

PARENTAL OPINION SURVEY

FIRST YEAR STUDENTS – Fall, 1998

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Student Information Flow Team (SIFT) asked the Office of Institutional Research and Academic Planning to conduct a survey of parents of first year students entering Rutgers in Fall 1998. This survey was designed to identify factors contributing to students' decision to attend Rutgers, evaluate the specific components of enrolling at the university, and provide benchmarks against which future improvements in the enrollment process can be measured.

The target population for the survey consists of the parents or legal guardians of entering first year students. The relatively young age of most entering students - many of these students are 17 and 18 years of age - make it likely that their parents are actively involved in the college selection and enrollment process. Moreover, the availability of basic information about why students select Rutgers from sources such as the Rutgers undergraduate application circumvents the need to obtain redundant information and provides an opportunity to seek the opinions of other individuals who are likely to have a significant impact on a student's decision. While the impact of parents and legal guardians in the selection of a college is likely to be quite strong, it is also reasonable to assume that parents would have intimate knowledge about various components of enrollment at the university (e.g., admissions, financial aid, academic advising, registration, and billing). Indeed, the perceptions and experiences of parents provide an important and often overlooked view of the Rutgers enrollment process.

Overview of Research Design

More than 6,000 surveys were mailed to parents of all first year full-time day students with residences within the United States. Students whose parents reside outside the country were excluded from the study for various reasons and only one survey was sent to a household with more than one student entering Rutgers. Several follow-up mailings produced an overall response rate of 43% with 2,633 returns. Furthermore, many of the responding parents (37%) offered written comments about the enrollment process as well as their student's experiences at Rutgers University in general.

Responses from parents are linked to various student databases allowing us to compare parent's perceptions of a student's college choice factors to a similar set of factors students had identified on their undergraduate admissions form. Demographic characteristics of students were also linked to parental responses for analysis.

The percentage of parents responding with a student in each of Rutgers' schools or colleges is within one or two percentage points of the overall distribution of the first year population as a whole. Background characteristics (age, gender, and in- or out-of-state permanent residence) of responders' children are quite similar to the overall first year student population included in this study. However, there are slight differences in the ethnicity (fewer Asians, more non-Hispanic Whites) and citizenship status (fewer non-citizen permanent residents) of respondents' sons and daughters, and in the education levels of the parents responding (more families with at least one parent having graduated from college).

Findings are summarized below and a series of charts and graphs displaying the data follow the executive summary.

Why Rutgers University?

Parents were asked to evaluate the importance, to the parent and to his or her child, of several factors related to the decision to attend Rutgers University. Students evaluated a similar list of college choice factors when they completed the Undergraduate Admissions form.

Results indicate that Rutgers' biggest draws, according to responding parents, are its academic reputation, value (cost in relation to benefit), and availability of specific academic programs or courses. According to parents, Rutgers' academic reputation and the academic program or courses offered are also top choice factors for students. Although value (cost in relation to benefit) seems to have greater salience to the parents themselves than parents say it does for their children, value is in the top three college choice factors for both parents and their children. When students are asked to choose their top three college choice factors among those listed on the Undergraduate Admissions form, academic quality or reputation, cost, and availability of majors come in first, second, and third, respectively, for these entering students. Location is also rated highly by students, but was not included in the list offered to the parents.

The Decision Process

Parents report that most students (77%) begin their search for a college in their junior year of high school or later. More than half (54%) of the students who are permanent residents (but not citizens) wait until after their junior year to begin their search as do many (42%) first generation college students. On the other hand, beginning the search early is a strategy used more by students who enrolled in their first choice college or school. Students from out-of-state are less likely to wait until after their junior year compared to students from New Jersey.

Parents responding to the survey are very active in the student's choice of a college with 87% saying they are very or moderately involved. Parents of African American and Puerto Rican

students report a higher level of involvement compared to the parents of Asian or Latino students who are not Puerto Rican. The type of involvement - the amount of time and effort parents personally give - is extensive: 87% of the parents report giving either a moderate amount or a great deal of both time and effort. Out-of-state parents are more involved than parents residing in New Jersey with more than half of these parents reporting expenditure of "a great deal" of both time and effort in the college selection process.

Responding parents report that nearly all students (97%) are moderately or very involved in the college choice decision. High school counselors are the most involved after parents and the students themselves, according to these parents. High school teachers, siblings, other family members, and student's friends have a slightly lower level of involvement. One in four of the parents responding indicated that Rutgers alumni are moderately or very involved. Parents report a smaller role is played by their own friends and by high school personnel other than teachers or counselors.

Although brothers and sisters, friends of the students, teachers, counselors, and Rutgers alumni all have lower levels of involvement for out-of-state students (based on permanent residence), their degree of involvement in the student's decision to attend Rutgers is impressive given the fact that these are out-of-state students.

Information Sources and Use

Findings indicate that parents and the students themselves are the most involved in the college selection process. Therefore, it is important to know what information sources they are aware of and which ones they rely on as they consider various colleges. Admissions publications and mailings from Rutgers University are the main sources of information used by parents during the college decision process. Half of the parents consult college guides; the second most relied upon source of information. University publications (other than those provided by admissions) are also a popular source of information and one-fourth of the parents consult the Rutgers

Internet Homepage, using it either moderately or heavily. In addition to the heavy consultation with print and electronic media, parents look to family members, high school counselors, Rutgers alumni, their own friends, and high school teachers for information regarding the decision making process.

Students are asked to list their top three information sources from a list of 15 on the Admissions Application form. Unlike their parents who rely heavily on media for their information, students rely on people. Of course, students most often note parents as their information source and, as we can see from the parents' responses, the parents do their homework. University students, guidance counselors, and friends are close behind their parents as important information sources for students.

Enrollment Steps: Knowledge, Understanding, and Timing

In the questionnaire, parents are asked to evaluate each of the enrollment steps before going into greater detail on a subset of these items. First we ask parents if they know about the activity. Among those saying yes, we ask if their understanding of the process is clear or unclear. Finally, we ask the knowledgeable parents to evaluate the timing of the activity. In the letter sent to parents to elicit their cooperation in the study, we ask for the parent who was most involved in the college selection process to fill out the questionnaire. Therefore, we expect respondents to be fairly familiar with the process.

Parental awareness of the listed enrollment steps varies widely. Awareness is highest for activities that occur early in the process: acceptance notification, application process, and the welcome letter from the college or school accepting the student. Parents are also highly likely to be aware of student orientation and the term bill. However, these "knowledgeable" parents are least aware of academic advising with only two-thirds (67%) indicating that they know about this

activity. As expected, parents say they are familiar with financial aid and, surprisingly, just as familiar with placement testing and registration for classes.

Even if parents know about the process, they may be unclear about it. Again, parents have the most difficulty with academic advising and financial aid, with class registration also presenting an area of confusion. A number of parents indicate a lack of clarity about the term bill or placement testing as well. As to the timing of these activities, most parents say the timing is about right. However, some activities stand out in that parents believe the timing is too early or too late. In general, the consensus is that timing is “too late” rather than “too early.” Academic advising, financial aid, and registration for classes happen too late according to 15% of these parents of first year students.

The Admissions Process

As noted above, publications and mailings from the admissions office are the main source of information parents use during the college decision process. Therefore, it is reassuring that parents are quite satisfied with the quality and the quantity of these materials. Satisfaction with the admission process is quite high overall with 95% of parents indicating they are satisfied. The quality and quantity of materials and the ease of completing the Admissions Application are slightly above the overall satisfaction level with the admissions process in general. One area for improvement is the campus tour where overall satisfaction is high but one in eleven of those participating in a tour were dissatisfied. Although no particular school or college has higher levels of dissatisfaction with the tour, the comments offered by parents at the end of the survey may be illustrative of both positive and negative comments about campus tours. A second area identified for improvement is the admissions staff. Parents having contact with the admissions staff are less likely to be satisfied with either the accessibility or the helpfulness of the staff than with other areas in the admission process.

The Financial Aid Process

Overall satisfaction with the financial aid process (73%) is considerably lower than satisfaction with the admissions process (95%). The lowest rating of satisfaction with the admissions process is 84%; the highest for the financial aid process is 77%. Best ratings go to the timeliness in the receipt of enrollment decision information and the ease of completing the financial aid application. Areas for improvement include helpfulness and understanding of the two-stage notification process where only two parents are satisfied for every one who is dissatisfied.

Academic Advising

Academic advising, like the financial aid process, is problematic for parents of first year students. Among the parents expressing an opinion, less than three-fourths (72%) indicate their overall satisfaction with academic advising. Dissatisfaction is not aimed at any particular area; helpfulness and accessibility of academic advisors and the quality of academic advising as it relates to course selection all receive satisfaction ratings of less than 75%. In general, academic advising is a black box for many parents especially if their children identify themselves either as Asian or not citizens of the United States. Unlike most questions where non-response is limited to a few percentage points, approximately 20% of the parents gave a "Not Applicable" response to the four academic advising questions indicating that they "did not have information" about these items. Wide variation (10 to 34 percent) in the "not applicable" response to academic advising questions is found for parents based on the registration unit of their child as well.

Registration for Classes

Registration for classes gets slightly higher marks than academic advising or the financial aid process. Overall, among parents evaluating the registration process, 80% expressed satisfaction. However, only 74% of these parents are satisfied with the times classes are offered, which thus limits their availability. Five parents are satisfied for every one dissatisfied when it comes to the number of course sections offered.

The Term Bill and Attendance Confirmation and Payment Form

The final section in the Parental Opinion Survey examines the Term Bill and Attendance Confirmation and Payment Form. Agreement is high that the steps to finalize registration are clear (91%) and the number of payment options offered by Rutgers University are adequate (89%). The overall rating of the term bill process is high (90%) as well. The most confusion about the term bill process surrounds the Hope Scholarship Booklet. Among the approximately 1,500 responding to this question, nearly one in three (28%) do not believe it is helpful.

General Comments from Parents

Parents provide a wide range of comments, not completely restricting their comments to the enrollment process. Fifty-five percent of the comments made by 974 parents are positive about Rutgers and the enrollment process. Twice as many (111%) suggest areas for improvement. This is not unexpected as those parents who feel strongly, either positively or negatively, are the most likely to write extensive comments.

One in four commenting parents write that Rutgers is great or the enrollment process is fine. Staff services are commented upon favorably by seven percent of the parents and four percent say something positive about their son's or daughter's particular school or college.

General positive comments are given about parental involvement and campus conditions as well. Admissions, financial services, orientation, course scheduling, academic advising, and housing (1%) also receive positive comments from these parents of first year students.

Parents are much more specific in their negative comments. Among those parents who offer comments, one-third (33%) have problems with financial services. Course scheduling (19%) and academic advising (16%) are also areas of dissatisfaction. A series of comments which are generally negative (13%) are directed at (the lack of) parental involvement, staff services, Rutgers University, the enrollment process, campus conditions, or the student's registration unit. Seven percent of the parents who comment have negative comments about admissions, orientation, or housing. Others are dissatisfied with placement testing (5%) or dining services (3%).

Summary and Conclusions

There is strong agreement on the factors both parents and students take into account as they consider colleges: academic reputation of the university, availability of specific programs or course offerings, and value or cost. Location is a strong factor as well. Many begin the process before the student's junior year in high school, especially if considering schools in states other than where their parents live. Students are most involved in the process with strong support from parents. Parents rely somewhat on their family, but more on media (admissions materials, other university publications, and college guides) while students rely on people (parents, university students, guidance counselors, and friends) as primary sources of information about colleges. High school teachers and counselors play an important role in the college choice selection, especially for minority students, as do Rutgers alumni.

Parental awareness of the listed enrollment steps varies widely. Awareness is highest for activities that occur early in the process: acceptance notification, application process, and the welcome letter from the college or school accepting the student. Parents are also highly likely to be aware of student orientation and the term bill. However, these “knowledgeable” parents are least aware of academic advising with only two-thirds (67%) indicating that they know about this activity. As expected, parents say they are familiar with financial aid and, surprisingly, just as familiar with placement testing and registration for classes.

Satisfaction is highest among parents of first year students regarding the admissions process and the term bill, with class registration coming in third. However, only 74% of these parents are satisfied with the times classes are offered, thus limiting their availability. Other parents are not satisfied with the number of course sections offered. The areas of financial aid and academic advising are both unclear and problematic according to many of these parents who say they are familiar with the process. Parents having contact with the admissions staff are less likely to be satisfied with either the accessibility or the helpfulness of the staff than with other areas in the admission process. The most confusion about the term bill process surrounds the Hope Scholarship Booklet. Among the approximately 1,500 parents responding to this question, nearly one in three (28%) do not believe it is helpful. Improvement in these areas, along with specific areas commented upon by parents such as campus tours, will improve the enrollment process experience for future first year students.