

Chapter 7

What 21st Century Students Want: Factors that Influence Student Selection of Educational Leadership Graduate Programs

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ABSTRACT

Enrollment numbers in graduate Educational Leadership programs are dwindling in many public higher education institutions across the United States. At the same time, for-profit institutions and institutions with private marketing partnerships have experienced increasingly greater enrollments. In this article, the authors present survey results of graduate students in Educational Leadership programs (N=100) to determine the factors that motivate students to select a particular graduate Educational Leadership program. Results suggest that Master's and doctoral-level students primarily select an Educational Leadership program based on the course delivery methods (with hybrid courses most preferred) and the convenience that the program offers in terms of scheduling and location.

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, the practice of marketing educational institutions was dismissed as undermining academic standards of quality and had little internal support (Anderson, 2008). However, government deregulation (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Jongbloed, 2003; Maringe, 2006) and technological change have altered the educational marketplace and rattled established university recruitment practices. Students now shop for education in national and global markets (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). No longer bound by schools in geographic proximity, students have unprecedented options: from premiere universities (e.g. Harvard, Stanford, MIT) offering massive open online courses (MOOC) to globally

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-0978-3.ch007

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delivered professional degrees (e. g. Coursera consortium; Johnson, 2012). Almost overnight, the combination of deregulation and technology advanced transformed universities from social institutions to an industry (Anctil, 2008). Like other commercial entities, universities now compete fiercely to keep paying customers – their students.

Despite a rising demand for higher education, growth for public institutions of higher education experienced a 1.1% decline in graduate student enrollment from 2009 to 2011 (Mehaffey, 2012; Redwing, 2012). By comparison, for-profit institutions saw a 30% increase in enrollment from 2008 to 2010. Commercial entities (e. g. University of Phoenix, Career Education Corporation, DeVry, Kaplan Education, and ITT Education Services) provide credentials and degree programs for a profit. For-profits' market share is increasing as they eliminate overhead by hiring less qualified, non-union, and non-tenured faculty (Mehaffey, 2012). Economic demand for these institutions is reflected by their 11% market share in 2009 (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System [IPEDS], 2010) and reported revenue of 19 billion dollars in 2008-09 (United States Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011).

To compete with for-profit institutions, some public universities have partnered with for-profit firms to market their online degree programs. Public-private partnerships ostensibly grew from a desire to transform traditional on-campus programs into fully online degree programs. In Texas, the resulting shift in the marketplace was swift. Shortly after the public Lamar University partnered with a private marketing firm, enrollment in two of its graduate education programs increased from 226 to 4,100 (Academic Partnership, 2012). Lamar's unprecedented growth sapped enrollment from similar programs offered at other Texas public universities. Similarly, when The University of Texas at Arlington partnered with a for-profit marketing firm, enrollment in their Master's degree in Educational Leadership subsequently increased by 402% (THECB, 2012). Intended or not, these programs altered enrollment at many state universities and produced a supply of graduates perhaps greater than the market demand. Such public-private partnerships in Texas likely exist in public institutions across the United States.

Shift in Public University Marketing Strategies

The professional literature yields few results of effective graduate recruiting and marketing plans before 2006 (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Higher education has since become a highly competitive market, and more aggressive recruiting methods are on the rise. Recruiters see students as investors in their own future rather than as learners, citizens, or scholars (Reader, 2011). Universities use direct brand marketing to create awareness, generate automatic responses, and manage customer relationships for client recruitment and retention (Sevier, 2004). In addition, target marketing identifies and pursues prospective students (Lewison & Hawes, 2007).

Nevertheless, as public universities engage the market, they are outstripped by more seasoned for-profit recruiters with deeper recruiting pockets. For example, the University of Phoenix's enrollment spiked in 2009 when a technically sophisticated 24-hour-a-day recruiting operation was implemented by highly trained enrollment and financial-aid counselors (Blumenstyk, 2011). Not to be outdone, Academic Partnerships increased enrollment in 2013 by offering free course credit with successful completion of MOOCs should students attend the university (Kolowich, 2013). Most recently, Western Governor's University created a competency-based model in which students complete an unlimited number of courses for a set price per semester. Limited recruiting dollars at public universities have made it difficult to compete with the commercial marketplace advantages of for-profit institutions.

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