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## ***Assessment of Initial Awareness Knowledge and Sources of Influence Leading to Enrollment Decisions for Students Entering Four-Year Automotive Programs***

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# Assessment of Initial Awareness Knowledge and Sources of Influence Leading to Enrollment Decisions for Students Entering Four-Year Automotive Programs

By Dr. Brian A. Sandford, Dr. Robert L. Frisbee and Dr. Gregory G. Belcher

The field of automotive technology has been noticeably affected by the increased influence of a globally oriented economy and the dynamics of a world market place resulting in subsequent changes in technology, industry standards, the workforce, and the workplace. For example, the evolution of hybrid automobiles, research on alternative fuels, and increased incentives for fossil fuel efficiency are some of the changes faced by the automotive manufacture and repair industry. Since the use of this advanced technology is predicted to continue, those individuals who must work on these new and evolving types of automobiles will need to have a more comprehensive skill set and greater knowledge in the area of new applied technologies. It is also predicted that, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2004), service occupations will increase the fastest and add the most jobs accounting for more than half the total job growth in the ten year period from 2002-2012. In fact, automotive service managers and technicians with advanced technical skills are currently in demand and it is anticipated that this demand will increase in the future (Cornish, 1996). As such, it is critically important to examine the issues related to the recruitment and retention of students entering into the automotive technology service field of study so that future supply can meet predicted demand.

## *Theoretical Framework*

### **Student Enrollment Behavior Theory**

The choice to attend postsecondary educational opportunities is as much an educational decision as it is an investment decision for both student and, many if not most times, the parent(s) as well. Although large sums of money have been dedicated to promote widespread access to colleges and universities, the impact of the interventions on students' and parents' investment decisions is as yet not fully understood (Avery & Kane, 2004).

Recent research has shed light on the importance of student enrollment numbers in universities and specifically in technology related areas. In response to these findings, technology educators should continue studying student enrollment behavior theory (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). A three-stage model of student enrollment behavior, developed by Hossler and Gallagher, (1987) and Jackson, (1982), is provided to help clarify student behavior regarding the issues of awareness and influence in relation to their postsecondary educational decisions.

### **Student Enrollment Behavior Theory Model**

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Jackson (1982) developed a 3-stage model that has become the most widely accepted model concerning student

enrollment behavior theory. The stages include: (a) college aspiration; (b) search and application; and (c) selection and attendance.

**Stage 1 - College aspiration.** The first stage of student choice is college aspiration and typically involves the student from early childhood through high school. In this stage, the student decides whether or not he/she wants to attend college (Hossler, Bean, & Assoc., 1990). The most influential factors that affect his/her decisions at this stage are: (a) family background; (b) academic ability; and (c) high school and neighborhood context (Paulsen, 1990).

**Stage 2 - Search and application.** Once the student has made the decision to attend college, they enter the second stage described as the “search and application” stage. In this stage the student begins to seek and acquire information about colleges that he/she is considering (Hossler, Bean, & Assoc., 1990). Institutional characteristics are important in stage two and Ihlantfeldt (1980) identified four major characteristics that affect the decision-making process at this stage. The first major characteristic is the programs or fields of study offered at the institution. Students begin to focus their choices based on what subject area they are interested in studying. The second characteristic is the quality or reputation of the program or university. Students are concerned about the quality of the education that they will receive and the strength of the reputation of their degree based upon the reputation of the institution. The third characteristic is the financial consideration of how much it will cost to live at the university of choice. This is an interesting paradox in that a parent’s financial consideration would be the cost of tuition and related academic expenditures whereas the student’s concern is more related to living expenses while attending. Perhaps this indicates the difference in role assignment or acceptance in that the student expects the parents to pay for tuition related expenses while the parents expect the students to, at least in some part, subsidize their own

living expenses and choice of living arrangements. The fourth institutional characteristic affecting the search and application stage is the location of the university. Most students prefer to go to college closer to home.

**Stage 3 - Selection and attendance.** The third and final stage in the model incorporates both the students’ decision or actual choice of a university to which they applied as well as the universities or colleges that have actually admitted the student. Research by Paulsen (1990) indicated there are ten major attributes of institutions that strongly influence the student’s decision in the final selection stage. They are: (a) cost; (b) financial aid; (c) programs; (d) size; (e) location; (f) quality; (g) social atmosphere; (h) athletics; (i) religious emphasis, and; (j) available jobs. Clearly, there are many factors related to how students process and arrive at decisions which ultimately influence how they intend on pursuing both educational and related personal or professional goals (Gray, 1997).

### **Past Research**

Fischer (1976) discovered that parents most influenced student decisions to enroll in a postsecondary occupational teacher education program and a visitation to the college campus was the most influential experience. Gilmore, Spire & Dolich, (1981) revealed that the factors considered by students in a six phase college selection process were academic program, cost, location, and the views of parents, guidance counselors, and alumni. Clark (2004) found that the ten most frequently selected factors recorded as influential in student decisions to enroll in a four-year post-secondary commercial aviation program were: program educational quality, university reputation, condition of equipment, institutional educational quality, location of institution, small class size, safety concerns, program characteristics, student to faculty ratio, and distance from home.

Findings from the research efforts of Frisbee (1997), Frisbee & Belcher (1999), Belcher, Frisbee & Sandford

(2003) focusing on what influenced automotive students to attend four-year automotive programs revealed that program and university reputation, campus visitation, parents/relatives, and high school/community college teacher/counselor were the strongest influences. This differs from conclusions found in similar studies conducted in the non-technical academic field concerning how students chose colleges by Hossler, Bean & Associates (1990) which showed that special academic programs, tuition costs, availability of financial aid, general academic reputation or quality, location or distance from home, size of student body, and social atmosphere were the most important influences to students. The disparities prompted the investigation into the phenomenon that since the influences were different, perhaps the sources of student awareness may also be different. The results of the previous research efforts provide interesting guidelines for further inquiry into the types of awareness information and sources of influence which drive student decisions to enroll in a postsecondary program and at which institutional level.

### **Problem Statement**

Recruitment efforts are a major component for maintaining and enhancing enrollment. The influential recruitment factors employed within baccalaureate automotive technology program areas were previously identified by junior and senior level students participating in four-year automotive technology programs. It is unknown, however, whether the successful recruitment factors identified in the previous study are the same for freshman and sophomore students participating in the program and, the sources of student awareness knowledge concerning the nature and availability of these programs is also unknown. Freshman and sophomore level students may be in a better position to reflect on what raised their level of awareness as well as what influenced them to attend a four-year program since they have recently made the decision to enroll and subsequently attend. Discovering what types of information

and what pathways or sources of decision-making influence are most important to students is an area that merited further investigation.

### Survey Development and Validation

The survey instrument developed by Frisbee and Belcher (1999) provided the platform and content for the questionnaire used in this research. The survey consisted of two parts: 1) information to help identify how students first became aware of the four-year automotive technology program and; 2) questions seeking student responses to what they considered to be the strongest area of influence affecting their decision to enroll and attend. Part one was modified to reflect the information related to the search and application stage identified by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) and Jackson (1982) addressing the search and application process. Part two of the instrument was similar to the instrument used by Frisbee and Belcher (1999) in their earlier research. Upon revision of the instrument, a panel of experts consisting of a class of freshman and sophomore four-year automotive students (n = 20) were asked if the items concerning their initial exposure to awareness information of the automotive program presented in the instrument accurately aligned with their actual experiences. Based on the panel of experts review, the following items were modified addressing sources of information: internet web page; alumni of the four-year automotive program and tour of technology center were added as information sources and, the item of High school/community college teacher were separated into two unique statements. Additionally, student representatives were specifically added to the list of information source items since this is a tool the program regularly employs to raise student awareness of this educational opportunity. Concerning the influence section of the survey, the following items were added and/or revised: the item of alumni was further defined to include alumni of the four year program, and four year faculty visiting high school or community college, student representative,

and internet web page were all added as sources of influence.

### Reliability

Data obtained from sixty-two (62) people involved in the pilot study provided the following reliability indices using Cronsbach's alpha as a measure of internal consistency for the summated scales: items contributing to the construct of sources of awareness knowledge .8251 and .8007 for the items contributing to the construct of sources of influence. According to Nunnally (1967, p.226), to increase the measure of reliability beyond .80 is non productive and "often wasteful." The recommendations of satisfactory levels of reliability provided by Nunnally (1967) led to the determination that the instrument was reliable based on the results of the pilot test.

### Population

Past research conducted by Frisbee and Belcher (1999), suggests that a larger response rate of juniors and seniors was obtained versus those provided by freshman and sophomores. As such, the decision was made to access students who were closer to the beginning of their university experience and program involvement. Students enrolled in the beginning course of "Engine Analysis" in the Automotive Technology Program in the Technology Studies Department at Pittsburg State University were chosen as the target population for this study. This course is mainly comprised of freshman and sophomore students who have most recently made decisions, based on information affecting their awareness as well as identifiable sources of influence, to attend the program. The study

**Table 1. Sources of student awareness of four-year automotive programs. N = 450**

	Awareness	Mean	SD
1.	Reputation of the four-year automotive program	3.15	1.025
2.	Reputation of the university	2.77	1.047
3.	Tour of the Kansas Technology Center	2.66	1.207
4.	Friends at university/community college/high school	2.56	1.166
5.	Campus visit	2.47	1.143
6.	Parent(s)/relatives	2.31	1.113
7.	High school/community college teacher	2.18	1.223
8.	Alumni of the university	1.98	1.148
9.	Alumni of the four-year automotive program	1.94	1.194
10.	Reading University Catalog	1.91	.920
11.	Promotional materials	1.85	.923
12.	High school/community college counselor	1.66	.948
13.	Internet Web page of the four year program	1.62	.930
14.	University recruiters visiting my high school or community college	1.58	.913
15.	Admission office at this university	1.38	.681
16.	Student representative of the four-year program visiting my school	1.36	.758
17.	Four-year automotive faculty visiting my high school or community college	1.29	.679
18.	Athletic advisor/coach	1.23	.585
19.	Articulation arrangement through a community college	1.22	.531

Note: 1= Not at All, 2=Very Little, 3=Somewhat, 4=To a Great Extent  
 Note: Items are placed in descending rank order of highest mean to lowest mean.

was initiated in the spring of 1999 and data was collected through the 2005 spring semester. A total of 450 usable surveys were collected.

**Findings**

Table 1 shows the four items that had the highest means were Reputation of the Four-Year Automotive Program (M=3.15, SD = 1.025), Reputation of the University (M=2.77, SD 1.047), Tour of the Kansas Technology Center (M = 2.66, SD 1.207), and Friends at the University/Community College or High School (M=2.56, SD = 1.166). Also notable are the sources of information which resulted in low means such as an athletic advisor/coach (M=1.23, SD=.585) and articulation arrangement through a community college (M=1.22, SD=.531) indicating that these are not important sources of student awareness knowledge.

As shown in Table 2, the five top items that influenced students to attend were: Reputation of the Four-Year Automotive Program (M=3.38, SD = .934), Kansas Technology Center Automotive Faculty (M=3.13, SD = 1.066), Reputation of the University (M=2.99, SD = 1.047), Parents and Relatives (M=2.71, SD = 1.11), and Campus Visit (M=2.65, SD=1.162). Once again, the two lowest sources of influence, athletic advisor/coach (M=1.23, SD=.584) and articulation arrangement through a community college (M=1.18, SD=.559) indicate that these are not important sources of influence for student decisions to attend four-year automotive programs.

When a comparison is made between items that made students aware and items that influenced their decision to enroll and attend, it is evident that several items are similar (Table 3). Some comparisons are not possible as three items were present in only one section of the survey. However, reputation of the Four-Year Automotive Program was the top item that both made students aware as well as influenced them to attend the program. The other top rated items included Reputation of the University, Friends, and Campus Visit, followed by Parents and Relatives with

**Table 2. Sources of influence for student decisions to attend four-year automotive programs.**

		Mean	SD
1.	Reputation of the four-year automotive program	3.38	.934
2.	Kansas Technology Center automotive faculty	3.13	1.066
3.	Reputation of the university	2.99	1.047
4.	Parent(s)/relatives	2.71	1.110
5.	Campus visit	2.65	1.162
6.	Friends at university/community college/high school	2.47	1.206
7.	Community in which the university is located	2.10	1.074
8.	High school/community college teacher	2.05	1.220
9.	Alumni of the four-year automotive program	2.04	1.223
10.	Alumni of the university	1.96	1.128
11.	Reading University Catalog	1.84	.944
12.	Promotional materials	1.62	.792
13.	High school/community college counselor	1.59	.926
14.	Internet Web page of the four year program	1.56	.866
15.	University recruiters visiting my high school or community college	1.38	.723
16.	Admission office at this university	1.38	.703
17.	Student representative of the four-year program visiting my school	1.36	.762
18.	Four-year automotive faculty visiting my high school or community college	1.31	.762
19.	Articulation arrangement through a community college	1.23	.584
20.	Athletic advisor/coach	1.18	.559

Note: 1= Not at All, 2=Very Little, 3=Somewhat, 4=To a Great Extent  
 Note: Items are placed in descending rank order of highest mean to lowest mean.

the lowest rated items being athletic advisor/coach.

**Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to discover the types of information and the sources of influence which are most important to students in the decision making process to enroll in a 4-year automotive technology program. Although the tenets of the study were accomplished, an ancillary finding showed that a comparison of the sources of student awareness and the sources of student influence yielded compelling evidence that what makes students aware of the automotive program and what influences them to attend these programs are quite similar. These include: reputation of the automotive program; reputation of the university; friends at the university/community

college/high school; campus visits, and; parents/relatives. Other items that deserve attention are high school/college teacher; alumni of the university and alumni of the four-year automotive program.

**Recommendations and Implications**

Persons involved in automotive technology program recruitment should become familiar with the findings of this study. In order to enhance student recruitment, specifically for four-year automotive technology programs, there are certain areas in which recruiters should focus their time and efforts.

Since reputation of the four-year automotive program was rated as the most important factor of both awareness and influence, additional attention should be

placed upon strategies, which maintain, enhance, and promote program reputation. The reputation of the automotive programs can be communicated to prospective students in different ways. Examples may include but are not limited to: (a) job placement statistics showing successful employment after program completion; (b) comparisons of employment opportunities within the program emphasis to other similar programs; (c) reputation of the program and potential career opportunities should be emphasized when faculty and/or admission office representatives visit high schools and community colleges and d) industry based awards, certifications and recognition such as that provided by the National Institute of Automotive Service Excellence.

Reputation of the university achieved the second highest mean in both areas of the survey. Providing data on program completers (beyond just four-year automotive), percentage of freshman students retained and average length of time to complete a four-year degree should be provided to potential students. Information addressing outside academic accreditation of the institution, independent peer ranking such as that collected by U.S. News and World Report, and community, state, or national recognition for teaching, service, or research could also be disseminated. Reputation of institution, college of study, and program area or emphasis are findings supported by Clark (2004), Green and Greene (2002), and Atherton (2001).

Campus visits are an integral part of the recruitment process to make students aware and influence them to attend a four-year automotive program. It is recommended that prospective students be encouraged to make a campus visit, to look over the program firsthand, and meet program faculty. Program faculty and university recruiters should cooperatively determine how best to facilitate these important first impression encounters. Greene and Greene (2002) reported on a student reflection on a particular college selection being based on his initial visit in which significant

Table 3. Awareness and Influence Items

	Aware		Influence	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Reputation of the four-year automotive program	3.15	1.025	3.38	.934
Kansas Technology Center automotive faculty			3.13	1.066
Reputation of the university	2.77	1.047	2.99	1.047
Tour of the Kansas Technology Center	2.66	1.207		
Friends at university/community college/high school	2.56	1.166	2.47	1.206
Campus visit	2.47	1.143	2.65	1.162
Parent(s)/relatives	2.31	1.113	2.71	1.110
High school/community college teacher	2.18	1.223	2.05	1.220
Community in which the university is located			2.10	1.074
Alumni of the university	1.98	1.148	1.96	1.128
Alumni of the four-year automotive program	1.94	1.194	2.04	1.223
Reading University Catalog	1.91	.920	1.84	.944
Promotional materials	1.85	.923	1.62	.792
High school/community college counselor	1.66	.948	1.59	.926
Internet Web page of the four year program	1.62	.930	1.56	.866
University recruiters visiting my high school or community college	1.58	.913	1.38	.723
Admission office at this university	1.38	.681	1.38	.703
Student representative of the four-year program visiting my school	1.36	.758	1.36	.762
Four-year automotive faculty visiting my high school or community college	1.29	.679	1.31	.762
Athletic advisor/coach	1.23	.585	1.18	.559
Articulation arrangement through a community college	1.22	.531	1.23	.584

Note: 1= Not at All, 2=Very Little, 3=Somewhat, 4=To a Great Extent

Note: Items were ranked in descending order according to mean values in the awareness category to facilitate comparisons between sources of awareness and influence.

institutional effort was expended on helping the student find both program and emotional “fit” because of a great tour, a good interview, and a pleasant follow-up to include the admissions process.

It is advised that recruiters continue to recognize the influence of friends in the recruitment process. Lindsey (1980) found that friends had more influence over student decisions in the selection of an area vocational school than either parents or teachers and counselors. As recruiters visit with prospective students, they should attempt to access them in social settings in which their

friends are also present. This may help to influence peer networks and ensure that information for future discussion or decisions is common knowledge rather than viewed as new or lacking initial peer acceptance. "Students' characteristics and behavior do influence other students' behavior...recognizing the existence and understanding the nature of peer effects are important to understanding a variety of critical issues facing both higher and lower educational institutions" (Winston & Zimmerman, 2004, p.405).

Recruiters need to continue to be aware of the influence that parents and rela-

tives have over prospective students. Parents were cited most often by all students as having the most influence on their plans, in a study conducted by Russell (1980) assessing the post-secondary plans and aspirations of a population of twelfth grade students. While talking with students, they also need to communicate with the parents who may have an influence on prospective student decisions. This may be achieved by letters, personal or home-based visits, telephone calls, and E-mail. The emphasis in this area is that parents/relatives are not ignored during the recruitment process and providing information to these sources of influence may be equally important as providing the information to the prospective student. The following statement made by Gray (1997) emphasizes the importance of parents in the student decision-making process, "Ultimately parents must decide what is best for their child, and they deserve to know the facts....most will welcome the truth" (p.28). Indeed, Goodwin and Kemerer (2002) state that parents matter most in the success of educational choices which affect their children. As Greene & Greene (2002) found, parents of currently enrolled students can and do influence the parents of prospective students and, as has already been established, students who are currently attending have an affect on the views of their prospective peers.

Vocational/technical programs (other than four year automotive programs) could benefit from this information as well. Much of the recruitment literature comes from the university level and only focuses on academic programs. Vocational and technical program recruiters may need to identify and utilize different approaches to the recruitment process than that currently used by academic program areas. Other vocational and technical education teachers should pay particular attention to factors that students deem important to them in the recruitment process.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The following recommendations are

made for opportunities for future study:

1. Research should be conducted on how to incorporate the reputation of the automotive program and career opportunities into formal student recruitment and program marketing plans. Additionally, since reputation of the automotive program was ranked the highest, investigating what characteristics of program reputation are important to prospective students would be desirable to further understand this area of investigation.
2. Additional studies should be initiated to determine if barriers exist that may be preventing students from attending a four-year automotive program and if so, what are the types and nature of these barriers. Included in this effort could be an investigation concerning if there are influences exerted upon student sources of information and decision-making related to other factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, educational attainment of parents, traditional vs. non-traditional status, age, etc.
3. Finally, a more in-depth study using qualitative methods may reveal data providing valuable insights into the dynamics of those sources of both student awareness and influence that affect student decision to access four-year automotive programs as well as other similar programs.

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