Factors that Influence Student Selection of Educational Leadership Master's Programs at Regional Universities

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Graduate enrollment numbers in Educational Leadership programs have dwindled at many public higher education institutions. At the same time, for-profit institutions and institutions with private marketing partnerships have experienced increasingly greater enrollments. Many public institutions are reevaluating their marketing and recruiting strategies as they struggle to compete for students. Central to any marketing strategy is knowledge of the needs and wants of consumers; in the case of higher education, the consumers are students. This study sought to determine the needs and wants of Master's-level Educational Leadership students by investigating the factors that influenced students' selections of programs as well as the recruiting strategies that students perceive as most effective via survey research methods. Results indicate that Master's-level students (n = 47) selected particular Educational Leadership programs primarily based on the course delivery methods (with hybrid courses most preferred) and the convenience that the programs offer. Participants perceived online advertising as well as face-to-face contact with university or program representatives as top recruiting strategies. University leaders would be wise to consider marketing efforts that highlight Educational Leadership programs' blended learning opportunities and convenience through a combination of online advertisements and face-to-face recruiting events for Master's-level students in Educational Leadership.

Keywords: *recruiting, graduate programs, Educational Leadership, Master's degree*

INTRODUCTION

Historically, recruitment strategies serve as a vital part of university admission processes; however, traditional recruiting practices falter in a marketplace of fierce competition from digitally delivered programs and for-profit universities. Online program delivery frees students from geographic boundaries. Massive open online courses (MOOC) aimed at large-scale participation through free and open access expand the reach of premiere university programs (e.g. Harvard, Stanford, MIT) worldwide through the Coursera consortium (Johnson, 2012). In addition, for-profit universities (e.g. University of Phoenix) successfully out-recruit public universities by thousands of students (Institute of Educational Sciences, 2010).

Faced with declining enrollments, graduate Educational Administration programs in Texas recognize their need to change. Traditionally, geographic limitations required full-time working professionals to pursue graduate degrees close to home. Universities that tout personal relationships, individual attention, and smaller learning environments believe online delivery impedes student learning. Nevertheless, enrollment trends support online options for graduate students with busy schedules.

As institutions transform to meet learner needs, program planning and recruitment hinges on students' preferences (Stevens-Huffman, 2006). At the same time, Texas Educational Leadership graduate programs grapple with declining enrollment, funding cuts, increasing tuition and fees, and fewer jobs in the field for graduates.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Trends in Higher Education

Calls for accountability, efficiency, and productivity in graduate programs result in increased costs, tightened budgets, and the comparative value of a graduate degree. The 11th century university model operating on a 19th century calendar is out of sync with 21st century students no longer willing to passively absorb lecture-delivered content (Mehaffy, 2012). Turner and Carriveau (2012) suggest the result is a perfect storm, in which, low general education success rates, skyrocketing costs, changing demographics, and failure to address the learning process face off against the expectation that schools produce evidence of the value added by their education.

Failure to effectively address these issues at the University of Texas and Texas A&M University resulted in a mandate for education more responsive to learner needs with fewer tenured faculty and more part-time instructors with professional experience (Burka, 2012). Increasingly popular online degrees and certifications have seen an estimated 6.1 million postsecondary students engaged in online courses in 2010-2011, an increase of 560,000 students from the previous year. Almost 30% of all higher education students take at least one course online (Sloan Consortium, 2011). In 2010-2011 an estimated 2.7 million students were enrolled in fully online postsecondary programs. Online enrollment is estimated to increase to 3.44 million students in 2015 encompassing 15.9 % of total postsecondary enrollment (GSV EDU, 2012).

MOOCs dramatically change educational opportunities for large numbers of students at a much lower cost (Burka, 2012). For example, Harvard and MIT created a joint experiment utilizing free online courses (edX), testing new ideas for massive online courses and digital education. Providing students with personalized feedback, web-based Crowdsourcing software breaks homework submissions into chunks to be reviewed by teaching staff, fellow students, and alumni volunteers (Parry, 2012). In addition, the Coursera consortium created by Stanford, the University of Michigan, Princeton, and the University of Pennsylvania, provides free, high-quality courses (MOOCs) from other top-rated universities.

While economic downturns historically increase enrollments in graduate programs, recent recession trends indicate new graduate student enrollment fell by 1.1% between fall of 2009 and fall of 2011 (June, 2011). Possible explanations include reduction in endowments funds, state budget cuts, and limited availability of financial aid. In addition, budget restrictions have increased scrutiny of the educational practices at colleges and universities, and have applied pressure to follow corporate paths of efficiency (Mehaffy, 2012; Redwing, 2012).

To create a university growth model by transforming traditional on-campus programs to an online learning format, Academic Partnerships (AP) piloted a model of a contractual partnership between the company and university in fall 2007. Using Academic Partnerships' model, Lamar University increased its enrollment in two graduate educational programs from 226 to 4,100 (Academic Partnership, 2012). In the fall of 2010, Academic Partnerships contracted with the University of Texas Arlington in the Master's degree in Educational Leadership and increased enrollment from 173 in the fall of 2009 to 558 in the fall of 2010 and 695 in the fall of 2011 (THECB, 2012). These dramatic changes impacted enrollment at many universities across the nation. One unintended consequence was an oversupply of graduates in the area of Educational Leadership. Other Texas programs maintained graduate enrollment by shifting to online and hybrid course delivery.

Marketing in Higher Education

While public universities struggle to reinvent themselves, market share trends for private for-profit institutions continue to increase. Representing 11% of the 2009 university market (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System [IPEDS], 2010) revenue from for-profit degree-granting institutions was 19 billion dollars in 2008-09 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011).

Over the last forty-year period, institutions of higher education have shifted from social institutions to an industry (Anctil, 2008). Marketing in educational institutions was once discouraged as undermining academic standards of quality and excellence (Anderson, 2008). However, with government deregulation and increasing competition (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Jongbloed, 2003; Maringe, 2006) institutions of higher education must market to

compete (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). Gumport (2000) attributes this change to the increase of academic management, the rise of academic consumerism, and the "restratification of academic subjects and personal to a use-value and exchange-value of particular knowledge in a wider society" (Gumport, 2000, pp. 67-69). The intense pressure for accountability, student enrollment, retention, and academic performance all drive institutions of higher education to operate in a more commercial manner (Anctil, 2008).

Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) found few results of effective graduate recruiting and marketing plans in the professional literature because the emphasis at most universities is on undergraduate recruitment. While traditional recruitment methods abound, more aggressive methods are on the rise. Higher education is a highly competitive market seeking effective recruiting strategies.

As public universities seek ways to engage the market, for-profits continue to experiment. 2009 was a banner enrollment year for the University of Phoenix, raising stock prices to $90.00 per share. Recruiting strategies behind this spike included implementation of highly trained enrollment and financial-aid counselors and a technically sophisticated 24-hour-a-day recruiting operation (Blumenstyk, 2011). In 2013, Academic Partnerships announced changed traditional online courses to MOOCs to recruit new students. Successful course completion resulted in free course credit when students were admitted to the university (Kolowich, 2013). The online for-profit Western Governor's University created a competency-based model in which students pay a set price per semester to complete an unlimited number of courses. On the other hand, for-profit institutions are notorious for hiring lower paid, non-unionized, and non-tenured faculty with lower qualifications and no research obligations (Mehaffy, 2012). Lowered personnel costs allow for-profit universities to dedicate more resources to recruiting and new technologies (Kirschnir, 2012).

Views differ as to the best marketing model for higher education. More universities are moving to direct marketing plans to compete with for-profit universities. Sevier (2004) supports a model using brand marketing to create awareness, direct marking to generate responses, and customer relationship management for client retention. With the increase in competition and resources constraints, more universities are focusing on a target marketing approach to identify and pursue prospective students (Lewison & Hawes, 2007). Students are no longer just viewed as learners, citizens, scholars, and ambassadors, but are seen as investors who are investing in their own future (Reader, 2011).

Other forms of marketing include collaborative relationships (Gibbs, 2002) and relationship marketing (Helgesen, 2008, Klassen, 2002). Relationship marketing in higher education focuses on building and maintaining the relationship of value exchange between the institution and three main customer groups: future students, current students, and alumni (McAlexander and Koening, 2001). The quality of these relationships is connected to the customers' long-term loyalty.

Marketing Tools

The Graduate and Professional School Enrollment Management Corporation (GAPSEMC) notes graduate programs must develop a strategic campaign to compete in today's competitive market. On average, 6-12 contacts (e.g. mail, phone, email, social media, and special events) must be made before students enroll in a program (GAPSEMC, 2012). Like other markets, colleges and universities must successfully define their niche and their market; this includes analyzing demographic data of current students to identify prospective students (Aldridge, 2010). Defining the higher education marketplace must focus on the variation in student demographics, psychographics, and behavioral characteristics, all of which have contributed to the "age of individualism" in which the dominant movement is viewing customers as individuals. However, it is important to extend the demographic data beyond the prospective students to all people served by the university, such as alumni, employers of graduates, financial supporters, and for state-supported universities. This would include tax-payers and the legislature (Lewison & Hawes, 2007).

Determining the most effective types of communication is key in marketing. While increased mobile technologies influence student communication, social media marketing focuses on customer engagement, improved communications, and increasing brand loyalty (Constaninides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). Ohio State University students preferred communication from the school via email (82%) followed by the website (17.8%). For general updates, 68.9% chose email, while 33.7% chose the web site (Ohio State Office of Student Life, 2010). Conversely, Robinson and Stubberud (2012) found students most preferred face-to-face communication, followed by email. Paper communication was

least preferred, while Facebook ranked last for work/school, but fourth for social communication.

A 2011 Pew Research Center Report noted 65% of adult internet users use social networking sites (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011); however, review of literature on social media and marketing in higher education revealed that, while recruiting officers and potential students both use social media, they use it for different purposes. Although universities used social media to connect with prospective students and to market their institution, there is no indication these media are used by said students to seek college admission (Nyangau & Bado, 2012). In contrast, Hays, Ruschman, and Walker (2009) found a significant relationship between the students who engaged in the university's social media network and eventual university admission.

Barnes and Mattson (2009) found admission officers in 2007and 2008 increasingly using social media to research and recruit potential students. In 2008, admission officers identified various social media platforms (blogging, video blogging, social networking sites) as marketing tools and felt social media were an important admission tools. In 2010, Barnes and Mattson discovered 95% of college admission offices using at least one form of social media and 91% identifying social media as "somewhat important" to their recruiting future. Barnes and Lescault (2011) found Facebook to be the most widely used social media tool (98%) followed by YouTube (86%), Twitter (84%), and blogs (66%).

The Center for Marketing Research found benefits of using social media for recruiting to include reduced printing costs (33%), and fewer monies spent on newspaper ads (24%) and radio and television (17%). In addition, 92% of undergraduate admissions agree social media is worth the investment, and report social media to be 44% more effective in recruiting for top MBA programs. The same report identified the most successful tools for recruiting undergraduates to be Facebook (94%), YouTube (81%), Twitter (69%), and Downloadable Mobile Apps (51%). Mobile apps were a favorite tool for top MBA programs, with 82% crediting them for being an effective recruiting tool (Barnes & Lescault, N.D.). Noel Levitz Incorporated identified the most popular social media tool as Facebook, followed by YouTube and Twitter (Noel-Levitz, Inc., 2012).

PBP Executive Reports (2010) reviewed major social network sites to assess ways intuitions of higher education could effectively use these tools for marketing. Facebook's fan pages, personal page, and group features offers institutions of higher education an excellent opportunity to maintain a viable online social presence. Twitter is useful to provide quick, admissions–related information to students and to direct them to the university's website for more information. Fusch (2011a, 2011b) found digital tools can be used for specific marketing purposes; YouTube is a valuable platform to reach prospective students; Facebook can generate the desire for campus visits; and Twitter provides admission officers the opportunity to provide personalized services to prospective students.

Purpose

Central to any marketing strategy is knowledge of the needs and wants of consumers; in the case of higher education the consumers are students. This study sought to determine the needs and wants of Master's-level Educational Leadership students by investigating the factors that influenced students' selections of programs as well as the recruiting strategies that students perceive as most effective via survey research methods. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors influenced Master's-level students' decisions to attend Educational Leadership programs?

2. What recruiting strategies do current Master's-level students perceive as most effective in influencing their decisions to attend particular Educational Leadership programs?

METHOD

Participants

Current Master's-level students from Educational Leadership programs at three public regional universities in the southwest United States were recruited for participation in the study ($n = 47$, $M_{age} = 36.89$, $SD_{age} = 8.06$, age range: 25-55 years, 75% female). Participants self-identified as belonging to the following ethnic categories: African American/Black (4%), Asian (2%), Caucasian (76%), Hispanic/Latino/Chicano (16%), and none of the above (2%).

Procedure

Consenting participants were asked to complete an online survey that invited them to retrospectively identify the factors that impacted their choice of Educational Leadership program. Participants were requested to provide additional information concerning the factors they selected; the survey was designed using branching logic as to elicit additional information about a particular factor only if the participant initially selected that factor as important. For the sake of brevity, a copy of the survey was not included in the article. The survey is available from the authors upon request.

Analyses

Participants' responses were analyzed descriptively. Frequencies, percentages, and averages of the aggregated and disaggregated data were calculated for interpretation. Data from the open-ended responses were analyzed thematically.

RESULTS

Participants were asked to identify their primary motivation for attending graduate school. Figure 1 displays the frequencies of responses. Note that most participants ($n = 47$) identified furtherance of their career (77%) as the primary motivation for attending graduate school. Markedly fewer participants identified goals of expanding their knowledge and skills or improving their earning potential (13% and 9%, respectively).

Figure 1. Primary reason that Masters' level students identified for attending graduate school ($n = 47$).
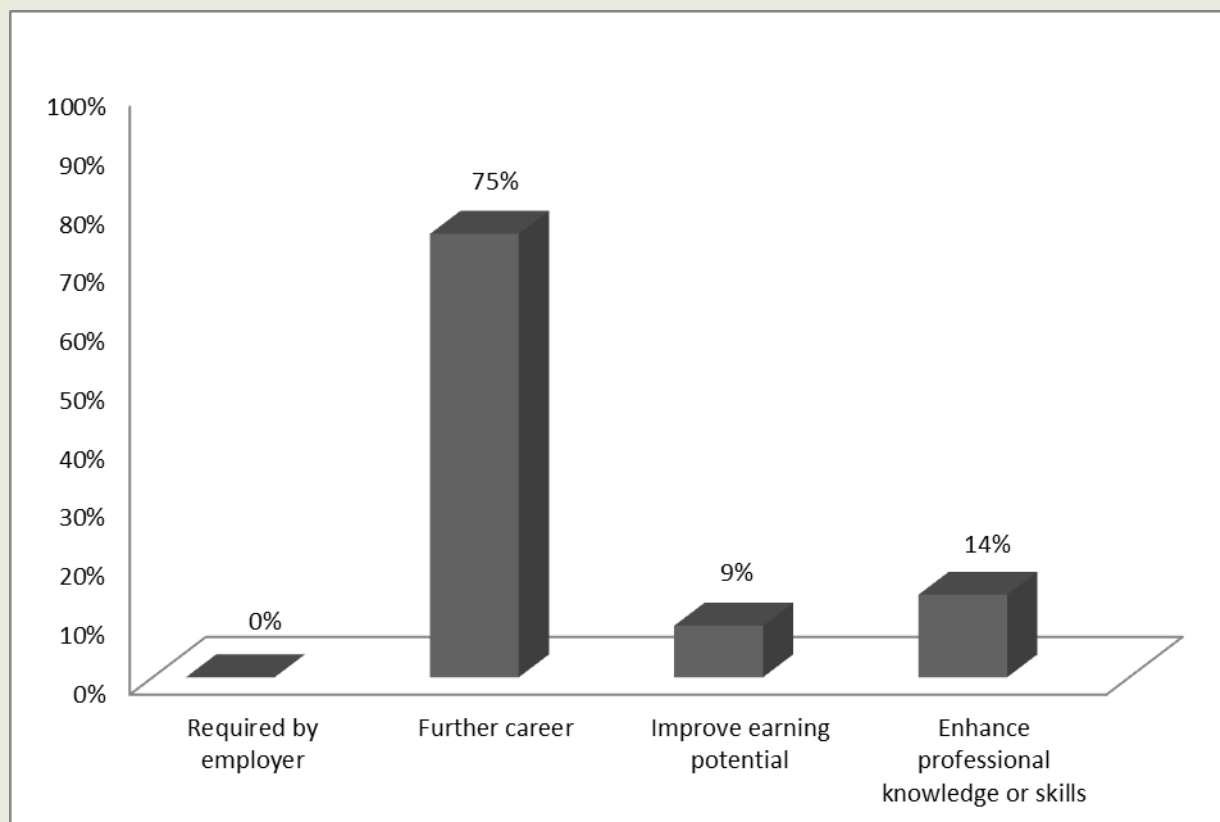

Factors that Influenced Program Selection

Participants were asked to identify from a prepopulated list or entry in an open-ended comments box any and all factors that influenced their choice to attend their current program. Figure 2 presents the factors that were identified by students. Delivery of coursework and convenience were identified by the majority of participants as influential factors. Tuition cost and reputation were the third and fourth top factors, respectively. Interestingly, although tuition

cost was identified by 43% of participants as important, the same participants indicated that the availability of scholarships and financial aid mattered much less, with only 2% identifying either as a top factor, respectively.

Figure 2. Factors that participants identified as influential in the selection of their current Master's level Educational Leadership program (*n* = 47). Note that participants could choose multiple factors, so percentages will add to greater than 100%.
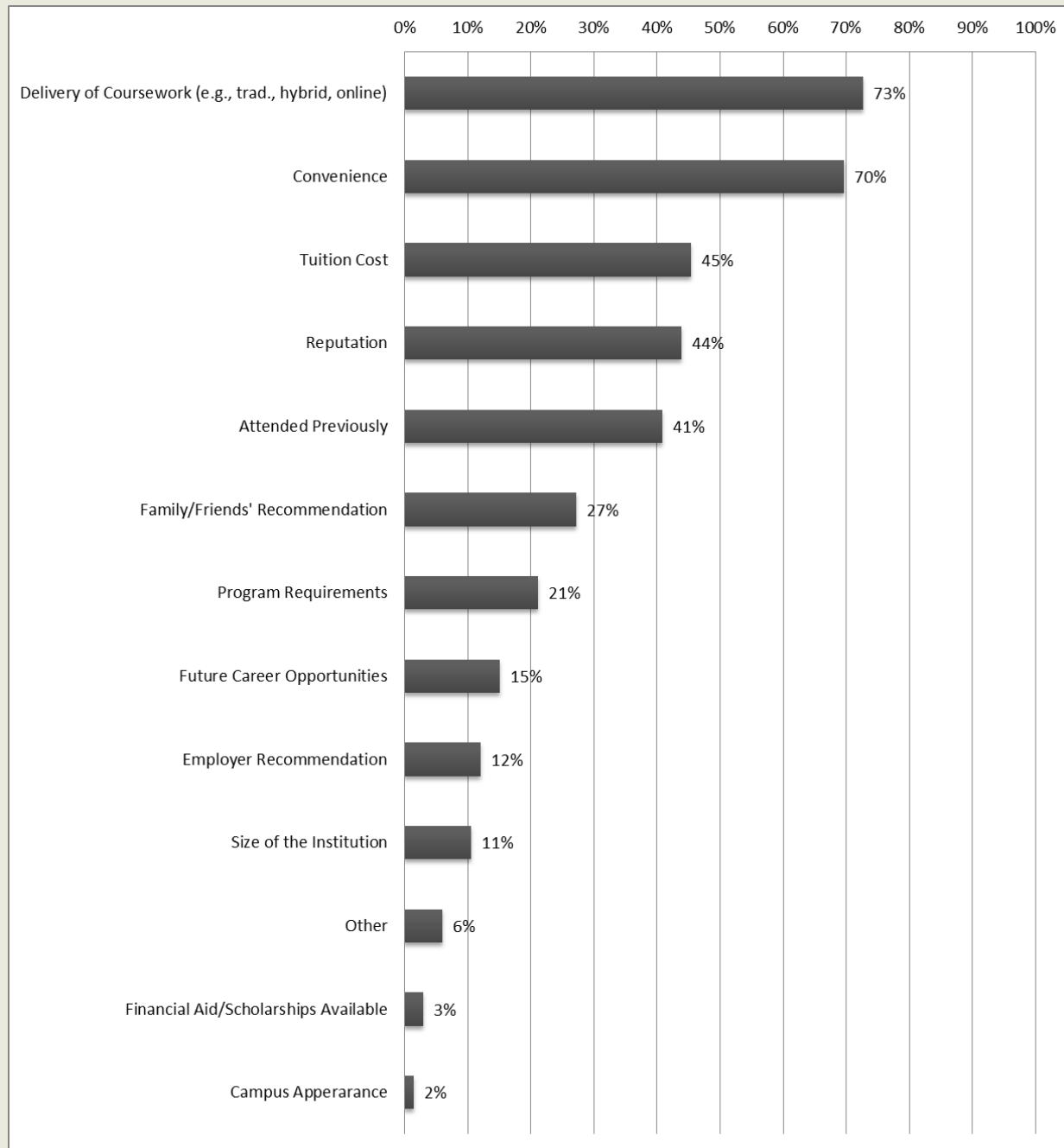

Males and females were found to identify similar factors, but there was disparity when the data was disaggregated by age category (see Figure 3 for results). Participants who were 30-39 years old overwhelmingly chose delivery of coursework as the most important factor (100%; *n* = 26), whereas only 20% of students that were 20-29 years old (*n* = 5) thought that the delivery of coursework was influential. Participants who were 20-29 years of age identified reputation, convenience, the fact that they had attended the university previously, and family/friends' recommendations as

top factors (40% for each factor; *n* = 5). The 30-39 year old age group (*n* = 26) chose delivery of coursework (73%) and convenience (65%) as the top two influential factors on the program selection. Participants in the 40-49 age range (*n* = 10) also identified delivery of coursework (100%) and convenience (100%) as top factors along with reputation (70%). Finally, participants who were 50-59 (*n* = 4) years of age identified reputation (75%) and convenience (75%) as the most important factors.

Figure 3. Factors that participants identified as influential in the selection of their current program by age category (*n* = 45). Note that participants could choose multiple factors, so percentages will add to greater than 100%.
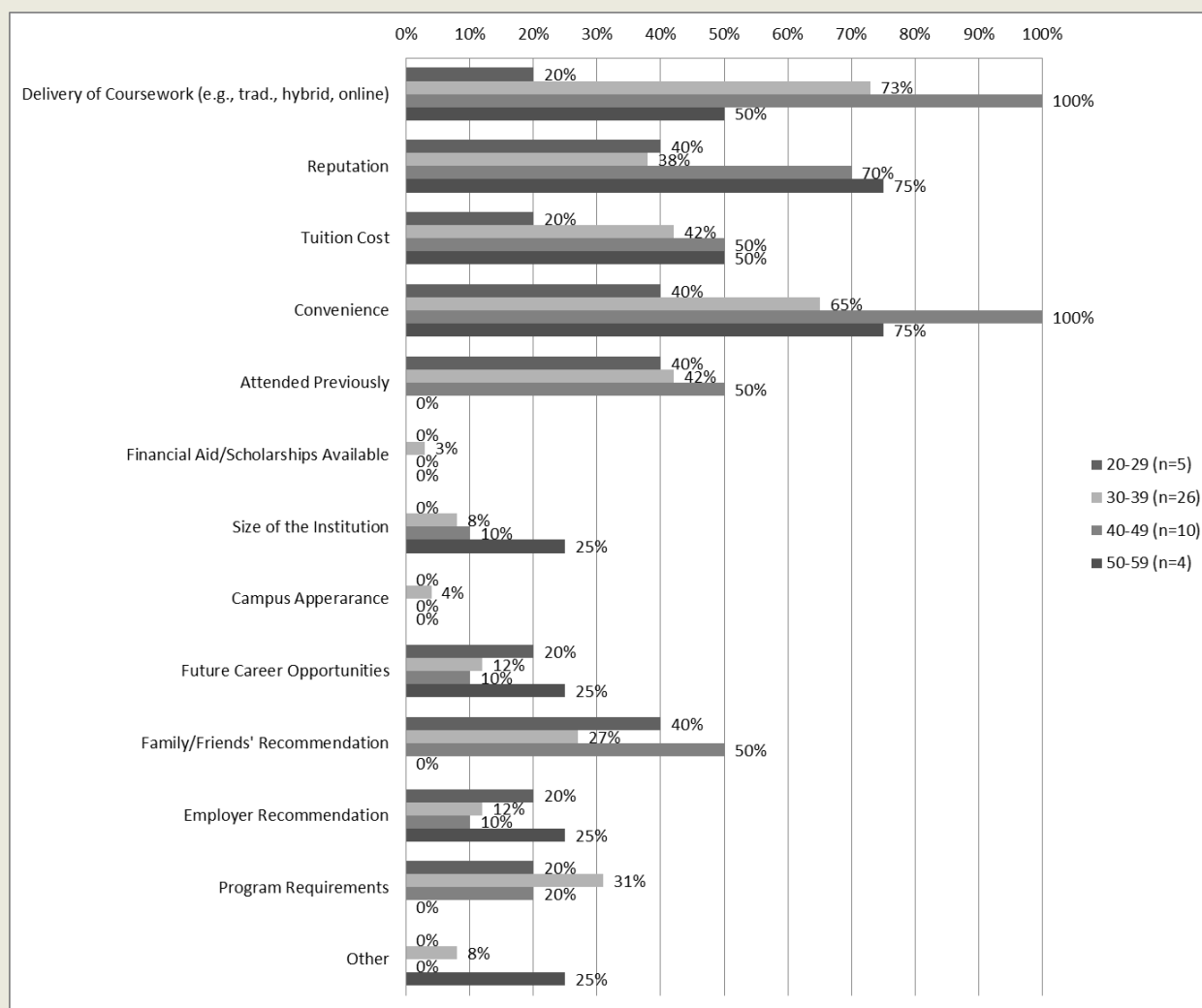

The top two factors identified by participants across all age groups as impacting their selection of program were delivery of coursework and convenience. Participants that identified either factor were asked in subsequent survey questions to elaborate on how that factor influenced their decision.

Delivery of coursework. When asked how the delivery of coursework impacted participants' decisions to attend their current universities, participants' (*n* = 47) selections were varied, with the greatest percentage indicating a preference for a mixture of online and face-to-face instruction (34%), but followed closely by preferences for more online instruction (28%). Only 15% identified more face-to-face instruction as impacting their decision (see Figure 4). From these results, it appears that some Master's-level students prefer a mixture of online and traditional face-to-face instruction (called hybrid or blended learning), but most tend to prefer at least some online component.

Figure 4. Aspects of the delivery of coursework that participants identified as affecting their decision to attend their current program (*n* = 47).
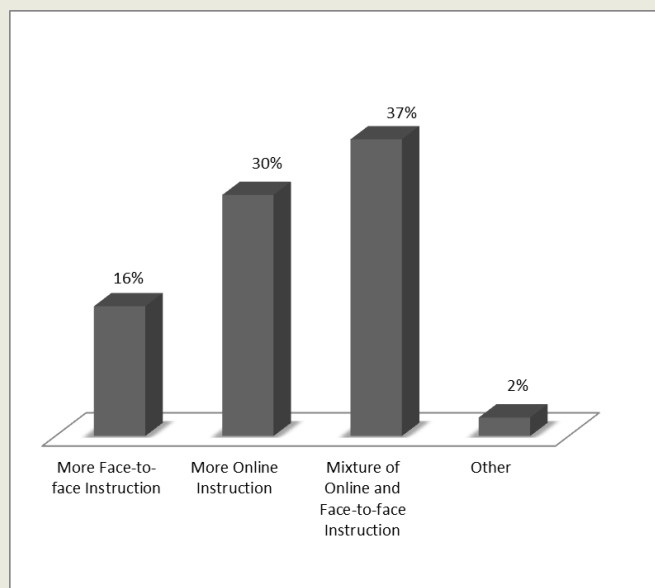
Note that participants could choose multiple factors, so percentages will add to greater than 100%.Participants were asked to provide additional open-ended responses to the question of how the delivery of coursework affected their program choice. Participants identified the flexibility of location and pacing as impactful of their program selection in programs with at least some online instruction (whether fully or partially online). Two participants noted that they chose a program with online components due to family obligations. In contrast, two participants mentioned that they chose their program because of the face-to-face components. Clearly, while many students prefer online course-work, some still desire the face-to-face components that are available in many programs.

Convenience. Figure 5 presents the aspects of convenience that participants identified as impactful of their program choice. Results were varied. Almost half of master's-level students (*n* = 47) noted they preferred a program that was close to their home (49%) and the convenience of scheduling classes was important (43%). Overall, Master's-level students were less concerned about the program being located close to their work (13%).

Figure 5. Aspects of convenience that participants identified as affecting their decision to attend their current program (*n* = 47). Note that participants could choose multiple factors, so percentages will sum to greater than 100%.
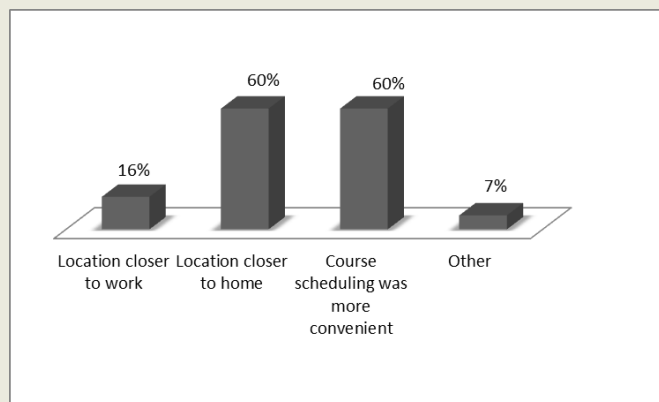
Participants were asked to provide additional open-ended responses to the question of how the delivery of course-work affected their program choice. One participant discussed his or her familiarity with the campus and the belief

that his or her institutional choice would help prepare him or her for a principal position. Another student discussed her or his preference for the orderly way the course work was planned so she or he could plan properly.

Recruiting Strategies

Participants were asked to rank the three factors that they believed to be the most effective in recruiting Master's-level students for Educational Leadership programs. The Condorcet method was used to analyze the ranked data (see Table 1 for the results). Online advertising was ranked as the top choice by most respondents, followed by contact from a program representative. The third highest was contact from a university representative.

From these rankings, it appears that students value online advertisements, yet it is interesting to note the category with advertising via social media was not ranked in the top three list of strategies. The second and third ranking that placed contact as important shows that, much like the factors that influenced their program selection, students still value personal contact when it comes selecting an educational program.

Table 1

Participants' Rankings of Recruiting Practices from Most to Least Effective in Master's-Level Educational Leadership Programs (n = 47)

Rank	Recruiting Practice
1	Online advertising
2	Contact from program representative
3	Contact from university representative
4	Face-to-face information session
5	Advertising via social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter)
6	Online information session
7	Advertising in popular print sources (e.g., newspapers, magazines)
8	Advertising in education-related trade journals
9	School district/service center contact
10	Word of mouth
11	Mailings

DISCUSSION

Participants identified delivery of coursework and convenience as the two most influential factors in choosing their current Educational Leadership graduate program. They reported a preference for a mixture of online and face-to-face delivery. Students mentioned family and professional obligations as key to the desire for at least some online instruction. Participants were also clear in their desire for a program that was convenient both in location and course scheduling. Scheduling was identified by participants as most important while convenience of location from home seemed to matter as well.

Given the increasing popularity of the fully online programs of for-profit universities and universities with for-profit marketing partnerships, it is not surprising to learn from the study results that students prefer convenience and at least some online delivery of coursework—two components that undoubtedly make up the fully online programs of

many for-profit institutions. It is interesting to note, however, that many of the participants indicated a preference to include at least some face-to-face instruction in a graduate program in Educational Leadership.

When it comes to recruitment strategies, students perceived online advertising and contact with university/program representatives as the most effective recruiting strategies. Combination of these strategies suggest university leaders should consider a mix of traditional, face-to-face recruiting methods, and new technological methods like social media to market their institution to prospective students. From these results, it is clear that Masters-level students believe that connecting with a face-to-face university representative is important. Yet the majority also chose online advertising as potentially effective. Future research could explore this further by investigating the kinds of online advertising that Masters-level students perceive as effective recruiting.

Implications for Practice

Results of the current study point to hybrid delivery of coursework and convenience as key to most graduate students' selections of Educational Leadership programs. Master's-level students are largely in agreement that a mixture of online and face-to-face coursework is preferred due to the flexibility that it offers for family and professional obligations.

Note, however, that all of the current study participants attend Educational Leadership programs at public institutions and, for that reason the results could be non-representative of the population at large. In addition, the respondents were largely female (75%) and Caucasian (76%), which could allow for potential bias. Regardless, the results offer interesting information concerning Educational Leadership programs at public regional institutions in the southwest United States. It may be that the students who chose public regional institutions valued at least some face-to-face instruction and chose a public institution as a direct result. Future studies could investigate that issue.

In sum, the results suggest that administrators of Educational Leadership would be wise to consider the convenience of their programs and hybrid course delivery options in order to maximize recruitment efforts and subsequent student enrollment. Results indicate that Master's students in Educational Leadership programs at public regional institutions prefer at least some face-to-face instruction, but enjoy the convenience that the online components offer as well. University leaders should consider utilizing employees to help recruit Master's-level students into their programs as contact with a person ranks high on effective recruiting strategies. The study results also revealed the fact that effective recruiting likely begins with catching prospective Master's students' attention via online advertising and following up with face-to-face contact to help boost enrollment. Reasoned action based on these results may help strengthen the marketing of Educational Leadership graduate programs at regional universities across the nation and their enrollment numbers as a result.

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