2009

# Reputation versus reality: the impact of US News and World Report rankings and education branding on hiring decisions in the job market

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# REPUTATION VERSUS REALITY:

# THE IMPACT OF US NEWS AND WORLD REPORT RANKINGS AND EDUCATION BRANDING ON HIRING DECISIONS IN THE JOB MARKET

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

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January, 2009

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This dissertation, written by

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under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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DEDICATION

For my three daughters,

Christina, Cathleen, and Franchesca,

and in loving memory to my parents

Donato A. Capobianco and Jennie Pevorus-Capobianco.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to Dr. Mark Allen, the chair of my dissertation committee, who guided me through the challenging dissertation process. The study would not have been possible without his expertise and support along with that of my other committee members Drs. Doug Leigh and Sean Jasso, who provided me with the motivation that sustained my intent to fulfill my education goal.

My appreciation to Ms. Daphine Wands whose encouragement, coaxing, and fine proof reading skills helped in polishing this document and illuminating its findings.

## ABSTRACT

Typically, leading brands provide benchmarks for constructing consumer preference in the marketplace. Reputation rankings have sustained and advanced the status of brand names in higher education with an implication that the degrees awarded by higher ranked schools have added prestige, a cachet with the potential of facilitating success in the job market. This implication makes reputation rankings a dependable tool for college and university marketing departments eager to increase student enrollment and retention by communicating its superiority among its peers.

By examining the influence of reputation rankings on the pre-decision preferences of human resource hiring professionals in evaluating employment applicants, this study found that there is little if any relationship between a degree from a higher education institution in the top tier of a reputation ranking and employment acquisition. Work experience emerged as the major deciding factor in the assessment of an applicant's qualifications. Degree field and employee referral appeared as important matters, while education program and academic record followed in playing a slightly diminished role. Academic record and non academic activities had a lesser degree of influence on hiring decisions.

Future study into the subconscious and conscious effect of reputation rankings on the job attainment goal of a college student in relation to the student's choice of HEI could provide new insights into student choice, college marketing strategy, and the value of rankings in education.

# Chapter 1:

## Education Rankings, Branding and Employment

The promise embedded in a college or university brand holds more significance than ever in today's highly competitive education marketplace. A distinct image and sound reputation provides a Higher Education Institution (HEI) with advantages in recruiting students in a world where an increasing number of for-profit schools pledge a degree and a career within months of enrollment, and where students have use the Internet to enroll and attend classes from anywhere on earth. Reduced government funding and deep discounting of tuitions by competing schools makes the already formidable challenge of attracting students even more difficult.

Concern about employability has replaced a student's long-established sources of motivation such as location and expense in selecting where to obtain his or her training for a career. To cope with this new priority, colleges and universities have turned to redesigning or reinventing their image. Success varies and is open to question. This dissertation looks for answers by using reputation rankings in examining the value placed on an HEI's image or brand by employers in search of job applicants.

### *Background of the Problem*

The anxiety and desire of college bound high school pupils for future employability is found in increasing numbers of publications and reports on use of reputation rankings in higher education (Institute for Higher Education Policy [IHEP], 2007). Job acquisition rates for students after graduation is attracting increased attention from college and university marketing administrators (Boston University School of Management, 2007; Chandler, 2006; Fiorito, 1981; Koc, 2007; Slippery Rock University

of Pennsylvania, 2007). Many of these administrators have been relying on the publicity from reputation rankings in nationwide publications like *US News and World Report* (*USNWR*) for promoting their institutions in hopes of a resultant increase in enrollment figures. Questions remain however whether reputational rankings are a reliable reference tool for either a higher education institution's recruiting strategy or a high school pupil's choice in what college or university to attend.

Prospective college students generally spend substantial time and money in choosing where to go for a higher education. A poor choice of college or curriculum is bound to prove disappointing to a student who finds out after graduation that his or her degree is from an institution not valued by employers (Harvey, L. 2000; Teichler, U., 2000, 2008). Communicating the value and worth of the degrees and the institution awarding them thus becomes a good way to increase student recruitment figures and speed post graduate job success.

College and university administrators search continuously for strategies that result in immediate and sustainable ways to boost enrollment figures and raise endowments. Solutions are sought from within through student contact and improving staff performance, or externally by using promotional channels to build relationships ("Marketing Institutions," 2004; Moore, 2004).

Reputation rankings in popular magazines, surveys of graduating high school students, even student blogs on the internet have not gone unnoticed by either the education marketing strategists or the students. In depth studies on use of rankings or benchmarks being accepted nationwide in university branding strategies however are no where to be found on the Internet.

*Statement of Purpose*

This study intends to provide insight into the importance of HEI rankings by examining the presuppositions of employment professionals in the context of information, choice, and decision making theories underlying their selection of employment candidates.

*Objectives*

The *raison d'être* for this study is to encourage additional exploration of the nexus of rankings, student recruitment, and college choice; to provide a method for measuring the success of higher education branding in recruiting and retaining students; and to provide employers with a reliable reference in or validation of their employment practices.

Since staffing managers are the first contact made by a graduating senior looking for a job, hiring professionals were selected as no-nonsense, professional, logical participants in the survey for this study. By drawing on their experience and knowledge, this study was intended to determine the degree employers in the Los Angeles area rely on *USNWR* reputation rankings for producing graduates capable of succeeding professionally

The survey produced data for measuring the success of the branding endeavors of universities and colleges throughout the Los Angeles region. An analysis of the employability of graduates provided information reflecting the degree to which staffing managers rely on quantitative benchmarks that rank the nation's HEIs.

Further examination of the statistics helped determine whether there was a correlation between the *USNWR* rankings and the recruiting and hiring decisions of

staffing managers in the metropolitan Los Angeles area. *Recruiting* means activities related to seeking out candidates for employment such as on-campus recruitment, job fairs, advertising in particular college publications, or through other special promotions. An *applicant* refers to graduates from *USNWR* ranked schools.

*Research Question and Conceptual Hypothesis*

The question addressed in this study is: What are the implications of hiring managers' perceptions of HEI reputation rankings on employability of graduates? Choice, attitude, memory, and information processing theories factored into this study of decision making by employment professionals in their hiring procedures. These theories encompass interlacing activities occurring when decisions are made in an organized manner and show how internal and external forces interact and influence the way a consumer thinks, evaluates, and acts.

Rational Choice Theory (RCT), generally associated with economics, has been an important contributor in the prediction of consumer decisions. RCT presumes that a person will exercise minimum risk in selecting what is best to accomplish his or her goal or, at the least, to obtain a maximum benefit. As the theory evolved over the past thirty years, an alternative approach has formed hypothesizing about limitations that exist in a decision maker's aptitude for sensing and processing information. Included in those limitations are the long term and short term capabilities of the working memory, options for acquiring, assembling and categorizing information, retrieving, and reactivating stored information.

Expected Utility Theory (EUT) states that the decision maker chooses between risky and uncertain prospects by comparing their expected utility values (Mongin, 1997).

In other words, people may be expected to adjust their rationality in proportion to the benefit derived from their choice. Circumstances involving information overload, lack of time and chaotic conditions present poor conditions for use of rational decision making model. An experiential level, acquired knowledge, and rapid cognition which contribute to intuition however are considered prospects in speeding elements within theoretic processes (Gladwell, 2005) such as EUT (i.e., combining probability and utility values).

*Brand Identity*

The etymology of branding stemmed from use of the branding iron for marking ownership of animals and then casks of wine and ale, to the brand marks that preceded trademarks in identifying the goods of a particular company (Gove, et al., 1966, p. 268). What started as an identification of simple consumer goods and an explanation of easy to understand benefits and low prices has evolved into a complex system of communications to provide consumers with an understanding of the inherent and often intangible benefits of a product or service. In communicating a significant difference, a brand helps people make decisions by implying high standards and superior attributes.

The globalization of education, increasing competition for students, campus controversies, and continuing challenges to reputation ranking systems raise skepticism and doubt about the accountability and responsibility of education institutions. Ignoring this new framework is bound to result in depressing consequences for higher education. Therefore, to cultivate a relationship, to build trust with its prospective constituents, and to maintain a high level of confidence with its constituents, an HEI capable of articulating how much better it is from another is an HEI likely to succeed in achieving its marketing goals.

*The Hiring Process*

An examination of job recruitment models makes a clear distinction between the process of attracting and that of choosing candidates for employment. Recruitment activities have been studied (Boudreau & Rynes, 1985; Giovanni, Rietveld, Nijkamp, & Gorter, 1995; Holland, Sheehan, De Cieri, 2007; Martin, 2007; Parker, 2007; Rynes & Barber, 1990) from the perspective of their influences on applicant attraction and their influence on applicant selection. Consideration is given to both in this dissertation; however, the primary focus of this study is candidate selection with respect to the reflective attribute of a college's reputation or brand identity on its alumni.

The investment in recruiting an employment candidate is time consuming and can be expensive. A Saratoga Institute study (Fitz-enz, 1997) estimated the standard internal expenditure for replacement of exempt personnel is at least one year's pay and benefits, up to a maximum of two years' pay and benefits. According to the study, the price tag for replacing an employee averaged out to 150% of that worker's annual earnings. The more a person's skill is specialized, the greater the person's value to the organization and the greater the outlay for job recruitment.

Filling job vacancies for capable managerial candidates requires deliberate and intense work (Garavan, 2007). A superior candidate with a promising future, particularly in the high skills area where corporations see their survival in the potential of the brightest and best, is more likely to be found at a college campus job fair than from a walk-in off the street (Connor, Pearson, Pollard, & Regan, 1999; Hendry, Arthur, & Jones, 1995; Lenaghan, & Seirup, 2007).

College campuses are probable places for finding employment candidates with the most up to date knowledge, a level of creativity required in today's global market economy and the highest potential person-organization (P-O) fit (Garavan, 2007; Gordon, 2006). Researchers have defined P-O fit as the compatibility between persons and organizations. Distinction and discussion grow out of whether a company is seeking a job candidate with characteristics to fit in, or a person with skills that meet an organization's technical requirements (Kristof, 1996). Whether at a college campus job fair or an in-house interview, the hiring professional is in charge of screening and making the decision about whether an employment candidate has the appropriate person-organization fit (Lievans, Decaesteker, & Geirnaert, 2001).

The recruiting-hiring process can vary according to a company's size and resources. Generally however, a request for a new hire in any size organization is launched by a supervisor for either of two reasons: as a replacement or as an augmentation to the staff. Though the supervisor is involved throughout the recruitment process and is responsible for a candidate's final selection, the employment specialist is the one who conducts the initial candidate screening.

This paper explores whether a relationship exists between university branding, *USNWR* rankings, and the job recruiter's winnowing process. A three-objective approach is used in identifying the relationship of brandings and rankings to employment. The first determines the influence of reputation rankings on the hiring process. The second objective considers reputation rankings in relationship to a college or university's branding initiative. The third resolves the question of whether the job a student desires

when he graduates is a realistic expectation in the promise of the perceived value of an HEI brand.

*Clarification of Terms*

*Acceptance rate.* The percentage of applicants accepted for admission by a college. The lower the acceptance rate the more competitive the school.

*Applicants.* Graduates from *USNWR* ranked schools.

*Attitude.* Summary evaluation of a psychological object captured in such attribute dimensions as good-bad, harmful-beneficial and likable-dislikable. (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000; Petty, Tormala, Briñol, & Jarvis, 2006).

*Base sample size.* Minimum number of responses from of a total targeted population required for a reliable sample in a survey.

*Brand.* A promise by a college or university and an expectation by students and employers.

*Brand elements.* Name, term, sign, symbol, or design or combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers, to differentiate them from those of the competition.

*Brand equity.* Marketing effects rarely attributable to brands.

*Categorization.* A process in which proposals and objects are recognized, differentiated, and understood. Categorization implies that objects are grouped into categories for explicit purposes. It is an indispensable element in prediction, inference, decision making, and in every kind of interaction with the surroundings.

*Consumer analysis.* Why and how people consume.

*Consumer behavior*. The reaction exhibited by a person in making a selection, using, or relying on the performance of a product.

*Dependent variable.* A variable understood to be dependent or caused by another (called the independent variable).

*Graduate.* A person who has obtained a bachelor's degree from a college, university or other HEI.

*Halo effect.* Main implication of the halo effect is that not only do beliefs influence attitudes, attitudes influence beliefs. For the purposes of this dissertation each person's attitudes and beliefs toward each stimulus are simultaneously determined; that the person's attitude influences but is not a direct function of other people's beliefs. A person who favors an alternative tends to rate it high on desirable attributes while people who dislike the alternative tend to rate it low on every one of the attributes.

*Information processing theory.* Consisting of three stages, encoding, in which information is sensed, perceived and concentrated; storage in which information is stored for a brief or extended period depending on processing encoding; retrieval, which addresses when information is found and restarted for use on an existing task.

*Integrated marketing.* An approach in promoting an organization's mission and goals based on the consistent and systematic strategic creation and delivery of marketing messages and materials.

*Liberal Arts College.* Colleges emphasizing undergraduate education and award at least 50 percent of their degrees in the liberal arts. The definition is derived from classifications established by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and used by *USNWR* in its Best Colleges publication.

*Matriculation.* Marks the formal admission of a student to membership of the University or College.

*Multi-attributes attitude models.* Basic assumption of multi-attribute models is that a number of attributes can be used to explain each person's overall attitude toward competing products. The attributes are thought of as variables.

*National universities.* Universities offering a full range of undergraduate majors, as well as master's and doctoral degrees; many strongly emphasize research. The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching lists 248 national universities in the United States, categorizing 162 as public and 86 as privately operated.

*Recruiting.* Activities related to seeking out candidates for employment such as on-campus recruitment, job fairs, advertising in particular college publications, general circulation newspapers, professional journals, company websites, or through other special promotions.

*Remembering.* Consists of two processes: cognitive learning, getting information into memory, and retrieval, getting it back out.

*Sample frame.* List of elements from which a sample is selected.

*Short term memory (STM).* Short term memory is that part of the memory that theoretically stores some degree of information for a brief duration of time. Contrasted to short term memory, long term memory (LTM) theoretically is capable of storing information for extended or indefinite time periods. Theorists believe information transfer from short term to long term memory can result by various processes such as repetition, association, attitude or intent.

*Subjective expected utility.* A method in decision theory in the presence of risk that combines a personal utility function and a personal probability analysis based on Bayesian probability.

*Tier I and Tier II colleges.* Descriptive terms used by publications like *US News and World Report* to identify colleges for ranking purposes. Tier I includes Ivy League and other top-50 colleges and universities, based on the magazine's criteria. Elements include reputation, general and educational spending per student, annual giving by alumni, standardized test score ranges and employment on graduation.

Tier II colleges number between 250 and 300 depending on how a college chooses to be recognized by the Carnegie Foundation's classification system Baccalaureate I liberal Arts colleges. Research I and Doctoral I universities that specialize in graduate and post graduate research among faculty are designated as either regional or national depending on the amount of their federal and foundation research grant sources

*USNWR.* U S News and World Report

*Utility.* Abstract measure of how much something is valued by someone. Economists use the term to describe the satisfaction or enjoyment derived from the consumption of goods or services. Consumers are generally thought to be acting rationally when their choices are based on maximum satisfaction or complete utility.

*Yield.* Percentage of accepted students who attend a college. The higher the number the more competitive a college is considered.

*Summary of Reputation versus Reality*

With nearly nine out of ten applicants being turned away by the country's most

prestigious colleges and universities (Athavaley, 2007; Mathews, & Kinzie, 2006) maintaining the best possible image is of high priority. Tier I colleges struggled to maintain a position of dominance, while Tier II colleges tried to capture the spillover from the increase in college applications over the past seven to ten years.

The increased competition and the uncertainties that students face in applying for admission require college and university advancement departments to become innovative in projecting or preserving the presence of their institution in the marketplace. HEIs work to position themselves by hiring faculty and supplemental staff, introducing new academic programs, and building libraries, laboratories, fitness complexes and dormitories (Enserink, 2007; Farrell, & Van Der Werf, 2007). Many have transformed from regional to national, even international, institutions in seeking to recruit and retain students.

At the center of this action is the HEI marketing department, with the assignment of projecting these activities on campus to the community, county, state, and the remainder of the world filled with potential college recruits (e.g., high school students) having future employment as their the basic goal. HEIs can claim to open the doors to an education for their students, but the door that matters most to a college graduate is the one he or she enters for an employment interview.

# Chapter 2:

## Review of Literature

Heightened competition, the strain of increased tuition discounting, federal aid diminution, and reputation rankings have forced higher education into taking an aggressive market oriented approach (Selingo, 2005; Strout, 2006). Academic leaders in small and large, public and private colleges and universities, intent on sustaining the viability of their institutions, are using the concepts of integrated marketing to enhance the institution's image, its brand, and the characteristics that set their HEI apart from others in the education marketplace.

More than an eye catching graphic representation, a brand in higher education is the promise of an experience, a mark of prestige, the assurance of value (Lockwood & Hadd, 2007). Convincing a target audience of the validity of those promises guarantees the success of a university's branding plan (Zambardino & Goodfellow, 2007).

Creating a positive image or brand for students and staff has become a strategic imperative for HEIs in their quest for attracting resources and creating goodwill (Belanger, Mount, & Wilson, 2002). Belanger et al. suggest that a comparison between student expectation and experience provides a reliable measure of an HEI's image. Because a college or university image tends to imbues itself as part of a person's identity, a graduate's persona often reflects an HEI's brand authenticity. Therefore, a college or university does everything it can to meet a student's expectation because failure to live up to the promises projected by its brand can result in negative consequences on student retention as well as extended damage to the institution's reputation.

Given a positive interpretation, marketing experts define branding cautiously and comprehensively as a promise of perceived value (Aaker, 1991, 2003; Keller, 1998, 2003; Kotler, 2005). Conversely there is the argument that the lack of restrictions in a free market have undermined the meaning for branding such that "the product itself as originally defined by rational needs and wants is no longer the point"(Barber, 2007 p. 184).

HEI branding is about identifying the significant features of an institution and communicating them in a clear, compelling, and ethical way. Authenticity in advertising is crucial because prospective students considering enrollment in an institution rely on honesty and truth reflected in a college or university's brand identity as they would in choosing any product or service (Brandon, 2005).

Education brand strategy is limited to marketing and advertising campaigns. The target audience determines the media and mode of information delivery. Thus, a college or university that presents its image in a way that helps people make their decisions can claim success in its branding policy. Placing reliance on college ranking methodologies to build an education brand is risky. Though effective in promoting institution attributes, the measures used in reputation rankings to determine placement may not be accurate (Lockwood & Hadd, 2007).

A student's involvement in choosing a university extends beyond that of a passive participant. Selecting a school implies making a sizable financial investment, requiring most students to incur debt even before graduating. The student, therefore, has a reasonable expectation of an educational experience that assures access to opportunities,

chiefly employment after graduating (Chapman & Litten, 1984; Litten 1980; Schomburg, 2007).

Employability is a subject of discussion on a growing number of campuses in this country. At The University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, for example, 98% of the students who seek employment after graduation either find a job or continue their education because of the university's commitment to a career-oriented education (UW Eau Claire Employment Survey, 2006). State University of New York, Maritime College, which prepares students for careers in the maritime industry, government, military, and private industry, boasts a 100% career placement rate (About Maritime, n.d.)

The leadership at Bryant College in Rhode Island has staked a claim on being "student centered" (Moore, 2004, p. 60) and has subjected its curriculum to a marketplace perspective. By assessing the markets its students entered after graduation, this small New England college designed programs stressing learning the skills and characteristics needed for success in the world after college. Their college's website prominently displays statistics asserting that within six months of graduation, 96 percent of their graduates either were employed or had entered graduate school (Quick Facts, 2007). Bryant's president, Ronald Matchley's emphasizes in the college's website welcoming message that "*The Princeton Review* and *Forbes.com* rank us one of the 'Most Connected Campuses' in the country, and *U. S. News & World Report* lists Bryant one of the Top 20 Master's colleges/universities in the North" (Message from the President, 2007).

*USNWR*'s annual rankings publication has become a national measuring stick for university branding (Farrell & Van Der Werf, 2007). The annual publication of the news magazine's supplement has become so well read that college presidents unhesitatingly

highlight their institution's placement as it rises in the *USNWR* ranking (Gannon President's Biography, 2007). Marketing departments and Advancement Administrators join in self-praise, viewing the placements as reflecting success in their branding as well as in achieving their goals in recruitment, retention, competition rates, and other things offering assurance that their students receive a quality education, and implicitly, appropriate marketable skills. In other words, HEI marketing materials are citing reputation ranking to suggest that graduating from their college or university is an assurance of employment.

From 1976 through 2006, a survey by UCLA's Higher Education Institute lists the most important reason given by students for going to college was to "learn about things that interest me, to get a better job and to make more money" (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007). The survey of entering freshmen reported that more than half (57.4%) listed "academic reputation" as very important in their selection of a college. This figure is almost equivalent to that in 1983 (58.4%). An HEI's track record in placing graduates in good jobs and in graduate schools are two other characteristics that have held steady as "very important" in a student's choice of which college to attend.

The most enthusiastic response (66.5%) in the 2006 freshmen survey however was to the question of a college education's value. Their response: the chief benefit of a college education is that it "increases one's earning power."

A Harris Poll (Harris Interactive, 2005) of 2,244 college bound high school students who were asked why go to college, 92% responded "to get a better job someday" (p. 2). A desire to "learn/gain knowledge" (p. 2) was selected by 90% and "to meet new people" (p. 2) was the response by 54% of those participating in the survey. Parents'

desire for the high school students to go to college was cited by 52% as “extremely/very important” (p. 2). The urging of teachers and guidance counselors for students to enter college was ranked in the survey at 26%.

The dilemma for the high school pupil (and their parents) is to select a school that will help in achievement of their goal of employment. For the institution, the difficulty is to adjust to the changing world by maintaining its core values within the promise encompassed by the brand it conveys (Harvey, 2000). The increased competition among HEIs has led to an emerging interest in how colleges and universities profile themselves. Once described as affordable, personally rewarding, and conducive to a broader social contract in serving the public interest, the traditional image of higher education has changed (National Crosstalk, 2002. p. 1A).

Educational performance in the public interest and institutional performance no longer maintain the same linkages. Competition among HEI’s has elevated the priority of their marketing actions. An HEI’s brand has reached new levels of interest becoming a strategic as well as a managerial issue. New images categorizing higher education as a service university, a corporate enterprise and as an entrepreneurial university further stimulate the drive for the rejuvenation of HEI branding. Though real in their respective categories, each redefines their roles and responsibilities to society in today’s world.

Moving away from the idea of higher education as a social institution and moving toward the proposal of higher education as an industry has been subject to criticism and controversy. Restructuring to meet the demands of the marketplace is seen as conceding education legacies, that “adaptation to market forces gives primacy to short term economic demands at the neglect of a wider range of societal responsibilities, thereby

jeopardizing the long term public interest including the notion of knowledge as a public good" (Gumport, 2000, p. 71).

Corporate Universities are designed to go beyond traditional job training in developing a highly skilled and specialized workforce. Their connection is with the sponsoring industries and the alignment of a company's goals with a highly functional specialized education (Allen, 2002).

Entrepreneurial universities are evolving out of societal changes. College constituencies have changed as have the demands of the workplace. "Employers and colleges are not designed to accommodate the longer life stage between adolescence and settling down" (Yankelovich, 2006, p. 44). HEIs must meet the changes by being entrepreneurial, through the integration of education, training, and work, along with changes in the curriculum. "By 2015 the humanities will be revitalized" (p. 48) when such changes increase society's respect for academic knowledge.

Whether the interest in branding is an indication that HEIs are being transformed from social institutions to an industry or is simply the capability of higher education to create structure, the subjects of transformation or adaptability are potential sources for exploration. Because if image and branding are to benefit, a deliberately focused study of higher education is required to shape appropriate strategy for coping with student enrollment challenges.

Based on the implicit, in some cases the explicit, promise of a university's brand and a student's main reason for selecting a university, the employability of a graduate presents a reasonable measure of a university's branding endeavor. Since staffing

professionals serve as gatekeepers in choosing employment candidates, it would seem logical to test this hypothesis on them.

*Reputation Rankings*

While the issue of employability may be at a tipping point on college campuses, HEI administrations still battle for position in the reputation rankings. Despite criticisms that the *USNWR* rankings are based on soft data, meaningless criteria, poor methodology (Wright, 1992); that data are missing or manipulated (Wainer, 2005); and that only high ability students or students from high income families use the rankings for making their choices (Dill, 2003), reputation rankings have an important signaling function for the most competent segment of the student market.

Whether the ranking strategy will sustain or remain in its preferential position is uncertain. Moody's Investor Service's 2007 Higher Education Outlook Report (Fitzgerald & Tuby, 2007) predicts difficult times ahead, painting a grim picture in stagnating growth figures and increasing college debt. Mid-tier private colleges spending heavily to improve their reputations, small rural colleges, regional public universities in regions of declining population, and community colleges in declining economic regions are the most challenged (p. 5). Moody's assigns bond ratings to 533 colleges, universities and community college districts. Investors and educational planners consider the publication a reflection of the economic health of the nation's HEIs.

Even though college rankings published in the mass media may not be considered to be the best way of comparing colleges, it could be argued that they do provide more useful information than accrediting agencies, college catalogues and most popular college

guides (Webster, 1992). The prospect that the rankings create a system of elite schools is evident but this too may not be all bad (Cook & Frank, 1993).

Richard Posner reasoned that higher rankings are an incentive for students to apply in number. Limitations, administrative and structural for HEIs, financial and academic for student, narrow the number admitted to those with the highest Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) scores. Though conceding the negative influence rankings might have, Posner (2007) saw positive implications:

> One with social private benefits [in that] the clustering of the best students at a handful of highly ranked schools may, regardless of the quality of the schools programs, contribute to the human capital formation of these students by exposing them to other smart kids and embedding them in a valuable social network of future leaders. (¶ 9)

The rush of students to highly ranked schools tends to create more qualified applicants than available slots and intensifies pressure on second tier schools to improve their academic standards. *USNWR* began publishing their rankings in 1983 as a marketing device for the magazine.

Rising higher education fees and a desire by students and their parents to distinguish between colleges made the listing increasingly popular. When HEIs began exploring ways to improve the attributes that would move them to a higher tier, the rankings transformed from a peer review system to a competition. Nevertheless, the wide appeal and ease in understanding the comparative characteristics and flexibility of rankings makes publications like *USNWR*'s Best Colleges and Universities widely read by the general public. Though filled with exhortations that the listed colleges and

universities do this and that, and have achieved thus and so, none appear to demonstrate that these actions or achievements result in higher quality (e.g., fulfillment of the institution's mission, or achieving a student's purpose in choosing to pursue a higher education).

Nevertheless, reputation ranking is used by HEIs for measuring quality when quality is defined in terms of how well institutions conform to their mission or reach their goals. Accreditation, licensure, academic program reviews, and outcome studies are other means colleges, universities and statewide systems of higher education use to illustrate their degree of quality. Multiple measures are certain to provide the closest calculation in assessing an institution's superiority.

*USNWR's* rankings are based on a set of up to 16 measures of academic quality that fall into seven categories with weightings assigned to balance what the magazine editors consider to be inequalities. The *USNWR* editors, in consultation with their own higher education experts, put more weight on outcome measures such as graduation rates and less weight on measures such as entry test scores and financial resources of the HEIs. The weightings are chosen somewhat arbitrarily and have become a subject of criticism by HEI administrators (Barnes, 2007). Even so, universities are quick to respond to *USNWR*'s questionnaires when they are circulated. The magazine's annual *Best Colleges and Universities* publication remains among the hottest sellers on the newsstands. Marketing and public relations administrators at colleges and universities persist in building student recruitment campaigns around the rankings.

Why do HEIs participate with such vigor in the rankings competition? Empirical analysis and research surveys prove there are distinct rewards to be gained (Meredith,

2004; Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999; 1999b; Webster, 2001). Monks and Ehrenberg's (1999) study corroborated that an HEI's placement in the *USNWR* rankings had a "significant influence on admission outcomes and institutional pricing policies for liberal arts colleges and universities" (p. 10) in the top tier of the *USNWR* ranking lists.

Based on the data collected by Monks and Ehrenberg (1999), institutions with improved rankings tend to admit fewer students, a greater number matriculate, and applicant SAT scores rise. HEIs with improved rankings in the top tier of schools were found to offer less tuition discounting than schools that lose ground in the rankings. Moving up one rank corresponded to a 0.4 reduction in the acceptance rate, a 0.2 improvement in the yield, and a three point gain in the normal SAT score the following year (p. 16). The study also found that schools raised net tuition by 0.3 the year following a one rank improvement. Institutions with a less favorable ranking have various options to resolve their student recruitment dilemma including the allocation of generous levels of grant aid to attract additional students from their declining applicant pools.

The interrelationship between SAT scores and academic reputation can take on added significance. Webster's (2001) analysis of *USNWR's* weighting considerations challenges the preference given by the publication to academic reputation in determining its tier formation. His analysis of 11 contributing elements disclosed that SAT scores of enrolled students have wider effect than academic reputation in determining the listing, so college bound students look to for guidance (p. 243).

Meredith (2004) validates the Monks and Ehrenberg study (1999) with an expanded analysis taking into consideration differentiations the rankings have on public HEIs and private HEIs. Among other things he found that changes in rank may alter the

socioeconomic and racial demographics in admissions to top tier schools (p. 451). The strongest effect on admission figures was observed in movement from the second quartile of the rankings to the first whereas movement within the first quartile was insignificant. The public schools were most affected.

Consistent with Meredith's (2004) analysis, public schools that improved in their ranking from the second to the first quartile showed a decline of 4% in its acceptance rate and an increase of 10% in the number of students from the top 10% of their high school class. Conversely, private school acceptance rates dropped insignificantly. SAT scores declined when public schools slipped out of the top tier. Those scores kept dropping as the schools declined in the rankings. When private schools fell into the lower tiers, their SAT scores went down and then slowly began to rise. Pell grants increased as school rankings dropped; suggesting that students with greater financial help made up the clientele, giving Meredith reason to conclude that the rankings shaped the socioeconomic composition of schools at the top of the rankings. No proof was found of any major effect on private gifts, grants, and contracts received by an HEI; however, it was speculated that alumni donations might have demonstrated "a stronger relationship to the rankings" (p. 459) if they had been considered separately from corporate support or research grants.

*Applicable Theory*

Post-1950s neoclassical consumer theory with the assumptions that choice is preference based, purposive, and informed is used in this study to gain insight into the relationship of college rankings and the employability of college graduates. The study is structured to examine the rationality that staffing professionals use in selection of an

employment candidate; that the decisions made by staffing professionals are shaped by preferences in terms of values and results replicate a reliability of process.

This study is confined to decision-making theories relating to consumer behavior rooted in the premise of rational choice. Rational choice entails those components defined in research focusing on processing aptitude, motivation, attention and perception, information acquisition and evaluation, memory decision processes, and knowledge.

The basic element of a theorist's premise is the person; a starting point from which assumptions are made before they can be tested and verified in a setting of larger social groupings and systems. Theories are inclined to support the hypothesis that people take personal and social actions based on self serving interests (Abell, 1991), a supposition suggesting that social phenomena are explained in terms of motivation and interaction. Deciding what is good and what is bad, what is preferred and what is not preferred, for example, are explained by Higgins' (1997) Regulatory Focus Theory. Moreover when the benefits in making a choice "are aligned with a self regulatory focus under conditions of goal compatibility, more favorable persuasion effects are found" (Aaker & Lee, 2001, p. 46).

The decision process begins when a need arises and is recognized because of a divergence between a consumer's preferred state and predicament (Engel, Blackwell, & Miniard, 2001). A search and evaluation follows. Sometimes preexisting evaluations are retrieved from memory to be acted on while at other times, consumers choose by making new evaluations. Understanding how these evaluations are determined is crucial in producing and promoting a preferred product. Choice defines dominance in the marketplace. Choice is at the center of competition.

Consumer learning offers a different view of competition. People develop strategies to get what they want. From these strategies come experiences that produce knowledge. The rules of the competitive game are shaped by this accumulated knowledge. Competition thus becomes a battle over the rules of the game, and competitive advantage arises from winning that battle.

Standards for a model employment candidate can come from a variety of reference points and may be applied through processes related to making a decision. Company policy can bias an employment recruiter's decision. Prior experience in finding graduates at a specific college or university may help a recruiter pinpoint a reliable source for potential employment candidates. Coupled with rational choice, consumer decision making, learning concepts, needs recognition and the theories that can be applied, picking the right candidate for a job can be an intensive process.

Consideration of this selection process will be examined under the categories of cognition, acquisition and recognition. These general classifications will be segmented into explicit topics. Cognition includes a rational choice perspective, competitive brand strategies and decision making concepts. Acquisition covers learning concepts, information processing concepts, learning and information gathering, and consolidation and consistency. Recognition, the final section examines the subject of brand equity, and employment and employability.

Although some of the resources being used in this study have a more holistic approach, RCT, for example, includes considerable mathematical content; this dissertation concentrates on basic concepts by modeling practical subjects not in proving theorems. The relevance of principles and findings to the employability of students, the

validity of a student's choice of university or college, and the college or university's branding strategy are the focal points of this study.

*Cognition*

*A rational choice perspective.* The theory of rational choice (RCT) is as complex as its components, reflected in studies of social physics by authors traced back to 1738 when Daniel Bernoulli (1954) published his paper Exposition of a New Theory on the Measurement of Risk. The paper was a response to a paradox that emerged from his cousin Nikolaus's earlier published theory of games of chance. Within this paradox is a theory of expected utility (EUT), which has come to serve as a basis for decision making under risk.

Bernoulli's paper introduces the concept of value stating that "no valid measurement of the value of the risk can be obtained without consideration being given to its utility" (p. 24). Almost 200 years later his assumptions emerged in studies by von Neumann and Morgenstein as a Theory of Games and Economic Behavior (1944) and in Kenneth Arrow's Social Choice and Individual Values (1963) that explores how people learn from experience by factoring in weighted elements from previous decisions into their current choices.

*Decision making concepts.* Dominant in the analysis of decision making under risk is EUT, or accepted versions of the theory (i.e., subjective expected utility theory (SEUT) in cases of uncertainty, and von Neuman-Morganstein (VNMT) in cases of risk). EUT has been generally accepted as a normative model of rational choice (Hammond, Keeney, & Raiffa, 2001) and applied as a descriptive model of economic behavior (Arrow & Raynaud, 1986).

In an example of a normative model (Hammond, et al., 2001, pp. 21–44), the approach to making the right choice is through use of a consequence table using a weighting system as a way to adjust values of alternatives to render them equal or irrelevant and permit even swaps or tradeoffs. An even swap increases the value of an alternative. One object will decrease in its value by an amount equivalent to that of another object.

A rational person, like a hiring agent who wants to fill a job vacancy, makes decisions by comparing the benefits in available alternatives. Weighting these benefits by their probabilities provides the choice with the highest expected utility. As explained earlier however, people behave differently from what theory suggests.

After three decades of systematic research which provided insights on a variety of questions about decisions, there is still a great deal we do not know. The approach taken in this dissertation can be viewed at two levels. One is through normative models (i.e., what should be done based on rational choice theories of choice). The other is by descriptive behavior, or what is done by people and groups in practice.

Normative analysis of choice has focused on how resolve problems by making the assumption that the decision maker has formulated a well specified set of alternatives (Hoch & Kunreuther, 2001). Descriptive models move through an identification step consisting of selecting relative alternatives and criteria and a processing step selecting an aggregation method and applying it to the data. Prescriptive solutions emerge from multiparty problems through thought process as well as outcome. The information researchers seek is that which will provide a strategy for people to think about process and outcome in a way that will improve their status quo (pp. 10–11).

*Competitive brand strategies.* Competitive brand strategies are created on an implicit understanding of the competitive process. This process is presumed to be driven by rational consumers. The logic of this process however does not always conform to behavior. People cannot be depended on to consider every option in reaching a deliberate choice in the usual sense of rationality (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979).

In a critique of EUT, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) expand thinking of decision making under risk by introducing an alternative model called Prospect Theory. Reasoning that people tend to isolate their choices by disregarding components that are shared by prospects under consideration, Prospect Theory distinguishes two phases in the choice process. The editing phase is a preliminary analysis of the alternatives. In the evaluation phase the alternative offering the highest value is chosen (p. 274). People learn what they like and how to make a choice. The way people can and do make decisions vary. Cognitive and motivational causes are standard. Affecting both is attitude.

*Acquisition*

*Learning concepts.* More than 40 years ago Robert J. Lavidge and Gary A. Steiner (1961) proposed a hypothesis suggesting that consumers were taken to the point of making a decision through a series of attitudinal stages. Their hierarchy of effects model of communications is based on three behavior dimensions. Advertisements provided awareness and knowledge in the cognitive stage, generating feelings and attitudes that would shape preferences. Preferences would become convictions in the cognitive stage, which would stimulate a consumer's choice. The more messages provided to people, the faster they would move along the continuum toward a favorable decision. At the time this model was proposed there was no scientific evidence to verify that it assessed the way the

psyche processed advertising messages. Subsequent studies have shown the hierarchy of effects model may be partially correct.

Aaker and Day (1974) found a collective effect, a causal flow, in the cognitive to attitude to behavioral pattern proposed by Lavidge and Steiner. Acker and Day proved quantitatively that the advertising variable effected awareness and to a lesser extent attitude, but had little effect on market share (p. 285). This study takes on even greater importance when examined in today's surroundings of increased competition and the vast assortment of virtual reality and real time cyber-technology that is available.

In the struggle to maintain a competitive edge colleges and universities have adopted a strategy used successfully in the commercial marketplace. Identified by Aaker (2003) as a *branded differentiator*, the intent of this feature, service or program is to set an organization apart from others. Harvard, Brown and Middlebury College for example hope to attract new students to an environmentally friendly school by promoting its *green campus* initiative (Harvard University, 2009). The University of the Pacific's attempt to be inclusive on its internet homepage by supplemented its student-centered philosophy with an animated marquee looping answers to the declaration *What makes Pacific different* (University of the Pacific, 2009). Unfortunately, none of the answers address the employment prospects of graduates.

There are three basic features of attitude: the notion that attitude is learned; that it predisposes action; and that such actions are consistently favorable or unfavorable toward the object (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, Ajzen & Fishbein, 2000; Petty, et al., 2006). Predispositions, by definition, are inferred from observed consistency in behavior.

Predispositions result from of an evaluative judgment, as addressed in Fishbein and Ajzen's Theory of Reasoned Action (1975, 1980) that postulated that behavior is not completely voluntary. Ajzen's theory of planned behavior (1991), based on the premise that people think about the implications of taking an action and that thought is based on attitude and social norms is an extension of Theory of Reasoned Action concept. According to the Theory of Planned Behavior, human action is guided by (a) the consequences of behavior, (b) the normative expectation of others, and (c) the presence of uncertainties that may ease or impede behaviors.

These two theories provide the fundamental scientific thinking focusing on behavior data and then explaining those behaviors through attitudinal information, reversing the process proposed by Lavidge and Steiner. Working with the premise that people make systematic use of information available to them and that they consider the implication of their actions before they engage in a given behavior, the theories of Ajzen and Fishbein predict and understand motivational influences of behavior.

Newer studies (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005; Glasman & Albarracin, 2006) expand on the role of thought, confidence, and experience in the decision making process. The most important contribution of Glasman and Albarracin's (2006) meta-analysis of the attitude-behavior relation is that people form attitudes more predictive of behavior when they (a) are moved to think about the object they are considering, (b) have direct experience with the attitude object, (c) report attitudes frequently, (d) rely on relevant information, (e) receive or generate information about the object, and (f) are confident their attitudes are correct.

If a student's purpose in going to college is to get a better job, and if a university's brand, or promise, is to provide students with the required skills and training for employability, what better way to measure the success of a college's branding than by analyzing the choice preferences of the constituency with the power to fulfill a graduate's goal?

The extent to which attitudes lead to certain behaviors plays an inevitable role in any study of consumer behavior. Though considered "the most distinctive and indispensable concept in contemporary American social psychology" (Allport, 1968, p. 59), consumer behavior is characterized by ambiguity and questions over whether attitude influences behavior.

*Information processing concepts.* While the value of a brand is determined by the consumer, the marketing organization determines whether its brand value is meeting the consumer's requirements. In struggling to gain the advantage in the highly competitive marketplace, colleges and universities launch rebranding initiatives to better project the changes they want to make. The image conveyed by an HEI's brand gives an institution its distinctive identity, an identity intended to set it apart from others in the marketplace.

When Beaver College became Arcadia University on July 16, 2001, enrollment rose and ridicule disappeared ("Beaver College changes," 2000). When Trenton State College in New Jersey changed its name to College of New Jersey and increased its admissions criteria, Edward B. Fiske (2006) referred to it as "an up and coming institution" (pp. 454–455) in his *Fiske Guide to Colleges*. An institution's name can be a powerful organizing principal clarifying its mission as well as projecting how it wants to

be perceived. Cal State Hayward changed its name to Cal State, East Bay to project its expanding role in the suburban counties east of San Francisco (Finder, 2005).

Branding strategy is not confined simply to name change. The choice of market strategy embodied in a projected brand image feeds back into the product and its style of presentation (Wernick, 2006). In today's global marketplace a university's corporate image has grown to become an administrative prominence (p. 566).

During his time as President of Harvard University, Lawrence Summers launched a number of initiatives to capitalize on the Harvard name. Summers, who also was a noted economist, was keen on repositioning the university in light of the widely expanding academic market. By relaxing undergraduate residency requirements, making course material comprehensively available on line and launching a large scale distance education program, he managed to globalize Harvard's reach technologically.

Competition for students, funding, and position in the marketplace has elevated the importance and the involvement of marketing on HEI campuses. The product of a college and university is the educational success of its students, which can be measured in their employability on graduation. Staffing professionals, through their choice of employment candidates, can provide that measurement.

In response to an increasing interest in brands, numerous techniques have been set forth to understand, measure, and track consumer attitudes over time. Nearly all the methods devised so far are based on defining and tracking levels of awareness, familiarity, and attitudinal change over time. Their common goal is what Kevin Keller (1998, 2003) refers to in his research as customer based brand equity. Its basic premise is that the consumer creates an image of the brand on a personal level, based on the way he,

or she, accesses, assembles, and retains information about the brand. The equity of the brand occurs when the consumer develops a strong, favorable, and unusual brand association in memory (Keller, 1998, 2003).

Branding tactics are used by university and college marketing organizations to produce positive changes in attitudes and outlooks. A positive reaction, such as selection of a graduate for employment, can be related back to the educational organization's marketing plan.

*Learning and information gathering.* Memory processing patterns may differ in circumstances when subjects are unfamiliar with the product category (Bettman & Park, 1980). Exploring features related to the effects of prior knowledge and experience, Bettman and Park determined that consumers start with "attribute-based evaluations and comparisons, turning to brand processing as the choice process unfolds" (p. 244), concluding among other things that consumers with more knowledge use brand processing to greater extent.

The associations consumers develop with brands often fall outside the bounds of practicality. Brands have become extensions of personal identity. Self concept and the desire for a personal identity drive consumers to form associations with brands (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). In this "culturally constituted world…meanings get into a brand through advertising because ads reference the general cultural symbols needed to provide meaning" (p. 378).

Memory phenomenon in consumer choice is further explored in the Biehal and Chakravarti (1983) study that found that differences in the accessibility of brand attribute information stored in memory caused by diverse learning goals moderated the outcomes

of subsequent choices. A belief that commitment to a previously chosen brand does not influence subsequent choices would explain and emphasize why colleges and universities are so aggressive in promoting their brand.

A lot has been learned and a good deal of insight has been provided on a variety of questions related to branding. One issue still to be examined with increasing depth is that of a university image.

Numerous studies that have attempted to provide information on how consumers process relevant information in evaluating and selecting brands (Bettman & Luce, 1998; Bettman & Park, 1980; Biehal & Chakravarti, 1983; Luce, Payne, & Bettman, 2000). Decisions are based on the information processed, whether a choice is being made by alternatives or attributes, and the degree of gain the selected preference holds for the decision maker (Bettman & Luce, 1998, p. 189). Generally, six or less criteria or attributes are used, although Miller (1956) suggests the number may be as high as nine.

The order in which attribute information is acquired has been another subject of focused study in brand selection. The results have shown that consumers used a brand search sequence or an attribute search sequence in making their decisions. In a brand search sequence, each brand is evaluated against all criteria before proceeding to the next brand. In an attribute search sequence, brand information is collected by examining all brands simultaneously on an attribute-by-attribute basis (Bettman, 1979).

Consumer credence in product attributes can come from direct experience or an external circumstance through an inferential process (Monroe, 1976). Consumers lacking knowledge or personal experience with a product, such as an HEI graduating student, might rely on the institution with which the student is associated. In this case, the brand

image would institute a halo effect and influence consumer thinking about attribute performance (Beckwith & Lehman, 1975).

*Consolidation and consistency.* Categorization is another information processing technique that consumers use in reaching decisions. This approach is based on the premise that people confronted with choosing from an assortment of things tend to divide them into categories. Breaking down things enables a person to understand and process information. If a new stimulus can be categorized, the effect associated with a previously defined category can be retrieved and applied to the stimulus (Cohen, 1982), (e.g., consumers combine the pieces of attribute information to arrive at the overall value of the object under consideration). Because of their limited processing proficiency however consumers form strategies to cope with the trade offs that have to be made in maximizing the quality attribute and minimizing negative feelings (Luce, et al., 2000, p. 296). Therefore, the emotional effect of a decision must be included in examining how consumers process information in achieving their goal.

Consumers select a brand that can help them reach a personal goal. Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) contributes to the benefit derived from the decision. The motivation for making a decision is either promotion or prevention. Promotion focused people seek advancement or accomplishment through attainment of their goal. Those stimulated by prevention are in search of protection and safety through fulfillment of their responsibilities and requirements (p. 694).

Brands can act as a symbol of personal accomplishment or provide self esteem, enabling a person to attain his or her preferred status. The question remains whether

colleges and universities that rely on the endorsement of published rankings in *USNWR* are delivering what high school students are expecting from a higher education.

Consumers ultimately need to make the transition to a brand-based process, as the focus eventually is brand based (Russo & Johnson, 1980). Thus there may be need to assist consumers with making tradeoffs involving information from attribute comparisons.

Choices made in the present reflect what has been learned in the past and often what is expected in the future. Though proficient at describing the momentary relationship that exists between preference and actions, the ability of choice theory literature to describe the dynamics that gave rise to these relationships is wanting.

Ever since the analysis of consumer panel data in the 1960s, it has been widely accepted that a consumer's choice is based on one made previously. Far-reaching contemporary literature has been published describing variations of the habit (Erdem & Keane, 1996; Guadagni & Little, 1983). The literature is diverse; however, most formulations follow a common approach: brand choices are initially represented by a cross section random utility model and dynamics are introduced by allowing preference to be a stated dependent.

The best procedures for modeling learning and information gathering are those drawn from statistical decision theory, reexamining learning over time in markets as a sequence of rational decisions under uncertainty (Erdem & Keane, 1996; Meyer & Sathi, 1985). In these attempts consumers view the relative attractiveness of each option in a market as a distribution of possible values. Consumers then act as intuitive utility

theorists each time, choosing the option that has the highest expected utility and then using Bayes's rule to update prior viewpoints about utility distribution of each option.

Relying on past performance and using a process of elimination is another way choices are made. In case-based decision making, the notions of satisficing decisions and aspiration level come into play.

Case based decision theory (CBDT) is seen as being relevant in certain conditions, not an alternative to expected utility theory in the decision making process (Gilboa & Schmeidler, 1995). EUT examines decisions hypothetically developing rules for future use. CBDT on the other hand is less formal and more subjective. It does not depend on a configuration of rules as is the case with EUT but relies on information acquired from personal experience. From those experiences come preferences that are applied in the evaluation of similar circumstances. In CBDT, the memory contains only those cases that happened. New information is treated as a subset to a scenario in EUT while in CBDT it is an additional experience.

The key premise is that when considering different courses of actions, the decision maker looks back and evaluates how each possible action has performed under similar circumstances. In other words, the desirability of an act depends on the previous action.

Choices made over time may exhibit serial dependencies; the preferences consumers have that underlie these choices are nevertheless stable. While we may switch among options to gather information about the quality of the product or refrain from buying out of an expectation that lower prices can be obtained in the future, the assumption has been that the preferences that drive these behaviors remain stationary.

There is another stream of behavioral research that suggests that preferences may be as much a consequence of a choice as a determinant of them. Consumers may make choices to yield an ideal set of preferences (Gibbs, 1997). A formal treatment of such self management has been offered by Bodner and Prelec (2001). Self signaling theory is described in their working paper as being rooted in an assumption that people derive utility from the diagnostic implications of their choices - what the choices imply about their preferences, aptitude, and disposition - even when the choices have no causal effect on these unobserved internal characteristics. Although self signaling was not originated as a theory of dynamic choice per se, it leads to interdependencies between past choices and current ones. These interdependencies stem from the understanding that a self signaling person is vulnerable to "moral placebo effects" (p. 17) where mere changes in ideas about one's traits or aptitude shape preferences over different courses of action.

One's past choices are fundamental sources of confirmation about one's traits and aptitude, as these choices can become binding precedents even when the rationale for doing the same thing is no longer valid. Since any person's decision is a potential precedent for subsequent decisions, self signaling endows each choice with more significance than it would have if evaluated in isolation.

*Recognition*

*Brand equity.* Measuring corporate image associations through various attributes has been a subject of study by researchers for more than 45 years (e.g., Spector, 1961). Keller (1998, 2003) says brand equity arises from two major elements, awareness and associations. Aaker (1991) regards brand association to be among five components of

brand equity, the others being brand loyalty, awareness, perceived quality and proprietary brand assets.

Despite the empirical substantiation, questions remain such as when and how these image associations have an effect on a person's evaluation (John, Loken, Kyeongheui, & Alokparna, 2006). A generally accepted concept is that consumers make attribute judgments based on what is stored in memory (Keller, 1998, 2003; Lynch & Srull, 1982).

According to associative network models (Anderson, 1983), memory consists of a network of nodes (e.g., concepts, brands or attributes in this case) and linkages among these nodes. In the framework of brands, consumers may have a brand node (Keller, 1998) with a variety of associations linked to that node. Theoretically a brand node starts working when a consumer retrieves information in memory. The brand node is linked to the attribute node. Depending on the accessibility and extent of information, a brand impression evolves.

Consumers learn, retain and act on information via unconscious and implicit learning processes (Krishnan and Chiakravarti, 1999; Erdem et al. 1999). The literature suggests the possibility that brand learning may occur through means not directly accessible via conscious process (i.e., in the awareness and associative forms) discussed by Keller (1998, 2003).

Brand equity is an intangible asset (Aaker, 1991). It depends on the associations made by the consumer and is based on attitudes derived from an awareness of the product associated with the brand (Keller, 2003).

Attitude strength evolves from both direct and indirect experience with the brand's product. Direct experience produces the strongest association. An awareness of a product conveyed through the experiences of others such as colleagues or friends can suffice however in producing a level of awareness and association that lead to perceived quality and inferred attributes. Though indirect and subconsciously, recommendations from friends and family can influence the image of an HEI and impinge on decisions made on brand association.

*Employment and employability.* A study of HEI branding in the marketplace would be incomplete without addressing the employer-higher education interface. Proposing that colleges and universities should be a place for training students for employment as opposed to providing them with an education is risky especially if academia takes its traditional stance of viewing an alliance between an HEI and employment as an erosion of academic freedom. Academics however have reservations of being linked with business, fearing such an association will infringe on academic autonomy and suggest the primary function of education is being diminished to the level of vocational training (Bates, 1999, p. 116).

Since the National Commission on Excellence in Education published A Nation at Risk, its 1983 report on the quality of education in America, there has been mounting pressure on higher education to contribute directly to national economic regeneration and growth. Increasingly, national and international assessments of the role and purposes of education point to a need for higher education to contribute to meeting the needs of the country, to guarantee future competitiveness (United States Education Department, 2007).

Human capital theorists (Becker, 1975, 1992, 1996; Yorke & Knight, 2006; Zula, & Chermack, 2007) have made insightful and convincing arguments of a nation's need for an educated populace, to the extent that government failure to press higher education to do its utmost to enhance graduate employability would be seen as tantamount to a treasonable action. Heavy investments in education by the governments in China and India have placed millions in those countries in a position of being able to compete for decent-wage jobs with workers from around the world. From the perspective of economist and Nobel laureate Gary Becker, "the challenge in the United States is how can we [sic] increase the number of young people going to college" (Milken Institute, 2007, February 2).

Sophisticated economies are assured of success when they are making the best use of their resources of knowledge (Yorke & Knight, 2006). "Although good education for all is widely advocated, it is increasingly said that effective higher education is essential for success in the competition of knowledge societies" (p. 566).

While government equates a quality higher education to employability even to the point that it may play a decisive role in the health of democracy (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Spellings, 2005), others fear such an emphasis threatens developmental outcomes for students and autonomy for HEIs (Bishirjian, 2007). Government interest is fueled primarily by policy matters whereas the interests of HEIs are focused on student achievement. Personal interests are the motivating causes for students who may describe their HEI experience as developmental or self enlightening. Generally however, students leave an HEI with the same concept they had when the entered: good quality higher education will lead to a good job.

Someone who enrolls in college expects to emerge skilled, qualified, and competent, when he or she graduates. Therefore, linking education with employability is logical however to equate employability with the quality of education presents questions.

The predisposition to equate processes with outcomes (e.g., education programs with graduate employment rates) may be flawed. By considering the discrepancy in a mismatch between an HEI's contributions to the employability of their students and to graduate employment rates, it may be short-sighted to view employability as an institutional achievement (Harvey, 2000, p. 97).

The path from college to the workplace is complex, involving more than academic skills. Built in to the coursework are implicit employability development opportunities and explicit employability advancement opportunities (p. 101). Despite the thoroughness of embedded programs and extra curricular opportunities, a range of variables contributes to the complexity of an employment recruiter's selection process, offered by an HEI.

Employment recruiters consider an institution's generally known reputation, regardless of published rankings. Concentration of study plays a central role, mainly in math and science-based industries. Work experience persists in imposing a strong influence on employment and employability, despite legislation, age, ethnicity, gender, and social class.

A useful alternative to rankings is an employability audit (p. 106) that would assess and seek to improve an institution's employability growth opportunities. This appraisal of work experience and attribute expansion in a curriculum would include job-seeking and job-getting skills. It could reconcile the opposition of academia to external

interference in the improvement and delivery of their educational program. It could provide a response to critics claiming a need for accountability in higher education. An internal employability audit, supplemented by a follow-up of job retention rates could provide major data in helping an HEI's reaches its highest point in delivery of education.

Existing policy persists in promoting the skills agenda. What may appear as skills in a class room to improve employment may not be of use in successfully performing in the workplace. Employers are looking for people competent and effectual, attributes that are not always synchronous. Employers anxious to fill their vacant positions with candidates who assimilate promptly with the corporate culture seek out those who might show that promise.

Enhancing an undergraduate curriculum to include a self identification process may provide a student with an awareness to help him or her "gain entry into and be successful in graduate employment" (Holmes, 2001, p. 112). This raises the question of whether the HEI's image is a reflection of its students (e.g., their performance in the workplace) or are the students a reflection of the school's image. It further suggests a need for understanding the extent of an HEI's influence on the employment destinations of his graduates.

Various matters regulate access to education opportunities, employment opportunities, and the preferences in the job market for defined groups of graduates. Socio-economic background, age and networks lead the list of limiting causes. And while higher education provides the skills and competencies required for a career, its status may have a dampening effect on the employability of its students. The relationship of HEIs to

the world of employment may play a greater role in pre-selecting students for future jobs than is acknowledged.

Blaming HEIs for pre-selection would be unfair. High school graduates still make the choice of subject they want to study and the college or university they want to attend. Though claiming their purpose in going to college is for a rewarding career, future employment prospects may not be the motivating factor. Graduation rates are likely to be more telling about the makeup of the student body than the quality of the coursework. Employment recruiting practices seems a more lucrative place for answers to a college graduate's questions about how best to reach his or her career destination.

The expansion of higher education has produced an increase in the number of graduates entering the workplace and both the workplace and higher education have undergone natural, necessary changes. Nevertheless, while "there is a growing focus on the role of social competencies affective and motivational as opposed to knowledge" (The European Commission, 2002 p.1), the assertion that "the primary purpose of higher education is to prepare students for the world of work" (Harvey, 2000 cites NCIHE 1977, p. 4) remains unchanged. Harvey (2000) wrote:

> Traditional fast track graduate recruitment may be declining but the shifting nature of work, with an evident shift toward more ownership of the work process, opens up considerable potential for graduates, provided they step outside traditional preconceptions of the graduate courier. (p. 6)

For their first job, graduates often find themselves in nontraditional kinds of work that may not be graduate level or much of a challenge. Under such circumstances they

have to make adjustments by growing their job, using skills that may be outside of the coursework they received in their undergraduate classroom studies.

A job can be defined as anything that has to be done; the action of completing a task or fulfilling an obligation. In the employment world, a job is something that provides a person with income to meet basic needs and a chance to contribute to society. A career, on the other hand, is defined as a profession; however, it produces more than just income and benefits. It provides opportunities for advancement, enables personal growth, and provides personal satisfaction through accomplishments, largely achievable through "knowledge, the key source" provided by a higher education (Teichler, 2000, p. 84).

A higher education that will maximize employment prospects has been the aim of high school seniors and college freshmen for the past 40 years that UCLA's Higher Education Institute has been keeping records (Pryor et al., 2007). Whether education and employability have united in a partnership or the two have run separate courses, crisscrossing one another though not always arriving at the same goal, finding the best way for high schools students to pick the right school that will take them to the best job is worthy of study.

*Summary of Conceptual Considerations*

It may be valid to claim that "the rise of academic management, together with the rise of consumerism and political concerns with the exchange and use value of higher education, have produced new organizational cultures and professional priorities" (Morley, 2001, p. 131). The highly competitive setting, in which HEIs compete for students, as well as dwindling government subsidies and the expanding interests of the

business sector in determining the purposes of higher education, raises the question of whether employability is a reliable performance indicator or a proper HEI marketing tool.

Generally known, through unacknowledged, research methods in graduate employment are implicitly biased (Johnson, 2003) by vested interests and funding sources that drive the studies. Those with most to gain and the highest amount of discretionary funds are the policy makers in government and business leaders in the corporate sector.

Corporate involvement allows influential private sector administrators to participate in public policy growth as well as in monitoring application of policies relating to their operations. The education sector often is included in policy expansion and research however their role in the process is relegated primarily to mediate and manage the policy created by government and business. The researcher who must seek out available financial support for a study has to be careful in aligning the findings. Studies that arrive at understood goals and purposes for which the research is commissioned have a good chance at future funding but often end up as generalizations without a theoretical base.

Graduate employment researchers come from higher education research units, research institutions, or are interested contract researchers. Researchers in education departments traditionally concentrate on school based education. Generally they have had little connection with graduate employment. Researchers involved in education studies normally come from the fields of sociology and economics. Economists naturally have interests in manpower supply and human capital approaches. Sociologists approach questions by examining the interaction between people and their social settings.

The participants in this study are employment professionals in charge of selecting employment candidates. This chapter described how cognition, acquisition, and recognition are employed by hiring professionals in the recruitment of college graduates. The following chapter assesses the degree to which each applies.

# Chapter 3:

## Methodology and Procedures

This chapter defines the purpose and design of the research. It describes the instrumentation that was employed, sources for data, collection strategies, and the analysis procedure used in examining the questions proposed in this study.

### *Survey Rationale*

Steep competition from corporate and electronic education providers and a continuing decline in government funding has made branding or image a priority on HEI campuses throughout the country. Besides the role it plays in strategic management decisions on campus, branding imparts strong external influence on the predilection of students in selecting the school that will help them realize their career goals (Moore, 2004; Pryor, et al., 2007).

Students have a degree of control over how and where they acquire an education. Colleges and Universities have an obligation for providing the programs and courses that prepare students for the workplace. Linking campus to career is in the hands of job employment recruiters as they seek out and are sought out by the best and the brightest graduates. The hiring decisions made by job recruiters can be as telling about an employment candidate as it is about the schools from which they graduate.

This paper identifies the value of rankings as a marketing tool in student recruitment by weighting *USNWR* reputation rankings against the decision making of employment recruiters. In doing so, it demonstrates the degree of influence those rankings have on the choices made by employment recruiters. A survey and focus group were used to analysis concepts and form conclusions.

*Research Approach and Design*

Developing an understanding of the perspectives of study participants from data assembled through an iterative process and then testing and revising that understanding through cycles of additional data collection and analysis until a consistent and rational meaning is found (Kaplan & Duchon, 1988) was the strategy and the intent of the survey design (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Survey Design Incorporating Strategy and Procedures in Assembling Data*

| Target | Special Population |
|---|---|
| Data Collection | Direct contact with participants and immediate collection of survey during bi-monthly organizational meeting. |
| Sample Frame | Employment recruiters with membership in prominent professional business organizations in the San Fernando Valley. SMASC's membership is homogenous in abilities, skills, ethics, and in applications applied in their profession as employment recruiters. |
| Sample Technique | Purposeful, self-administered, random (Op-in) survey of subset grouping/ |
| Probability of Selection | Equal. |
| Sample Size | Dependent on attendance at meeting, within the range of 30 to 50 members, Data received from a greater number of survey respondents in this group will be considered in the analysis. |
| Weighing | Omitted (self-administered survey). No post sampling. |

Members of the Los Angeles Chapter #3006, Staffing Management Association of Southern California, Inc. (SMA of Southern California) were asked to participate in the study. This organization is described on its website (SMASC Website, 2008, About Us section) as "a special interest chapter of the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM), dedicated to providing educational, developmental, and

networking opportunities to members of the human resources community who have a particular interest in the employment field".

Made up of employment practitioners, members share professional values and interact with one another to discuss workplace subjects and experiences. The organization "is committed to adding value to the employment process through education and identification of best practices, providing a local forum for understanding employment issues, advancing the employment profession and encouraging member involvement in their professional community" (SMASC-SC Website, 2008, About Us section). With such distinctive characteristics, the organization was an optimal choice for participation in this study.

Qualitative research relies on the quality of information obtained per sample unit (Sandelowski, 1995; Douglas, 2003). The level of knowledge, the degree of experience, the makeup of the SMASC membership assured a reliable source for informed responses indispensable in drawing proper inferences from the data analysis. Homogeneous sampling guaranteed control of conditions and characteristics, making a recurrence of responses achievable with a small sample from the 125 member organization.

Generalizing from sample findings is less important in qualitative than quantitative research (Christy & Wood, 1999). This study sought an understanding of the subject within the confines of the sample and therefore focused on people, interactions, and behaviors. It was imperative that study participants present noteworthy possibilities. Reliance was placed on the researcher's experience and integrity because data from the survey were to be used to "derive statistical inferences about the population from the sample" (p. 189).

Experienced researchers agree that the narrower the scope of the study, the smaller the number of participants required for reaching saturation (Henry, 1990, Meadows & Morse, 2001; Porter, 2004). A few specialists have ventured precise numbers ranging from 6 participants for phenomenologies to a range of 30 to 50 for ethnographies and grounded theory and up to 200 for qualitative ethological studies (Morse, 1994). A proper number is recognized when responses become repetitious.

The number of sampling units needed to get informational redundancy can be controlled by maximizing or minimizing categories of variation (Sandelowski, 1995). It is just a matter of aligning the sampling strategy with the purpose and the method chosen for a study. Sandelowski (1995) explains that:

> purposeful sampling for demographic homogeneity and selected phenomenal variation is a way a researcher working alone with limited resources can reduce the minimum number of sample units required within the confines of a single research project and still generate credible and analytically significant findings. (p. 182)

With this in mind, a survey instrument was crafted for the professional employment recruiters who participated in this study. Composed of 17 questions, the survey (see Appendix A) addressed recruiter predispositions, candidate qualification-HEI brand correlation, and brand preference-reputation rankings relationships. The concluding question was aimed at identifying the range and frequency of industries participating in the survey instrument. I distributed the survey as part of a regular bi-monthly meeting. With approval of the organization's leadership, a brief presentation describing the purpose of the study preceded the distribution. Participants were assured of

confidentiality and access to the findings in complimentary copies of the published dissertation.

*Content Reliability and Validation*

The survey was pre-tested by four senior HR professionals with extensive staffing experience who considered the substance and relevancy of the questions. Changes were made in accordance with the recommendations. The senior HR experts selected for this review process were employed by leading industries in the Boston vicinity, a geographic region smaller but comparable in population, diversity, economic base, and educational resources as the Los Angeles region. Using staffing professionals outside the survey area was intentional to increase the probability for objectivity by minimizing possibilities of collaborative responses often common in professional organizations offering networking opportunities.

Survey questions were created based on a review of the literature about consumer problem solving including processing capability, motivation, attention and perception, information acquisition and evaluation, memory decision processes. and knowledge (Engel et al., 2001). The questions implied a logical relationship between the reputation rankings and their influence on the choices being made by employment recruiters. The responses determined whether construct validity (Babbie, 2007) existed (e.g., that a favorable ranking would be more likely than a less favorable ranking) to influence an employment recruiter's decision.

*Base Sample and Alternative Scenarios*

Based on earlier meetings, SMASC officers had expected up to 100 members in attendance on March 12, the organization's second meeting of the year. Low attendance

of less than half that number however resulted in 36 persons ultimately participating in this initial stage of the study. The full membership is comprised of 125 employment practitioners and service professionals with direct involvement in the improvement and execution of employment polices and procedures within their respective companies. While this association of human resource professionals shares homogeneous elements, consequential inferences drawn from the survey were made with the understanding that industry specific parameters might impose variances in the selection process.

The objective of the survey was to get a representative sampling from the population so that results could be generalized back to the population. With common interests and a professional expertise in recruiting college graduates for employment, there was a strong likelihood for redundancy in the responses rather quickly. Use of a small sample therefore was warranted because of the collective attributes of the members and their position as specialists in the field which was a key element of the study. A precise number was determined as the data were tabulated (Thorne, 2001, pp. 154–155; Meadows & Morse, 2001, pp. 192–193).

Based on the common characteristics of the participants, a sampling to redundancy was expected to occur within a range of 30 to 50 responses (see above Meadows & Morse, 2001). Although 30 responses sufficed in identifying emerging themes, a larger number of participants likely would improve the balance of depth and breadth in the study as well as simplify reasoning in an inductive analysis.

*Consent Procedures*

Preliminary information of the research study was provided to SMASC for email distribution to its membership database before the meeting when the surveys were to be

presented and distributed (see Appendix E). The membership was informed that the survey was designed to learn their perceptions in connection with the hiring practices of their organization in employment of college and university graduates (see Appendix F). Participants were assured of confidentiality, that only aggregate data would be disclosed, and that the results would be reported as part of an academic study.

Neither physical nor emotional risk was involved. The survey was voluntary and exclusive to the membership of the target organization. Based on Pepperdine's GSEP human subject guidelines (2001) the study was considered exempt and without need of a full review or prior written consent from participants (see Appendix G).

*Instrumentation*

The instruments employed in this study were fashioned and used solely for this research. The colleges referenced in the survey (see Table 2) were drawn from the rankings published by *USNWR* and were confined to those institutions whose geographic locations were regarded as being within the local or primary access area of the industries participating in this study.

Table 2

*USNWR ranked Higher Education Institutions in the Immediate Area*

| |
|---|
| 1. California Institute of Technology |
| 2. California Lutheran University |
| 3. Concordia University |
| 4. CSU Fullerton |
| 5. CSU-Irvine |

*table continues*

6. CSU-LA

7. CSU-Long Beach

8. CSU-Northridge

9. Chapman University

10. Claremont McKenna

11. Harvey Mudd

12. Mount St. Mary's College

13. Occidental College

14. Pamona

15. Pepperdine University

16. Pitzer

17. Redlands University

18. Scripps College

19. USC

20. UCLA

21. Vanguard University

22. Westmont College

23. None of the above

24. Other please list below with rationale

The survey was comprised of three parts. Section I examined whether published reports of college and university rankings influenced their employment decisions. Opt-out provisions were available for respondents who felt their organizations fell outside the choices available in the query.

Section II asked respondents to select up to five universities from which they frequently recruited employees. Listed were 22 institutions. Conceivably respondents could have selected every one. Limiting their choice to five was intended to maintain focus on those schools that come to mind quickest (Miller, 1956) and produce more meaning analysis of data.

Section III encompassed demographics. The list of 11 primary industries (see Table 3) was intended to be comprehensive.

Table 3

*Comprehensive List of Locally Represented Industries*

| |
|---|
| 1. Advertising/Publishing |
| 2. Automotive |
| 3. Consumer Products |
| 4. Education |
| 5. Entertainment |
| 6. Financial Services, including Insurance |
| 7. Food/Beverage/Travel/Hotel |
| 8. Health/Medical |
| 9. Retail Sales |
| 10. Telecommunications |
| 11. Technology |
| 12. Other |

After the survey was conducted and the data collected, the results were assembled in a data analysis software package. For this study, StatSoft's *STATISTICA* was used to

make comparisons within the survey group and correlations of interacting variables within the data set.

*Procedures*

A purposive survey questionnaire was used to answer questions regarding reputation rankings in association with the selection of employment candidates. The survey was administered under controlled conditions in an atmosphere conducive to achieving greatest involvement and to get complete, thoughtful, responses to open ended, closed end, contingency, ordinal, dichotomous, rank order, and Likert response scale questions.

Contact with the SMASC membership participating in the survey was direct, responses were collected immediately and, with the approval of organization's leadership, multiple incentives for participation were offered. Incentives, even those of low value have been credited with increasing response rates by almost 25 percentage points (Porter, 2004, pp. 13–14). The incentives offered for participation in this survey were non monetary so as not to be construed as compensation. Three prizes were awarded in a random drawing which was conducted and controlled by the organization.

Everyone in attendance was given a survey and a numbered ticket. The ticket was used solely for the awarding of prizes in a random drawing by the organization's officers. Care was taken to make sure that there was nothing to link a survey to any ticket holder, therefore ensuring identities were protected and confidentiality was preserved.

*Data Collection*

The survey was made up of 17 questions. The questions were coded according to software specifications and for ease in facilitating an analysis of the data.

With the study's purpose as a reference point, a two step procedure was used to fashion code categories (descriptive labels) by identifying the relationship value and the significance of each question. Frequencies and cross tabulations of data recorded under these categories identified themes that were used to formulate a conceptual schema that was then used for completing an analysis and reaching conclusions (see Figure 1).

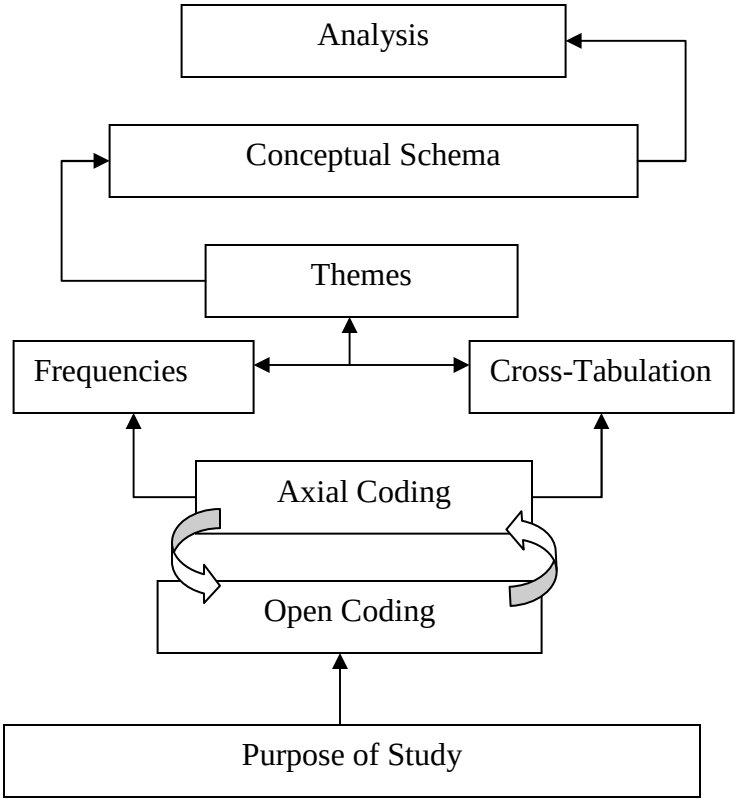


*Figure 1.* The data collection process: Open coding identifies the relationship of the question to the survey and axial coding refines that relationship to give it an identity.

Each of the 17 questions was assigned a label used for inputting data into the computer analysis program (see Appendix B for codebook). The label represented the essence of the question and specified its relationship to the study.

The features of the paradigm introduced in the coding procedures of Strauss and Corbin (1998) were used in developing labels for the survey in this study. Categories emerge from a process of open coding, generating categories and their properties. The

next step was to determine how the categories varied dimensionally by linking them to subcategories through axial coding. Open coding identifies concepts by exploring relationships. Axial coding explores the relationships between the concepts. “One does not stop coding for properties and dimensions while one is developing relationships between concepts (Strauss and Corbin, p. 136).” Open coding and axial coding are conjoined acts.

In this study, one label, *role*, identified the survey respondent’s position and responsibilities. The response was aimed at determining whether position in the organizational structure had a bearing on use of rankings. *Region* was used to identify the locale where the respondent recruited employment candidates with the prospect of identifying lucrative locations for employment. For insight into the respondent’s external and internal influences, *choice* was used. *Knowledge* and *preference* explored a respondent’s awareness adding breadth and depth to the prior questions. The next two questions labeled *branding* and *branding value* examined more closely the effect of branding on the decision making processes of employment recruiters. Where and why were examined in the questions coded *recruitment* and *relationship*. The following three questions related explicitly to the recruiting activity. The final question labeled *industry* showed the extent of the survey’s inclusiveness.

*Data Analysis*

Using elements of the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), responses to the open ended and closed end questions were examined with frequencies and cross tabulation. A conceptual schema was derived with this method that permitted an intense and extensive examination of the presuppositions of employment professionals

regarding information, choice, and decision making theories underlying choices made in the selection of employment candidates. Inductively this eased work in defining the importance of reputation rankings in HEI branding strategies.

Responses were examined; variables were extracted, and grouped to reflect themes. Interpretations of the themes were made to determine whether any patterns were present.

During the course of the analysis, impressions, interpretations, schemes, and suppositions evolved. The range of thought produced an objective collection of information that generated positive, productive answers to questions about the relationship of HEI reputation rankings to decisions by employment recruiters and the branding strategies employed by colleges and universities.

*Supplemental Research: Focus Group*

As a qualitative instrument, numerically tabulated responses limit a survey's interpretive depth (Creswell, 1994, 1998). To add substance and validity to the study, therefore, a post survey focus group was drawn from volunteers to more closely examine the responses given by their peers. The discussion group's commentary was used to corroborate the survey's information and strengthen its interpretation.

*Prefocus Group Materials*

A welcoming letter affirming the time and agenda was emailed to focus group participants a week before the meeting. Attached was a purpose statement and collated results of the survey. Raw data were withheld in compliance with promised protection of survey participant privacy and respondent confidentiality. Telephone calls were made before the meeting confirming the participation of each focus group volunteer. A

teleconference as opposed to gathering in a central location was decided as the most convenient way of meeting. The teleconference was recorded with full consent of the participants. This assured greater accuracy in later examining of the statements made during the conversation. The 45 minute teleconference began at 11 a.m. on April 15.

*Group Composition and Meeting Location*

The focus group was made up of long term members of SHRM, several of whom have been active as officers in the SMA of Southern California. Included were:

- A past chair of the SHRM National Employment Committee and adjunct professor for 17 years at Chapman University who has taught graduate level Human Resources courses including Recruiting and Selection. He is vice president for a global talent management and leadership solutions organization that provides businesses and professional organizations in 27 countries with outplacement services, executive coaching, and leadership training programs.
- A director of staffing for a major retailer that manufactures and sells lingerie, personal care and beauty products, apparel and accessories in the United States, Canada and 40 countries throughout the world. She supervises a team of recruiters in charge of management level staffing for their brands in the 11 western states.
- A vice president for one of the world's largest global job postings distribution companies. Working with Fortune 500 companies to improve their on line hiring strategies, he is in charge of coordinating use of a major applications tracking system that distributes job requisitions to over 1400 job boards.

- A University Recruiting Manager for a Fortune 500 technology company.
- An executive recruiter with a wide clientele base that includes Fortune 500 companies throughout Southern California.
- An assistant vice president and director of human resources involved in strategic and tactical guidance for a domestic and international staff of a faith-based non-profit that has its home offices in the Los Angeles vicinity.

*Purpose of Postsurvey Focus Group*

The objective of the study was to determine if a familiarity of *USNWR* reputation rankings and a perceived credibility of the magazine influence the employment selection of college graduates. Focus group discussion therefore centered on the extent to which *USNWR* reputation rankings influenced the decisions made by members of The Southern California Employment Managers Association as reflected in their survey answers. The shared characteristics of the post survey focus group in concert with their professional qualifications and their interest in the subject provided an excellent setting for a lively and informative conversation (Morgan, 1996).

*Agenda, Script, and Questions*

The meeting began with a welcome, review of agenda (see Appendix C), purpose of meeting and ground rules. A script (See Appendix C) was distributed with the agenda. After self introductions, I launched the discussion with an overview of the survey. The scripted questions were interwoven into the discussion that was concluded with a summarization of the group's exchange. Everyone had the chance to clarify their remarks and offer final comments before the meeting ended.

*Data Assembly: Strategy and Theory Relationship*

This dissertation used responses to survey questions and a focus group discussion in identifying behavior indicating receptiveness to HEI branding and reputation rankings in choice selection of employment applicants. The survey questions were designed to explore the theories relating elements of comprehension, memory processing, evaluation judgment, and cognitive psychology that are described in Chapter II where the basis for the rational choice model is established.

By developing a rational choice theory about choice behavior in employment selection, new ways for examining how respondents select employment applicants were established. The first matter addressed in this work was the identification by respondents through answers that demonstrated recognition of HEI branding and reputation rankings. If recognition was shown by responses, questions three, four and eight were related to choosing from colleges and universities listed in *USNWR* reputation rankings. The survey went on to explore the frequency and intensity of this behavior in the remainder of the questions.

Of particular interest were questions related to branding and reputation rankings and the resultant behavior of hiring professionals in choosing an employment candidate. Through an examination of causes affecting respondent behaviors and determining whether the influence of those causes had significant effect on the survey data, observations were made about the importance of the causes to the respondents. Supplemental open ended questions provided survey participants with a chance to expand on their answers. The additional information from these spontaneous responses helped explain and strengthen answers to the closed ended survey questions.

The costs and benefits of choosing an appropriate employment candidate would appear evident in the case of a hiring professional's obligation to his or her company. External influences may not be as clear; therefore, indicators measuring ability, motivation, and task difficulty are required for an evaluation. The indicators are threaded through the subsections labeled cognition, acquisition and recognition. Attitude, learning, memory and risk were the indicators used to distinguish the variations in the responses to the survey in this study.

Considering attitude as an indicator of preference, studies have shown that attitude is learned and predisposed to action (Fishbein & Azjen, 1975; Azjen & Fishbein, 1980, 2000; Petty et al., 2006). Aligning the advantages in making the choice with the self regulatory limitations acquired from earlier experience (Higgins, 1997), the predispositions to actions are consistently favorable or unfavorable toward the subject.

Memory as an indicator is capable of exploring the effects of prior knowledge and experience on decision making. Studies (Bettman & Park, 1980, Bettman and Luce 1998, Escales & Bettman, 2005) show consumers rely on attribute based evaluations drawn from memory in processing choices. By categorizing (Cohen, 1982), consumers are able to combine the pieces of attribute information retrieved from memory to assign a value that determines their preference for the object under consideration. Limited processing capacity (Miller, 1956) requires consumers to rely on their memory to make trade offs, maximizing attributes and minimizing negative feelings (Luce, et al., 2000, p. 296).

Risk as an indicator is an element in making any decision. Various theories testify to the role of risk when a choice is being made. From Bernoulli's paper (1952) Exposition of a New Theory of Measurement of Risk, to Mongin's (1997) Expected

Utility Theory, examining decision making in cases of uncertainty (Von Neuman & Morgenstern, 1944), and in cases of risk, an examination of risk in decision making has been studied as a normative model of rational choice (Hammond, et al., 2001) and applied as a descriptive model of economic behavior (Arrow & Raynaud, 1986). An alternate to the expected utility theory is Kahneman and Tversky's Prospect Theory (1979). Consisting of two stages, editing and evaluation, outcomes are first determined and then evaluated in terms of highest utility and lowest utility. In this fashion a reference point is determined and used to identify the choice that offers the most gain.

Branding is a major indicator because of its direct relationship to the subject under study. Kevin Keller (1998, 2003) explores the dynamic connection of brand to a consumer, theorizing that when a consumer is able to identify with a brand, the consumer commits that association to memory.

A study by David Aaker and George Day (1974) of the relationships among advertising, consumer awareness, attitudes and behavior found that the influence of advertising went from advertising directly to behavior, and not through attitude. The intrinsic value of brand strength and the role it plays in the choice process, addressed by Aaker (2003) in a later article is especially applicable in the survey used for this study that seeks among other things to determine whether a brand must form and maintain a special distinctive quality to give consumers a basis for selecting it over others.

The first question in the survey about the role played in making decisions relies on elements of the attitude indicator. The self regulatory part of the attitude indicator is applicable in question two on whether and where an organization recruits because such

decisions would be a result of experience. Experience along with elements of the memory indicator and the attitude indicator applies to the preference ranking in question three.

The major indictors in question four are experience and risk. Prior expectation, previous encounter, with employment candidates, and contact with the institutions are likely components in a company's strategy for finding promising recruits. For employers whose hiring decisions are shaped by the success of their recruiting strategy, employer perceptions of an institution's desirability may be closely parallel to the perceptions of the students in selecting an institution to maximize their employment opportunities. The next question on familiarity with *USNWR* reputation rankings drew on attitude, memory and brand indicators.

Direct and intended to measure the survey participant's perspective, this open ended question provided a framework in correlating responses to other variables in the questionnaire. Branding, rational choice, behavioral and attitude theories were reflected in the responses.

In the seventh question attitude, memory, and brand indicators again were tested along with elements of the risk indicator, as the answer being sought disclosed the degree of risk an organization was willing to take when recruiting an employment applicant from other than a top tier HEI. Degree of risk also was shown in question eight regarding how well students are able to transfer their skills from a college campus to a workplace. Attitude and memory indicators were required for the response.

Every one of the indicators come into play in question nine about perceived degree of the importance of reputation rankings and in question ten seeking the identification of the top five HEIs used for recruiting. Attitude and risk were the primary

indicators in question eleven where case based and self regulatory experiences were reflected in the responses.

Question 12, asking whether recruitment is a routine activity, and question thirteen, relating to the person responsible for recruiting, relied on attitude, specifically the self regulatory limitations resulting from experience, and the risks involved by the hiring organization and the people assigned to select employment candidates. The attitude, risk, and brand indicators were the considerations applicable in question fourteen that asks whether lists of schools are used for recruitment and in question fifteen, which asks whether schools have been added or dropped from the list or remained unchanged. Responses helped identify the attributes related to the schools used in the recruitment process (e.g., students from the schools on the lists used for recruitment possess greater potential in specific jobs). Question sixteen was designed to determine the degree to which bias, halo effect, or educational effectiveness (e.g., quality of student) affects the attitude on decisions made by companies in reviewing the recruitment referral process. No attributes were required for responding to the final question seeking industry identification.

Besides providing a theoretical base on which to frame and review the survey questions, the indicators were considered during discussion by a post survey focus group. The post survey discussion setting permitted respondents to expand their survey responses and to elaborate on their approach in answering the questions. By facilitating an open discussion about the survey experience, the dialogue provided supplemental information which validated the data obtained in the survey results.

*Methodological Assumptions*

Employment professionals were chosen as respondents for the survey in this study because of the importance of their role in staffing their organizations. The employment professionals serve as the independent variable because their hiring practices can "cause, influence or affect outcomes (Creswell, 1994, p. 63)." The magazine rankings would be (the) dependent (variable) because "they are the outcomes or results of the influence of the independent variables" (p. 63).

Assessing the *USNWR* rankings regarding employment recruiting decisions was the primary goal of the survey linked to this study. Its purpose was to gain insight into the attitudes of job recruiters during their evaluation of college graduates applying for positions with companies in the Los Angeles metropolitan region.

The results permitted logical inferences to be made about (a) whether an HEI's ranking affects a student's goal of obtaining the best possible job, (b) the quality of an HEI's education program with respect to developing the employment potential of its students, and (c) the degree to which a student's goal for employment is aligned with an HEI's success in securing a favorable or improved ranking. These inferences and others drawn from the data helped in answering the question of whether a university's or college's branding strategy contributes to the employability of its graduates.

*Delimitations and Limitations of the Study*

This study is delimited to colleges and universities in the metropolitan Los Angeles region. Respondents to the survey represented businesses that were likewise located in the same geographic vicinity. Therefore, results were exclusive to this region.

Survey participants were members of the Employment Management Association of Southern California. Members represented all levels of staffing professionals with varying degrees of involvement in their company's job recruitment and candidate selection process. Company size and sophistication of recruiting practices could be determining matters. The influence of norms and habits and/or a company's culture has the potential for producing atypical results such as a halo effect.

*Summary of Methodology and Procedures*

This study was driven and directed by the desirability for a better understanding of the relationship of reputation rankings to the hiring decisions of professional employment recruiters. To identify a concise yet comprehensive assortment of possible relevant variables, an organization whose membership represented a larger population was selected. In attempts to classify the answers accurately, the questions were phrased to reflect explicit elements of reality.

The questionnaire asked participants to describe and evaluate their decisions in selecting employment candidates as they related to *USNWR* rankings. Its primary goal was to determine the prevalence of rankings used in marketing HEIs as defined by (a) awareness of HEI reputation rankings, (b) method of valuing brand identification with employment applicant, and (c) employment hiring policy.

Survey participants evaluated the perceived effectiveness of the rankings. The insights into the relevance of rankings, recruiter choice, and HEI marketing techniques cannot preclude the practicability of shaping approaches to subsequent studies. A post survey focus group, included volunteers from the survey respondents, had the opportunity to supply additional information to improve interpretation of the data.

# Chapter 4:

## Survey Outcomes

This dissertation is aimed at answering the following three questions within the framework of the results of a survey taken by a professional organization and an open discussion by a small group from that organization about its members' responses.

- Does an HEI's reputation ranking affect a graduate's employment prospects? Specifically, this study examines whether a high school student who uses *USNWR* rankings in choosing a college or university for a degree has an edge in the job.
- Do reputation rankings contribute to an HEI's branding strategy? A top tier ranking would appear to be a convincing selling point for the HEI, but does use of reputation rankings in an HEI's marketing strategy contribute to the employability of its graduates?
- Is the student's goal for employment aligned with an HEI's success in securing a favorable or improved ranking? If student aspirations are the priority of an HEI and a student chooses a higher education to be successful in the job market, are *USNWR* rankings an appropriate measure for student selection for employment purposes?

The data used for an assessment of these questions were obtained from 36 of the 55 persons who attended a scheduled meeting of the SMASC. Results from assembled data were scrutinized by a six-member volunteer focus group drawn from the SMASC membership. This process was aimed at establishing the appropriateness of the

organization's membership for participation in the study and providing insight into the questions related to reputation rankings.

Using a focus group enabled the researcher to draw on information from a guided group discussion to explore the decision making processes of the participants more deeply; to secure a better understanding of the responses in the survey; to test the feasibility of undertaking a future study; and to refine the procedures and methodology for employing further study (Babbie, 2007). Focus group dialog was sought within the frame of survey data associated with reputation rankings in general, and US News & World Report rankings in particular.

*Survey results*

The first two survey questions were proposed to establish expertise and credibility. Of the six options available, 39% of those participating reported to be employment staffing professionals; 19% were Staffing/Human Resource Managers, 17% were made up of HR generalists, 14% were staffing/HR directors and 3% were HR vice-presidents.

The remaining 8% verified their role about graduate employment with designation outside the options in the survey. Conversations with attendees at the SMASC meeting however indicated that the undeclared survey participants were independent contract employment professionals.

More than half of those participating in the survey, 57%, specified recruiting nationwide while 17% used the local vicinity to obtain their candidates, and 9% recruited regionally. Organizations and hiring professionals who recruited in combinations of national, regional or local vicinities accounted for the remaining 17%.

The primary consideration of HR professionals in assessing an employment applicant was work experience (28%). Academic record (22%) was the second choice followed by non academic activity and field/degree (each 19%). Employee referred candidates was preferred by a small representation (8%), while *USNWR* (3%) attracted little interest (see Figure 2).

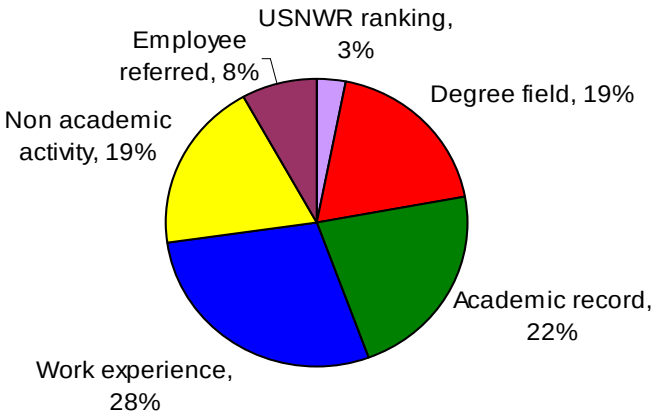


*Figure 2*. Choice preference order of employment professionals in considering job applicants

*Note.* The pie chart shows the relative frequencies of being ranked 1st (or last). Not so many placed employee referred 1st but many ranked it as their 2nd or 3rd or 4th choice, hence a higher mean ranking is shown in the non parametric test later in this chapter.

When asked to describe the role of an HEI's image in their organization's recruiting strategy, survey participants suggested that company hiring strategy tended to be program associated as opposed to image oriented. Their primary interest was in finding a candidate with a degree aligned with the job requirements. Targeting schools by program and seeking an association between the position to be filled and the experience level of the candidate were response subthemes.

College image was a lesser subtheme frequently described in combination with other things and often last in line with features of a company's employment recruiting strategy. Degree of familiarity with the *USNWR* rankings was split three ways: 36% of the respondents were somewhat familiar with *USNWR* ranking; 33% were very familiar; 30% were not familiar with the rankings (see Figure 3).

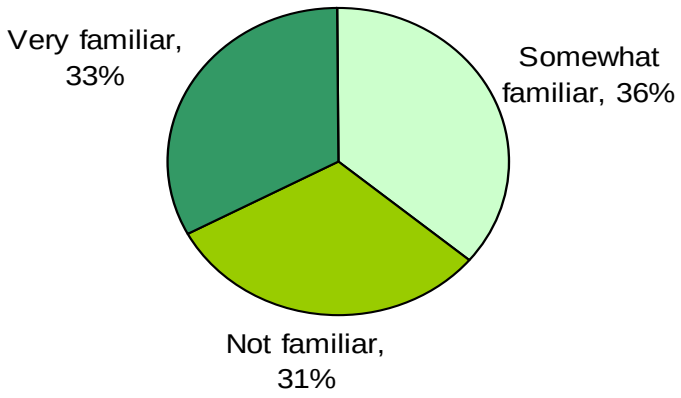


*Figure 3.* Professional employment recruiters' degree of familiarity with *U.S. News and World Report* reputation rankings

After establishing the degree of familiarity with *USNWR* rankings, perspectives of college reputation ranking in general were explored in the next survey question. Though there was general agreement that reputation rankings project an appropriate assessment of colleges and universities, others survey participants considered the rankings "a waste of time" or "did not go deep enough" and "could be misleading."

Focus group concurrence also was expressed on the role that rankings play in a student's choice of an HEI, however in terms of the hiring process rankings have no relevance. Despite their degree of familiarity and their points of view about reputation

rankings, more than two-thirds (64%) of the HR professionals did not recruit from top tiered schools; almost a third (28%) said they did; the balance (8%) had no college recruitment program in place.

Relying on their experience, 83% said graduates from *USNWR* top ranked colleges and universities are neither more successful nor less successful than other candidates selected for employment. The remaining 17% of the survey respondents found graduates from the top tier schools tended to be more successful in their careers.

When it came to identifying an appropriate candidate for an employment interview (see Figure 4), brand value was *very unimportant* to 39% of survey participants; 22% considered it *somewhat important;* 17% regarded *USNWR* as *moderately important*; 11% listed it as *somewhat important.* Only 3% of those taking the survey regarded brand value as a *very important* part in their decision making process.

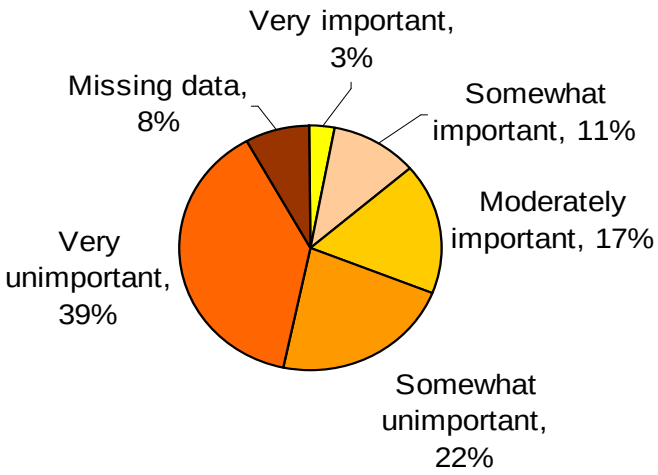


*Figure 4*. The role of brand importance in the decision making of professional employment recruiters

Recruiting was a routine activity for almost 70% of the survey respondents. The participants were divided, 49% to 51% respectively, when asked whether their companies assigned specific people to college recruiting and those that did not (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Company involvement of HR in recruitment on campus*

| Choice | Yes | No |
|---|---|---|
| Routine activity | 69% | 31% |
| Specific recruiter assigned | 49% | 51% |

*Note: N=35*

Almost 75% of the survey participants signified they used lists of schools for recruitment; 91% stated their organizations have maintained the same number of schools or added to the list of schools they use; 9% said they had reduced or removed the number of schools they include in their employment recruiting activities. Of the responses in Q15, 47% had added schools to their recruitment lists and 44% maintained the same list they had been using in the past (see Figure 5).

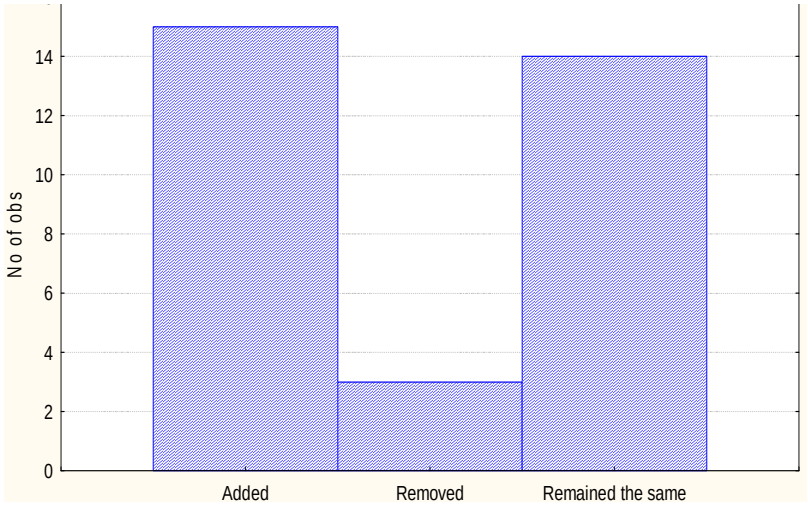


*Figure 5.* Fluctuations in college recruiting lists used by hiring professionals

Information extraction from full response survey questions was driven by keywords drawn from the framework of each question. While word frequency and contextual relationship continued to be relied on in Q16 for identification of themes, subthemes and relational themes, the keywords for knowledge discovery were drawn from data gathered in Q3.

Question three asks survey respondents to rank in preference order the features they use in choosing employment applicants. The nine options offered were intended to find out whether reputation rankings play a role in helping a college graduate find a job. By placing candidate credentials and reputation rankings in the framework of the hiring process, data were gathered to reflect the relative importance that hiring professionals put on the elements and to test a popular idea that a degree from a high prestige school provides job candidate with an edge in the job market. Candidate credentials related to degree, academic and non academic achievements, and work related experience. Reputation rankings included reference to an HEI's education programs and well as published reviews.

The data from Q3 provided the groundwork in mining the information obtained from Q16 that asks respondents to be precise in describing the most important consideration given in the selection of an appropriate candidate. Reputation, experience, and degree, were determined to be reasonable breakouts of the main categories in Q16. Experience was further sub-classified into work, internships, and employment. Degree was broken down into study and academics. Experience had the highest frequency of 13, while there were four references to degree. Program reputation was mentioned twice and implied in several other cases.

Finding an employment candidate who would be a proper "fit" for the job was mentioned in several responses. "Perceived abilities and experience" was another reply. Some of the direct answers expressed preference for "internships and work experience" and "work portfolio." The value of a strong connection between corporate organizations and colleges or universities was reflected in the answer stating that company employment choices were anchored in "the history of alumni we have hired."

*Non parametric testing of decision factors.* Relying on a nonparametric test for comparing multiple dependent variables, the Friedman ANOVA was used to examine the rank order of preferences used by the Human Resource professionals participating in this study when considering an undergraduate applicant for employment. The Friedman ANOVA by ranks test presumes that the variables under consideration were measured on at least an ordinal (rank order) scale.

The null hypothesis for the procedure is that the different columns of data (e.g., variables) contain samples drawn from the same population, or specifically, populations with identical medians. Thus, the interpretation of results from this procedure is similar to that of repeated measures ANOVA.

The average rank from each option was generated from the Friedman test. The mean and standard deviations were calculated based on the nonparametric nature of the data. The null hypothesis being tested was that there is no difference in rankings to the separate activities (e.g., work experience, degree, field of study, reputation of school, reputation of programs, and referral) on the choice preference of the HR professionals.

The outcome of the Friedman test illustrates that HR professional have preferences in their selection of employment applicants that range from most to least

significant with *USNWR* and other reputation rankings at the lower end of the scale (See Table 5). Results rejected the null hypothesis and thereby proved a variation and priority order in the choice preferences of the HR professionals.

Table 5

*Friedman Analysis of Variance for Rank Order Preference*

| Variable 3 option | Average rank | Sum of ranks | *M* | *SD* | Ranking |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Work Experience | 2.00 | 72.00 | 2.00 | 1.57 | 1 |
| Degree Level | 2.75 | 99.00 | 2.76 | 1.36 | 2 |
| Referred by Company Employee | 3.74 | 134.50 | 3.74 | 2.05 | 3 |
| Word of Mouth Reputation of HEI | 4.79 | 172.50 | 4.83 | 1.91 | 4 |
| Word of Mouth Reputation of HEI program | 4.99 | 179.50 | 5.03 | 1.90 | 5 |
| Academic Record | 5.01 | 180.50 | 5.06 | 1.75 | 6 |
| Non-academic activities | 5.86 | 211.50 | 5.88 | 1.82 | 7 |
| *USNWR* Reputation Ranking | 7.64 | 275.00 | 7.65 | 0.86 | 8 |
| Other | 8.21 | 295.50 | 8.24 | 1.06 | 9 |

*Note.* Friedman ANOVA and Kendall Coeff. Of Concordance ANOVA Chi Sqr. (N = 36, df = 8) = 169. 9106. p = 0.00000. Coeff of Concordance =.58997. Average rank r = .57825

Based on the outputs in Table 5, work experience is the prime preference of HR professionals participating in this study. Degree level and a company referral in that order

are the next two elements used to guide the decision making in the employment candidate selection process.

The HEIs' word of mouth reputation and the reputation of the institutions' programs follow with academic and non academic attributes trailing. Reputation rankings appear to be least useful to hiring professionals in their search for an appropriate employment candidate.

*The Wilcoxon matched pairs test.* The Friedman test is a nonparametric test of statistical significance for use with ordinal data from correlated group or in this case correlated preferences. It is a nonparametric version of one-way, repeated-measures ANOVA (Vogt, 2005).

This test was conducted to examine if the participants, the employment professionals, are consistent in their preferences when choosing from among job applicants. In this study, participants were asked to rank their preferences when hiring given nine options or choices (e.g., work experience, degree level, company referral, word of mouth reputation of HEI, program reputation, academic record, non academic activities, *USNWR* reputation ranking, and other reputation rankings). If the result is significant, the null hypothesis is rejected, asserting that preferences exist among the nine options. The Friedman ANOVA only tests for overall differences in ranking. This omnibus test however must be followed by pair-wise comparisons.

Having established the rank order preferences, therefore, the relationships between the variables were examined to determine with some degree of confidence whether any associations would be owing to chance, (e.g., whether the relationship is of statistical significance, that is $p < .05$). The Wilcoxon Matched Pairs Test was used for

this part of the analysis. The Wilcoxon matched pairs test is a nonparametric alternative to the t-test for dependent samples. Used to determine if the differences in adjacent ranks are statistically significant, it permits one to be exact about where the differences occur.

The Wilcoxon Test calculates a Z score by comparing the raw data (see Appendix E) with the rankings to obtain a p value (Higgins, 2004). The test statistic is subtracted from the mean of the test statistic and its difference divided by the standard deviation. The means and standard deviation of the different scores that are illustrated in Table 6 between each option is based on its average rank.

Table 6

*Wilcoxon Matched Pairs Test Outputs for Preference Relationships*

| Rank comparison | Comparing two dependent variables | Difference in avg. rank | z | *p*-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1&2 | Work Experience vs. Degree Field | 0.75 | 1.99 | .047* |
| 2&3 | Degree Field vs. Employee Referred | 0.99 | 1.78 | .076 |
| 3&4 | Employee Referred vs. HEI Reputation | 1.05 | 1.98 | .047* |
| 4&5 | HEI Reputation vs. HEI Program Reputation | 0.20 | 0.41 | .681 |
| 4&6 | HEI Reputation vs. Academic Record | 0.22 | 0.58 | 563 |
| 5&6 | HEI Program Reputation vs. Academic Record | 1.02 | 0.12 | .903 |
| 6&7 | Academic Record vs. Non Academic Record | 0.85 | 2.13 | .034* |
| 7&8 | Non-Academic Record vs. *USNWR* | 1.78 | 3.65 | .000* |
| 8&9 | *USNWR* vs. Other | 0.57 | 3.19 | .002* |

*Note.* * p < .05 = statistical significance

The Z score for standard normal distribution is calculated for each pair and the results summarized in Table 6. The p value is an approximation that used to determine the degree of significant and used in identifying whether the null hypothesis is rejected.

The procedure presupposes that the variables under consideration were measured on a scale that permits the rank ordering of observations based on each variable and allows rank ordering of the differences between variables. Different ratings by the same variable provide key information. In Table 6, the Standard Normal distribution (*z*) is used to test the difference between two means. The Standard Normal distribution has a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. An asterisk denotes statistical significance differences ($p < .05$) in rank.

In the scattered instances of incomplete responses to this variable, a standard accepted approach using mean substitution was applied to avoid losing data because of case-wise deletion of missing data (e.g., replacing missing data in a variable by the mean of that variable; see Appendix E). In cases where only three or four preferences were listed, the mean was assigned to the incomplete options. In one case the respondent evidently weighted his answers, adjusting the reflected values in several of the nine options to show relative position (i.e., substituting five, six, seven and eight) and leaving choices blank instead of applying a progressive one through nine sequence of numbers. Reasoning the respondent was using the larger number as the most preferred, substitutions were employed. The resulting alignment of the response pattern with the other surveys showed the rationalization was appropriate and the assigned figures acceptable.

The Wilcoxon rank-sum test, assesses whether two samples of observations come from the same distribution. The null hypothesis is that the two samples are drawn from a single population, and therefore that their probability distributions are equal. When the computed probability is below 0.05, we can reject the null hypothesis at level 0.05 and conclude that the two samples are significantly different.

This implies that those pairs indicating a statistical significance are distinct from one another. The tests prove that hiring professionals consider an employment applicant's most significant asset to be work related experience. It appears to be more than an enhancement to the requirement of an applicable degree. Company referral is a separately considered benefit, distinct from the employment professional's personal perceptions of the candidate's alma mater or the degree program. Academic and non academic record are measured separately. *USNWR* reputation rankings is lowest ranked by the HR professional.

*Focus Group Results*

A script and agenda were prepared for the focus group meeting (see Appendix C). The six point script was intended as a guideline and not for use as a rule book. Its purpose was to provide focus group members with flexibility that would encourage them to expand an interpretation of the survey results. Focus group members were asked to relax, be open, think deeply, and consider alternatives in the environment of a free flowing modestly structured conversation as opposed to submitting to a point by point review of the 17 question survey.

Care was taken to include the fundamental elements of the 17 survey questions. Using the scripted questions as a guide, four themes emerged from the focus group discussion.

- Theme A. Observations and opinions of survey results

Participants agreed with the results saying that their preference and processes for selecting candidates for employment evolved over years of acquired hiring practices. Their goal was to of identify someone as the best fit for a job. Their best possibility of accomplishing that goal was by finding someone with a degree from an accredited college and with a solid record of related work experience.

- Theme B. Perceptions of reputation

The employment professionals drew their perceptions of an HEI's reputation from particulars such as their firm's association with a college or university, their successful encounters in interviewing candidates from specific schools, personal recommendations from associates and friends.

- Theme C. Value of *USNWR* reputation ranking

They believed students use *USNWR* rankings to identify what schools and training are available in the immediate vicinity. The hiring professionals agreed that reputation rankings can serve as a tool in a college's marketing strategy.

- Theme D. Correlation between reputation rankings and employment opportunities

The employment professional were unanimous in their conviction that *USNWR* reputation rankings was of little use to a student seeking employment.

In the absence of facial expressions and body language, close attention was given to the participants' tonal quality, vocabulary, and conversational courtesy. No one over talked or debated. Consensus prevailed in the conversations confirming the expectation of working with a homogeneous group. Their quickness to adapt to a teleconference was an equally reasonable expectation since the telephone is probably their most frequently used communications tool. My primary job as facilitator was controlling the meeting in an unobtrusive way. To cover each topic thoroughly, care was taken to prevent groupthink by encouraging new streams of thinking.

*Focus Group Discussion*

Each focus group member had their own way of describing what an HEI's reputation meant to them. All agreed however that it was a personal thing. A *Fortune* 500 technology company executive said:

> My description is defined for me by perception, by my own perception of a given institution. Whether the perception that is in the eyes or is in the mind of the recruiter or the hiring manager is entirely accurate or not, I think that's part of the mystery and the dynamics of marketing or branding. At the same time I think I would weigh other issues that come up in an interview…things like work experience or even just the nonverbals like eye contact; does this person have it together, do they seem to have potential, those sorts of things.

Work experience was a recurring theme as expressed in this observation from a member of the group:

> Definitely, I would be looking for experience. I deal primarily with sales people and their experience rather than what school they went to. Now there are some

schools that always stand out in my mind as top notch of schools, but again those were drilled into me long before *U.S. News & World Report* ever came out so I don't think rankings really had that much of an affect on me as far as using it as a hiring tool.

An experience headhunter who was part of the focus group pointed out that there are caveats to be considered in the candidate selection process:

You have to go to the school that's going to help you with the career in the interest of choice. If you want to be a practical engineer, Cal Poly is a lot better for you than Cal Tech, and if you want to be the theoretical engineer and end up over at NASA go to Cal tech. I think the ranking could be valuable for the student, but I don't think the rankings are used by corporations.

There was nothing conditional about the certainty of a staffing director for a major national retailer:

Figuring that those schools with the highest rankings possibly have the smartest kids getting into them because the kids with the most options, the best grades, the best SAT scores, the best leadership qualities, all of those kinds of things; all of the top schools want those kids so it is possible that those schools are graduating a higher caliber of student. I don't know, and in saying that the students then may do more in their careers but I think that those students who have that level of commitment, the drive, and everything else, and it doesn't matter what college they came from, their careers are going to do well. I don't think it's the school. I think the schools are just screaming for excellent workers, excellent students.

It is not reality to believe that getting into a premier college means nothing but

green lights on the road to becoming the chief executive officer of a major corporation. The vice president for a global talent management and leadership solutions organization expressed it this way:

> Now if you have you have specialty issues like consumer goods, packaging, then you may not want to go to Ohio State, you might want to go to Northwestern, or you're looking for HR talent, you might want to go Cornell not Ohio State, but if you're looking for a recent college graduate you not going to find a lot of significant difference between Ohio State and Purdue and Wisconsin in terms of education, unless it's of a specialty nature. You hire people for jobs and the school they went to but at some point that just evaporates.

The vice president of a nationwide job posting distribution organization had this perspective:

> Every time the *U.S. News & World Report* comes out on the newsstand I always buy a copy or read it quickly at the stand one or the other and again it's always been for bragging rights to see where my school is, where my friends schools are. I never thought of it really to use it as a hiring tool and so that was always kind of a secondary thing and I never really thought about my perception of the magazine until you brought up the topic.

Stated concisely and representing the consensus to the question of whether use of reputation rankings will help graduates acquire a job was this response from a focus group member:

These colleges are marketing to perspective students and the students believe, and the students' parents believe, that these rankings mean something. They don't really.

# Chapter 5:

# Implications, and Recommendations

The intensity of debate and diversity of thought about academic rankings make it surprising that there has been such a lack of scholarly attention in using students' goal attainment to quantify and assess the academic quality of colleges and universities. Raymond Hughes' (1925) was one of the first researchers to define academic excellence in terms of multidisciplinary reputation standing. Up until the explosion in popularity of *USNWR*'s annual rankings, a small number of major reviews made up the body of work (Conrad, 1987).

An academic quality ranking was defined by David Webster (1986) as a status or position based on criteria that measure academic quality and a rank order listing of colleges, universities, or departments based on reputed quality in a field of study. Webster relied on a survey of employment professionals to determine whether a diploma from a top ranked school represents added value during the employment process when examined within the framework of *USNWR*'s rankings of colleges and universities.

Both blamed and credited for swaying student selection in choosing where to pursue a higher education, *USNWR* has been long criticized for creating competition atypical of the higher education community (Farrell & Van Der Werf, 2007). Data on the familiarity, perceived value, and role of reputation rankings in decision making were gathered for this paper from a survey of staffing professionals and a follow up focus group discussion.

## *Implications*

The results of this study show that reputation rankings are neither a predictor nor

a guide in achieving an undergraduate's goal in getting a job. Human Resource professionals see no connection between reputation rankings and an undergraduate's qualifications for employment; and that rankings play little if any role in their decision of whom to select from among undergraduates applying for a job. A number of HR employment professionals reported being unfamiliar with the popular published list of best colleges and universities. Those who did recognize the rankings considered them a useful marketing tool; eye appeal for college websites and other HEI promotional material; and/or useful as a source for identifying colleges or universities with potential employment candidates for specific job vacancies. The priority considerations used by hiring recruiters for identifying competent job applicants were a degree in the appropriate field, work experience and on-the-job accomplishments. Other desirable attributes included employee referrals, non-academic activities, and academic record.

A job applicant's work experience holds greater interest for HR hiring professionals than a degree from a brand name or top tier college or university, according to the data in this dissertation. Realization that these priorities could be a deciding reason in a job interview could have an affect on the way a student chooses an HEI; the way a college or university fashions and directs its marketing strategy; and new metrics for ranking schools of higher education.

An HR hiring professional's goal is to match a job applicant with the skills required for employment. They are looking for job candidates who are competent and show the potential for being able to adapt their classroom learning and experience to a new workplace; someone with characteristics and skill to be the right fit for the job.

To avoid a mismatch, professional job recruiters rely on objective predictors for their evaluations, centering their preference on candidates with a track record of work related experiences. Rankings are considered too soft a metric in making a decision.

Given this information and other data from this study, undergraduates and graduates can focus on achieving their goals by concentrating on functional rather than transitory elements. The functional features of applicable degree, program performance and extracurricular involvements may not require as close an inspection as work experience is so critically connected to job performance.

Structuring a study of work experience based on form and substance could provide a better understanding of the meaning and value of accumulated skills and how HR hiring professionals evaluate them. While these features represent the qualities deemed most important by HR professionals, a logical extension of these results could prove worth incorporating into the strategy and planning of HEI marketing and administrative leadership management practices.

*Implications for practice.* The certainty that a degree from a top tier school would provide employment candidates with an advantage was determined by this study to be transitory at best and useless to hiring experts. Human Resource professionals, ranging from generalists to executives, conceded that an employment application from a graduate of a top ranked school might give them brief pause in their decision making, but the attributes that mean most them are related work experience, degree specialty, employee referral, academic record, and non academic activities. Only after assessing those attributes, might they be likely to consider a diploma from one of *USNWR*'s top tier schools.

Staffing professionals found little to no importance (64%) in brand value. Two thirds (67%) of them noted that they had either slight or no familiarity al all with the rankings.

The observations and opinions from the focus group reinforced the analytical findings from the survey. They concluded that reputation rankings do not serve as a useful approach for high school students and college freshmen in attaining their goal of preferred employment. The focus group believed that the primary value of *USNWR* reputation rankings was in bragging rights for alumni and friends added the supposition that college bound high school students use *USNWR* rankings much as the would use the free online Web mapping service MapQuest – to see what is out there.

This study has shown that hiring professionals do not rely on rankings in the selection of employment applicants. Persons seeking a higher education therefore cannot rely on rankings as a guide if their goal is to improve their employment potential. The data results showed that colleges and universities using rankings as recruiting instruments in their promotional materials are not reaching their targeted audience unless that audience is alumni and friends.

Despite the flaws such as the shifting weight and sum approach used by *USNWR*, reputation rankings may be useful in putting together a geographic inventory of local and regional HEIs. It may be counterproductive for colleges and universities that give prominence to their ranking on their internet web pages, magazine advertisement and in-house produced promotional materials to equate ranked colleges with high admission requirements (SAT scores) and high institution fees. Revisions of internet promotional

materials should be done cautiously however, since the World Wide Web often is the primary access point of contact for international students.

Complaints from HEI administrators, no matter how compelling, may be futile and unnecessary under the circumstances produced in this study. Such remarks tend to fuel a continuing controversy, something the news media is always anxious to publish. Published reports are likely do more for the sales of the newspapers and magazines than improving an HEI's image.

This study takes an objective approach in examining rankings and concludes that rankings: do not measure the effectiveness of an HEI's education program and do not enhance an HEI's brand or reputation; their affect on student recruitment is questionable at best; and they play no role in a student achieving his purpose in acquiring a higher education.

It is reasonable to presume that reputation rankings can make selection of an employment applicant fast and easy. Information about the quality of a college or university, when published in a respected in highly subscribed news magazine, appears reliable and thorough. *USNWR* news magazine has evolved over the years to become a highly respected source for news and information. Its annual publication of best colleges and universities in the United States promises accuracy to the degree of the limitations of the peer responses used in the reports it prints. Rankings make it easy to compare schools. The key word here is easy. Comparison is dubious.

A college bound high school student's choice is subjective and conditional on his/her socioeconomic circumstances. Students with high SATs from families with high incomes are welcomed by HEIs. This study suggests that a degree from a top tiered

school is no assurance of immediate employment after graduation and even less help as time passes. Once the student leaves his/her HEI with a diploma, they enter a world to find a truly level playing field and as good a chance as anyone to reach their goal of getting the job they want.

Performance of product is a major determinant in brand identity. Consumer vetting narrows the field and determines the leader in the marketplace. The leader provides the standard of comparison by which lesser known brands are measured and evaluated. Consumer unfamiliarity makes scrutiny more intense. Formal advertising may assure awareness but word of mouth is most trusted by consumers and a more likely driving force in expanding sales. Under these circumstances, a lesser brand has a chance at competing however it still would be viewed in comparison with standards established by the leader. A comparable comparison process in applied in matters related to higher education. Though word of mouth initially might attract students, it may have a harmful effect if word gets around that an HEI is failing to produce graduates who can perform in the workplace.

Critics calling for increased accountability and transparency in the delivery of a higher education see solutions in proprietary rights (e.g., pay checks, employment success). Demands to subject HEIs to the sort of scrutiny as the Securities and Exchange Commission demands under the Sarbanes-Oxley Act on privately funded public corporations will contribute more to increasing an institution's operational costs than to elevating the educational quality of an enrolled student.

A student's aspiration in seeking a higher education is future employment. An HEI's function is helping the student reach that objective. Reputational rankings have no connection to either of those intentions.

*Implications for further study.* Superior brands are synonymous with outstanding performance and outstanding performance is usually associated with top products. This study examined the influence of reputation rankings on the pre-decision preferences used by human resource hiring professionals in evaluating employment applicants. By considering how much influence a brand name college or university carried, our intent was to determine whether undergraduates are better positioned for employment if their degree is from a top ranked school.

Normally, leading brands provide benchmarks for building consumer preference in the marketplace; therefore, *USNWR* rankings were used as a reference in this study because of its popularity as a source for identifying the best performing HEIs in the county. Work experience emerged in the study as the deciding reason used by human resource hiring professionals when assessing an applicant's qualifications. Degree field and employee referral appeared as central matters, while education program and academic record followed in playing a slightly diminished roll. Academic record and non academic activities had a lesser degree of influence on hiring decisions. A number of survey participants were unfamiliar with reputation rankings, making the attribute non-normative and possibly affecting the quantitative value of the other options used to determine the suitability of an employment candidate.

The conclusion was apparent: *USNWR* reputation rankings had little if any influence in the pre-decisional phase of the HR professionals' choice process. Left

unanswered is whether reputation rankings has a functional role in the hiring process and, if they do, how they would affect the other pre-decisional attributes used in this study.

A supplemental study would be useful in testing the strength and confirming the priority of the attributes as well as in determining whether reputation rankings are capable of playing a role in the pre-decisional choices made by hiring professional. Distribution of the latest *USNWR* rankings to half of the volunteers in advance of administering the surveys would outset any apprehension about familiarity with reputation rankings. The results will complement the results of this initial study by clarifying the priority of the pre-decisional choices of human resource employment professionals.

*Recommendations*

Colleges and universities cannot be blamed for incorporating distinctive characteristics such as a superior ranking in a defined category in their advertising and promotional materials. To imply that a student enrolled in a top tier school would be guaranteed to learn or would be successful when they graduate and enter the job market would be misleading.

Colleges and universities are slow to change traditional methods and policies. Incorporating the findings of this study into a marketing strategy and using it with other data to create a new measure of quality for HEIs may require outside help. Another way to speed things would be by removing the layers of bureaucracy and designating the marketing function as an executive position. An experienced qualified manager and well trained staff are critical in identifying problems and reacting rapidly to the constantly changing conditions in today's highly competitive education marketplace. A marketing

professional who has the support of the chief executive officer (e.g., College President, University Chancellor) can be far more reactive than a line officer in fulfilling the requirements of the institution.

Reputation rankings may serve well as a morale booster and promote pride among staff and alumni, the controversial nature of the subject however and its limited value as bragging rights could limit response in soliciting university funding. Doubts being cast from within the education community itself question whether rankings have validity. Among the problems in the reputation rankings debate is that of elitism that is alleged to have developed among higher education, an education elitism which can be a measurable deterrent to benefactors.

Giving students a better chance at getting work internships and building a strong post graduate job networking system might prove to be more productive for HEIs in their recruitment and retention efforts. The vigorous advancement of staff and students may present more value than in perpetuating the controversy over whether the rankings are right or wrong. Enhancing the college culture is bound to have a far more positive affect on an undergraduate's future than on the sales of *USNWR*'s annual Best Colleges publication.

A culture of collegiality is fundamental to establishment of a successful networking system on campuses. Networking is about making connections and building relationships. It offers college and university students a chance to learn the skills required in a career field, the career paths that are possible, and the necessary steps for making a career plan.

A campus culture with a well developed networking system can improve job internships, plans for post-graduate education and employment searches. This study's data suggests that undergraduate job opportunities and career success are far more achievable where college networking is part of the campus culture.

Whether perpetuating the controversy over the flaws and unfairness of *USNWR* weight and sum approach has any affect on the success of the magazine's marketing tool is beyond the scope of this study. To urge the publishers to do anything but perfect their successful magazine's marketing strategy would be counterproductive. Given the cutbacks and difficulties characteristic of university bureaucracies, the information gathered by a for-profit private publication may well be the most up to date available. As such, the rankings could serve as a key planning tool for universities. Fewer frequent changes in the ranking formula and using multi-year data would be apt to reduce anomalies in an institution's performance. Using percentile ranges instead of averages would present a clearer picture of the spread of performance (Clarke, 2002).

Many higher education institutions have already begun incorporating data on the number of graduates that have obtained full time employment in their field of study within the first year of receiving their degree. An emphasis on employment success rates in their marketing materials and a strong internship program giving students a chance to augment their academic studies is bound to attract prospective students and businesses that are always on the lookout for promising employees.

Internships and apprentice programs are worth a closer look. Adaptation of the European use of apprenticeship programs in the American higher education system may have benefits.

Use of technology and the Internet in providing experience, job leads, and networking may lead to instant and extended solutions for enrolled students. Social networks offer the promise of advancing one's intended career while still in college as well as in promoting a person's professional skills after entering the workforce.

This is a prototype study limited to a single region with distinctive characteristics. Other metropolitan locales are likely to present their own mix of industries and higher education institutions; however, responses and reactions from organizations like the SMASC in subsequent studies are expected to produce similar results.

Besides exploring a new frontier, this dissertation was designed to spark further inquiry. Additional study of decision making by employment professionals and larger samples can be used to expand the initial results of this work. Exploring reputation rankings from the perspective of a student's goal seems like a lucrative area and a natural follow up to this study. The subconscious and conscious effect of reputation rankings on the job attainment goal of a college student in relationship to a student's choice of HEI could offer new insights into student choice, college marketing strategy, and the value of rankings in education.

*Final Comments*

There are substantial differences in deciding what college to attend (i.e., higher education) and which dishwashing detergent to buy (i.e., product brand). Similar principles of cognitive psychology are applicable however in the subject matter of memory and how people use processes in accessing and evaluating brands. Advertisements, magazine articles, word of mouth, and the omnipotent internet provide a flood of information, causing persons to formulate patterns by employing self regulatory

controls to shortcut their decision making process. Though still relying on memory to store information in a form that is organized in patterns and available to be retrieved, shortcuts are sought to find ways to convince a decision maker that his or her choice is a rational one. The strength of attributes and methods such as categorization links past choices with present ones. Attitudes may limit new information but remain in the interest of maximizing the value of the decision.

Participants in this study were asked to reflect on nine features. Their choice of work experience as a primary consideration suggests higher education institutions may want to consider inclusion of a stronger training related element in their coursework, a program with ties to the workplace. Even in second place, course completion, a degree is still high on everyone's list. The majority of focus group participants said "all we look for is a college graduate." The priority order placing a company referral in the top three preferences emphasizes the value of a refined network among the students and alumni. An in-house recommendation relieves the degree of risk in choosing from among candidates competing for a job.

A well organized network among students and alumni can contribute to enhancement of an institution's word of mouth reputation. Companies that come to recognize an HEI as a dependable employee resource may also come to realize the value of a sustaining relationship; a partnership that could range from volunteer involvement with the institution to financial support of the college or university department responsible for pre-employment training. Reputational rankings, conversely, are of no value in the hiring decisions made by human resource professionals who participated in this study. More imperative to the job recruiters, who represented employers in Los

Angeles and nearby communities, are a job applicant's work related experience, a college degree, and a company connection. This study concluded that other than a point of modest pride for alumni, *US News and World Report's* annual rankings is best used by precollege students for reference purposes not for making a choice of what college or university to attend.

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APPENDIX A

Survey

## Staffing Practices

## Survey 2007

This 17-question survey is part of a post graduate study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Pepperdine University. Individual responses are confidential and participants are assured of anonymity, so please do not place your name or identify the name of your company on this survey. Complimentary copies of the dissertation including an evaluation of the collective results of this survey will be provided to the SMA of Southern California in appreciation for the cooperation of all of its members.

1. **What is your role/title in relation to making staffing decisions?**

(Circle one)

Employment/Staffing Professional

Human Resource Generalist

Staffing/HR Manager

Staffing/ HR Director

HR Vice President

Other

2. **Do you recruit:**

(Circle all that apply)

Nationally

Regionally—Western US

Locally—LA/Orange/Ventura Counties

**3. Please rank in order of preference from 1 through 9, the factors that concern you most when considering an employment applicant possessing a bachelor's degree.**

____Candidate's degree level and field of study

____Candidate's academic record

____Candidate's work experience

____Candidate's non-academic activities

____Referred by company employee

____Reputation of Institution from which the candidate graduates

____Reputation of the Institution's program as it pertains to the position to be filled

____US News & World Report ranking of the institution

____Other ranking surveys such as Princeton Review or Forbes.com.

Please identify other _____

**4. Please describe the role that a college or university's image plays in your company's employment recruiting strategy?**

**5. How familiar are you with the annual U.S. News & World Report listing of America's Best Colleges?**

(Circle answer that applies)

Very familiar

Somewhat familiar

Not familiar with it. (Please go to question Number 8)

6. **What is your opinion of university/college rankings such as those published annually by US News and World Report, Princeton Review, Fiske Guide to Colleges, Maclean's University Rankings, Forbes.com and others?**

(Use space on this page for your response)

7. **If your company participates in college recruiting, is it more likely to visit colleges and universities that are listed in "Top Tier" or tier one category in U.S. News & World Report?**

(Circle the answer that applies)

Yes

No

Do not participate in college recruiting

8. **In your experience, to what extent are graduates from U.S. News & World Report top ranked schools successful in their careers with your company?**

(Circle one)

More success than graduates from lower ranked schools

Less successful than graduates from lower ranked schools

Neither more successful nor less successful than graduates from lower ranked schools

9. **Please rate the importance of the U.S. News & World Report college rankings on your decision in determining which applicants to invite for employment interviews?**

(Circle one)

Very Important

Somewhat Important

Moderately Important

Somewhat Unimportant

Very Unimportant

**10. From the following list please circle up to five (5) universities or colleges in the Los Angeles metropolitan area from which your organization most frequently recruits employees.**

1. Cal. Tech
2. Cal. Lutheran University
3. Concordia University
4. CSU-Fullerton
5. CSU- Irvine
6. CSU- LA
7. CSU-Long Beach
8. CSU- Northridge
9. Chapman University
10. Claremont McKenna
11. Harvey Mudd
12. Mt. St. Mary's College
13. Occidental College
14. Pamona
15. Pepperdine University
16. Pitzer

17. Redlands University

18. Scripps College

19. USC

20. UCLA

21. Vanguard University

22. Westmont College

23. None of the above

24. Other. Please list.

**11. Do alumni from any of the schools you selected from the above list predominate in your organization's professional and/or managerial positions?**

(Circle one)

Yes (Please list the schools' code numbers from above)

| |
|---|
| |

No

Don't know

**12. Is college recruitment a regular activity in your organization?**

(Circle one)

Yes

No

**13. Does your company have a specific person assigned to college recruiting?**

(Circle one)

No

Yes

**14. Does your organization use a specific list of schools for recruitment?**

(Circle one)

Yes

No

**15. Have schools been added or removed from the list or remained the same over the last two years?**

(Circle one)

Added

Removed

Remained the same

**16. Please complete the following sentence:**

The most important consideration for my company in determining which college graduates to invite for a job interview is:

**17. Your organization's primary industry.**

(Circle one that best describes your company's business.)

Advertising/Publishing

Automotive

Consumer Products

Education

Entertainment

Financial Services, (including Insurance)

Hotel/Travel/Food/Beverage

Health/Medical

Retail Sales

Telecommunications

Technology

Other

**End of Survey**

***Thank you for taking the time to help us with our research.***

# APPENDIX B

## Codebook

*Figure A.* Codebook showing labels, questions, and numerical values assigned to attributes for processing variables.

**VAR 1: Role**

**1. What is your role/title in relation to graduate recruitment?**

1. Employment/Staffing Professional

2. Human Resource Generalist

3. Staffing/HR Manager

4. Staffing/ HR Director

5. HR Vice President

6. Other

**VAR. 2: Region**

**2. Do you recruit:**

1. Nationally

2. Regionally

3. Locally –LA/Orange/Ventura Counties

**VAR. 3: Choice**

**3. Please rank in order of preference from 1 through 9, the factors that concern you most when considering an employment applicant possessing a bachelor's degree.**

1. Candidate's degree level and concentration

2. Candidate's academic record

3. Candidate's work experience

4. Candidate's non-academic activities

5. Referred by company employee

6. Reputation of Institution from which the candidate graduates

7. Reputation of the Institution's program as it pertains to the position to be filled

8. US News & World Report ranking of the institution

9. Other ranking surveys such as Princeton Review or Forbes.com

10. (Text) Please identify other

**VAR. 4: Strategy**

**4. Please describe the role that a college or university image plays in your company's employment recruiting strategies.**

1. Text response

**VAR. 5: Knowledge**

**5. How familiar are you with the annual U.S. News & World Report listing of America's Best Colleges?**

(Circle answer that applies)

1. Very familiar

2. Somewhat familiar

3. Not familiar with it. (Please go to question Number 8)

**VAR. 6: Opinion**

**6. What is your opinion of university/college rankings such as those published annually by US News and World Report, Princeton Review, Fiske Guide to Colleges, Maclean's University Rankings, Forbes.com and others?**

1. Text response

**VAR 7: Preference**

**7. If your company participates in college recruiting, is it more likely to visit colleges and universities that are listed in "Top Tier" or tier one category in U.S. News & World Report?**

1. Yes
2. No
3. Do not participate in college recruiting

**VAR 8: Branding**

**8. In your experience, to what extent are graduates from U.S. News & World Report top ranked schools successful in their careers with your company?**

1. More successful than graduates from lower ranked schools.
2. Less successful than graduates from lower ranked schools.
3. Neither more successful no less successful than graduates from lower ranked schools.

**VAR. 9: Brand Value**

**9. Please rate the importance of the U.S. News & World Report college rankings on your decision in determining which applicants to invite for employment interviews?**

1. Very Important
2. Important
3. Moderately Important
4. Somewhat Unimportance

5. Very Unimportant

**VAR. 10: Recruitment**

**10. From the following list please circle up to five (5) universities or colleges in the Los Angeles metropolitan area from which your organization most frequently recruits employees.**

1. Cal Tech
2. California Lutheran University
3. Concordia University
4. CSU-Fullerton
5. CSU- Irvine
6. CSU- LA
7. CSU-Long Beach
8. CSU- Northridge
9. Chapman University
10. Claremont McKenna
11. Harvey Mudd
12. Mt. St. Mary's College

13 Occidental College

14. Pamona

15 Pepperdine University

16. Pitzer
17. Redlands University
18. Scripps College

19. USC

20. UCLA

21. Vanguard University

22. Westmont College

23. None of the above

24. Other. Please list

**VAR. 11: Relationship**

**11. Do alumni from any of the schools you selected from the list above predominate in your organization's professional and/or managerial positions?**

1. Yes (Please list the schools' code numbers from above )

2. No

3. Don't Know

**VAL. 12: Routine Activity**

**12. Is college recruitment a regular activity in your organization?**

1. Yes

2. No

**VAL. 13: Recruiter**

**13. Does your company have a specific person assigned to college recruiting?**

1. No

2. Yes

**VAL. 14: List**

**14. Does your organization use a specific list of schools for recruitment?**

1. Yes

2. No

**VAL. 15: Changes**

**15. Have schools been added or removed from the list or remained the same over the last two years?**

1. Added
2. Removed
3. Remained the same

**VAL. 16: Invitation**

**16. Please complete the following sentence.**

The most important consideration for my company in determining which college graduate to invite for a job interview is:

1. Text response

**VAL. 17: Industry**

**17. Your organization's primary industry.**

(Circle one)

1. Advertising/Publishing
2. Automotive
3. Consumer Products
4. Education
5. Entertainment
6. Financial Services, including Insurance
7. Hotel/Travel/ Food/Beverage
8. Health/Medical

9. Retail Sales

10. Telecommunications

11. Technology

12. Other

# APPENDIX C

## Script and Agenda

Script

1. How would you describe the advance materials?
    a. Thought provoking
    b. Informational
    c. Insufficient

*Discuss*

2. How would you describe the survey results?
    a. No surprises
    b. Some surprises
    c. New insights

*Elaborate*

3. Based on the survey, would you say reputation rankings support the hiring process?
    a. Supports the hiring process
    b. Does not support the hiring process

*Elaborate*

4. Which survey question(s) would you consider most pertinent to supporting the hiring process?

*Explain*

5. Has the survey caused you to reconsider your opinion of the *USNWR* reputation rankings?
    a. Yes
    b. No

*Discuss whether survey provides more or less confidence in USNWR.*
*Discuss whether opinion about USNWR influences the reputation rankings*

6. Overall impression about survey:
    a. Good use of time
    b. Waste of time
    c. Provided useful information
    d. Something your peers should take

Agenda

1. Welcome

2. The Plan:

   A 60-minute meeting dedicated to good conversation and focused discussion.

3. Purpose of meeting

   To evaluate SMASC survey results from the perspectives of individual members.

4. Self introductions:

5. Distribute script

   The script is aimed at providing a guide to an exchange of views presented by the participants. The questions within the script are intended to assist the facilitator in understanding the responses and identifying themes and patterns that emerge from the discussion.

6. Facilitator's Role

   - Encourage conversation
   - Seek insight to add meaning to the numerical data collected in the earlier survey.
   - Ensure everyone has their say.

7. Focus Group member's role

   - Relax
   - Be open
   - Think deeply
   - Consider alternatives

8. Final thoughts – Conclude meeting

# APPENDIX D

## Focus Group Code Book

**VAR 1: Materials**

**1. How would you describe the advance materials?**

1. Thought provoking
2. Informational
3. Insufficient
4. Discussion

**VAR 2: Results**

**2. How would you describe the survey results?**

1. No surprises
2. Some Surprises
3. New Insights
4. Discussion

**VAR 3: Process**

**3. Based on the survey results, would you say reputation rankings support the hiring process?**

1. Supports the hiring process
2. Does not support the hiring process
3. Discussion

**VAR 4: Pertinence**

**4. Which survey question(s) would you consider most pertinent to supporting the hiring process?**

1. Discussion

**VAR 5: Opinion**

**5. Has the survey caused you to reconsider your opinion of the *USNWR* reputation rankings?**

1. Yes

2. No

3. Discussion

**VAR 6: Impression**

**6. Overall impression about the survey.**

1. Good use of time

2. Waste of time

3. Provided useful information

4. Something your peers should take

5. Discussion

# APPENDIX E

## Raw Data

## Listing Rank Order Preference of Survey Participants

| Rank Degree level | Rank Acad level | Rank Work exper | Rank Non-acad activ | Rank Comp Refer candid | Rank Univ reputa | Rank Univ prog reputa | Rank U.S. NWR | Rank Others |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | 5 | 4 | 7 | 6 | 2 | 1 | 8 | 9 |
| 1 | 2 | 6 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 3 | 6 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 4 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 1 | 6.5 | 2 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 3 | 6.5 | 6.5 |
| 1 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 9 | 8 |
| 5 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 7 | 4 | 8 | 9 |
| 2 | 5 | 1 | 6 | 7 | 3 | 4 | 8 | 9 |
| 2 | 5 | 1 | 7 | 3 | 6 | 4 | 8 | 9 |
| 4 | 7 | 1 | 9 | 8 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 6 |
| 3 | 6 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 4 | 7 | 8.5 | 8.5 |
| 3 | 7 | 1 | 7 | 4 | 2 | 7 | 7 | 7 |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 4 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 1 | 7 | 6 | 8 | 9 |
| 5 | 6 | 1 | 7 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 | 7 |
| 3 | 6 | 1 | 9 | 2 | 4 | 5 | 7 | 8 |
| 2 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 5 | 1 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 3 | 6 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 5 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 1 | 2 | 6 | 7 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 8 | 9 |
| 4 | 5 | 2 | 7 | 3 | 6 | 1 | 8 | 9 |
| 3 | 6.5 | 1 | 6.5 | 2 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 | 6.5 |
| 4 | 9 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
| 2 | 6 | 1 | 8.5 | 8.5 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| 2 | 3 | 1 | 5 | 4 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 4 | 7 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 6 | 5 | 9 | 8 |
| 2 | 5 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 2 | 3 | 4 | 8 | 5 | 1 | 6 | 7 | 9 |
| 4 | 5 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 7 | 6 | 8 | 9 |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 4 | 8 | 9 |
| 3 | 6 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 7 | 4 | 8 | 9 |

# APPENDIX F

## Advance Information E-mail

Dear LA SMASC member,

This is an invitation to members of the Los Angeles Chapter #3006, Employment Management Association of Southern California, to participate in a research survey at your upcoming March meeting. The 17-question survey is designed to obtain the opinions and experiences of employment professionals as they relate to the hiring practices of their organizations in the employment of college and university graduates.

Participation is voluntary and exclusive to the LA Chapter SMASC's membership; confidentiality and anonymity is assured; only aggregate data is to be disclosed. The results and analysis of the data are to be reported as part of an academic study in partial fulfillment of the degree of Ed.D. doctor of education, for Pepperdine University. The LA SMASC will receive complimentary copies of the published dissertation for its assistance in this study.

To all members, my deepest appreciation in advance for your consideration and cooperation for participation in this study.

Sincerely

Fausto D. Capobianco
Ed.D candidate
Pepperdine University

APPENDIX G

Informed Consent Letter

Date:

To: Members of the Employment Management Association of Southern California

From:
Pepperdine University
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

RE: Survey

Dear SMASC member:

My name is Fausto Capobianco and I am a doctoral student in Organization Leadership at Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology, under the supervision of Dr. Mark Allen. My studies and experience as a senior executive in the public and private sector have made me well aware of the important responsibility that employment professionals like you have in staffing your respective organizations. I therefore would like to invite you to participate in a survey to help me identify whether reputation rankings such as those published by US News and World Report can help college graduates get a job. Please read the remainder of this cover sheet carefully.

The title of my study is "Reputation versus Reality: The Impact of US News and World Report Rankings and Education Branding on Hiring Decisions in the Job Market." **Completion of the survey is strictly voluntary.** It will take about 20 minutes to complete. The survey asks questions about issues and attributes you may take into consideration in your employment recruiting practices; the influence of US News and World Report reputation rankings on your choices; and some general demographic queries. **You have the right to refuse to answer any question you choose not to answer.**

The only foreseeable risk associated with participation in this study is the amount of time involved in completing the questions. A potential benefit of participation is that the study may provide information that ultimately will help improve the quality of college graduates applying for employment in your organizations.

To protect your privacy, we are not asking you to provide any information that can identify you, such as your name. **Please do not write your name on any portion of the survey or on this informed consent.** If you would like documentation of your participation in this research, you may obtain an informed consent form by contacting me

at **fdcapobianco@gmail.com or by calling 626-791-6275.**

Surveys will be collected before you leave today's meeting. I am required to keep all information collected for this study in a secure manner for at least three years. All data will be maintained in a locked file cabinet in my home and will be accessible only to the researcher and faculty supervisor. After the survey information is no longer required for research purposes, the information will be destroyed. A copy of the dissertation and findings of the survey will be available within approximately six months. A complimentary copy will be provided to the SMASC for its cooperation in this study.

**Volunteers are being sought for follow up participation in a post-survey focus group to discuss the study's initial findings. The meeting will be schedule at a time mutually convenient within the next three weeks.** Tentatively plans call for a noon meeting that will take approximately 90 minutes. Confidentiality of data and privacy conditions will continue to be maintained. **If you would like to participate, please provide contact information in the space provided at the bottom of this cover sheet.**

If you have any questions concerning the research herein described, you may contact the researcher at (626)791-6275, or the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Mark Allen, at 310-568-5593. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Dr. Stephanie Woo, chairperson of the Pepperdine University Graduate and Professional Schools Institutional Review Board (GPS IRB) at (310)506-8554.

Sincerely,

Fausto D. Capobianco
Doctoral (EdD) candidate
Pepperdine University
Graduate School of Education and Psychology
6100 Center Drive
Los Angeles CA 90045

**Yes, I would like to become participate in a focus group discussion to evaluate the initial results of today's survey.**

**I can be reached at:**
**Phone number (please include extension if applicable)**

**Email address**

**Preferred time of day for contact**

APPENDIX H

IRB Form

**PEPPERDINE IRB**
**Application for a Claim of Exemption**

Date: IRB Application/Protocol #:

**Principal Investigator: Fausto D. Capobianco**
☐ Faculty ☐ Staff ☐ Student ☐ Other
School/Unit: ☐ GSBM ☒ GSEP ☐ Seaver ☐ SOL ☐ SPP
☐ Administration ☐ Other:
Street Address: 2177 Oakwood Street
City: Pasadena State: CA Zip Code: 91104
Telephone (work): (626) 791-6275 Telephone (home): (626) 791-6275
Email Address: fcapobia@pepperdine.edu

Faculty Supervisor: **Dr. Mark Allen** *(if applicable)*
School/Unit: ☐ GSBM ☒ GSEP ☐ Seaver ☐ SOL ☐ SPP
☐ Administration ☐ Other:
Telephone (work): (310) 568-5600
Email Address: Mark.Allen@pepperdine.edu

**Project Title: Reputation versus Reality: The Impact of US News and World Report Rankings and Education Branding on Hiring Decisions in the Job Market.**
Type of Project (Check all that apply):
☒ Dissertation ☐ Thesis
☐ Undergraduate Research ☐ Independent Study
☐ Classroom Project ☐ Faculty Research
☐ Other:

Is the Faculty Supervisor Review Form attached? ☐Yes ☐No ☐N/A

Has the investigator(s) completed education on research with human subjects? ☐ Yes ☐ No
Please attach certification form(s) to this application.

**Investigators are reminded that Exemptions will NOT be granted for research involving prisoners, fetuses, pregnant women, or human in vitro fertilization. Also,**

**the exemption at 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2), for research involving survey or interview procedures or observations of public behavior, does not apply to research with children (Subpart D), except for research involving observations of public behavior when the investigator(s) do not participate in the activities being observed.**

1. Briefly summarize your proposed research project, and describe your research goals/objectives. This study intends to provide insight into the importance of HEI rankings by examining the presuppositions of employment professionals in relation to information, choice, and decision making theories underlying choices made in the selection of employment candidates.

2. Using the categories found in Appendix B of the Investigator Manual, list the category of research activity that you believe applies to your proposed study. Number 2.

3. Briefly describe the nature of the involvement of the human subjects (observation of student behavior in the classroom, personal interview, mailed questionnaire, telephone questionnaire, observation, chart review, etc): Questionnaires and focus group discussion

4. Explain why you think this protocol should be considered exempt. Be sure to address all known or potential risks to subjects/participants. The research used for this dissertation involves survey and interview procedures however it (A) does not infringe on the human subjects identification and (B) does not place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or presents any threat to the subjects' financial standing, employability or reputation.

5. Explain how records will be kept. Investigator will retain records on hard copy and digital media for a minimum of three years.

6. ☐ Yes ☒ No Are the data recorded in such a manner that subjects can be identified by a name or code? If yes:
   - Who has access to this data and how is it being stored?
   - If you are using a health or mental health assessment tool or procedure, what is your procedure for referring the participant for follow-up if his/her scores or results should significant illness or risk? Please describe.
   - Will the list of names and codes be destroyed at the end of the study? Explain your procedures.

7. Attach a copy of all data collection tools (e.g., questionnaires, interview questions or scripts, data collection sheets, database formats) to this form. Be sure to include in such forms/scripts the following information:
   - a statement that the project is research being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a course, master's thesis, dissertation, etc. (if applicable)
   - purpose of study

- a statement that subjects' responses will be kept anonymous or confidential (explain extent of confidentiality if subjects' names are requested)
- if audiotaping or videotaping, a statement that subject is being taped (explain how tapes will be stored or disposed of during and after the study)
- a statement that subjects do not have to answer every question
- a statement that subject's class standing, grades, or job status (or status on an athletic team, if applicable) will not be affected by refusal to participate or by withdrawal from the study (if applicable)
- a statement that participation is voluntary

Please note that your IRB may also require you to submit a consent form or an **Application for Waiver or Alteration of Informed Consent Procedures form.** Please contact your IRB Chairperson and/or see the IRB website for more information.

8. Attach a copy of permission forms from individuals and/or organizations that have granted you access to the subjects.

9. ☐Yes ☒No Does your study fall under HIPAA? Explain below.

9.1 If HIPAA applies to your study, attach a copy of the certification that the investigator(s) has completed the HIPAA educational component. Describe your procedures for obtaining Authorization from participants. Attach a copy of the Covered Entity's HIPAA Authorization and Revocation of Authorization forms to be used in your study (see Section XI. of the Investigator Manual for forms to use if the CE does not provide such forms). If you are seeking to use or disclose PHI without Authorization, please attach the **Application for Use or Disclosure of PHI Without Authorization** form (see Section XI). Review the HIPAA procedures in Section X. of the Investigator Manual.

I hereby certify that I am familiar with federal and professional standards for conducting research with human subjects and that I will comply with these standards. The above information is correct to the best of my knowledge, and I shall adhere to the procedure as described. If a change in procedures becomes necessary I shall submit an amended application to the IRB and await approval prior to implementing any new procedures. If any problems involving human subjects occur, I shall immediately notify the IRB Chairperson.

Principal Investigator's Signature Date

_____ _____

Faculty Supervisor's Signature (if applicable) Date

**Appendices/Supplemental Material**

Use the space below (or additional pages and/or files) to attach appendices or any supplemental materials to this application.