



Where Did They Go: An Analysis of Why Admitted Students Did Not Enroll in UNA

Office of Institutional Research,
Planning, and Assessment

About the Author

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Methodology.....	3
Results - Descriptive Data.....	4
Results - Telephone Survey.....	11
Conclusion.....	13
References.....	15

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment was directed to find out as much information as it could about the students who were admitted to UNA for the fall 2013 semester but who did not enroll (n=1,112). Highlights of the information gathered is below:

- A total of 46% of the students are attending two-year colleges.
- A total of 22% attend Masters/Comprehensive institutions with the large majority enrolling in Jacksonville State University, Troy University, and the University of Montevallo.
- Out of those students who attended a Masters/Comprehensive institution, 36% attended a private college or university.
- Most students chose institutions that were closer to home than UNA. However, within UNA's Primary Service Area, many of these students attended institutions further away than UNA.
- The primary reason for not attending UNA was that they were not awarded a scholarship.

The study also concluded the following:

- A large part of UNA's market niche is concerned about price and may look for lower cost alternative if they believe their perceived value will be the same or better.
- Many in UNA's market niche are also enrolling in private institutions where, while costs are higher, a higher value may be perceived.
- UNA should strive to keep student costs down to a minimum, while creating unique programs designed to minimize the effect of costs increases. Such programs could include specifically targeted scholarship opportunities, as well as academic procedures to help students earn their degree in four years.
- By UNA offering the Vanguard Scholarship Program, the institution should create higher demand of target students while, at the same time, aim its broader message toward quality rather than cost.
- UNA clearly should strengthen its branding and messaging by focusing on the unique benefits to students who enroll at its institution.

INTRODUCTION

Shortly after the official census data collection for the fall 2013, it was discovered that UNA's acceptances to enrollment yield had dropped from its normal rate of 39% to 34%. This five-percentage point drop in matriculation culminated in approximately 136 fewer freshmen enrolled at UNA.

This drop also accounted for a 9.5% decrease of new freshmen enrolled from the previous fall semester. On September 26th, the Vice President of Academic Affairs and Provost's Office directed the Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment to gather whatever data was available concerning these students who chose not to attend UNA.

Nationwide, data indicates that both new freshman and current student enrollments are declining. The U.S. Census reported that college enrollment declined for the first time in six years during the fall 2012 semester and that trend is continuing this fall (Reuters, 2013). According to Moody's Investors Service (2013), enrollment challenges will persist for several years, and those institutions likely to suffer the biggest squeeze will have a larger dependency on tuition as their primary revenue source.

Understanding where these students decided to enroll (if they enrolled at all) and why they chose a particular institution over UNA are seminal questions that should be addressed within the institution's enrollment management research plan. This study addresses these questions of students who were admitted to UNA during the fall 2013 semester but who decided to attend another institution. The methodology used in this study, along with results obtained, is included within this report.

METHODOLOGY

After the Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment (OIRPA) completed its official collection of census data from the fall 2013 semester, it utilized the cooperative efforts of both the Admissions and Registrar offices to generate a list of those students who were admitted to the institution but who did not enroll (n=1,112). On October 10th, this list was then forwarded to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center to determine the status of each of these students.

The National Student Clearinghouse is the nation's leading source for education verification and student outcomes research. Currently, most US higher education institutions participate in data sharing with this organization and, according to the Clearinghouse; it maintains data on almost 98 % of all higher education students within the US. The Research Center provides student outcomes data to higher education institutions, states, school districts, and educational organizations.

On October 15th, the Clearinghouse responded with a report indicating the enrollment status and other demographic data of each student on the list. The Clearinghouse was able to find data on 838 of the original 1,112 list of students (75%). Reasons why the Clearinghouse could not find data on all of the students could be attributed to one or more of the following:

1. The institution where the student enrolled does not share data with the Clearinghouse
2. The student decided not to enroll in a higher education institution
3. A Clearinghouse-participating institution had not yet submitted their data

From these 838 students, various comparative descriptive data were generated based on information provided by the Clearinghouse, as well as data collected by UNA during the application process.

In addition to the descriptive data, OIRPA also conducted telephone interviews with those students who decided to enroll in an institution similar in role, scope, mission, and size, to UNA. Respondents were asked why they decided not to enroll in UNA and what the institution could have done differently to ensure that the student would have chosen UNA.

“The National Student Clearinghouse is the nation's leading source for education verification and student outcomes research.”

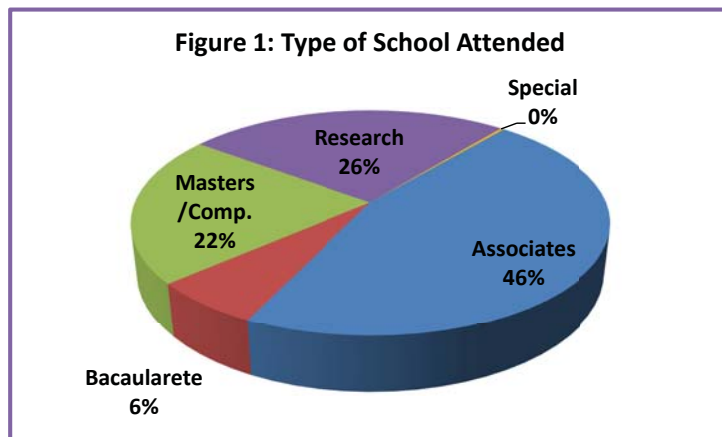
Where Did They Go: An Analysis of Why Admitted Students Did Not Enroll in UNA

RESULTS - DESCRIPTIVE DATA

The following results came from data obtained from the Admissions and Registrar offices at UNA as well as from the National Student Clearinghouse:

Type of Institution Attended

Based on an abridged classification of institutional types from the Carnegie Commission, students were placed into type of institution they attended. For purposes of comparison, UNA is classified as a Masters/Comprehensive institution. The data in **Figure 1** indicates that the majority of students who decided not to attend UNA enrolled in an Associates-level or two-year college (46%). Out of this percentage, 104 enrolled in Calhoun



Community College, 85 enrolled in Northwest Shoals Community College, and over 40 enrolled in both Wallace State Community College and Beville State Community College.

A total of 216 students enrolled in a Doctoral-Granting Research institution (26%). Out of this percentage, 77 enrolled in The University of Alabama, 33 enrolled in Auburn University, and 32 enrolled in The University of Alabama – Birmingham.

A total of 180 students enrolled in a Masters/Comprehensive university (22%). Out of this percentage, 28 enrolled in Jacksonville State University, 22 enrolled in Troy University, and 18 enrolled in the University of Montevallo.

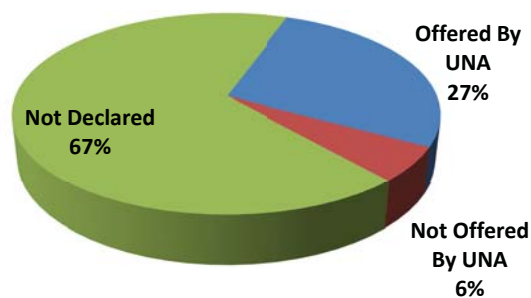
It should be noted that, based on a prior study by Luna and Vaughn (2012), the two- and four-year institutions mentioned above are also the predominant institutions of choice when students transfer out from UNA.

“A total of 180 students enrolled in a Masters/ Comprehensive university (22%). Out of this percentage, 28 enrolled in Jacksonville State University, 22 enrolled in Troy University, and 18 enrolled in the University of Montevallo.”

Where Did They Go: An Analysis of Why Admitted Students Did Not Enroll in UNA

General assumptions can be made as to why students decided to attend either a two-year college or one of the state's four-year research institutions over UNA. With this in mind, a major focus of this research concerned why students who were accepted at UNA decided to attend another similar Masters/Comprehensive institution. One significant reason students may decide on one institution over another is academic program (major) availability. However, as shown in **Figure 2**, this may not provide an adequate explanation. Out of all students who chose another Masters/Comprehensive institution over UNA, only 6%

Figure 2: Majors Sought Masters/Comprehensive



“Out of all students who chose another Masters/Comprehensive institution over UNA, only 6% chose an academic program not offered by UNA.”

chose an academic program not offered by UNA. The vast majority (67%) did not declare a major and 27% chose programs that were also offered at UNA.

Throughout the rest of this section, descriptive data from all of the 838 students will be compared to those 180 students who chose to attend a Masters/Comprehensive institution.

Primary Residence of Students

According to **Figures 3-A and 3-B**, the majority of students from both groups came from UNA's primary service area. This primary area includes Colbert, Cullman, Franklin, Lauderdale, Lawrence, Limestone, Madison, Marion, Morgan, Walker, and Winston

Figure 3-A: Primary Residence All Students

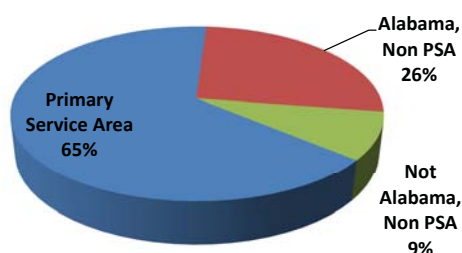
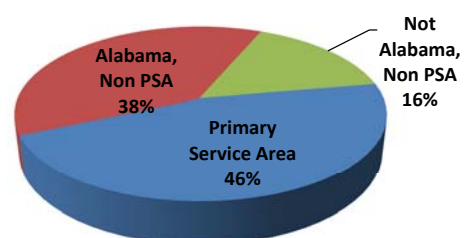


Figure 3-B: Primary Residence Masters/Comprehensive Students



Where Did They Go: An Analysis of Why Admitted Students Did Not Enroll in UNA

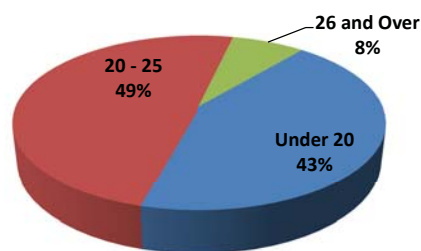
counties in Alabama; Alcorn, Itawamba, Lee, Prentiss, and Tishomingo counties in Mississippi; and Decatur, Giles, Hardin, Henderson, Lawrence, Lewis, Lincoln, Maury, McNairy, Perry, and Wayne counties in Tennessee. A significantly higher percentage of Masters/Comprehensive students came from Alabama counties outside the primary service area and from outside the state as compared to the All Students group. An explanation of this difference can be attributed to the large number of Primary Service Area students within the All Students group who attended two-year colleges.

For example, over 65% of All Students came from the Primary Service Area as compared to those enrolled in only Masters/Comprehensive institutions. Likewise, within the All Students group, 26% came from within the State but outside of the Primary Service Area as compared to 38% of the Master's Comprehensive group.

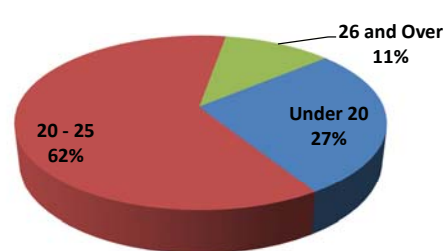
ACT Composite Score

The ACT Composite Score average for all students in the group as well as those who attended Masters/Comprehensive institutions was 21. This is the same average as the ACT Composite score of UNA's entering freshman cohort for fall 2013. While the distribution of ACT Composite Score for All Students and Masters/Comprehensive students is similar (**Figures 4-A and 4-B**), there is a significantly higher percentage of Masters/Comprehensive students who have scores that fall within the 20-25

**Figure 4-A: ACT Composite Score
All Students**



**Figure 4-B: ACT Composite Score
Masters/Comprehensive Students**



range. While this difference in distribution is understandable, it may also support recent initiation of the Vanguard Scholarship Program whereby some scholarship dollars are diverted to give partial scholarships to students earning a 23 or 24 ACT score.

For example, out of the 180 students who decided to attend

Where Did They Go: An Analysis of Why Admitted Students Did Not Enroll in UNA

a Masters/Comprehensive institution, 108 of them came from UNA's Primary Service Area. Out of these students, 26 (24%) would have been eligible for a partial scholarship through the Vanguard program. A total of 18 of these 108 students (17%) earned ACT scores higher than 24. It is interesting to note that, during the telephone interview, the majority of these 44 students cited scholarship availability and cost of attendance as the main factor that kept them from attending UNA. However, it should also be noted that 19 students of these 44 (44%) made the decision to attend a private institution.

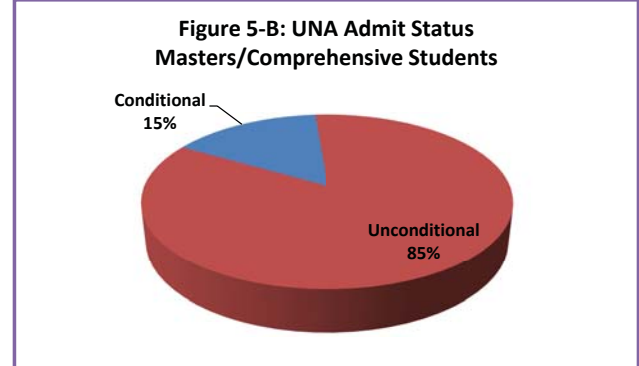
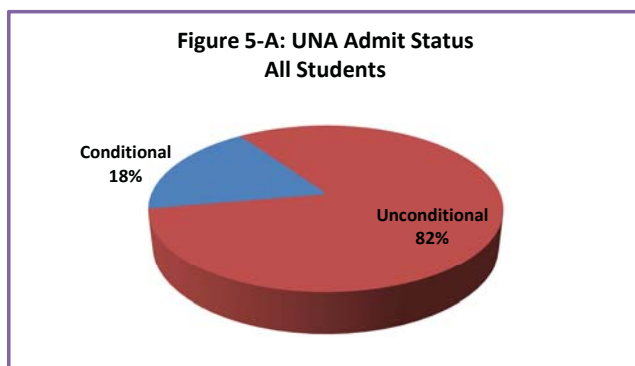
Enrollment Status of Students

According to UNA policy, freshmen may be admitted to the institution as either conditional or unconditional. A conditionally admitted student does not meet the general requirement threshold for the ACT score or high school grade point average within the student's core units.

A Temporary Admit status indicates that the institution is missing an official document (i.e. ACT scores, final high school transcript, dually enrolled college transcript, etc.). Therefore, students were either classified as Temporary or Complete and as either Conditional or Unconditional. Since the Temporary and Complete status have little bearing on a student's academic ability, this study condensed status as either Conditional or Unconditional.

It should be noted that Conditionally admitted freshmen are not eligible for any of UNA's "Excellence" or merit-based scholarships. However, some of these students could receive band or athletic scholarships.

According to **Figures 5-A and 5-B**, the overwhelming majority of



students within both groups were admitted unconditionally. This information could also be useful to further support UNA's initia-

Where Did They Go: An Analysis of Why Admitted Students Did Not Enroll in UNA

tion of the Vanguard Scholarship Program.

Institutional Governance

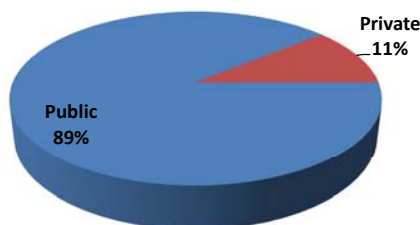
While state support of public higher education has significantly waned over the past five years to where most public institutions are receiving less than half of their revenue from the state, the tuition of public higher education is still attractive to many. Although tuition costs for public higher education have increased commensurate to decreases in state revenue, the costs for private-sector education have also increased and are still much higher than public higher education.

Michael Porter (1980) reduced any competition into three unique strategies:

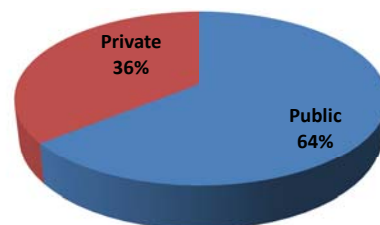
- Cost Leadership
- Product Differentiation
- Market Segmentation

Speaking academically, Luna (2012) stated that these strategies represent the ways in which an institution could provide students with what they want at a perceived better price, or more effectively than others. Essentially, Porter maintained that all companies (higher education included) compete on cost, perceived value (differentiation), or by focusing on a very specific customer (market segmentation). Therefore, students who attend a significantly more expensive private institution clearly perceive a better or more effective education than the public counterpart.

**Figure 6-A: Institutional Governance
All Students**



**Figure 6-B: Institutional Governance
Masters/Comprehensive Students**



Looking at **Figures 6-A and 6-B**, it is evident that most students who attended an institution other than UNA enrolled in a public college or university. There is, however, a significantly higher percentage of students within the Masters/Comprehensive group who attended private institutions (36%) over the All

Where Did They Go: An Analysis of Why Admitted Students Did Not Enroll in UNA

Students group. If the higher numbers of students within the Masters/Comprehensive group who attend private institutions perceive a higher quality of educational experience than at a public institution, UNA could exploit this perception by changing its image to reflect its small class sizes, quality of teaching, and the fact that 80% of its total credit hour production is taught by full-time faculty (Luna, 2012).

Distance from Home

How far a student will live from home is often a deciding factor when attending an institution. While some students desire to live far away from home, others want to be much closer. An important question for this research, therefore, focused on the average distance from the student's home to the institution they are attending as compared to the distance from their home to UNA. The original file received by OIRPA contained the zip code of the permanent address. Zip codes for the attending institution were then later added to the file.

In order to calculate distance using zip codes, the longitude and latitude (in degrees) had to be added to the file for each zip code. Next, each longitude and latitude value had to be converted from degrees to radians using the following formula:

$$long = atan(1)/45 * longdeg$$

NOTE: The formula for latitude is the same as the formula for longitude

Next, the Great Circle Distance Formula was used to calculate the distance in miles between the two pairs of values. Assume that the longitude and latitude for the first zip code are LONG1 and LAT1, respectively, and the longitude and latitude for the second zip code are LONG2 and LAT2, respectively. The Great Circle Distance formula is as follows:

$$Dist = 3949.99 * \arccos(\sin(LAT1) * \sin(LAT2) + \cos(LAT1) * \cos(LAT2) * \cos(LONG1 - LONG2))$$

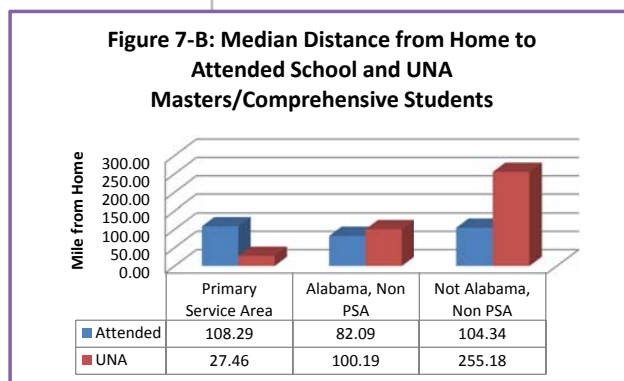
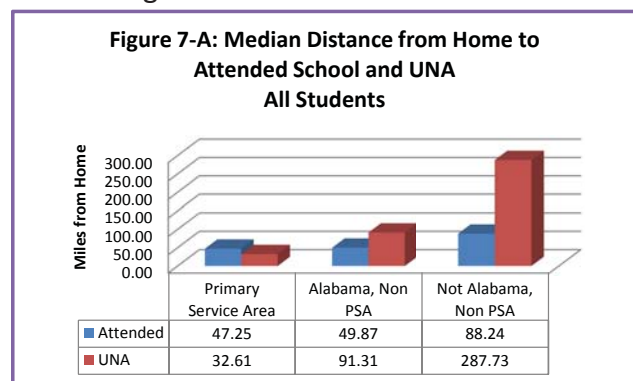
Mean distances for distance between home and attending school, and distance between home and UNA were calculated by residency status and type of institution attended. It was determined that using mean values would result in significantly skewed results because a few students from each group decided to attend institutions considerably further away than the majority of the students within the group. These outliers tend to inflate the mean. To adjust for this skewness, the median was used in-

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Where Did They Go: An Analysis of Why Admitted Students Did Not Enroll in UNA

stead. The median is the actual midpoint of a frequency distribution of observed values and is not affected as much by outliers as the mean. Results shown in **Figures 7-A and 7-B** indicate that students living outside of Alabama and outside of UNA's Primary Service Area are attending institutions that are closer to home than UNA. This is true for both the All Students and Masters/Comprehensive groups.

Concerning students within the state but who reside outside of



the Primary Service area, both The All Students and Masters/Comprehensive groups indicate that the distance between the students' home and the attending institution is closer than the distance between their home and UNA.

Students within the Primary Service Area, however, are attending institutions that are further away from their home than UNA. Within the All Students group the distance from home to the attending institution is slightly higher than between their home and UNA. For the Masters/Comprehensive group, the distance is almost four times greater.

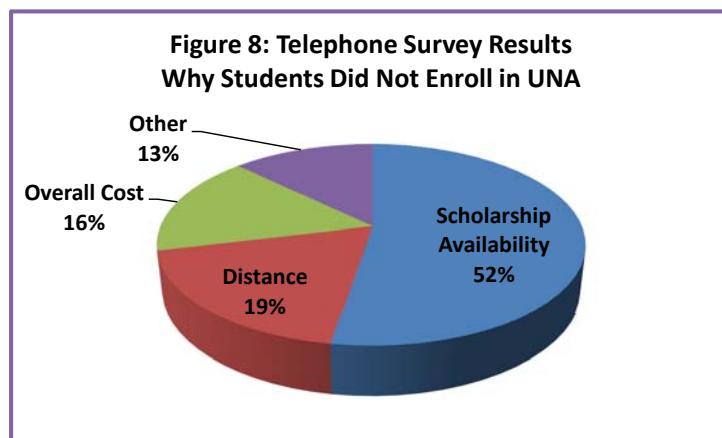
RESULTS - TELEPHONE SURVEY

While assumptions can be made as to why students attended either two-year colleges or four-year research universities, UNA was interested in learning why students who were accepted to UNA decided to attend Masters/Comprehensive institutions which are similar in role, scope, and mission to UNA. Furthermore, as the data above suggests, the majority of these students did not attend another institution due to an academic program not offered at UNA.

As part of this research report, the Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Assessment planned to conduct individual telephone interviews with each student who decided to attend a Masters/Comprehensive institution. Phone numbers were obtained through a cooperative effort of both the Admissions and Registrar offices as part of the original data file requested. Out of the total number of students who chose to attend a Masters/Comprehensive institution (n=234), the office successfully interviewed 118 (50%) while 8 (3%) refused to participate in the interview. A total of 69 (30%) of the respondents did not answer the phone after two attempts, and 39 (17%) of the phone numbers were invalid.

Why Students Did Not Attend UNA

The primary question asked of the 118 respondents was why they chose not to enroll in UNA. As shown in **Figure 8**, the overwhelming response (52%) was that the institution they are currently attending offered them either a partial or full scholarship while UNA did not.



while UNA did not. A total of 19% said that distance was their main concern citing that they either did not want to live too far away from home or that their parents did not want them to live

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Where Did They Go: An Analysis of Why Admitted Students Did Not Enroll in UNA

too far away from home. A total of 16% stated that cost was a factor and UNA would be more costly to attend than the school they are currently attending either because the tuition was higher at UNA or because they received some type of financial assistance from the institution in which they decided to enroll. The other category included personal issues (9%), major not offered (3%), and customer service issues (1%).

It should be noted that scholarship availability and overall cost seemed to affect respondents within UNA's Primary Service area to a greater extent than those students residing within other Alabama counties or those students who resided outside of Alabama and outside of the Primary Service Area. This is also supported in the **Figures 7-A and 7-B** that indicate students within these areas attended schools that were closer to their home than UNA.

When asked what UNA could have done to convince them to enroll at UNA, the single answer from most of the respondents was to ensure the availability of more scholarship offerings.

CONCLUSION

As noted in Luna (2012), higher education nationwide is in a state of change and instability. Potential students have more higher education options than ever and education marketers must develop and refine the messages necessary to attract and retain students, while generating sufficient revenue to keep institutions active.

In many instances, college choices are geographically motivated so there is instant local demand. Clearly the research from this study supports this claim to some extent. Similar brand messaging has been employed for a long time, and largely successful. However, over time, and as trends change, brand messaging needs to be updated and channels adapted to reach the right consumers, despite where they reside.

In today's market most students are looking for value in their education dollar. In this case:

$$(perceived) \text{ VALUE} = (perceived) \text{ BENEFITS} - (perceived) \text{ COSTS}$$

Therefore, while some students may focus more on the costs of enrolling at a particular institution, others focus more on the benefits. In developing branding strategies in a highly competitive and volatile environment, colleges and universities should concentrate resources and efforts more on promoting the benefits of attending their particular institution, rather than emphasize the costs associated with it.

Higher education, therefore, is becoming more competitive from a variety of perspectives. Internally, institutions must manage costs, while at the same time meet a growing need to specialize and communicate a unique message to an expanding marketplace. From the applicant's vantage, student prospects are faced with more education options than ever before. Therefore, a solid marketing and enrollment management strategy can directly affect the bottom line of a higher education institution through the measurement and understanding of its position in the marketplace, the elimination of weaknesses, and building upon its strengths.

From this research the following assumptions may be formed:

1. A large part of UNA's market niche is concerned about price and may look for lower cost alternative if they believe their perceived value will be the same or better.

Where Did They Go: An Analysis of Why Admitted Students Did Not Enroll in UNA

2. Many in UNA's market niche are also enrolling in private institutions where, while costs are higher, a higher value may be perceived.
3. UNA should strive to keep student costs down to a minimum, while creating unique programs designed to minimize the effect of costs increases. Such programs could include specifically targeted scholarship opportunities, as well as academic procedures to help students earn their degree in four years.
4. By UNA offering the Vanguard Scholarship Program, the institution should create higher demand of target students while, at the same time, aim its broader message more toward the academic benefits of UNA rather than a discount in cost.
5. UNA clearly should strengthen its branding and messaging by focusing on the unique benefits to students who enroll at its institution. Such benefits could include the fact that 80% of all credit hour production is taught by full-time faculty, significantly smaller class sizes, exemplar academic programs and achievements of students therein, and the overall climate of the UNA campus.

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