



Why Do Students Choose CSU Fullerton?

An Analysis of Responses to the Intent to Register Survey

Why do students choose CSU Fullerton over other institutions of higher learning? Is the primary factor the closeness of our campus to their homes? Or is it the attractiveness provided by our low fees, or the temperate weather? Perhaps students choose CSU Fullerton because the program offerings are unique. These factors were examined in a brief mail survey conducted by the Office of Enrollment Management in Spring of 1999. Dimensions chosen for analysis are shown in the box below.

<p>Reputation of college/univ (not important) 1—2—3—4—5 (very important)</p> <p>Cost of attendance (not important) 1—2—3—4—5 (very important)</p> <p>Availability of my major (not important) 1—2—3—4—5 (very important)</p> <p>Reputation of my major (not important) 1—2—3—4—5 (very important)</p> <p>Distance from home (not important) 1—2—3—4—5 (very important)</p> <p>Other very important factor(s), please specify: _____</p>

These factors were determined in collaboration with Dolores Vura, Director of Analytical Studies, Dr. James Blackburn, Director of Admissions and Records, and Chuck Moore, Director of Enrollment Management/University Outreach.

METHOD

Participants

The target population was comprised of all students applying for Fall 1999 admission to CSU Fullerton. Anonymity was not provided, as students were asked

to give identifying information in order to "reserve their place in the student body." No other incentives were offered.

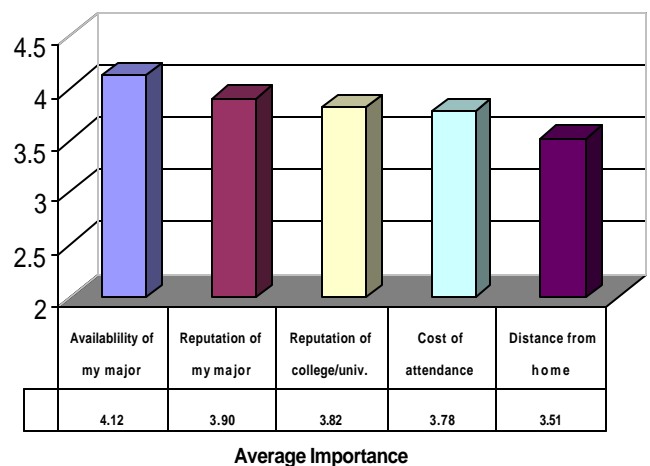
Instrument

The survey was designed by the Office of Enrollment Management and was printed on 8½ x 11-inch card stock with a single centerfold. The address label appeared in one quadrant, survey items in another, the return postpaid address in the third, and a letter to students in the fourth section. Overall, the survey appeared concise, professional, and well designed. Instructions to the student consisted of this statement, signed by the Admissions Officer:

Dear Student: The Cal State Fullerton community is happy that you have been admitted and your enrollment is eagerly awaited. This letter is about an opportunity for you to reserve your place in the 1999-2000 student body and for the university to make the best possible plan for your arrival on campus. Please complete and return the attached Statement of Intent to Register form by May 15, 1999 ... In doing so and in meeting any other enrollment conditions, you will be automatically invited to participate in New Student Orientation. ... Again, the Cal State Fullerton community looks forward to you joining us for New Student Orientation this summer and for the university's largest and best for fall semester.

On the other side, the instruction "Tear here and return" appeared above the "Intent to Register Form." Instructions read: "Check one: I will enroll in Cal State Fullerton for the fall 1999 semester." Or, "I will enroll in another college or university for the fall 1999 semester: Where?" This was followed by a space to write in the name of the competing institution. A third option was, "I will not enroll in any college or university for the fall 1999 semester."

Figure 1
Factors Influencing Choice of College





Vernon R. Padgett, Ph.D.
 Director (Acting)
 E-Mail: vpadgett@fullerton.edu

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Student Affairs Research Center
 Langsdorf Hall 206
 California State University
 P.O. Box 6830 • Fullerton, CA 92834-6830
 714.278.2591
<http://sa.fullerton.edu/studentresearch>

These instructions were next: "Among the various college characteristics that influenced your choice of school, which were deciding factors? Please rate each factor by circling the appropriate value:" Below these instructions appeared the five scales.

Following these items, ample space appeared for students to write their names, SSNs, signatures, and the date. The Likert-type scales, with 1 = Not Important, and 5 = Very Important, provided for cross-scale comparisons. In other words, a mean on the Reputation of College can be directly contrasted to a mean on the "Availability of my Major" scale.

Procedure

The CSUF Admissions Office provided mailing labels for all potential students who had applied for the Fall 1999 semester. This group comprised the study population and included all persons whose applications were received through the end of April 1999. Surveys were mailed out at the end of April to 5,986 CSUF admittees. Students were instructed to complete the survey and return no later than 15 May 1999. Ten respondents completed their survey over the telephone, due to some recipients receiving only one half of the survey (due to USPS damage). These students telephoned the EOP offices and were assisted in completing their surveys.

RESULTS

Data Handling

Surveys were received from 2,073 students. Another 59 were damaged by the USPS and not delivered. Return rate was 35 percent, a good response rate for a mail survey. Students who stated they would enroll numbered 1,401, and 672 students returned the survey stating they would not enroll in CSU Fullerton. An additional 11 students stated they would not enroll in any college for fall 1999. Because of their small number, they are not included in further analyses. Data were transcribed from the survey into an Excel database

then uploaded into SPSS 9.0 for statistical analyses. Very few responses were received to the request for "Other very important factor(s), please specify"; these are not discussed further.

Descriptive Statistics

The mean response from students on each of the five items is shown in Table 1. This table summarizes responses from all students, whether they are rating Cal State Fullerton, or the other school they chose. The most important factor in influencing choice of college, for all students, was "Availability of My Major," M = 4.12, followed in importance by "Reputation of My Major," M = 3.90. The least important factors influencing choice of college were "Distance from Home," M = 3.51, and "Cost of Attendance," M = 3.78. The relative importance of each of these five variables in influencing choice of college or university can be seen in Figure 1.

Did students who stated that they would attend CSU Fullerton differ from those who chose another college or university? Table 2 shows responses to each of the five items, categorized by "Yes: I will enroll in CSUF in Fall 1999" and "No: I will not enroll in CSUF." There are differences in the ratings of the factors, depending on whether students were rating CSU Fullerton, or a different school of choice.

As shown, the most important variable in the choice of which college to attend is "Availability of My Major" regardless of whether the student will or will not enroll in CSU Fullerton. For students planning to attend CSU Fullerton, the second most important factor was "Reputation of My Major." For those planning to attend college elsewhere, the second most important factor was "Reputation of College/University." Cost was the third most important factor for student coming to CSU Fullerton, but the third most important factor for the other students was "Reputation of My Major."

Inferential Statistics

Did students differ in responses to the factors, depending on their intent to register at CSU Fullerton? To answer this question, we analyzed responses on each item with Analysis of Variance.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Factors Influencing Choice of College for All Students

Item	Mean	N	Standard Deviation
Reputation of college/university	3.82	2032	.99
Cost of attendance	3.78	2037	1.17
Availability of my major	4.12	2028	1.05
Reputation of my major	3.90	2021	1.11
Distance from home	3.51	2033	1.27

Note. Scale is 1 to 5, with 1 = Not Important and 5 = Very Important.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Factors Influencing Choice of College by Intent to Register

	<i>"I Will Enroll in CSUF Fall 1999"</i>			
	<i>"Yes" (N = 1401)</i>		<i>"No" (N = 672)</i>	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Reputation of College/University	3.83	.95	3.81	1.07
Cost of Attendance	3.93	1.09	3.46	1.25
Availability of My Major	4.16	1.00	4.03	1.14
Reputation of My Major	3.96	1.07	3.80	1.18
Distance From Home	3.61	1.23	3.32	1.33

Reputation of College/University

Students' responses on the scale "Reputation of College/University" did not differ as a function of intent to register, $F(1, 2017) = ns$. As shown in Table 2, average responses were almost identical, whether students did, $M = 3.83$, or didn't, $M = 3.81$, intend to enroll at CSU Fullerton. The reputation of the college or university was not a deciding factor in the choice of which college to attend (although means for high prestige vs. low prestige schools may differ among the 672 enrolling elsewhere).

The remaining four factors each significantly differentiated students who would attend CSUF from those who would not attend CSUF. Each is statistically significant at $p < .011$. Two have very high significance levels of $p < .000$. Given the constant N across comparisons it is possible to assess the strength of effect or the relative importance of each factor by inspecting the magnitude of the F ratio.

Cost of attendance

The largest F statistic is associated with the Anova for the factor "Cost of Attendance." Students who will and will not attend CSUF differed most on this item, as compared to their respective differences on the other four items assessing factors influencing intent to register at a college or university. Those who will attend averaged 3.93, versus 3.46 for those who will not attend, $F(1, 2021) = 72.3, p < .000$. See Figure 2. Cost of Attendance was not the most important item in influencing choice of college, but it most differentiated those students choosing to attend from those choosing not to attend.

Availability of my major

Students who intended to register here, $M = 4.16$, differed from those not intending to register, $M = 4.03$ on the 1 to 5 Importance Scale, $F(1, 2014) = 6.50, p = .01$. Availability of major of choice was more important in the decision to attend CSUF for those so deciding than for those deciding against attending CSUF; however, both groups rate it slightly above "4" on the 1 to 5 scale of Importance in making the decision of where to attend a college or university.

Figure 2
Importance of Cost in Intent to Register

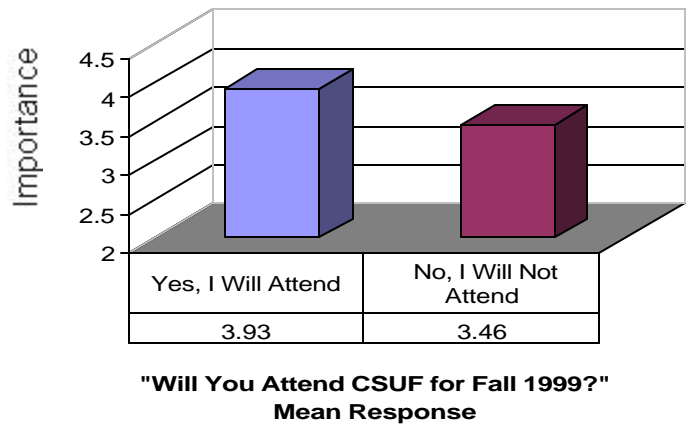


Figure 3
Importance of Distance from Home in Intent to Register

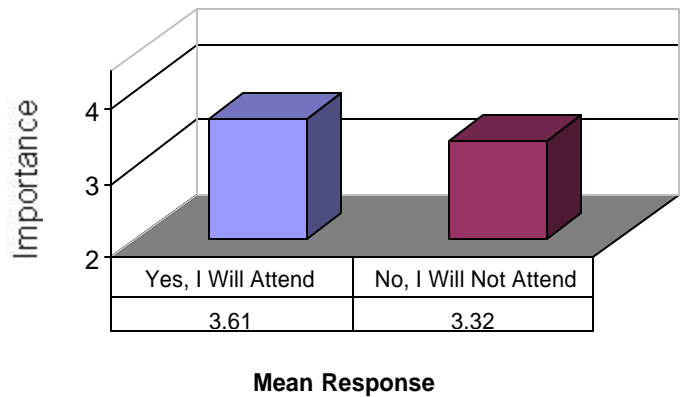
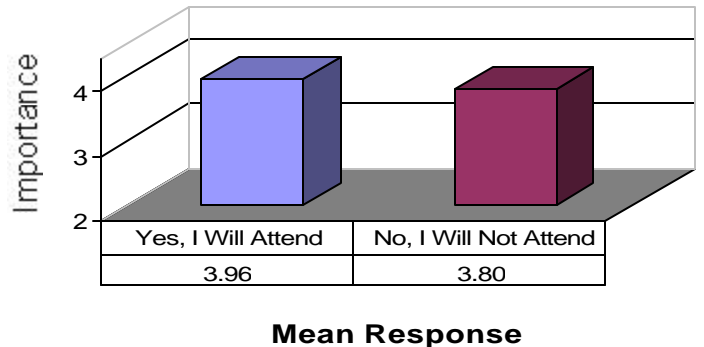


Figure 4
Importance of Reputation of Major in Intent to Register



Distance from home

Students who intended to register here, $M = 3.61$, differed from those not intending to register, $M = 3.32$ on the 1 to 5 Importance Scale, $F(1, 2017) = 23.21$, $p < .000$, indicating that distance from home was significantly more important in the decision to attend CSUF for those so deciding than for those deciding against attending CSUF. This difference is shown in Figure 3.

Reputation of my major

Students who intended to register here, $M = 3.96$, differed from those not intending to register, $M = 3.80$ on the 1 to 5 Importance Scale, $F(1, 2007) = 9.65$, $p = .002$. Reputation of major is more important in the decision to attend CSUF for those so deciding than for those deciding against attending CSUF. However, both groups rate it slightly below "4" on the 1 to 5 scale of Importance in making the decision of where to attend college or university, as shown in Figure 4.

Questions for Further Exploration

Which Factors are Most Important in Choice of College?

The most important factor in determining college is "Availability of my Major." Availability of Major is most important whether the student intends to register here, or, does not intend to register here. The next most important factor for influencing choice of college is "Reputation of my Major." Students who intend to register here rated this slightly higher in importance than they rated the third most important factor, "Cost of Attendance." "Distance from Home" was least important in determining which college or university a student chooses. To summarize these main findings, the most important factor, regardless of whether students are attending CSU Fullerton or not, is "Availability of Major"; the second most important factor for "our" students was "Reputation of My Major" but for students attending elsewhere was "Reputation of College/University." Third in importance for "our" students was "Cost" and third for the rest was "Reputation of My Major."

On Which Factors Do Students Who Intend to Register Differ from Students Not Intending to Register?

The largest difference between these two groups was on the factor "Cost of Attendance." Students who intend to register here indicated that cost of attendance was a more important factor in their decision to register than did students not intending to register at CSU Fullerton. The next greatest difference between these two groups was found on the factor "Distance

from Home." Students who are planning to attend indicated that distance from home was more important in their choice of college than students not planning to attend. Statistically significant differences occurred between students intending to register and those not intending to register on the items "Reputation of my major" and "Availability of my major." However, students who intended to register at CSUF ranked these factors only slightly more important to them than students who intended to register elsewhere in their choice of which college to attend. These findings must be viewed with caution, as we cannot determine whether students choosing not to attend CSU Fullerton are rating the factors important to them with respect to the school they have chosen to attend, or with respect to CSU Fullerton, or with respect to schools in general.

Practical Applications

Our main finding was that "Availability of Major" was the most important factor in a student's choice of which college to attend. Next most important, for students attending CSU Fullerton, was "Reputation of My Major." Based on these findings, we should make certain that all publications we provide to prospective students list not only the major but other academic programs as well, and present those programs in a manner that emphasizes their quality. We further must ensure that these publications are geared to the appropriate population: The 12th graders, and not to the counselors at those schools. While other factors are important to prospective students, it appears that the main theme of any outreach materials should focus on the programs available at CSU Fullerton, and the quality of those programs, as opposed to the convenient location of the school, or its low expense. The findings tell us we need to continue to examine avenues for the more effective marketing of each major and minor program offering.

The Office of Enrollment Management has already incorporated the survey results into its work efforts: All Outreach staff are now well-versed on the requirements of each major and each minor at CSU Fullerton. An Outreach counselor is now appointed to each School in order to gain a deeper understanding of each major and minor program. In addition, the new Connections Brochure is a directory that lists majors and contact phone numbers. This new publication is a direct result of the research outcomes. Another change in Outreach strategy is behavioral: Outreach staff are now directed to quickly connect prospective students with representatives from the majors and the major departments. We expect this change will improve recruitment by putting

prospective students in contact with faculty in their majors more quickly.

Directions for Future Research

Changes in the Spring of 2000 Survey will allow comparisons of responses of students who are attending CSU with those who are not. In the present survey, comparisons of students who were and were not planning to attend CSU Fullerton were not as clear as possible--rankings from students not choosing to attend may or may not have referred to CSU Fullerton. The item states "Among the various college characteristics that influenced your choice of school, which were deciding factors?" We cannot know whether a given ranking by a student who chooses to attend elsewhere is in relation to our institution or the one they are attending. In the new questionnaire students will rank the school **they are going to attend**. Students attending other schools can rank us, and we can compare ourselves to our competitors.

Note. This report was authored by Vernon R. Padgett, Ph.D., Student Affairs Research Center, and Chuck Moore, Enrollment Management/University Outreach. We thank Kristen Faircloth, Eduardo Marin, Darlene Trostad, and Edward B. Salas for technical assistance, and Kandy Mink, Naomi Goodwin, and Sue Boeltl for editorial review. In particular we thank Dolores Vura, whose substantive suggestions greatly improved the report. This is Research Report 1 of 1999-2000.