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A very crucial turning point in one's life: College/University choice

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Abstract

This study aims to find the factors that impact students' college choice in different contexts. The researchers will be doing a cross-cultural study in order to see whether students in the USA and Turkey share the same or different concerns during this entire process. Since college is a determining factor in the profession students will be trained to practice, the researchers believe it will be interesting to see what kinds of issues students are considering while making their choices in both cultures. A questionnaire will be used in this cross-cultural study and will be administered in the three different institutions. This current study will use gender as the variable to understand how gender becomes instrumental in making the college choice.

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1. Introduction

As of the very first day one embarks on the journey we may simply call “education,” one plunges into an ocean full of new venture. Each venture takes one up to a higher level until the time comes when the student has to decide whether to seek higher education and, if so, has to determine which college to attend (for the purpose of this study, the terms “college” and “university” are used to imply an institution of higher learning). According to the Carnegie Foundation, for most young people, the decision to attend college is probably the most important decision they will have made in their lives thus far. This is the choice that will help a person build for the future and a critical decision that will shape his or her life for years to come.

John Dewey says education is the social continuity of life (Dewey, 1916, p.10). It is only education, he asserts, that fills the gap between the immature and the civilized. With the growing needs of our present day societies, and the rapid developments occurring in all aspects of life, Dewey's statement becomes justified. As early as the 1930s, Dewey was a proponent of hands on learning or experiential education, and considering the new generation of college students, it is apparent that their educational aspirations are inclined toward Project Based Learning rather than traditional tuition when making their college choices.

All candidates have their own aspirations to fulfill. In his 1837 speech “The American Scholar,” Ralph Waldo Emerson said that educators should, “set the hearts of their youth on fire.” It is of vital importance that students

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should be encouraged to find the best college that nurtures the knowledge they are in pursuit of. Hence schools play a significant role in shaping the goals students have set for themselves.

"There is, perhaps, no college decision that is more thought-provoking, gut wrenching and rest-of-your life oriented - or disoriented - than the choice of [college]." (St. John. In Beggs et. al., 2006, p. 381) In the college classroom, one confronts students who are either overwhelmingly happy for being where they are, or utterly regretful for having made that choice. It should not be forgotten that in some cultures parents have a great role in the decision- making process. Such parents put pressure on the youth, and rather than letting them choose a college according to their talents, capabilities, aptitude and perhaps most importantly their aspirations, parents fulfill their own dreams through their children.

As such is the case in some cultures, it is worthwhile dwelling on this issue from the perspective of the population of this study that is comprised of two distinct cultures: Turkish and American. In Turkey, it is a very common practice to see some teenagers sitting in the college classroom in a very irresponsible way. This is due to parental influence. These students have two options: They either have to major in an area they have no interest in or leave school, and stay at home. This would mean boys would fulfill their military obligation while girls would get married to the man of their parent's choice. Parents would want their young adult teens to have not just any but prestigious professions in the future that they could brag about. Medical schools or engineering schools are at the top of their list. Through private tutoring and constant support/pressure, such parents would make sure their teens score high points in the university entrance examination.

In the USA, the situation is rather different. Whether it is a state college or a private one that students go to, they still have to pay for tuition. Rates change tremendously from school to school, and that is the point where students feel some parental influence because it is the parents who have to cover the tuition and other costs if the student cannot get financial aid or a scholarship. However, many parents leave it to their teenagers to decide what program they want to pursue at the college and which college they will attend.

This study aims to find the factors that impact students' college choice in different contexts. The researchers will be doing a cross-cultural study in order to see whether students in Turkey and in the USA share the same or different concerns during this entire process. In order to better understand how they acted throughout the entire ordeal, the researchers first elicited responses to understand how the students approached the colleges they considered as a possibility. When we consider the youth of today to that of the past, it is apparent that they want to embark on a life of their own once they are out of high school. Do they also aspire to leave the home area when they go to college? Is this situation valid in both cultures? Do both cultures allow teens in this age group to proclaim their independence that soon? The survey responses are expected to show how they compare, another important factor.

A further decisive factor among the self-conscious students is how they perceive education, educational standards, educational facilities, and what the institution will do for them once they are out of school. This current study aims to pinpoint how students, based on their gender differences, conceive higher education when they are on the verge of making such an important decision.

Since college is a determining factor in the profession students will be trained to practice, the researchers believe it will be interesting to see what students consider while making their college choices in both cultures. Scholars in different parts of the world have studied this issue, as well. Beggs et.al., (2006) conducted their research using a holistic approach very similar to what the writers of this paper have planned to implement from the very start, and hence have a qualitative and quantitative study which will better explain the factors that affect choices students make on the road to tertiary education. A Russian scholar, O.M. Razumnikova, in her article "The Interaction Between Gender Stereotypes and Life Values as Factors in the Choice of Profession," mentions the gender differences in the entire process stating, "In spite of the proclaimed 'equal opportunities' for men and women when it comes to acquiring some profession, stereotypical notions about "men's" or "women's" specialties... still hold sway among a substantial portion of the population" (Razumnikova, 2005, p. 21). Therefore, this current study will use gender to understand how gender becomes instrumental in making a college choice.

2. Background of the Study

High school senior year students, whether it be the Turkish pretext or the American pretext, feel overwhelming pressure due to the fact that they have to make their choices. It is the choice that will build their future, and therefore

will need imminent attention. Not only the internal factors but numerous external factors have to be considered as well. Tierney, Houang and Henson in their joint paper "Alternative Estimation Procedures for Studies of Student College Choice Behavior: A Cross-Validation Analysis," presented a model of influences that explains the public versus private matriculation decision. They propose that the probability of a student's decision to matriculate in a public institution is a function of the student's sex, ability, family income, institutional tuition, distance from the institution, institutional selectivity, and total financial aid offers (Tierney et.al., 1979, p. 30).

All related literature suggest that external influences can be categorized under three headings. These are namely the influence of significant persons as to where a student will live and study during the college years, the institution's efforts to be able to reach out to prospective students, and the popularity, appeal, and ranking of the institution. Students in Turkey and the USA do feel these influences help shape their expectancies of college life.

3. Literature Review

Research has been carried out across both countries, as it is an imminent concern to the colleges to know how their prospective students make their choices, and what criteria they use during the decision making process about applications, opportunities, fees, popularity, location, financial aid, and other similar points.

Mattern and Wyatt state that students often consider the location, specifically the distance from home, of a college when narrowing down the ones they want to apply to. Despite this fact, they claim, there is a limited amount of research investigating actual student behavior. The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) published a study (Pryor et al. 2005) that indicated that first-generation students, students whose parents have no college experience, are more likely to stay closer to home (Mattern and Wyatt, 2009).

All literature related to this study agrees unanimously that college search requires all students to ask themselves how they want their colleges to look, what matters the most, and what shortcomings they will tolerate in areas outside their primary requirements (Shaw et.al., 2009). The variables students usually resort to as they make their choice are academic performance, demographic characteristics, home and school characteristics, and participation in school activities.

Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith describe student college choice as "a complex, multistage process during which an individual develops aspirations to continue formal education beyond high school, then later makes a decision to attend a specific college, university or institution of advanced vocational training" (Hossler et.al., 1989, p. 238).

Each and every student has his/her own aspirations, and hence makes the choices in line with these aspirations. Bergerson (2009) writes that the process of choosing whether and where to go to college is conceived of as a linear process in which students develop aspirations for college (even as they commence their search for potential colleges to attend) and finally choose a particular college in which they enroll.

Bergerson (2009) and Teranishi, Ceja, Antonio, Allen, and McDonough (2004) have pointed out that the most widely cited and used process model known as the three-stage model was developed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). This model posits that student college choice is a developmental process, consisting of three developmental stages: predisposition, search, and choice.

Predisposition, the first stage, refers to the period when students develop aspirations for college and decide whether to go to college or choose other alternatives, such as work or military service.

Search is the second stage; students actively seek information on specific institutions and develop a list of colleges to which they intend to apply. Choice is the final stage in which students complete applications and choose a particular college to enter (207).

It has also been pointed out by researchers that visits to colleges can provide opportunities for ... deeper evaluation, allowing students to ask themselves whether or not a school feels like the right place for them. It is important to find a place where the type of people present and the philosophy of the institution align with the prospective student's personal interests, goals and values (Martin, 2009).

Beggs et.al., (2006) in their study state that every institution [has] to consider its own unique qualities including the pool from which its student body is recruited. They also mention the fact that socioeconomic background, number of first generation college students, and geographic focus of recruiting will have an impact on how career related information should be packaged and delivered.

Applying to college is a rigorous process based on a reciprocal relationship between students and institutions, as both actively search to meet their own needs and aspirations for the best education and student body, respectively (Rubin, 2008).

4. Methodology

This paper is a cross-sectional survey since the researchers are interested in the opinions of a group of people about a particular issue. In this type of research, information is collected through asking questions in order to describe the beliefs of a sample population (Frankel and Warren, 2008, p. 390). As with all surveys, the problem has been defined, the target population has been identified, and the mode of data collection has been determined.

As Frankel and Warren suggest, the inventory was directly administered to students at Macon State College (MSC) in the U.S., and Aegean University and Bilgi University in Turkey. Demographic questions were used to gather information about the students and their background. Variables were gender, age, school type, and education of the mother and father. Data collected was analyzed to see if there were relationships between variables. The study attempted to understand the students' reasons for college selection.

5. Data Analysis and Results

The main concern of the researchers in this study was to learn the students' reasons for choosing a college. The population consisted of eighty-five students. Forty of the students were from Macon State College (MSC) in the U.S., twenty of the students from Aegean University in Turkey, and twenty-five students (all male) from Bilgi University in Turkey. The gender frequency was 44 males, or 52%, and the frequency of females was 41, or 48%. The age range was 16-56, with only 5 students older than the age of 19. Every student, except one, attended public schools. The education of the mothers and fathers was very similar. Since age, school type, and parental education coincided, it was decided that gender would be the only useful variable to use.

The surveys were translated into English and Turkish. Fifteen questions were asked, with multiple answers to choose from. Based on the data gathered from the return of a total of eighty-five usable questionnaires (100% of the returns), the researchers determined these particular students made up their minds about college choice by using college recruiting practices, using issues of whether to stay in the same home area or not, and using decisions related to the quality of education they would receive.

Pertaining to college recruiting practices, all students agreed (questions 9 & 12) that campus visits where they could meet with current students were very important to them. MSC students and Bilgi male students agreed on question 11 that they benefited, also, from the information colleges provided on their Internet web pages. Male and female students from Aegean totally disagreed and did not find the Internet web pages to be reliable. These results are a striking contrast since today most students rely on Internet information to help them make decisions. Question #6 asked students to rank which campus activities were more important to them – education, social/cultural, or sports. Students at the three institutions stated education was most important. Social/cultural ranked as second, and sports ranked as third in importance.

Students were asked how much of their college decision was based on a preference to stay home, or close by, or to leave the area (questions 1 & 2). MSC students who are attending a college in their area cited affordability and parental pressure to stay close to home. Aegean and Bilgi students attending the university in their area said that the university was as good as ones elsewhere. The Aegean females and Bilgi males further indicated that they would prefer to stay close to home. Male students at MSC and Aegean who wanted to leave the area cited the reason as being they thought they would receive a better education if they left. Female MSC students who wanted to leave the area gave no specific reason. Female Aegean students said if they left the region that they would leave in order to learn about new cultures. All students who responded that they wanted to relocate cited the desire to assume more responsibility.

When students were asked if they planned transfer (question 3), the majority of students said “no,” except for MSC females who answered “yes.” For question 13, all students answered that the proximity of the campus was a decisive factor in their decision-making. Question 14 asked where students would choose to live. All males

answered that they would prefer to live with their family. All females answered that they would prefer to share a house with others.

All answers indicated that the level of education they received should be at the highest standards and that the qualifications of the faculty were very important to the students. Turkish students were particularly concerned (questions 5 & 7) that their diploma would be recognized internationally. Aegean males and MSC students did not seem as concerned about international job possibilities. The students further indicated that a good education would lead to a good job, and that was their ultimate goal.

6. Conclusion

As this study included students from two distinct backgrounds and cultures, i.e., Turkey and the USA, the researchers were expecting diverse responses as to how these students make their college choices. However, due to their similar background characteristics and the remarkable similarity of their responses, the only variable that proved useful in the study was gender. The only question that revealed a great difference in the way of thinking between the US and Turkish students was that the Turkish students, and females in particular, were concerned the diploma should be recognized internationally and the level of education should be at internationally accepted standards.

There are many factors that affect college choice. The questionnaire asked students about college costs, what they expected to find in a college, how they went about familiarizing themselves with college, parental pressure, and many other influential issues. Out of all the questions asked to these students from the two countries, the majority of the responses focused on college recruitment practices, issues of whether to stay in the home area or not, and decisions related to the quality of education they would receive at the college of their choice.

Despite the limitations the researchers encountered throughout the entire process, the results give an insight into how students in both countries go about making one of the most important decisions of their life – college choice.

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