

**Factors Influencing College Choice of Matriculants and Non-Matriculants: A Generational Comparison**

Julie Scroggs  
University of Missouri  
2-04 Agriculture Building  
Columbia, MO 65211  
(573) 884-3244  
scroggsj@missouri.edu

D. Adam Cletzer  
University of Missouri  
122 Gentry Hall  
Columbia, MO 65211  
(573) 884-6503  
cletzerd@missouri.edu

The rate of jobs in agriculture, food and natural resources (AFNR) industries is expected to grow by about 2.6% between 2020 and 2025 (Fernandez et al., 2019). These industries create about 59,400 jobs every year. The current trajectory of AFNR graduates able to fill those jobs is around 36,100 — 61% of the overall graduate pool. This projection means that about 40% of jobs within AFNR industries will be filled by people without AFNR degrees. In order to create an innovative and diverse workforce in AFNR industries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, higher education institutions need to recruit, retain, and graduate students ready for those industries. How can colleges cultivate this workforce? One important consideration is the characteristics of current high school students: Generation Z. Recruiting Gen-Z students requires colleges of agriculture (COAs) to revise their tactics as they transition from recruiting Millennials to Gen Z'ers. While there are many studies of college choice (e.g., Rocca & Washburn, 2005; Robinson, Garton, & Washburn, 2007; Shrestha et al., 2011), they typically focus only on students who were admitted and chose to attend a particular college. This study goes two steps further. First, it compares both matriculants and non-matriculants at a large, Midwestern COA. Second, since this study is a replication of a 2002 study (Washburn, 2002), it also compares factors influencing college choice across two generations at the same COA.

### **Literature Review and Conceptual Framework**

This study uses Chapman's (1981) college choice model as its conceptual framework. Chapman (1981) states there are certain characteristics or influences that impact a student's college choice. The first are the characteristics a student has, such as aptitude and socio-economic status. Second are external influences, such as influential persons. Third, fixed characteristics of a school, such as location, cost, size, etc. Finally, how the college reaches out to its prospective students (e.g., campus visits, calls from a recruiter) is the last characteristic. Now, we briefly review Chapman's (1981) college choice framework, as it relates to Gen Z students. First, student characteristics; an important determinant of Gen-Z's characteristics has been the Great Recession and now the COVID-related recession. Financial scarcity and household upheaval have impacted how these students look at their futures and how they make their college decisions. Today's students are believed to be more concerned about cost and financial aid, and they want to know about their return on investment (Loveland, 2017). Second, significant persons; studies of Gen-Z suggest peers now have a higher impact on their decision to attend a particular college than do parents, teachers, etc. (Rickes, 2016). Third, fixed characteristics of school; cost of tuition, financial aid opportunities, and job prospects are all paramount for Gen-Z recruits (Loveland, 2017). Finally, outreach and communication; among studies of COAs, visiting campus (Shrestha et al., 2011), meeting with faculty members (Setterbo et al., 2017), and written communication (Baker et al., 2013) are three of the most important ways to reach today's prospective students.

### **Purpose & Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to determine the degree to which various factors influenced admitted students' decision to enroll or not enroll in the College of Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources (CAFNR) at the University of Missouri — Columbia (Mizzou), and to compare Millennial and Gen-Z students. This study addressed research priority 3 of the AAAE research agenda (Stripling & Ricketts, 2016) and is guided by the following research objectives:

1. Compare the levels of influence of significant persons, fixed characteristics, and sources of information impacting decision to attend CAFNR between matriculants and non-matriculants.
2. Compare trends in college choice decision-making processes among matriculating and non-matriculating students between fall 2001 and fall 2020.

### **Methods**

This descriptive, self-reported survey research study (Ary et al., 2013) was a census of matriculating ( $n=585$ ) and non-matriculating ( $n=908$ ) students in CAFNR at Mizzou during the fall semester of 2020. This study relied on the same instrumentation utilized in Washburn (2002) in order to accurately compare students across time. The primary 74-item questionnaire was initially developed in 2000 by Washburn and based on a review of literature current at the time (e.g., Christmas, 1989; Cole & Fanno, 1999; DesJardins et al., 1997; Kealy & Rockel, 1987; Killian, 1999; Scofield, 1995; Taylor & Johnston, 1993) and organized around Chapman's (1981) Model of Influences on Student College Choice. It was administered to students admitted to CAFNR in fall 2001. In 2020, matriculants were administered the questionnaire on a rolling basis during CAFNR's Summer Welcome program using Dillman's tailored design method (Dillman et al., 2009), and received a 66.6% response rate of usable questionnaires ( $n=390$ ). Non-matriculants were administered their questionnaire later, in October 2020, via online survey platform Qualtrics, using Dillman's tailored design method (Dillman et al., 2009); non-matriculants received a 15.2% response rate of usable questionnaires ( $n=138$ ).

### **Results/Discussion/Conclusions**

First, significant persons; parent/guardian was the top ranked person of influence for both matriculants and non-matriculants. Among matriculants, parent/guardian rose three places from 2001, displacing "Relative who attended college." Interestingly, among matriculants, "High school agriculture teacher" fell from fifth place in 2001 to 10th today, while it held steady at 11th among non-matriculants. This finding conflicts with broader studies of Gen-Z that suggest peers have the highest influence (Rickes, 2016), suggesting perhaps students enrolling in COAs differ on who they look to for guidance on attending college.

Second, fixed characteristics of the institution; "opportunities after graduation" was a primary factor for both matriculants (first) and non-matriculants (second). This factor rose from 2001 (third and seventh, respectively). The largest gap between matriculants and non-matriculants was "cost" (seventh and first, respectively). This gap also existed in 2001 (ninth and third, respectively), but among both groups "cost" edged higher in importance. This supports research that Gen-Z is generally more concerned with costs and return on investment (Loveland, 2017).

Third, sources of information; matriculants and non-matriculants shared the same rank order of the top four sources of information: "visit to campus," "degree program website," "personal conversation with a representative," and "university website." Matriculants today seem to have mirrored non-matriculants in 2001, who similarly ranked those sources of information (first, second, fifth, and third, respectively). One interesting finding was the low importance today's students place on print publications, which were ranked between seventh and 17<sup>th</sup>.

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