MARKET RESEARCH FINDINGS

Interviews with Non-matriculating Admitted Students

University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, Iowa
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Background

As the leadership of the University of Northern Iowa seeks to understand the institution’s market position and opportunities, it must also understand why some students choose to enroll elsewhere. This research initiative revealed the perceptions and beliefs of students who were admitted to UNI but enrolled at other institutions.

As part of a larger market research project on institutional image, Noel-Levitz conducted individual telephone interviews with a small sample of non-matriculating students. This research was primarily qualitative in nature and was intended to uncover the themes emerging from conversations with non-enrolling admitted students from fall 2008.

Paralleling other survey instruments used in the broader research initiative, the script used for these interviews was designed to gather information about the college choice process, students’ understanding of key concepts and their perceptions UNI and key competitors.

Summary of findings

Top findings from these interviews include:

- Iowa State University was most often mentioned by these students as the school they chose to attend, but the complete list of schools chosen represented a diversity of types of competitors (Iowa public universities, Iowa private colleges, Iowa community colleges and several out-of-state colleges and universities).

- While these surveyed students chose not to attend UNI, the university was generally their second choice. In fact, about half of the respondents indicated UNI as the institution they would have attended if not enrolled at their current choice. This is the most positive finding, as it suggests that with additional effort, UNI has a significant opportunity to improve its yield rate with accepted students.

- “Atmosphere” of the campus they chose, staying closer to home, preference for a smaller campus and affordability were major themes for attending an institution other than UNI.

- Even students choosing a large public institution used “intuitive” reasons such as “close knit campus” and “felt like home” as reasons for their choice.

- Students attending private colleges generally chose schools they regarded to be smaller and more comfortable in comparison with UNI. They tended to describe their school of
choice as small and friendly and described UNI as big. So while UNI markets itself as a small public university, it is still not perceived as “just right” for a significant group of students.

- Although these students often describe UNI as a bigger school than the one they chose to attend, they do believe it has a great reputation. Many students know other students who attend UNI and the university’s reputation among these students is solid. As in the inquiry pool surveys, UNI is known by non-enrolled students for its teacher preparation and business programs.

- Financial aid or scholarship assistance was one of the most important variables to students when asked to rate the importance of a selected list of criteria.

  - When students were asked why they did not enroll at UNI many responses concerned financial aid and/or price sensitivity. Students are attending community colleges because it is less expensive and private institutions because they were more aggressive with their aid offers. In at least one case, the competitor sweetened the package at the end to lure the student away.

  - While UNI is considered a friendly, affordable choice, students found the financial aid packages at private competitors attractive. In addition, many competing campuses have May-July activities to keep students connected to their initial first choice.

  - Undecided students see community colleges as an affordable option. Why spend significant resources when they haven’t settled on a major?

- When asked how they knew whether faculty at a school were “friendly” students were most likely to say they learned this through direct interaction with faculty when visiting campus. But this was not something they were likely to say they experienced when they visited UNI. Faculty interaction in the “shopping” phase is increasingly important. High-achieving students in particular are very discerning and want to see and hear from the people they will be spending significant amounts of time with – the professors.

- Students’ definitions of “highly qualified” faculty varied considerably. This was a challenging question for students to answer because they found it difficult to be introspective. The most interesting answer was from a student who said, “Teach me in a way I understand easily.”

- Determining the academic quality of a school was also hard for these students. Many of them relied on what they had been told by others, or perceptions in their communities.

**Recommendations**

1. In their ranking of college choice factors, non-enrolling admitted students listed excellent teachers, friendly professors and interaction with highly qualified professors among their top four sources of influence – just after financial aid and scholarships, which placed first. This means that it is critical for admitted students to have maximum exposure to UNI faculty in every possible way: in-person events and receptions for admitted students, email and other written correspondence from faculty, department open houses and online chats with faculty.
Quite a few respondents mentioned meeting and talking with faculty on other campuses. This was described as a key way that they could determine if a school has friendly professors.

2. For a certain group of students, UNI needs to feel even smaller! That is, the university needs to convince many applied students that they can succeed, be comfortable and find their place at UNI. Admissions should examine the campus visit process in particular to find ways to make the introduction to the UNI campus even easier, friendlier and more individualized than it is today. Even though UNI is comparatively personal for a public institution, students from small schools and communities still may find the university to be overwhelming.

3. Telecounseling staff and others who work with students over the phone should be trained to identify students who have concerns about attending a large university. For example, if the “U ’N’ I Mentoring” program is successful and effective, this program could be a centerpiece for communication with this target group of students.

4. Develop a strong communication (letter, email, brochure) for undecided-major students and their parents about why exploring your options while studying at UNI is a good choice. Use profiles and quotations from formerly undecided students who are now happily engaged in majors or are recent graduates of the university.
Methodology

Using a script modeled on the questionnaires used in the telephone surveys of inquiries and their parents, we conducted individual, in-depth telephone interviews with a small sample of non-matriculating students for the fall 2008 class. The interviews were conducted by a Noel-Levitz consultant with extensive experience as an admissions dean.

Using a list of non-matriculants provided by UNI, we attempted 496 calls and completed 35 interviews. In addition, parents who answered the phone shared the destination school for 23 more non-matriculants.

Summaries of the responses to the individual questions asked in the interview are provided in the following sections. While we have provided these summaries, it is important to bear in mind that these represent a very small sample of students and the results should be viewed as directional, not statistically based.
Summaries of interview responses

What college or university have you chosen?

Iowa four-year publics - 19:
- Iowa State University (11)
- University of Iowa (8)

Iowa four-year privates - 23:
- Coe College (5)
- Central College (4)
- Loras College (3)
- Luther College (3)
- Simpson College (2)
- St. Ambrose University (2)
- Grinnell College
- Drake University
- University of Dubuque
- Wartburg College

Iowa community colleges - 8:
- Kirkwood Community College (2)
- Des Moines Area Community College
- Hawkeye Community College (2)
- Ellsworth Community College
- Iowa Central Community College
- Iowa Western Community College

Out of state - 8:
- Arizona State University
- Colorado State University
- ITT, Omaha, Nebraska
- Marquette University
- Scottsdale Community College (AZ)
- Southwest Minnesota State
- University of Nebraska – Lincoln
- University of Missouri – Columbia
If you had not chosen [SCHOOL OF CHOICE], where would you have gone?

UNI (17)           St. Olaf
Iowa State (3)     St. Thomas
University of Iowa (3)     University of Minnesota
Creighton or University of Iowa  Wartburg
Cornell College  Would have applied to more schools
Lawrence University, WI    Not sure (4)
St. Ambrose

What stood out about [SCHOOL OF CHOICE]?

Location:
- Location (4 students mentioned)
- In town
- Bigger city; more comfortable
- Closer to home; more comfortable; smaller classes
- Closer to home; didn’t know what I wanted to major in

“Atmosphere”:
- Atmosphere
- People
- Personable: staff members, everyone, professors, admissions
- Friendly staff; small community vs. public university
- Really liked the people and campus
- Liked atmosphere; science and music programs
- Close-knit campus
- Felt like home
Specific programs:
- Smaller, good theatre department
- Actuarial science in Business College, dorms, location
- Academic program
- Only school with computer graphics
- Youth ministry program; private school, affordable
- Poli Sci program, law school
- Luther had an international studies program; UNI did not

Size:
- Size, attended a small Catholic high school
- Smaller campus
- Academic block schedule
- Good student-to-faculty ratio and athletic program

Cost:
- Less expensive
- Size and price
- Great academic reputation, loved the atmosphere, lots of financial aid

Miscellaneous other:
- Got the courses I needed (student attended UNI orientation and did not get the courses she wanted; therefore left and went to local community college)
- Great academic reputation, loved the atmosphere, lots of financial aid
- Legacy; my aunts and siblings attended Luther

What major will you be studying?
Undecided (11) Business (2)
History/secondary education (2) Accounting
General education Business, International Business
Undecided/elementary education Computer Graphics, Computer Networking
Early childhood education Journalism
Animal Science Political Science
French Pre-med
Actuarial science Chemistry
Music/nursing Biology, Microbiology
Business and Law Psychology
### How many other schools did you apply to?

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<th>Responses</th>
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<td>Five</td>
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<tr>
<td>Six or more</td>
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### Please rate how important this factor was to you in choosing [SCHOOL ENROLLED]

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<th>Factor</th>
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<th>Important</th>
<th>Somewhat important</th>
<th>Not very important</th>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>Student interaction with highly qualified professors</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Small classes</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>Quality of the major you will be studying</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of academic facilities (classrooms, labs, library)</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>Safety on campus</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>Overall reputation</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>Job or grad placement</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>Nationally known athletic programs</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Opportunities for community service</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
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</table>
How could you tell if a school has friendly professors who readily meet with individual students?

By talking with the faculty:

- Talking with them
- Talk one on one with them
- Visits to campus, interviews with faculty
- Tried out for scholarship program, had two short courses over two days
- Meetings with professors
- Went to orientation, ready to answer questions
- Touring campus, faculty stopped and talked with me
- When I visited; I talked with the main professor for my major
- From tour guides; also met a few friendly faculty
- Talked with a few of them; gave speeches at visit days; talked to advisor
- Met with several faculty members when I visited the campus
- Toured the campus; interactive panels with students and faculty; visited classes with professors who interacted with visiting students
- Interactive conversation between professors and students; professors invite students over for pizza

Other characteristics mentioned:

- Know my name; care; know me beyond classes
- Someone who knows your name, offers help
- Go in anytime and get one on one help
- Small class sizes, professors willing to talk with you one on one
- Willingness to be helpful
- Interaction with students; tone of voice
- Pay attention to student needs and help them
- Easy to contact after class
- Post special hours for incoming students before selecting courses
- Helped me get the classes I needed
- Being open, willingness to answer questions

Other sources of information:

- Staff I met on tour, I don’t know, small group interaction
- Used website
- I don’t know; campus visit
Not sure (3)

Which is the most important reason why having friendly professors is important / very important:
Success in college (22)
Better career opportunities (8)
Won’t get lost in the crowd (3)

**If you could choose a professor who is highly qualified in a way that matters most to you, how would you describe that person’s qualifications and experience?**

**Experience / expertise:**
- Experience, length they had been there
- Experience in the field, where they attended grad school
- Research in their field, good reputation with other students
- Expertise in field, personable, hands on
- Expertise in their field
- Actually has real life experience before teaching in college
- Be experienced teachers, personable, care about my success
- Teaching that course for a long time; experience in field; first-hand knowledge

**Degrees / qualifications:**
- Degree of education, teaching style, challenge in the classroom
- Resume; how they conduct themselves in class; overall attitude towards teaching
- High degree-master’s; know subject really well; friendly; willing to work one on one after classes
- Academic background of the professors
- Degrees earned by faculty; friendliness when asked questions
- Looked online at degrees earned by professors
- Not sure, what they studied, class size
- Don’t know, background, credentials

**Teaching ability**
- Way they teach, students keep coming back
- Teach me in a way I understand easily
- Meets students’ needs
- Helpful to me; just by talking to other people
- How they get along with students, how well they teach
Reputation
- Reputation
- Good reputation among students, gold star teaching award

Other
- Not sure, seemed to be confident
- Seeing their work, talking with them

Don’t know (5)

There are many ways to define academic quality. What is most important to you when you are evaluating a school’s academic quality?

Faculty; learning environment:
- Capable professors, offer assistance, make themselves accessible to strong students
- Professor, watched a class, liked the material covered
- They seem interested in the students
- Focus on learning, motivating students, offering challenging classes
- Small classes; quality professors
- Background of professors

Reputation:
- Reputation
- Reputation of major
- Hear from others; sitting in classes, engaging students
- Mainly through others, alums
- From Des Moines area, well-known institution, grads are in the area

Graduation / outcomes:
- Graduation rate
- Placement of graduates, what jobs they went to after graduation
- Standards, grad requirements, interest in students
- How well students do in classes; success of students

Admissions criteria:
- Overall average SAT/ACT; feel from campus visit
- SAT/ACT averages
- A high grade point average to get in (accepted)
Miscellaneous other:
- Nationally rated programs; size of program classes
- Program strengths
- Good facilities; smaller class sizes, highly educated faculty
- What the school is involved in
- Dad looked online

Don’t know / Not sure (7)

**When you think about [SCHOOL OF CHOICE] what do you think is its image among students?**

Note the number of references here to the school of choice being small and friendly.

Size – small:
- Smaller college, really good education
- No idea, small, close community, really nice and helpful
- Great school if you are looking for personal attention, more opportunities to be more involved
- Smaller campus
- Small, but has majors you can’t find elsewhere; different; exciting
- Small, friendly, good academically
- Small; good academic institution
- Smaller; personal school
- Smaller college; best list for privates; small class sizes 16:1
- Not too big or small; lots of opportunities; law school

Size – big:
- Big place, but easy to get around

Friendly / fun:
- Open and friendly
- Fun place, small enough you get to know everyone
- Fun
- Community, active student body, positive atmosphere
- Very friendly, small; I feel safe; feels like home; only two hours away
- Friendly, simple process
- Involved students, outgoing
- Beautiful area, people are very friendly
Programs:
- Really good business school and religious studies
- Big science/music school; small campus; people easy to talk to

Cost:
- Community college, less expensive, good school, some think it’s easy, not difficult to find things
- Not expensive; close to home; know other students

Miscellaneous other:
- I just love it there; great school
- Urban city lifestyle; small school in urban environment
- Love it; positive atmosphere
- Great campus; small, private, liberal arts; good study abroad opportunities
- Youthful, everything you need is on campus
- Harder to get into than UNI, harder working students, also more experienced

And when you think about University of Northern Iowa overall, what do you think is its image among students?

Size – big:
- Bigger, harder to find a place, something for everyone
- Bigger, really good for teaching, more expensive, but you get your money’s worth
- Bigger
- Big (2)
- Bigger, but not too big; lots of majors and opportunities
- Not as open, bigger school
- Friendly, but bigger
- Too busy; overwhelming; big difference in size
- Larger, cheaper, good for teaching and sports
- University-so class sizes are larger; bigger city; campus is more spread out

Size – small:
- Smaller, easier to talk to teachers
- Similar to Iowa State but smaller
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Campus:
- Nice campus; liked people; heard it is a suitcase campus
- Best campus of the three Iowa publics; friendly people
- Best of three publics in IA
- Loved campus, convenient
- Really nice campus; counselor assigned to help you; nice athletic facilities

“Teaching school”
- One of the top ranked teaching schools in the country
- Really good teaching school
- Good teaching reputation

Good:
- Good school if you are looking for a big change, you will also meet more people
- Good education
- Awesome facilities good programs; nice place
- Good school (3)

Miscellaneous other:
- Most students are from the area and leave on weekends; missing residential college experience
- People like it; sister attends, but don’t know people as deeply

Don’t know (6)

Based on what you know, does the University of Northern Iowa offer the major you wanted?
Yes (23) (“One of the best in the US.” An accounting major)
No (6)
Don’t know/not sure (3)

What were your positive impressions of UNI?
Reputation:
- Reputation
- Reputation for great business education, atmosphere
- Known for business and education
- Nice campus; knew my way around/have been there several times; have newer buildings; business is highly known there
- Very good school; just not right for me
- Strong programs, could see myself getting involved on campus

Friendly
- Friendly, good environment
- Really friendly, easy to get to know people
- People were friendly; organized tour- good overview
- Liked campus; talked with professors

Size
- Bigness
- Nice campus; big but not huge
- Class size, lots of people to meet
- Small class sizes compared to University of Iowa; great teaching reputation

Cost
- Cost, cheerleading program
- Offer many things; cost of attendance was not high, good scholarships and study abroad opportunities
- A bit cheaper; classmates going there; friendly
- Reasonably priced

Location
- Big city atmosphere, but fresh classes
- Good location

Miscellaneous
- My cousin goes there
- Cousin attended; didn’t consider it seriously; nice climbing wall
- Good football team
- Really liked it

Same school colors as high school; really liked it

None / don’t know
- I forget
- I don’t know
- None specifically

What were your negative impressions of UNI?
None (11)
Size
- Did not like campus, bigger
- Too big
- Bigger school, two years of general education before business courses
- A lot bigger; but also public-not a negative
- Overwhelming, so many people; not as personable
- Really large
- Too small, compact

Cost
- None, just more expensive
- Price range

Suitcase campus
- Suitcase campus (2)
- Suitcase school - sister has experienced that
- Kids leave on weekends; not strong in all academic departments

Miscellaneous other
- Did not like the athletic program
- Didn’t have my major
- Was not able to visit with professors
- Can’t be as involved; not a private school, fewer service opportunities
- Couldn’t get the classes I wanted, was told they were saved for upcoming orientations
- Safety was an issue
- It gets cold there
- Not what I am looking for

Did you apply to UNI?

Yes (32)
No (5)
Why did you choose not to enroll at UNI?

Cost / Financial aid
- Better scholarships at the college I chose
- More expensive
- I plan to transfer there; less expensive to attend a community college
- Last minute scholarship from Loras
- Distance; no law school, received more money where I am attending
- Luther offered a better aid package later on
- Because money for scholarships were equal to the cost of UNI
- Mainly financial aid
- Because of academic offer, Luther’s was better
- Stay closer to home; cheaper to attend DMAC
- “Fit” and financial aid

Program
- Didn’t have major, Drake was a better fit
- Didn’t have my major
- Luther was a better fit; and a better music program

Size
- Bigger school
- Liked smaller campus
- Larger class sizes, smaller college was better for me

UNI not “first choice”
- It was my second choice and I got into my first choice
- Backup school; wanted to go up North
- Back up school; too big; prefer small town
- Iowa State was my first choice

Personal reasons (not about UNI)
- Process got away from me; too much to do senior year
- Unsure of major

Miscellaneous other
- Mostly location; wanted a bigger city
- Was not able to visit with professors
- Suitcase campus
- Uneasiness at UNI
- Nothing grabbed my attention
- Not enough of a social scene

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<th>Respondents</th>
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