concerted efforts to reach out to underrepresented students. When connecting with all students, it’s important to (2) reach out during all phases of the college perception formation process. Sioux Falls high school students indicated that cost was a primary factor when choosing a college, but also shared that there are other factors that are more important. Therefore, it would be valuable to (3) effectively address their cost concerns while leading with personalized information about the factors that matter most to the student. Many students believe that to achieve the independence and opportunities they
associate with going to college, they need to leave Sioux Falls. Augustana needs to (4) show Sioux Falls students how they can still achieve independence and discover new opportunities while staying in their hometown. Finally, since students’ perceptions of Augustana’s high cost is removing Augustana from their consideration early in the college decision process, Augustana must (5) address this issue early in the perception formation process and work to ensure that other factors such as retention and being a fun campus are strong.

5.2 Sioux Falls Demographics

Within the past six years, student demographics have rapidly changed within the Sioux Falls area school districts. Students in the area are increasingly becoming more diverse while Augustana’s student body has remained relatively the same. In order to increase the number of students from Sioux Falls, concerted efforts should be made to reach out to these underrepresented students. It is especially imperative that these students visit campus whether it is through an admission event or not, so that the idea of going to college is not foreign or overwhelming. Ideally these visits would happen in middle school or early high school, so that these students can work towards this goal while in high school.

5.3 College Perception

The research showed the perceptions of college began for many at an early age and took the form of three phases: forming feelings about college, gathering information about colleges and finally evaluating their perceptions of college. Currently much of the recruiting at Augustana is done during a student’s junior or senior year of college. However, for many this
may be too late if the student has formed negative perceptions at a young age. Because of this it is important for the university as a whole to be reaching out to students of all ages whether it is through admission events, current students hosting activities, professors visiting schools, or through other efforts. Regardless it is exceptionally important that Augustana increase their recruitment efforts once a student enters high school since this is when many begin to enter the gathering information phase where they are actively seeking out college information that changes their perceptions.

5.4 College Priorities

Two college priorities that Augustana was specifically interested in were cost and being located in Sioux Falls. Many students indicated that cost was one of their primary factors for choosing a college. However, the majority indicated that there would be other factors that would trump this such as academics, student life or location. The danger for Augustana is that many students rule Augustana out early in the decision process due to the perception of being too expensive. Therefore, students are unable to learn about and relate to the other features of the university that would make Augustana a good fit for them. In order combat this, I recommend that Augustana begin to address this perception early in the decision process so that students and parents are open-minded to the other features Augustana offers. I also recommend gathering information from students about their priorities for college and sending personalized messages based on these interests. This information can be gathered when a student expresses interest in the college, through a survey or through other means. By
demonstrating how Augustana can deliver on the students’ primary priority, this can help the student overcome the perception of high cost.

The other factor that Augustana was interested in was learning about what students thought about staying in Sioux Falls for college. Only 7% of students surveyed indicated that attending college within thirty miles from home would be the ideal distance. Many indicated that they wanted to explore someplace new for college. Sioux Falls students tended to associate college as being a time where they could experience independence and new opportunities and many believed that Sioux Falls would not be able to provide this. My recommendation for Augustana is to show specific examples of ways Sioux Falls students have achieved this independence and have experienced new opportunities. This needs to be one of Augustana’s primary messages for the Sioux Falls area so that students add Augustana into their college decision list early in the process. It is possible that a similar message would work outside of the Sioux Falls area, but more research would need to be conducted to see if this message would resonate with these students.

5.5 Affordability

In comparison to Augustana’s top competitors, the college is viewed as having strong academics and outcomes, yet it is viewed last in terms of affordability. While it is important to share information with students which is specifically focused on their individualized experiences and goals, this may not always be feasible on a large scale. Therefore, it is important that all other areas of Augustana’s perception are very positive. The two issues that were identified in the research as needing attention were retention and fun campus. For many students, the
retention issue is tied to high cost; therefore the better retention can be for Sioux Falls students, the less these two factors will be associated. While Augustana did not rank exceptionally low in having a fun campus, it did not rank as high as some of its competitors. The more Augustana can do to share how fun their campus is and to create events that students want, the more this message will be shared. This message will have a particularly strong influence on those students who highly value attending a college with vibrant student life.

The topics covered in the research are ones that have been consistently discussed by administration, faculty, and board members at Augustana. There are many opinions on how to best reach Sioux Falls students, and this research has helped to provide some clarity in those decisions. It is important to reach out to students from underrepresented backgrounds in Sioux Falls and to find ways to bring them on campus at an early age. This study has also shown administration that the issue of cost is important to address, yet there are other factors that can outweigh cost in the decision making process. Being located in Sioux Falls is another area that admissions and marketing can address by highlighting ways students can be independent while staying in their hometown.

The presentation of findings to my client was used by Augustana in its planning for fall 2016 recruitment. My research will help shape Augustana’s admissions and marketing messages for students living in the Sioux Falls area. It has also been beneficial to the Board of Trustees and faculty in making strategic planning decisions for the future. In addition to the presentation I gave in spring 2016, an abridged copy of this thesis was sent to the client. My hope is that this research and recommendations will serve as a guide not only for the admission
office, but for multiple offices on campus on how to best relate to Sioux Falls students and to share how Augustana can be the right college for them.
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION AND PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON APPLIED THESIS

6.1 Introduction

Through this project I have not only learned about what it means to design and conduct a research project, but I have also learned how to do this within the field of applied anthropology. While this process was sometimes difficult and took unexpected turns, I am very pleased and proud with what I have accomplished. I hope these personal reflections will offer additional understandings into the anthropological approach and applied anthropology as a whole.

6.2 Project Design

Thinking back on my project design, I am pleased that I used a mixed-method approach. Each method provided a unique perspective and allowed me to examine the topic holistically. Initially I had even more methods outlined, but scaled back due to time. Overall I feel that this was the best decision since the methods I did use allowed me to focus on my primary research questions.

One difficulty was outlining all the research questions so far in advance of conducting the research. I sought the flexibility of being able to change questions and topics on the fly with participants. Looking back though, I am pleased that the IRB process forced me to examine my questions and to think about my goals in advance. Since the interviews and focus group were semi-structured, the questions allowed me a framework to ask questions, while at the same
time I was able to probe further if desired. Upon reflection I do wish that in my student
interviews and focus group I would have asked more follow-up questions on a few topics, but
especially on opinions of area colleges. While I was able to gain deep insights on Augustana
University, I was lacking some of the qualitative information on the other institutions.

However, the largest obstacle was changing employers from Augustana University to
Lawrence & Schiller at the beginning of the project design process. Lawrence & Schiller is an
advertising agency which works with clients from a variety of industries. One client of Lawrence
& Schiller is the University of South Dakota. Since I knew that this college is a competitor of
Augustana’s, I have not shared any results of my study with my current employer. Because of
this change there was a possibility that I would need to find a new client and completely change
my research project. Thankfully it worked to continue with Augustana, but because of this my
timeline was extended. This reinforced the need to be flexible, but also to learn about how to
manage client relationships.

6.3 Conducting Research

While I allowed myself ample amount of time to conduct the research, I was once again
reminded of the need to be flexible. One of the largest challenges was in scheduling the student
interviews. My initial goal for the interviews was to complete eight to ten, yet I only completed
six that submitted their informed consent. While there were twenty-four students who
indicated interest in being interviewed, the majority did not respond to my emails, even after
sending multiple correspondences. There could be a couple reasons for this. One is that
because of timing with my survey, focus group and interviews, I was not able to start contacting
students until about one month after the survey concluded. Because of this, some students may have forgotten that they agreed to be interviewed. Contacting students also lined up with the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays, which is when many students have finals in addition to many family obligations. This busyness could be another reason for the low response rate. I also ran into an issue of not receiving an informed consent sheet from one of my interviewees. In order to increase the likelihood of students agreeing to be interviewed, I allowed students to choose the option of being interviewed via the phone. After the interview was complete and I received their informed consent, I mailed them their incentive. In most cases this process worked very well, with the exception of one. One student did not send back her informed consent form despite multiple emails from me. Because of this I removed her interview from my transcript. Looking back, I should have pushed to have the informed consent before the phone interviews began, but due to my low response rate for student interviews I was wanting to move more quickly than I should have been.

The student survey was another learning experience for me. While I am pleased with the data received, I did hope for more completed responses. One reason for the low response rate may be the lengthy informed consent at the beginning of the survey where they were required to have a parent or guardian sign before continuing. Through survey monkey I saw that many students dropped out around these questions. I also think that I could have shortened the length of the survey to encourage more responses. Regardless I am overall pleased with the types of questions asked and the information received. It allowed me to understand broader trends, which added context to my qualitative research.
In my current job, I am conducting similar types of research, but with larger numbers of participants. Since my total participant numbers were significantly smaller in the thesis research, this was something that had been a concern. While I did receive useful information, the small number of respondents did not allow me to further segment the data by demographic information such as race/ethnicity and first generation college student status. Due to time and resources however, it would have been unfeasible to add additional participants. That being said, I believe that the information I did gather was strong and I made sure to triangulate my findings among all the various methods. This made me see that useful data can be gathered from small participant numbers, especially when mixed methods are used.

6.4 Myself as a Researcher

Though I do conduct research through my work, this is the first project where I designed, conducted, and analyzed the information primarily on my own. I did receive quite a bit of help from Dr. Nuñez-Janes, especially with the designing and analyzing phases, but due to the distance between us, much of the research was done on my own. This allowed me to rely on my own ingenuity and resourcefulness to organize and conduct the research and helped to build my confidence as a researcher.

One of the largest barriers was managing the project, my personal life, and my work life. I had started a new job at the beginning of the research project and was trying to balance all areas of my life. Typically my inclination is to move forward quickly on projects, but I knew that this would cause me to become burned out and overwhelmed. I allowed myself flexibility and
tried to schedule the different methods at different times. While this caused my research to extend over multiple months, I believe that it was the best situation for myself.

Regarding conducting research, I saw myself improve with each interview I facilitated. However, when I was listening back to the interviews, there were sections where I wish I have asked additional follow-up questions. I feel that I too often allowed the interviewee to give me the easiest answer. To avoid this in the future I need to keep this top of mind when conducting the interviews. There is also value in listening to and transcribing interviews shortly after they are conducted. I waited to transcribe the interviews until they were all complete. If I had transcribed the interviews earlier, I might have been able to adjust my questioning.

6.5 Contributions to Client and Discipline

I believe that through my research, I provided my client clarity in how to move forward in connecting with Sioux Falls students. This is something that has been discussed extensively by administrators and faculty at the institution without being able to agree on a productive way to move forward. The findings of this study allow the university to look at the situation holistically and to hear directly from students. Not only will this help the admission office, but it also gives other departments on campus ideas on how to cater to these students. The findings were very well received and sparked a productive discussion. While it will take time for these findings to fully go into effect, I feel there is the potential for them provide useful direction for the next few years.

This project has also contributed to the discipline of anthropology by adding research about college choice. So far there is limited information from the student’s perspective and
even less focused on the Upper Midwest. Most research focuses on national trends or on specific groups of students. There is also little research done on how students choose a college after the recession of 2008. After this time, there has been increased scrutiny on colleges and discussion on whether it is even worth it for students to attend. By listening to students and understanding their ideas surrounding college, it is obvious that attending college is still important to many students even if their priorities have slightly shifted. I am sure that more research will emerge in the following years on this topic, but I am pleased to have contributed at least somewhat to the overall discussion.
APPENDIX A

PROFILES OF STUDENT PARTICIPANTS
PROFILES OF STUDENT INTERVIEWEES

Annie is a senior at Lincoln High School. While she has her college choices narrowed down to a few, she is still undecided as to which college she wants to attend. She is also still narrowing down her major, but she is thinking of studying something in the health field.

Carrie is a junior at Harrisburg High School and is planning on graduating a year early. She is the first in her immediate family to attend college, so she has been relying heavily on her guidance counselor and family friends to help guide her through the process. She is planning on taking a year off to work before starting college.

Matt is a junior at O’Gorman High School. He has already started to visit colleges and is looking at colleges outside of South Dakota. While he is still undecided in his major, he is thinking of business, religion, or pre-med.

Ruby is a senior at Brandon Valley High School. While she is still deciding on a college she is leaning towards Augustana. Ruby is strongly considering majoring in sign language interpreting, but would like to also continue doing art.

Sally is a senior at Harrisburg High School and has decided to attend Augustana. She is involved in athletics and is planning to continue with this at the collegiate level. Sally plans on majoring in something related to health.

Tanya is a sophomore at Washington High School. She is very involved in basketball and is planning to play in college. Currently Tanya is strongly considering South Dakota State University and she wants to study something in the health field.
APPENDIX B

STUDENT SURVEY PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS
SURVEY PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Figure B.1. Gender

Figure B.2. Grade in school

Figure B.3. High school attending
STUDENT INTERVIEW DEMOGRAPHICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>17%</td>
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Figure B.4. Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harrisburg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon Valley</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O'Gorman</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure B.5. High school attending

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure B.6. Grade in school
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
COMMUNITY MEMBER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

• First, I’d like to know a little bit about you.
  o What is your background? (hometown, education, etc.)
  o How and why did you come to work at ______ organization?
  o How long have you been here?
  o Do you work closely with any other groups at the school?

• Please describe your organization
  o Can you describe the students it serves?
  o What is its goal?

• Please describe what an average work day looks like:
  o Can you describe the students you work with? (Background, age, etc.)
  o How many students do you interact with?
  o How does this group of students differ from others you have had interactions with?

• Currently, how would you generalize your students’ post-graduation plans?
  o How has this changed since you started?

• In your opinion what are the most common colleges/universities that students attend?
  o Why do you think this is?
  o Is this truer for some students than others? How so?

• What other college guidance are your students receiving?
  o From where are your students receiving most of their information about college?
• What do you see as the most significant influences in a student’s college choice?
  o Who do you see as the most significant influencers?
• How much interaction do you have with the students’ parents or families?
• What do you see as the reasons why students want to (or do not want to) attend college?
  o Are there specific barriers? If so, what?
• How important is a college’s location in a student’s college decision?
  o Why do you think this?
• What are some primary reasons a student decides to attend college in Sioux Falls?
  o What are some primary reasons a student decides to not attend college in Sioux Falls?
• How important is college cost in a student’s college decision?
  o Why do you think this?
  o How have you seen this change in recent years?
• Anything else you’d like to tell me about college attitudes in Sioux Falls high school students?
• Did I miss anything? Do you have any questions for me?
• Any recommendations for other people to talk to?
STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- First, I’d like to know a little bit about you.
  - What grade are you in?
  - How long have you lived in Sioux Falls?
  - What high school do you attend?
  - What activities are you involved with?
  - Any other personal information you’d like to share? (i.e. family, friends, hobbies, etc.)

- What are your post-graduation plans?
  - Why did you choose this?

- How old were you when you decided you wanted to attend college? Why?
  - Have you always had one in mind that you wanted to attend? Why/why not?

- Have any other immediate family members attended college? If so where and what did they study? i.e. parents, siblings, etc.
  - How have they influenced your college search?

- When you think of college, what are the first ideas that come to your mind? Why is this?

- Why do you want to go to college?

- What are the 3 most important things you look for in a college? Why?

- Have you thought about a major? As of right now, what would be your ideal career?
  - How set are you on this major?
  - How important is it to you that your school has this major?
c. Thoughts on general education?

- Have you thought about any activities you want to participate in? If so what? How important is this to your college search? Why?

- Have you been on a college campus before? If so what was the first time and why?

- What is the most positive interaction you’ve had with a college?

- What is the least positive interaction you’ve had with a college?

- In what ways have you already interacted with colleges? i.e. mail, email, billboards, attending events, etc.
  - Which ones caught your attention?
  - Which ones were not effective?

- Have you been on a campus visit before?
  - If so, what was it like?

- When you have questions about anything related to college, where do you look for information? Why?

- Who have been the largest influencers for you in your college search?

- What would be the ideal distance you would want to travel for college? Why?

- Have you considered attending a college/university in Sioux Falls? If so, why or why not?

- On a scale of 1 to 10 how large a factor does cost play into choosing a college? Why?

- Are you expecting to receive scholarships? If so for what?

- If you have questions about financial aid where would you look for information?

- Did I miss anything? Do you have any questions for me?
APPENDIX D

SURVEY QUESTIONS
1. Please select your gender:
   a. Male
   b. Female

2. What race/ethnicity do you identify with? (select all that apply)
   a. African American
   b. American Indian/Alaska Native
   c. Asian
   d. Caucasian
   e. Hispanic/Latino
   f. Other

3. What grade are you in?
   a. 10th
   b. 11th
   c. 12th
   d. Other__________

4. What high school do you attend?
   a. Lincoln
   b. Washington
   c. Roosevelt
   d. New Technology
   e. O’Gorman
   f. Harrisburg
5. What is your current GPA?
   a. Less than 1.0
   b. 1.0-1.9
   c. 2.0-2.9
   d. 3.0-3.4
   e. 3.5+

6. Please indicate the highest level of education your mother completed:
   a. GED
   b. High School Graduate
   c. Some College
   d. Technical certificate
   e. Associate’s Degree
   f. Bachelor’s Degree
   g. Master’s Degree
   h. PhD/Professional Degree
   i. Unknown

7. Please indicate the highest level of education your father completed:
   a. GED
b. High School Graduate

c. Some College

d. Associate’s Degree

e. Technical certificate

f. Bachelor’s Degree

g. Master’s Degree

h. PhD/Professional Degree

i. Unknown

8. Do you have any older siblings?

   a. Yes (skip to 9)

   b. No (skip to 10)

9. Is your older sibling currently enrolled in college or a college graduate?

   a. Yes

   b. No

10. Please list the first three colleges/universities which come to mind:

    a. _______________________________

    b. _______________________________

    c. _______________________________

11. Please list the first 3 words which come to mind when you think of a college/university:

    a. _______________________________

    b. _______________________________

    c. _______________________________
12. Do you plan on attending a technical institute, college, or university after high school?
   a. Yes
   b. No (Please end the survey. Thank you for your time.)

13. How old were you when you decided you wanted to attend a college/university?
    ____________________________

14. Do you have a major(s) or career goal in mind? ____________________________

15. Why do you want to attend college? (Select all that apply)
   a. To have fun
   b. To find a good job
   c. To grow as a person
   d. To learn more about the world
   e. My parents want me to attend
   f. My friends are going to college
   g. Other

16. Have you started your college search?
   a. Yes
   b. No (Please continue to Question 18)

17. IF YES, have you visited any college or university campuses for an official campus visit? (i.e. through the admission office)
   a. Yes
   b. No
18. Have you visited any colleges/universities for other activities? (i.e. school trip, athletic or music event, conference)
   a. Yes
   b. No (proceed to question 20)

19. IF YES, what for? (select all that apply)
   a. School trip
   b. Athletic event
   c. Music event
   d. Conference
   e. Theater event
   f. Other ______________________

20. Please indicate if you have experienced the following: (select all that apply)
   a. Phone call from a college
   b. Mail from a college
   c. Emails from a college
   d. Billboards for a specific college
   e. Social media advertisements for a college
   f. Radio advertisements for a college
   g. Television advertisements for a college

21. In general, how did you feel about each of the following?

   Rank each on a scale of 1 (Felt Positively) to 5 (Felt Negatively). There was also a
   “Have not experienced”.
22. Please rank Augustana University (formerly Augustana College) on the following items:
   a. Unfamiliar with school (please continue to the next question)
   b. Affordable------Expensive
   c. High academic reputation------Low academic reputation
   d. High job placement rate------Low job placement rate
   e. Fun campus to be a student-------Boring campus to be a student
   f. Easy to be admitted------Difficult to be admitted

23. Please rank South Dakota State University on the following items:
   a. Unfamiliar with school (please continue to the next question)
   b. Affordable------Expensive
   c. High academic reputation------Low academic reputation
   d. High job placement rate------Low job placement rate
   e. Fun campus to be a student-------Boring campus to be a student
   f. Easy to be admitted------Difficult to be admitted

24. Please rank University of South Dakota on the following items:
25. Please rank Southeast Technical Institute on the following items:
   a. Unfamiliar with school (please continue to the next question)
   b. Affordable------Expensive
   c. High academic reputation------Low academic reputation
   d. High job placement rate------Low job placement rate
   e. Fun campus to be a student-------Boring campus to be a student
   f. Easy to be admitted------Difficult to be admitted

26. Please rank University of Sioux Falls on the following items:
   a. Unfamiliar with school (please continue to the next question)
   b. Affordable------Expensive
   c. High academic reputation------Low academic reputation
   d. High job placement rate------Low job placement rate
   e. Fun campus to be a student-------Boring campus to be a student
   f. Easy to be admitted------Difficult to be admitted

27. Please rank University of Minnesota Twin Cities on the following items:
   a. Unfamiliar with school (please continue to the next question)
b. Affordable------Expensive

c. High academic reputation------Low academic reputation

d. High job placement rate------Low job placement rate

e. Fun campus to be a student------Boring campus to be a student

f. Easy to be admitted------Difficult to be admitted

28. What are the most important factors for you when choosing a college/university to attend? (Select up to three)

   a. Cost

   b. Academic reputation

   c. Has my major/area of study

   d. Distance

   e. City where the college is located

   f. Activities you can participate in (i.e. sports, music, clubs, etc.)

   g. College size

   h. Type of college/university (i.e. public, private, 4 year, 2 year, etc.)

   i. Updated facilities

   j. Connection with family or friends

29. What would be the ideal distance to travel for college?

   a. Less than 30 miles

   b. 30 – 60 miles

   c. 61 – 120 miles

   d. 121 – 300 miles
e. More than 300 miles

30. How much are you and your family expecting to pay per year for your college education? ________________

31. Are you expecting to receive scholarships to attend college?
   a. Yes
   b. No

32. If so, what would these scholarships be awarded for? (select all that apply)
   a. Academics
   b. Athletics
   c. Music/Theater/Art
   d. Church/Community Service
   e. Other
APPENDIX E

FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL
1. Let’s start with general introductions. Please state what school you are at, how long you’ve been a counselor at your current school and approximately how many students you serve.

2. Please describe what an average work day looks like:
   
a. How many students do you interact with?
   
b. What are your job responsibilities?
   
c. What topics do you meet with students about?
   
d. What percentage of your day is spent on providing college advice?
   
i. Do you like this?

3. How would you describe the average Sioux Falls high school student?
   
a. What are their demographics?
   
b. Are they involved/engaged?
   
c. What are their academic interests?
   
d. What are extracurricular interests?

4. Have you seen the Sioux Falls student body change in recent years? If so, how?

5. How have you seen attitudes towards attending college change in recent years?

6. What types of schools are they interested in attending? (4 year, 2 year?)
   
a. Why do you think this is?
   
b. Has this changed from recent years?

7. Are there specific areas of study which are more popular? If so, which ones?

8. What do you see as the reasons why students want to (or do not want to) attend college?
9. What are some common characteristics of students who are interested in pursuing post-secondary education?

10. When do you see students beginning their college search?
   a. Has this changed from years past?

11. Where are students receiving most of their information on college? (websites, admission counselors, etc)
   a. What are the positives of this?
   b. What are the negatives?

12. What do you see as the most influential part of the student’s college search? Why?

13. How do you best advise students?
   a. Whether to attend
   b. Type of school to attend
   c. Major

14. What other resources are available at the school for students to help with their college search?

15. What do you see as the most significant influencers in a student’s college choice?
   a. Who do you see as the most significant influencers?

16. Why do think students want to attend college today?
   a. Where is this motivation coming from?
   b. Have these always been the reasons?

17. In your opinion what are the most common colleges/universities that student attend?
   a. Why do you think this is?
18. How important is a college’s location in a student’s college decision?
   
   a. Why do you think this?
   
   b. What is the ideal distance students are willing to travel?

19. What are some primary reasons a student decides to attend college in Sioux Falls?

   a. What are some primary reasons a student decides to not attend college in Sioux Falls?
   
   b. Are there certain types of students who you see as more

20. How important is college cost in a student’s college decision?

   a. Why do you think this?
   
   b. How have you seen this change in recent years?

21. Do students expect to receive scholarships?

   a. If so, for what?

22. How do you advise students with financial aid questions?

23. What can colleges be doing now to help you advise students?

24. Anything else you’d like to tell me about college attitudes in Sioux Falls high school students?
APPENDIX F

SURVEY OPINIONS OF AREA COLLEGES
Figure F.1. Rankings for Southeast Technical Institute

Figure F.2. Rankings for University of Minnesota Twin Cities
Figure F.3. Rankings for South Dakota State University

Figure F.4. Rankings for the University of South Dakota
Figure F.5. Rankings for the University of Sioux Falls

Figure F.6. Average ranking per category
APPENDIX G

SLIDE DECK OF PRESENTATION TO AUGUSTANA
COLLEGE ATTITUDES IN SIOUX FALLS

April 2016
Kristin Duesterhoeft

AGENDA

RESEARCH GOALS & METHODOLOGY
CURRENT LANDSCAPE
PERCEPTIONS OF COLLEGE
COLLEGE PRIORITIES
SOUTH DAKOTA COLLEGES
TAKEAWAYS/RECOMMENDATIONS
RESEARCH GOALS & METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What is impacting and shaping Sioux Falls high school students’ perception of college?

When looking at colleges what are students’ highest priorities in their college search?

What are their attitudes towards colleges in South Dakota?
METHODOLOGY

Research was conducted from September, 2015 – January, 2016.

COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS

FOCUS GROUP

STUDENT INTERVIEWS

ONLINE STUDENT SURVEY

METHODOLOGY

COMMUNITY INTERVIEWS

3 interviews

College access advisors
Former employee of Sioux Falls school district

FOCUS GROUP

1 focus group of 6 high school guidance counselors

2 from Roosevelt High School
2 from Washington High School
1 from Lincoln High School
1 from CTE
CURRENT LANDSCAPE

BUZZ

In the last few years there has been a large amount of public discourse about how college is too expensive, students are drowning in debt and graduates are unable to find jobs.

Forbes / State & Urban

Sorry, But 'College Is Too Expensive' Is Not A 'Myth'

Drowning in student loan debt

Last week, President Obama proposed some relief for graduates with student loans. But for too many, decisions made in college on student loans continue to haunt them.

7 College Graduates Whose Lives Were Wrecked by Student Loan Debt

See Which College Majors Lead Graduates to Their Parents' Basements

U.S.

MILLENNIAL COLLEGE GRADUATES: YOUNG, EDUCATED, JOBLESS

By Leann McCreath Goodman on 5/21/13 at 8:22 AM
BUZZ

This discourse isn’t just isolated to large cities. Focus group participants mentioned how students’ and parents’ ideas of college have recently started to change. We see an increased shift towards 2-year and technical schools because of cost and job placement rates.

“...And parents, especially based upon our nation and state and city’s need for skilled workers and the shift in where the money is at for future employment, they’ve become much more financially savvy about their investment in education and outcome of education.” - Sioux Falls Guidance Counselor

“In the last 3 years, as the tech schools have had good careers. There’s a shift in our parents’ attitudes towards tech schools. They were maybe stuck with “co-tech” and maybe it’s not a good paying job because that’s what they grew up with. I think what’s helped the last few years is the influx of money. Come here, we’ll pay for school.” - Sioux Falls Guidance Counselor

GENERATION Z

AGES 0-20
60 MILLION STRONG
DIVERSE
SIOUX FALLS ENROLLMENT

**Sioux Falls Area K-12 Enrollment**
(Sioux Falls, Harrisburg, Tea, Brandon Valley School Districts)

- **24%** Students of Color
- **33.6%** Increase in Students of Color
- **6.1%** Increase in Caucasian Students

Source: SD Department of Education
SIOUX FALLS

The population is much more diverse and with that comes challenges and opportunities. Students are also interacting with others on a daily basis who come from different backgrounds than themselves. This combined with being digitally connected at all times has made the world a lot smaller.

“The very obvious and large shift has been with the E.I.L. students. Our diversity is much, much greater, but so are our populations when it comes to socioeconomic. Both extremes to be honest. If you would talk to us 16 years ago, we’d say we’d have a strong middle class and a few extremes. Now there are more of the extremes. It is a significant difference.” - Sioux Falls Guidance Counselor

“The Sioux Falls community changed significantly towards greater diversity and towards greater socioeconomic need... It was a little slower at first, but the last 7-8 years it’s been progressing. Years ago... the highest level of free and reduced lunch in a building would be like 35% and as I left, there were schools that were 100% at poverty... And we went from maybe a handful of languages in the early days, to as I left, if you looked at the dialects we were in the mid 70's as for the different types of languages being spoken by our kids” - Community Member

“...if you think about the student of today, way back before our times, our world was our front yard, the students of today, the world is their world. Why would there be any reason to stay right here?” - Community Member

SO WHAT?

The social conversation about college is focused on its high expense and the tough job market.

Gen Z is highly tuned into the world around them, connects digitally, is pragmatic and diverse.

Sioux Falls is changing. School enrollment is growing and becoming more diverse.
COLLEGE PERCEPTIONS

WHEN ARE PERCEPTIONS FORMED

How Old Were You When You Decided You Wanted to Attend College?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Number of Respondents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always Known</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
WHEN ARE PERCEPTIONS FORMED?

The student on the left has always known they wanted to attend college and chances are their parents attended and instilled this in their children. We then have another group that is not considering college until middle or high school for a variety of reasons. For many first generation students this would be a more common trajectory.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DECIDED EARLY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ELEMENTARY</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIGH SCHOOL</td>
<td>HIGH SCHOOL</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HOW ARE PERCEPTIONS FORMED?
FAMILY

Family is a strong influence in whether to attend, the type of school which a student considers as well as the “real” feel based on their experiences. This influence starts at an early age and continues through graduation.

“The main influence to think college at all is if there is a role model in the family. Someone who has gone. And then as to which institution they pick, family really drives and is a key player. It’s as much as where mom, dad, older sister or brother went.” – Community Leader

“I guess since I had two parents who went to college it’s one of those things I have to do whether you like it or not.” – Student Interview

“I defer to my brother a lot because it’s easy and he’ll be honest with me.” – Student Interview

“Some are just SDSU students. They don’t have a choice. In some families that runs deep.” – Sioux Falls Guidance Counselor

4 in 5 students had visited a college campus for a non-admission related visit

CAMPUS VISIT
CAMPUS VISIT

Many students' first experience with a college is not through the admission office. This first visit can impact their overall feelings of college. It is especially important for first generation students in order to give them confidence to be on a college campus.

"Iowa State was first and I loved it because it was college and then I compared everything to that." - Student Interview

"I guess just being there a lot. I sort of understand the atmosphere and seeing the student life, stuff like that. It's just a little easier to understand what college is like. Seeing students, meeting professors." - Student Interview

"They don't need to come to a class; they need to be invited for an activity, maybe to participate in some type of activity, maybe they eat in the huddle, maybe they eat in the commons, maybe they go to a basketball game, so they feel the confidence that they've been on a campus. It's okay, there are nice people there." - Community Leader

"Just helping us to get kids on campus... I've had some students who lived around the Roosevelt area and they've never been to Davey Farms or Washington just because of transportation they can't. So going to Augie or USF isn't a reality for them. So just figuring out that transportation piece... especially if their parents aren't involved." - Sioux Falls Guidance Counselor
HOW ARE PERCEPTIONS FORMED?

FEELINGS TOWARDS COLLEGE

GATHERING INFORMATION

FEELINGS TOWARDS COLLEGE

BUZZ  FAMILY  SCHOOL/OTHER CAMPUS VISITS

GATHERING INFORMATION

HIGH SCHOOL CLASSES

HIGH SCHOOL STAFF

COLLEGES/UNIVERSITIES

Born  Elementary School  Middle School  High School  Graduation
HIGH SCHOOL CLASSES

In high school, students have the opportunity to take more electives related to their specific interests which helps to determine the areas they like and want to continue. Increasingly, they are interacting with colleges through dual-credit programs.

“I want to go into the medical field and I wanted to be a vet for the longest time, but I’ve kind of been changing as I’ve been taking more classes and I just want to go into that medical field.” – Student Interview

“I think trying to figure out a good idea when I’m in high school. Then when I’m in college, just trying to get a good idea of what to take and am most interested about based on how those go. And what I enjoy with an advisor of course.” – Student Interview

“Through dual credit, they get exposure to USD, SDSU, DSU and then they’re like this is affordable and I’ve already taken a few classes at USD. When I graduate, I’ll go on to USD because it’s more comfortable. So that has something to do with it as well.” – Sioux Falls Guidance Counselor

HIGH SCHOOL STAFF

One way high school staff influence students is fairly passive. Just by seeing where staff members have gone indirectly influences students. Staff also actively encourage students to consider different options and to help guide them through the process. Many students view high school staff as guides. This is also important for first-generation students who do not have this support at home.

“I’d say there is now more diversity of teachers. It used to be just USD and SDSU, but now we’re getting a broad range of teachers from all kinds of different areas. That demonstrates it enough. It’s another aspect they don’t stop and think oh look where they went. They see it enough through, so it’s in their mind.” – Sioux Falls Guidance Counselor

“Basically mostly my counselor, she helps me so much with everything. Without her I wouldn’t know half the stuff I know.” – Student Interview

“I’m really close to my school counselor too and she went to USD, which is nice.” – Student Interview

“We talk about different options for students. If it’s college planning, how to visit, how to apply, sign up for ACT and then senior year just really working with kids individually getting them app in, financial aid, FAFSA, scholarships, etc.” – Sioux Falls Guidance Counselor

“And that’s why I think it’s so important in our role to connect with students in a large group, so that it is a safe person to talk to and now I’ll go into the office and talk to them because I don’t have a clue and I’m first generation.” – Sioux Falls Guidance Counselor
Students are noticing the communications from colleges and have mixed thoughts. Some think that it is a point of pride, especially at first but for many it needs to have some personalization or something that sparks their interest. This is the same with phone calls, if it is not personalized, it doesn’t have a strong positive effect.

“I think for some kids it’s very prideful. They’ll talk about how much they get. Oooh Duke wants me. I think if it’s a prestigious school they’re interested in, then they’re excited about it. If they’re getting mail from schools where they know they’re not going then they’re super annoyed.” – Sioux Falls Guidance Counselor

“Only if it’s from schools I’m interested in. There is one I get from Washington and they go straight in the garbage. And I’m like that’s a waste of paper and I don’t know how you got my address. If it’s personalized, I’ll look at it.” – Student Interview

“I think St. Olaf and Augustana both send a magazine and it had interviews with actual students and that was really cool to see what their experience was like and to understand that better.” – Student Interview

“I don’t mind speaking on the phone but it’s really nice when someone reaches out to you and with scheduling things and not just contacting you and bugging you and bugging you and you still interested? Or are you not and we’ll take you off. It’s a deterrent because you know it’s not the same.” – Student Interview
COLLEGES/UNIVERSITIES WEBSITES

We also see the websites for the universities being used during this phase. For many students, it’s fun to look at different programs and activities. It’s a way for them to start dreaming of their life at that school. They realize that this isn’t the same as visiting campus, so it’s important to spark enough interest and inspiration that they will want to visit for themselves.

“It’s something fun for me to look at the different programs and stuff like that.” – Student Interview

“They have separate videos, like one of them is FAFSA scores, then academics, then extracurricular. For that they usually show the gym and then what they do outside of school.” – Student Interview

“I look around and the first thing I look at is the days and what activities they have during the day I can go... I look at activities and then what their majors are and what they’re most known for. And then I look for their after they graduate job rates. When I get out of college I want a job right away. And then I just kind of go on the website to see what else they have to offer like the cost and how many kids are there and basic information.” – Student Interview

HOW ARE PERCEPTIONS FORMED?

![Diagram showing the process of forming perceptions towards college]

FEELINGS TOWARDS COLLEGE

GATHERING INFORMATION

EVALUATING PERCEPTIONS
HOW ARE PERCEPTIONS FORMED?

FRIENDS IN COLLEGE

While friends in college has always played an influential role in the college decision, it has gained in importance. Now when students leave for college, they may be physically gone, but they are still very connected to their high school friends via social media. Friends are therefore a source of information who also have the ability to change students’ minds.

“We don’t talk enough about social media and how that affects them. The majority of kids know other kids who are in college now or tech school and they stay way connected. So it’s not social media or the schools, but by their friends. It’s not like they graduate and are gone anymore.” – Sioux Falls Guidance Counselor

“For most schools I’m interested in, I know people there, so I can just talk to them as well. Kids who have gone to my school that have ended up there.” – Student Interview

“I had a friend who graduated and she lived in the dorms and I don’t think she went home for the first couple months of school, so it’s like humans maybe you can disappear even if you live in Sioux Falls.” – Student Interview

“So really continuing with that first year and then making that experience last is really important for students who do end up here who are from Sioux Falls and getting them to stay. And then also consistency. I think students like Augustana or anywhere else. If they know a friend went somewhere all 4 years, that’s really going to mean a lot.” – Sioux Falls Guidance Counselor
“I actually rode up there with my mom a few weeks ago, we went to Mankato, U of M, and Bethel. And I actually had my heart set on Bethel, I really liked it until I got home and talked to my friends and they have friends who go there and apparently they’re super strict. I heard a lot of things that made me think I wouldn’t like it. That’s something I’m scared about and why I want to talk to students now because a lot of them are dropping out and it’s all about academics, they don’t have any homecoming activities. I’m just kind of worried about that.” – Student Interview
ADMISSION TOUR

For students, the tour is what they are going to use to see if they can visualize themselves on campus, so everything matters. It starts with just the appearances, but the tour guide also plays an important role.

“I’ve had students say, I like the campus, but I can’t imagine myself living in that dorm for 9 months out of the year. Whether we’d like to say that or not. That’s their home for 9 months. So if it’s really run down, and they’re looking and saying, oh can I envision myself here? That’s really outdated and I can go here and I have the same relational experience and it’s more updated?... Especially for the initial contact of a student coming in. I think a beautiful campus makes a difference. They also feel oh man this is nice. And then they get to the deeper stuff.” ~ St. John’s Guidance Counselor

“They say I can see myself being in this area, this works for me. But that also goes a long way to who is giving the tour. I have heard more and more from parents the last few years about oh I loved that school, but they had the worst tour guide and it just killed it for my kid.” ~ St. John’s Guidance Counselor

“When I went and visited USF and they talked to us, they seemed really real... People were making jokes and they seemed really friendly and down to earth.” ~ Student Interview

ADMISSION COUNSELOR

Another important aspect is the admission counselor. Students mentioned that their admission counselor was a source of information. They turn into an extension of the school. They help the student determine whether the school is a good fit and act as a guide through the admission process.

“I met with the St. John’s admission counselor and that was just really a good experience. I felt so good and just explaining everything about the college and it seemed like a good fit for me.” ~ Student Interview

“I guess I do a lot of self-research, but the admission counselors at Augie are really great. I talk to Wade all the time. He does such a phenomenal job. He’s helped me through some dual credit things. It’s nice to have an admission counselor who is looking out for you, because you’ll talk to people who say oh just buy the credits, but he’ll go through the next steps to contact people and make sure it’s right.” ~ Student Interview
ADMISSION VISIT

All of these experiences add up to what it would be like to be a student, so no aspect should be discounted. Students need to see the school for themselves and experience it for themselves.

"Me and my mom went. It was actually amazing. I didn't want to put on too much of a show for my mom because she was like oh my gosh this is amazing! I actually met with one of the sign language professors and then I met with one of the students there. She gave me a tour around the campus and also met with information about everything around there. I also met with someone else there. I can't remember her name but someone else there. Thad and I was there for over 2 hours. I loved all of it." – Student Interview

"It was a school I told my parents no, I don't want to go here. It's too close, it's 3 miles down the street. Why would you even suggest it? It's one of those things where I was like ok I should tour it. So I toured it last February and I actually just really liked it." – Student Interview

HOW ARE PERCEPTIONS FORMED?

FEELINGS TOWARDS COLLEGE

GATHERING INFORMATION

EVALUATING PERCEPTIONS
CURRENT PERCEPTIONS

22% ACADEMICS
15% OUTCOMES/FUTURE
13% FINANCIAL
9% CAMPUS LIFE

ACADEMICS

“The differences from high school I think are the types of classes, one or three classes a week for certain ones and a lot of time spent studying outside of it.” – Student Interview

“A lot of reading. I’m excited about the liberal arts focus because they want you to find themselves and you don’t have to be decided when you’re so young.” – Student Interview

“I think the classes of just taking something more personalized, but also something that interests me.” – Student Interview

OUTCOMES/FUTURE

“Basically better opportunities to get ahead in life. I strive to do my best every day. I’m the person who gets up at 5 in the morning to get something done at school. I’m so motivated in high school. I really care about my grades. It’s something that I really strive for. College. I really think it’s a better opportunity for life.” – Student Interview

“When they talk about their jobs today, college played a big role in how the rest of your life is going to go. They try to always tell you that. Work hard get there.” – Student Interview

CAMPUS LIFE

“I’m really excited to meet new people. That’s the main thing. I’m excited to be in an all-girl dorm. I think the hallways would be fun to be with a bunch of different people.” – Student Interview

“I think the prospect of meeting new people. Leaving behind and keeping up with those who are important to you. I’m so excited to meet new people. I think it’s going to be good. I’ll live in the dorms.” – Student Interview

“The social aspects, the different ways I can get involved throughout the clubs because I know that is way different from high school. all the ways you can get involved which is interesting.” – Student Interview
# Current Perceptions

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## Independence Opportunity

### Reasons to Attend

- **To grow as a person**: 87%
- **To find a job**: 81%
- **To learn more about the world**: 77%
- **To have fun**: 58%
- **My parents want me to attend**: 27%
- **My friends are going to college**: 19%

"I think in order to find a job that I'll love going to every morning, I'll need to get an education that specializes in the field I'm interested in. Everything I'm interested in is with people and the health field, so I still haven't figured out exactly what I want to do, but I know getting a degree will help me." — Student Interview
COLLEGE PRIORITIES

Most Important Factors When Choosing a College/University

- Has my major/area of study: 76%
- Cost: 66%
- Academic reputation: 30%
- Student activities: 25%
- Distance: 18%
- Type of school: 18%
- City: 15%
- College size: 9%
- Updated facilities: 6%
- Family or friends attended: 8%
ACADEMICS

While students have some ideas of what they want to pursue, their majors are not yet finalized. However, knowing the school has their initial interest areas is a great comfort. Many are also looking for personal attention and an advisor who will help them discover the right fit. While job placement numbers are really valuable to parents and to some students, they don’t connect with students the same way as thinking about what they will study.

“If they would have a good art program or something that would get me along in the lines of either being in the art major, business or the psychology business. Something with good programs like that.” – Student Interview

“Yeah, almost every place I go, like in the opening thing they say it’s a 99% placement. Every single place. Is that true or not? Every place has said that.” – Student Interview

“Do you have a major or career goal?”

Yes 35%
No 65%

“For academics it’s probably more towards the smaller class size as something that’s important. Professors, I know there are some that promote one on one, and that helps me a lot with learning, the one on one help, just knowing the professor. Having the health options there since some schools don’t offer a lot.” – Student Interview

“I like smaller schools, definitely. Something with small class sizes. It seems there is a lot more emphasis on teachers for making sure every student will be able to succeed. I really really liked that.” – Student Interview

COST

How Much Are You And Your Family Expecting To Pay Per Year For College?

Not Sure 23%
Less than $15,000 23%
$15,000-$25,000 40%
More than $25,000 14%
COST

89%

Of survey respondents expect to receive scholarships

ACADEMICS
(53% of respondents)

MUSIC/THEATER/ART
(46% of respondents)

ATHLETICS
(15% of respondents)

CHURCH/COMMUNITY SERVICE
(9% of respondents)

OTHER
(7% of respondents)

COST

For some, cost was an indicator as to whether they would even consider the school. But for many, while it was an important factor, it wasn’t the most important. Many mentioned the reason they were overwhelmed about the large cost of college was because they didn’t want to be in debt for the rest of their lives. Almost all admitted that there would be other things, like academics, that would trump cost.

“The only thing that stands out is some of the scholarship emails or letters that I get. Or saying what I’ll get. That’s a big part if I’ll be able to afford it. That’s interesting to see if I’d even have the chance of going.” – Student Interview

“I guess affordability would be a key factor, but it wouldn’t be the most important because I know there are student loans and scholarships you can get.” – Student Interview

“If it’s somewhere I was dreaming of going, I think it’d be worth it. But I’m thinking of the future and not being in debt.” – Student Interview

“Well for my family, I wouldn’t say that we aren’t well off, and we aren’t underprivileged, we’re just upper-middle class, so it’s a big deal especially if you’re considering graduate school to have the undergraduate debt be less as you can and not spend the rest of your life paying off your loans.” – Student Interview

“It’s not my most important thing because you can still pay off loans, but it is a big factor because you don’t want to be stuck with debt for the rest of your life.” – Student Interview
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LOCATION

What we saw in the survey was that many students mentioned that about 1 to 2 hours would be the ideal distance for college. Many interviewees said that they wanted to stay close which meant 4-5 hours away, but not in Sioux Falls.

"One would probably be closer to home. People are very dependent on me. Very close to home, but not too close. A max of 5-6 hours. It's not all the way to California, but I can drive home. Driving distance." - Student Interview

"I'd say between 2 to 4.5 hours. I don't really mind, it's just that around Sioux Falls there isn't a lot you have to go far farther away. I don't necessarily mind too far as long as it's not too far." - Student Interview

"Distance from home is something that's important. I don't want something that is necessarily in Sioux Falls, but in a smaller city if I need to come home for the weekend or something like that." - Student Interview

"I get homesick pretty easy, so I think I'd like to stay around Sioux Falls or South Dakota area, so I'm not going to go too far, but I don't know. I could see myself going a couple hours away, but I don't see myself going more than 5 or 6 hours." - Student Interview

Ideal College Distance

- Less than 30 miles
- 30-60 miles
- 61-120 miles
- 121-300 miles
- More than 300 miles
SIOUX FALLS

For many students, the idea of staying in Sioux Falls is not appealing. It's only after they've decided to stay in Sioux Falls when they mention the opportunities. This is more of a way to justify why they would stay here. For those who are up front about staying in Sioux Falls, it's because their family is here, not because they are passionate about the city. For many students, staying in Sioux Falls just isn't exciting, it's known and does not mesh with their perception of college.

"I've actually looked at colleges up in Minnesota, but decided I think I need to stay by my family. I'm really close to them, so I think it'd be kind of risky." - Student Interview

"I like Sioux Falls but it's just since I've been here my whole life, it's fun to explore a new place. I know this town so well, it's fun to explore somewhere else." - Student Interview

CURRENT PERCEPTIONS

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INDEPENDENCE OPPORTUNITY
COLLEGE PRIORITIES

LEAVING SIOUX FALLS = INDEPENDENCE

= FREEDOM

= DISCOVER YOUR PASSIONS

SOUTH DAKOTA SCHOOLS
FIRST ASSOCIATION SCHOOLS

Augustana
USD

28% IN-STATE PUBLIC
27% OUT OF STATE PUBLIC
25% IN-STATE PRIVATE
20% OUT OF STATE PRIVATE

SD SCHOOLS

RANK FROM 1-5
AFFORDABLE
ACADEMIC REPUTATION
JOB/GRAD SCHOOL PLACEMENT RATE
FUN CAMPUS
SELECTIVE ADMISSION PROCESS
AUGUSTANA

We see that students think Augustana has a great community, great academics and amazing people. However they are concerned about the expenses. Some won’t even consider Augustana because of it. Since the cost is more than public schools, everything else needs to be much stronger, including retention, which was brought up by the guidance counselors. The perception for many is that even if you can afford Augustana your first year, you won’t be able to after that.

“They’re very interactive with the community. They reach out to you. They’re very friendly, very just amazing. They’re just so sociable. You can talk to them and they listen to you and they try to accommodate you in any way they can and they’re still professional.” – Student Interview

“I’m leaning towards them, they’re just really expensive, so I’m trying to figure that out too. But they’re going to help me make a major/minor and figure out classes I can take.” – Student Interview

“I looked into Augustana and everything, but private schools cost a lot more money. I’d go to one, but the money thing, it’s one of my options.” – Student Interview

“Augie gets great PR and they have wonderful alumni. Some of those pieces you already know about and that’s wonderful. But I think it is the money piece. And the retention piece. I think kids know about that.” – Sioux Falls Guidance Counselor

HOW ARE PERCEPTIONS FORMED?

FEELINGS TOWARDS COLLEGE

BUZZ FAMILY SCHOOL/OTHER CAMPUS VISITS

GATS INFO EVALUATING PERCEPTIONS

HIGH SCHOOL HIGH SCHOOL COLLEGES INTERESTS

ADMISSION VISIT

FRENDS IN COLLEGE

BORN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL MIDDLE SCHOOL HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION
TAKEAWAYS/RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Sioux Falls is changing. There is a new generation entering college and it is quickly becoming more diverse not only in students of color, but also in socioeconomic background.

   **RECOMMENDATIONS:**
   1. Show students the authentic side of Augustana and be present where they are spending time – online.
   2. Make concerted efforts to reach out to students of diverse backgrounds and create visit events that get them on campus in middle school or early high school.

2. College perception begins to be developed early and is formed in 3 phases: feelings towards college, gathering information and evaluating perceptions.

   **RECOMMENDATIONS:**
   1. Start connecting students early to campus by hosting top-notch events for schools, athletics, and other community events.
   2. Make sure to connect with students in each aspect of the perception formation process, especially once a student enters high school.
TAKEAWAYS/RECOMMENDATIONS

3. Sioux Falls students see college as a chance to pursue their passions which will lead to a job they love. College is where they will learn how to do this and create the path for the rest of their life.

   RECOMMENDATION:
   1. Highlight not only the stats about job and grad school placement rates, but share stories about how Augustana helped students discover their passions which led to their dream job.

4. For Sioux Falls students, ideas of college are wrapped up in independence, freedom, and finding their passion. They believe that to do that, they need to leave Sioux Falls.

   RECOMMENDATIONS:
   1. Need to demonstrate how Sioux Falls students can be independent and have new experiences at Augustana.
   2. Share stories about students who have achieved this independence and bring them to their previous high school.

5. While Augustana is viewed as a strong school for academics and placement rates, its perception of being unaffordable causes many people to rule it out early in the decision process.

   RECOMMENDATION:
   1. Because of this perception, all other aspects must be very strong. Areas to focus on would be how it is a fun campus and retention.
REFERENCES


Jaffe-Walter, Reva & Stacey J. Lee. “‘To Trust in My Root and to Take That to Go Forward’: Supporting College Access for Immigrant Youth in the Global City.” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2011): 281-296.


