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EXPLORING CURRENT COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER STUDENTS'  
PERCEPTIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI BRAND AND POTENTIAL  
CONNECTIONS TO COLLEGE CHOICE

A Dissertation Presented in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Education in the Department of Higher Education at the University of Mississippi

By

SARAH CHRISTOPHER SAPP

DECEMBER 2021

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## **Abstract**

Institutions of higher learning today rely on tuition dollars to function. During a time when the pool of high school graduates is shrinking, colleges and universities must look to alternative target markets to meet enrollment goals, including those transferring from community college. Community college transfers have unique attributes that contribute to their brand perception of colleges and universities and their overall college choice process. This dissertation suggests a need to study the college decision-making process for community college students and their perception of brand identity, specifically at the University of Mississippi. As the Flagship university in Mississippi, UM has a responsibility to try to reflect the racial make-up of the state in its student body. Since the community college population is more diverse than that at UM, the college has a perfect opportunity to recruit from this market to try to improve the diversity of enrolled students. This paper proposes a mixed methods methodology that examines both qualitative and quantitative data obtained through a survey mechanism and interviews. In the third manuscript, the DiP shifts to leadership principles that would guide this study and also covers the investigator's personal experience throughout the research and writing process.

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## CHAPTER I

Ten years after the Great Recession of 2008, state spending on public colleges and universities remained well below historical levels. “Overall state funding for public two- and four-year colleges in the school year ending in 2018 was nearly \$10 billion below its 2008 level, after adjusting for inflation” (Mitchell, Leechman, Masterson, & Waxman, 2019, p. 1). Today, institutions must rely more heavily on tuition and fees to function, driving up the cost of tuition for students and the need for higher education institutions to increase enrollment to generate the revenue needed for operation.

This need to increase enrollment comes at a time when the pipeline of students to fill those seats is shrinking. Most states have seen stagnant or declining numbers of high school graduates in sync with recent population trends, with about 2.3 million fewer students enrolled in college during the fall semester of 2019 than in fall 2011 (Nadworny & Larkin, 2019). Reports from the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) indicate high school graduation numbers fell from a peak in 2011 at 3,452,793 to 3,423,639 in 2021 and are projected to fall to 3,298,597 by 2031 nationally (Bransberger & Michelau, 2016).

The decline in high school graduates coincides with recent stagnant or declining enrollment nationwide. While undergraduate enrollment increased an incredible 37% between 2000 and 2010, from 13.2 million to 18.1 million students, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, enrollment decreased 7% between 2010 and 2016, from 18.1 million to 16.9 million students (McFarland et al., 2019). Undergraduate enrollment is projected to increase by



a mere 3% (from 16.9 million to 17.4 million students) between 2016 and 2027, a net loss of 700,000 students nationally since 2010 (McFarland et al., 2019). The same study predicts a net loss of approximately 47,322 students from academic year 2018-19 to 2028-29 from the South (McFarland et al., 2019).

Enrollment across Mississippi public universities fell from a system total of 81,378 in 2017 to 80,592 in 2018 (IHL MS Unduplicated Academic Year Enrollment, 2018). The University of Mississippi experienced its first decrease in enrollment in 2017 by 470 students, or 1.9%, followed by another decrease in 2018 by 522 students, or 2.2% of their overall enrollment after 22 consecutive years of enrollment growth. The institution lost almost 1,000 students (IHL MS Unduplicated Academic Year Enrollment, 2018) in just two years. Institutions of higher learning are finding increased competition to enroll prospective students, and they must appeal to and recruit every viable population for prospective students, including community college students, as they consider the decline in the number of high school graduates at a national and state level.

### **Problem of Practice**

As the Flagship university for the state of Mississippi, the University of Mississippi should strive to not only serve as many Mississippians as possible, their recruitment efforts should strive to yield an enrollment that is representative of the state. According to the most recent U.S. Census data, 59.1% of residents of the state are Caucasian, 37.8% are Black or African American, .6% are American Indian or Alaskan Natives, 1.1% are Asian, .1% are Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, 1.3% are two or more races, and 3.4% are Hispanic or Latino. Nearly 41% of Mississippians are from non-white racial/ethnic backgrounds. According

to 20-21 IPEDS enrollment data published by the University of Mississippi, only 21% of the student body have minority status.

The 15 community colleges in Mississippi report a more diverse student body from which the University of Mississippi can recruit to help improve the disparity in minority representation that exists between the university and the state of Mississippi. According to 2018 enrollment reports publicly available through the Mississippi Community College Board, all 15 community colleges in the state reported a higher enrollment of students from a non-White racial/ethnic background than the University of Mississippi.

### **Community College Transfers: Enrollment Context**

Since 1973, average inflation-adjusted public college tuition has increased by 274% while median household income has grown by only 7% (Mitchell, Leachman, & Masterson, 2016).

Students and parents seeking more affordable options often look to the community college system as a place to complete the first two years of their four-year degree, creating a unique target market from which four-year institutions of higher learning can recruit. Among all

students who completed a degree at a four-year college in 2015–16, 49 percent had enrolled at a two-year college in the previous 10 years. The Community College Research Center indicates of

former community college students who earned a bachelor's degree in 2015–16, 63% were enrolled at a two-year public institution for three or more terms. Texas had the most former community college students among bachelor's degree earners in 2015–16 with 75% (n.d.).

Mississippi LifeTracks is an interoperable data system that facilitates research and analysis and provides linkages between early childhood, K-12, postsecondary education, and the workforce in a secure and efficient manner. (Mississippi LifeTracks, 2021, para. 1). The latest Mississippi LifeTracks data indicate a total of 72,374 students were enrolled in the Mississippi Community

College System in 2017 while 82,654 were enrolled in public universities in 2016 (Mississippi LifeTracks, 2021.).

Some four-year institutions in the state of Mississippi fare better than others with recruiting and enrolling prospective transfer students. In the fall term of 2018, a total of 5,340 community college students enrolled at four-year colleges across the state. Mississippi State University enrolled 1,593; the University of Southern Mississippi enrolled 1,268; the University of Mississippi enrolled 909; Mississippi University for Women enrolled 535; Delta State University enrolled 325; Jackson State University enrolled 300; the University of Mississippi Medical Center enrolled 165, Alcorn State University enrolled 137 and Mississippi Valley State University enrolled 108 (IHL MS First-time Transfer Students by Mississippi Community/Junior College, 2018). Of the 909 that the University of Mississippi enrolled, 307 of them transferred from Northwest Mississippi Community College—approximately 1/3 the entire transfer population at UM (IHL MS First-time Transfer Students by Mississippi Community/Junior College, 2018). Prior research indicates these transfer students have unique needs with regard to academic support, financial aid support, social support, orientation and pre-enrollment programs, as well as accurate and comprehensive university communication (Dewine, Ludvik, Tucker, Mulholland, & Bracken, 2016), all of which contribute to these students' overall university brand perception (Nguyen et al, 2016; Orîndaru, 2015).

### **Branding in Higher Education**

With hundreds of colleges and universities vying for the attention of the same prospective students in an increasingly cluttered higher education marketplace, institutions of higher learning must find a way to stand out among their competitors within each market segment. Higher education institutions across the globe have begun a search for a unique definition of what they

are in order to differentiate themselves and attract students and academic staff (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2008). Extant literature in organizational behavior and marketing indicates that individuals who strongly identify with a brand or an organization perceive it as part of their self and express this association through various supportive behaviors (Ahearne, Bhattacharya, & Gruen, 2005; Elbedweihy & Jayawardhena, 2014). In the higher education sector and in the context of this manuscript, enrolling at a particular institution is the supportive behavior at hand. Ultimately, if prospective students can be enticed to become impassioned about the brand, and if they want to actively be associated with it, they are more inclined to enter into a relationship with the organization through enrollment (De Chernatony & McDonald, 2003).

There is evidence that a well-branded university attracts ‘more and better students, more full and fuller-paying students, more students who will persist, better faculty and staff, more donated dollars, more media attention, more research dollars, and more strategic partners (Sevier, 2007). For instance, carefully researched and implemented brand positioning at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, a small, highly-rated liberal arts college, used primary recruitment data to gauge results of their new brand positioning and accompanying recruitment communication strategy and found both campus visits, applications, and enrollment were steadily increasing, bringing in a freshman class 20% larger in 2003 than in 2002 (Sevier, 2007). Similarly, the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford and the University of Alabama experienced significant enrollment growth after investing considerable resources into branding efforts (Sevier, 2007). Existing literature connects investments in branding initiatives to increases in enrollment, but scant literature exists establishing brand perception’s relationship to a student’s perceived college choice criteria they use to enroll at any specific institution.

### *Branding Terminology*

The American Marketing Association describes *brand* as a “name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify them from those of competition.”

(American Marketing Association, 2021, para. 1) Social identity theory indicates people express themselves beyond a personal identity to develop a social identity; in the marketing context, consumers do so by identifying and associating themselves with brands that reflect and reinforce their self-identities, regarding the brand as an extension of the self (Kuenzel & Halliday, 2010).

*Brand personality* is “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand” (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). According to the American Marketing Association (AMA): “Brand personality is the psychological nature of a particular brand as intended by its sellers, though persons in the marketplace may see the brand otherwise (called brand image). *Brand associations* are “anything a consumer associates with the brand in his or her mind (i.e. organizational, product-related, symbolic, or personified)” (VanAuken, 2003, p. 7). Brand association is further defined as “customers’ memory and feeling when they talk about those products, services, or organizations” (Chen, 2016). Keller (1993) classifies brand associations into three categories: *brand attributes*—descriptive features that characterize a product or service or what a consumer thinks the product or service is or has and what is involved with its purchase or consumption (Keller, 1993, p. 4); *brand benefits*—the personal value consumers attach to the product or service attributes or what consumers think the product or service can do for them, including functional, experiential, and symbolic benefits (Keller, 1993, p. 4); and *brand attitudes*—the consumers’ overall evaluation of a brand, whether good or bad. Brand attitudes are important because they often form the basis for consumer behavior (e.g. brand choice) (Keller, 1993, p. 4). *Brand reputation* reflects actual stakeholder perceptions that are developed over time and thus are more durable, stable and stakeholder-driven than image” (Plewa, Ho, Conduit, & Karpen, 2016). The

combination of brand personality, brand reputation, and brand association yield cognitive and affective brand image/perception. *Brand image* is “the totality of perceptions resulting from all experience with and knowledge of the brand” (p.7). Often used interchangeably with *brand image*, *brand reputation* reflects actual stakeholder perceptions that are developed over time and thus are more durable, stable and stakeholder-driven than image” (Plewa, Ho, Conduit, & Karpen, 2016). Individuals have both an affective and cognitive attitude toward brands, forming this brand image, wherein affective attitudes generally refer to emotions, moods and feelings and cognitive attitudes relate to a person’s beliefs, experiences, ideas or knowledge about something. I will heretofore refer to the combination of brand image and brand reputation as an overall *brand perception*. Much of the previous research has focused on university brand perception in the context of current students or Alumni and educational and service offerings and quality (Plewa, Ho, Conduit, & Karpen, 2016; Rauschnabel, Krey, Babin, & Ivens, 2016; Chen, 2016; Panda, Pandey, Bennett, & Tian, 2019).

#### *Brand Personality in Higher Education*

Work by Rauschnabel, Krey, Babin, and Ivens, develops and validates a six-dimensional scale tapping the University Brand Personality Scale (UBPS), which strongly relates to brand love, positive word of mouth, and students' intention to support their university as alumni (2016). Using existing brand personality scales as a reference in naming, 1) prestige (accepted, leading, reputable, successful, considerable), 2) sincerity (humane, helpful, friendly, trustworthy, fair), 3) appeal (attractive, productive, special), 4) lively (athletic, dynamic, lively, creative), 5) conscientiousness (organized, competent, structured, effective), and 6) cosmopolitan (networked, international, cosmopolitan) dimensions represent university brand personality space. Prestige emerges as one of six UBPS factors. The study’s findings suggest that the UBPS establishes

correlations with brand love, word of mouth, and students' intention to support their university after graduation. However, not all dimensions correlate equally with brand love. In contrast to generally positive relationships, the “prestige” dimension displays negative relationships. They explain, “The prestigious personality of the university emanates from its perceived success and reputation, which can come across as not welcoming to students and inconsistent with a warm and caring personality” (2016).

#### *Brand Association in Higher Education*

In Chen’s “The relationships between brand association, trust, commitment, and satisfaction of higher education institutions,” the author found brand association has a direct significant positive effect on student trust, student commitment, and student satisfaction (2016). She defined brand association in the higher education context as “anything which is deep-seated in students’ mind about the school brand; it is the attributes of the brand that come to students’ mind when they talk about the school brand” (2016, p. 974).

#### *Brand Reputation in Higher Education*

Plewa, Ho, Conduit, and Karpen, conducted a 2016 study that shows the combined effects of students’ academic, relational, and physical experiences aggregate to their overall perception of university reputation. The study revealed which resource configurations were associated with high reputation: (a) the faculty and course materials, (b) the combination of a core learning offering with either facilities and campus life or administrative staff support and industry linkage, (c) the learning support environment components, and (d) facilities combined with industry linkages. They also found combining the core conditions with facilities and not focusing on course materials and industry linkage contributes to high reputation.

In their 2012 study of fall-entering freshmen at both public and private institutions, Joseph, Mullen and Spake found reputation had a positive association with university selection criteria. Private university students appear to evaluate reputation, selectivity, personal interaction, facilities and cost, whereas public university students evaluate programs, athletics, reputation, cost, housing and location, although the findings lend support for different interpretations of common factors. Whereas reputation for students at public institutions was limited to perceptions of a quality education and accreditation, students at private institutions viewed reputation as including name recognition, reputation of the university and reputation of the faculty (p.1).

#### *Brand Image in Higher Education*

Driesener and Romaniuk define brand image as collective consumer brand perceptions that play an important part of identifying the position of the brand (2006). In a higher education context, Panda, Pandey, Bennett, and Tian considered the effects of brand image on student satisfaction and the effect of university's reputation on the relationship between university's brand image and current student's level of satisfaction, finding "positive brand image results in increased reputation and is positively associated with the satisfaction level of students, which would eventually lead to tangible and intangible benefits for the university" (2019, p. 244). The authors concluded:

Universities must actively work toward building their brand image and to differentiate themselves from their competitors. In a maze of options available to students, universities will do well, if they can convey their philosophy and outline their core competencies through a memorable brand image. (Panda, et. al, 2019, p. 245)



In the context of examining a business school's brand, Sywed and Kitchen explored what cognitive or/and affective brand attributes drive brand image; whether cognitive brand attributes (educational quality) precede affective brand attributes (the school's character or personality); and if the two attitude components (cognitive and affective) have a direct or mediating effect on behavioral response (2014). They hypothesized that cognitive and affective brand attributes drive business school brand image. They further postulated that cognitive brand attributes have an effect on affective brand attributes—a student's experience and knowledge of the school would affect the feelings and emotions toward the brand—and that both cognitive and affective brand attributes would have a direct effect on loyalty and satisfaction. Finally, they hypothesized that the cognitive and affective attitudes about the brand that help students form an overall attitude evaluation or brand image will have an effect on loyalty and satisfaction. They demonstrated that while both cognitive and affective attitudes are equally important in shaping higher education institutions' brand image to students, students' positive recommendations to schools depended largely on the affective (prestigious, adventurous, empathy and competence) rather than upon the cognitive brand attributes (2014).

Nguyen, et al. found that “when students choose to commit for the study of a postgraduate degree, a variety of factors influence their decision, of which the brand performance and brand image constructs play major roles” (2015, p. 3105). Brand reputation, however, proved to be less important. The authors' literature review suggested “in the HE sector, a student will generally assess a brand in a hierarchical sequence: the rational values first, before proceeding to a higher level—the emotional values” (2016, p. 3107). Their review of the literature also suggested that “a purchase decision is often made by evaluating extrinsic cues such as price and packaging because intrinsic cues such as service or product quality are not

available at the time of purchase” (2016, p. 3106). The authors conceptualized university brand performance, represented by five dimensions—competence of brand, distribution, product quality, service quality, and price. The results of their study supported their hypotheses that brand performance would have a positive impact on the university’s reputation, brand image, and student commitment and that brand image would have a positive impact on the university’s brand reputation and student’s commitment to a university.

#### *Affective Brand Attitudes in Higher Education.*

In Durkin, McKenna, and Cummins’ 2012 study, “Emotional connections in higher education marketing,” the authors contend that emotional rather than rational messaging is effective in positively affecting prospective students’ college choice, as evidenced by their case-study conducted at the University of Ulster. The authors present compelling evidence that their emotionally-driven campaign met its intended goals through (a) data that showed 87% of respondents found the campaign effective/very effective in encouraging 16 to 19-year-olds to study at the university, and (b) data that showed 70% of respondents in the target market liked the campaigns featured character by year two of the campaign.

Although much of the previous research on university branding has been conducted with current students and alumni, the literature consistently demonstrates a connection between brand perception and behavioral response. Higher education institutions should theoretically be able to evoke a prospective student’s behavioral response by creating and disseminating messaging that incorporates applicable significative and symbolic variables that resonate with students’ social inputs over time. Enrolling at the university is the ultimate behavioral response at the center of this inquiry.

## **Branding at UM**

In a 2018 interview with the Director of Brand Strategy and Marketing at the University of Mississippi, Ryan Whittington, he explained very little previously had been done to understand what the Ole Miss/University of Mississippi brand actually means to prospective students or their influencers (R. Whittington, personal interview, 2018, October 29). At the time, little qualitative and no quantitative data existed that helped explain the school's position in the market, and therefore UM had no basis from which to create brand strategy to improve that position in the marketplace.

UM Communications signed a contract in March 2019 with Carnegie Dartlett to execute a brand study with the purpose of understanding the current university brand reputation and brand position among its competitors. Through 10 live workshops, one online workshop, “Carnegie Dartlett facilitated in-depth dialogue with 2,237 diverse University of Mississippi stakeholders—faculty, staff, students, alumni, friends and leadership—to find out what the authentic personality and story of UM at its best (Vangsness, 2019, September). The results of the study that were presented to members of the university community revealed personality dimensions respondents associated closely with the university that university marketing professionals could use in creating a more consistent brand voice in their marketing messaging: beautiful, established, prominent, classic, charming, hospitable, familial, inclusive, supportive, empowering.

They also conducted an online, opt-in quantitative survey among 1,787 respondents in Jackson, Mississippi, Gulfport/Biloxi, Memphis, North Mississippi, Atlanta, Chicago, and the Dallas/Fort Worth area, ages 16 to 65 with varying degrees of affiliations to the institution—2% student/faculty/staff, friend or family is/was student/faculty/staff, business/community partner,

and no affiliation. With eight regional competitors in the set—Auburn University, Louisiana State University, Mississippi State University, Texas Christian University, University of Alabama, University of Georgia, University of Southern Mississippi, University of Tennessee-Knoxville—respondents ranked UM eight out of nine in terms of overall reputation, with one being the best and nine being the worst (Vangsness, 2019, September).

While this study uncovered perceptions about university reputation and brand personality at an aggregate level among constituents of varying levels of affiliation to the university (Vangsness, 2019, September), the Carnegie Dartlet study did not provide segmentation of responses that could illuminate the UM brand perception among those enrolled at a community college with the intent of transferring to a four-year college, nor did it offer a specific research methodology future researchers could use to replicate their study. Further, the study did not explore what relationship, if any, the brand perception has with college choice. This dissertation in practice seeks to understand community college transfer students' perceptions of the University of Mississippi brand and how, if at all, they influenced their college choice process.

## CHAPTER II

Many institutions of higher learning today are dependent on tuition dollars to operate. With a dwindling high school population from which to recruit new students, colleges and universities are increasingly reliant on non-traditional market segments, like students who first attend community college, to bolster their enrollment. Previous research indicate a student's university brand perception formed over time—influenced by layers of social and demographic context, college choice criteria, recruitment and marketing efforts—affect behaviors students display in a higher education context. This dissertation in practice seeks to uncover what relationship, if any, exists between community college transfers' brand perception of the University of Mississippi and their ultimate decision to enroll.

### **Methodology**

This dissertation in practice seeks to understand community college transfer students' perceptions of the University of Mississippi brand and how, if at all, those perceptions influenced their college choice process. The methodology for the study is described in this section. Specifically, I will discuss the mode, participants, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, contextual considerations, and research questions related to the research.

### **Mode**

In pursuing this study, I am looking into the nature of people's perceptions and what relationship that perception has on their decision-making. I have chosen to use both qualitative and quantitative methods and analysis techniques to explore the two dimensions of this problem

of practice. “Mixed methods research draws on potential strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods, allowing researchers to explore diverse perspectives and uncover relationships that exist between the intricate layers of multifaceted research questions” (Shorten & Smith, 2017). This mixed-methods study seeks to advance “the systematic integration, or “mixing,” of quantitative and qualitative data within a single investigation or sustained program of inquiry, allowing for a more complete and synergistic utilization of data than separate quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis” (Wisdom & Creswell, 2013). Since this study will explore community college students’ perceptions about the University of Mississippi brand and their college choice criteria, the qualitative research will “interpret and share others’ perspectives on some aspect of the social condition,” (Glesne, 2016). Additionally, qualitative methods are useful in helping understand the barriers to college enrollment of underrepresented groups (Perna, 2006), so examining the qualitative feedback from these market segments may help shed light on university brand efforts that could help reshape brand perceptions among these audiences that could potentially pose as a barrier to enrollment. The quantitative research will allow me to quantify the relative strength of brand personality, brand attributes, and the factors students considered when picking a four-year college to attend. The quantitative analysis will also establish if there is a relationship between demographic variables and the respondent’s recorded response to their understanding of UM’s brand personality traits, its brand attributes, and the factors students considered when picking a college to attend.

### **Participants**

Using student data from the UM Office of Admissions and Registrar, I will invite students who transferred to the University of Mississippi in the last two semesters to participate

in the survey. I will email survey participants to ask them to participate in a 30-minute follow up interview.

### **Data Collection**

I will use previous literature and my professional experiences to create a locally developed quantitative survey (see Appendix A) to collect demographic information about the participants. I will also ask participants to list and rank by level of importance the brand personality traits, brand attributes and factors that contributed to their making a final choice on which college to attend. I will use email to distribute this Qualtrics survey. To improve validity, I will pilot my survey with 10 people to make sure my survey questions are clear and answered appropriately. Depending on the results of the pilot, I will adjust the questions as needed. After the survey is officially launched, I will ask those who complete the quantitative survey whether or not they are willing to participate in a follow-up interview. I will interview all who volunteer, schedule permitting. I will use a semi-structured interview process, and those questions are in Appendix B.

### **Data Analysis**

Previous literature, qualitative, and quantitative analysis will provide the triangulation that assures validity and trustworthiness of the data (Antonow, 2015). I will use manual hierarchical coding for analysis of the 30-minute interviews. I will include narrative analysis of each interview and identify themes across the interviews. I will have a third-party reviewer with a scholarly and practical background in college choice conduct an audit of my narrative analysis and coding to verify the integrity of my conclusions and identify and reduce any potential researcher bias that may have emerged through my interpretation.

For the quantitative analysis, I will first use a data reduction method by hierarchical grouping based on the responses to the open-ended text questions. I will create a new variable in the data set based on the hierarchical grouping or categorization. I will run basic descriptive statistics to establish frequency and create a contingency table. I will use a multi-dimensional chi-square operation in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to test if there is a relationship between demographic variables and the new grouping variable. After the participants rank their responses by level of importance for brand personality, brand attributes, and factors that contributed to their final college choice selection, I will be able to identify which responses were listed more than once by respondents. For each response that was listed more than once, that response will be averaged across participants' rankings to provide a mean ranking score.

### **Ethical Considerations**

To ensure the highest standard of ethics and quality of effort, I will submit my proposal to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The purpose of IRB review is to help assure appropriate steps are taken to protect the rights and welfare of humans participating as subjects in the research.

### **Contextual Considerations**

I am collecting this data during the time of a pandemic. Since my data gathering is electronic, I would not have to change my methodology to accommodate the restrictions in place due to COVID-19. However, some limitations may present themselves in the data, including unprecedented consideration of the virus on college choice in general. I would address these considerations that could potentially emerge in data interpretation and the limitations.



## Research Questions

This dissertation in practice seeks to understand community college transfer students' perceptions of the University of Mississippi brand and how, if at all, they influenced their college choice process. I will address the following research questions:

R1: What is the brand perception of UM to community college transfer students?

R2: How, if at all, does the perception vary across select demographic variables?

R2H1: There will be variations across demographic variables.

R3: To what extent is there congruity between the characteristics seen by transfer students as most important in a college and their brand perceptions of UM?

R4: How, if at all, do UM brand perceptions of community college transfer students influence their college choice process?

R4H1: Brand perceptions influence college choice.

R4H2: Brand perceptions will play out in college choice in several of Perna's layers of context.

## **CHAPTER III**

UM needs to attract students both to fulfill its mission and to be a financially sustainable enterprise. It is more important than ever for the University of Mississippi to seek out populations outside of traditional students to meet enrollment goals and improve the diversity of the student body to better reflect the racial diversity of the state of Mississippi, like those coming from the community college system. This dissertation suggests a need to study the college decision-making process for community college students and their perception of brand identity of UM. In this manuscript, I will discuss the conceptual framework for this study, Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate principles, general leadership principles, personal leadership attributes, and what I learned from the process of creating this DiP.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This dissertation in practice seeks to understand community college transfer students' perceptions of the University of Mississippi brand and how, if at all, those perceptions influenced their college choice process. Hence, my conceptual framework consists of three elements— the body of knowledge about community college students; Perna's model of college choice; and the Howard-Sheth Model of Consumer Buying Behavior. I will use this framework to help create a survey mechanism that will help interpret how community college students perceive the University of Mississippi brand and how, if at all, that perception shapes their college choice process through the lens of a consumer buying behavior model.

I will use Perna's Model of College Choice to create information about habitus, cultural context and influencers that affect community students' decisions to attend college and which college to attend. I will use information about community college transfer students' unique attributes established by previous literature to help in creating an appropriate survey mechanism to determine how, if at all, community college transfer students' overall brand perception of the University of Mississippi is related to their college choice process. I will use the Howard-Sheth Model of Consumer Buying Behavior to provide a parallel way to consider inputs and outputs in decision-making processes that result in a purchase, providing a lens through which to interpret the results of the survey, operationalized through the college choice process. The results will provide insights for future brand marketing endeavors and messaging for this specific target market.

### **Body of Knowledge About Community College Students**

Both the Howard-Sheth Model of Consumer Buying Behavior and the Perna Model of College Choice consider multiple layers of signative, symbolic, and social input stimuli, including demographics and social and cultural capital, that ultimately affect choice criteria and brand perception. Hence, higher education institutions that make segmented appeals to students in a unique brand voice that acknowledge these layers of context, affirming brand attributes that coincide with the target market's values, beliefs, and motives, should be able to affect college choice in some way. The body of knowledge of community college students explains contextual layers that inform their consumer buying behavior in their ultimate college choice.

### ***Demographics***

It is well documented that community colleges serve a large proportion of minority, first-generation, low-income, and adult students (Ma & Baum, 2016). Data from the American

Association of Community Colleges indicates students enrolled for credit in the nation’s community colleges were 25% Hispanic, 13% Black, 46% White, 6% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1% Native American, 3% two or more races, 4% other/unknown, and 2% Nonresident Alien (2019). “Similar percentages of Asian and white undergraduates enrolled in the public two-year and public four-year sectors, but 44% of black and 56% of Hispanic students were in the public two-year sector in 2014, compared to 29% from these groups in the public four-year sector” (Ma & Baum, 2016).

About 55 percent of dependent students with family incomes below \$30,000 in 2011–12 started at a community college (Community College Research Center, n.d.), indicating there is a large and growing contingency of low-income, Pell Grant-eligible students across the nation’s community colleges. As Table 1.1 shows, 37% of community college students reported annual household income of less than \$20,000.

Table 1.1 *Proportion of Community College Students by Income Category*

Income	Overall	Dependent	Independent
Less than \$20,000	37%	23%	47%
\$20,000-49,999	30%	28%	31%
\$50,000 and up	33%	49%	22%

Adapted from The Advisory Committee on Student Financial Assistance, 2008

According to findings from the “Transition Matters: Community College to Bachelor's Degree” report:

New enrollment data now available suggest that a major shift in college enrollment from four-year colleges to two-year colleges occurred among low- and moderate-income college-qualified high school graduates

between 1992 and 2004. These shifts portend higher projected bachelor's degree losses for the high school class of 2004 – as well as higher projected cumulative losses for the current decade. (The Advisory Committee on the Student Financial Assistance, 2008, p. 1)

Furthermore, research has shown community college and other low-income students have the most need regarding the financial aid process (Davidson, 2014).

### ***Lifestyle***

Summary findings from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) indicate community college students often have work and family obligations that leave little time for campus life. At the time of the 2005 release of the survey, 60% of community college students were enrolled part-time, 57% worked more than 20 hours a week, 36% spent 11 or more hours per week caring for dependents, and 21% spent six to 20 hours a week commuting to and from class (2005, p. 4)

The American Association of Community Colleges indicates about 80 percent of community college students work, with 39 percent working full-time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). For the two out of three community college students who are working while in school, if involvement does not occur in the classroom, it is unlikely to occur at all (Donaldson, Graham, Martindill, Bradley, 2000; Tinto 1997). At a national level, 84% of students indicate they do not participate in college-sponsored extracurricular activities (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, 2004, p. 9).

### ***Proximity to Home***

The ability to attend college close to home is often among the most important factors that U.S. high school students, especially non-Whites and the socioeconomically disadvantaged,

consider (Turley, 2009), so the idea that community college students, who are disproportionately low-income and from non-White backgrounds, are particularly sensitive to a college's proximity to home comes as no surprise. In fact, the median distance students live from home is only eight miles at public, two-year colleges (Wexler, 2016).

### ***Need for Developmental Education***

Federal BPS (Beginning Postsecondary Students) data from 2009 indicate that 68% of students beginning at public two-year colleges in 2003–2004 took one or more remedial courses in the six years after their initial college enrollment; 59% took at least one course in math, and 28 percent took at least one course in English. At four-year public colleges, 40% of students took one or more remedial courses within six years; 33% took math and 11% took English (Community College Research Center, n.d.). At public two-year colleges, 48% of students who began in 2003–04 took two or more remedial courses within six years. At public four-year colleges, 21% of students took two or more remedial courses (Community College Research Center, n.d.).

### ***Community College Choice Process***

Many community college students begin their college choice process in high school with a planned trajectory from a 2-year campus to 4-year institution where they will earn a baccalaureate degree. Dubbed *intentional student* by Tobolowsky and Bers (2019), some make this decision during the search process when they discover attending a four-year institution straight out of high school is cost prohibitive to their financial situation. Often transfer college choices are based on only a few factors, such as transferability of credits, course availability, reputation, cost, and proximity to family and friends (Barreno & Traut, 2012; Eagan et al., 2016).

Reputation, one of the few factors on which students based their transfer college choice, is an important element of an overall brand (Kuenzel & Halliday 2010). There is evidence that cultivating an immersive institutional brand experience has potential to influence the student decision-making process by establishing an emotional relationship between the institution and prospective student (Rauschnabel, Krey, Babin, & Ivens, 2016). Once a college understands the unique attributes of their target market, in this case the community college transfer market, they can utilize brand management techniques to cultivate relationships with prospective students and influence their college choice (Kalimullin & Dobrotvorskaya, 2016), highlighting the brand personality attributes and brand values that reflect those of the target market.

### ***Insights from Community College Leadership***

I interviewed the chief academic officer at Northwest Mississippi Community College, Vice President for Academic Curriculum Dr. Matthew Domas, in an effort to better understand the behaviors and mindset of the students attending the largest feeder school for the University of Mississippi. There are three primary reasons students choose Northwest, according to Domas in reference to results from the institution's student satisfaction survey. First and foremost, affordability is the top reason students choose the institution. While the student body's socioeconomic status runs the gamut from "the poorest of the poor to very wealthy," Domas explained, "the majority are middle class to low SES, with a large percentage of students receiving Pell Grant. This is the low-cost option." The institution's survey results led Domas to believe that graduating with no loans and no debt is important to this population. The college received \$16 million in Pell aid last year, and 60% of enrolled students receive Federal Pell dollars. The student body, he observed, is price-sensitive. For instance, when the college recently increased tuition and fees for their associate degree nursing program, applicants and

administrators expressed great concern. “Price and affordability really impact our students,” Domas said. “If Ole Miss goes up \$2,000, people aren’t going to freak out, but if Northwest goes up \$50 or \$1000, people feel it.” This low-cost option’s proximity to home ranked as the second most cited reason for attending, followed by program of study, which Domas explained was generally associated with specific career and technical programs, not Associate of Arts degrees needed for transfer. I asked Domas to describe, from his professional experience, what unique attributes his students demonstrate academically, financially and emotionally compared to their peers who go straight to four-year college. He described three key areas of difference. First, a large contingency of Northwest students is academically unprepared for college level work—some, according to Domas, because of a learning disability, others because their K-12 schools did not provide the academic rigor needed to prepare them for college level work. Academic support and advising are, therefore, especially important in this environment. Again, he mentioned low socioeconomic status related to underperforming area schools. He reported 70% of students work part-time or full time while attending school to manage their financial situations, leaving very little time for students to involve themselves in student organizations or activities beyond attending an occasional football game. Socializing on campus is minimal outside of the classroom interaction. Emotionally, he explained, a lot of his students are on their own to find their way through college as independents without family support, many from single-parent households. Coupled with the responsibility of work, these conditions can be tough on students emotionally. He noted that despite the emotional stress that could be at play, the institution’s counseling center goes largely unused by the majority of students (although he speculated many students do not utilize the facility due to work, life, and school obligations). At this point in the conversation, he commented on how his students generally took their conditions



in stride, as facts of life that would not derail their ambition to get their degree, training, or certificate to improve their station. He described a pervasive resiliency and pragmatism among students despite the academic, financial, and emotional strains unique to this population.

I asked what the most frequent reason a prospective student who had previously shown interest in Northwest ultimately would not enroll. Because the college does not use a survey mechanism to track this type of data, Domas speculated work or family issues were at play for students who declined their admission offer to the school, with an emphasis on the importance of needing to work to support themselves and their families as the number one reason. Of the students enrolled in Associate of Arts degree programs, many express career aspirations as a major motivator in why they are attending college. He described his student body as “career driven” but noted that achieving a better, higher-paying job in the field of their choice does not always coincide with their course selections or majors. According to Domas, only 20% of Northwest students pursuing an Associate of Arts degree transfer to a four-year college prior to completing their associate’s degree; 40% either graduate and/or transfer; and most of those students go to UM. He attributes proximity as a major contributor to Northwest graduates choosing UM. He explained most students only apply to one school for transfer, because they know their four-year completion strategy before they ever enroll at the two-year school. “I think most of them pretty much already have their mind made up. ‘I’m going to Delta State. I’m going to Ole Miss.’ A lot of music people say, ‘I’m going to Southern.’ They don’t apply to two or three and see what they get. They investigate, and they figure it out, and they are going to one particular school because it is closer or they are offering them ‘this’ much money,” Domas said. When asked what personal values or beliefs his students consistently demonstrate (e.g. religious or ideological, work ethic/discipline, family values, time management, prioritization in

work/school/home life), Domas asserted the student body was very diverse in many of these capacities. He did, however, draw some assumptions from their behaviors. He, again, pointed to the fact that so many students work while in school and are in school to help them advance in their chosen fields—so he could reasonably assume that the majority of his students valued working and providing for themselves and their families. With regard to family values, Domas regarded the importance of proximity as a major determinant in choosing Northwest as an indicator that home life and family are of great importance to his student body.

### **Perna's College Choice Model**

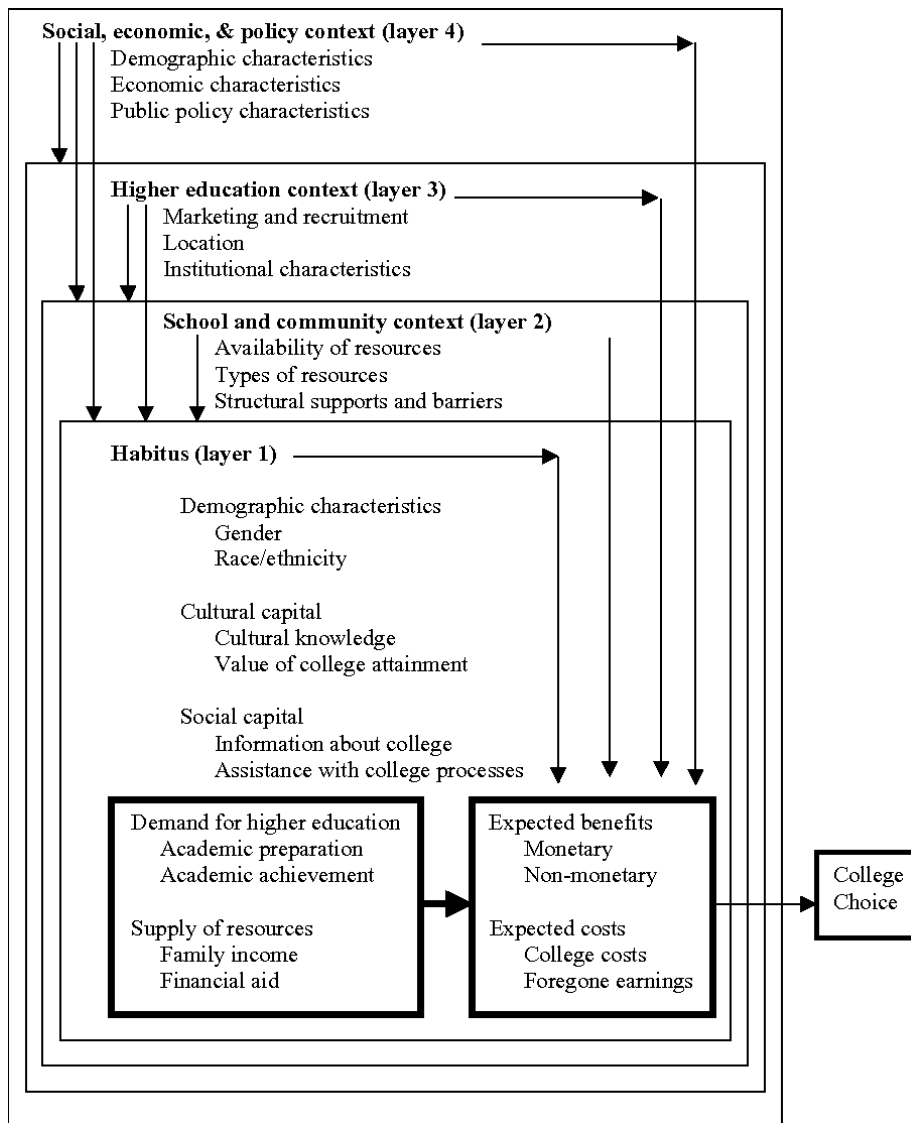
While Hossler and Gallagher first introduced the theory that the college choice process is made up of three phases—predisposition, search, and choice (1987)—Perna presented a college choice model “that integrates economic and sociological approaches and considers the choice process of specific groups such as African Americans, Hispanics, and low-income students” (Tobolowsky & Bers, 2018). She proposed college choice decisions are based on a cost-benefit analysis “nested within several layers of context. The first context with which the prospective student considers attending college is that individual’s habitus, or “the internalized system of thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions acquired from the immediate environment, conditions an individual’s expectations, attitudes, and aspirations” (Perna & Titus, 2004, p. 506). Perna’s model further considers school and community context; the higher education context; and the social, economic, and policy context (Perna, 2006). Perna acknowledges the role marketing and recruitment play in the college choice process in the higher education context.

Others propose student experiences and other intangibles like social and cultural capital are important in the college choice process, as well as individual characteristics like race or ethnicity, religion, age, sex, academic ability and duration of the institution search process

(Dawes and Brown, 2002; Lockwood and Hadd, 2007)—student attributes echoed in the Perna model, illustrated in Fig. 1.1.

**Figure. 1.1**

*Perna’s College Choice Model*



“Studying College Access and Choice: A Proposed Conceptual Model.” by L. Perna in J.C. Smart (Ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, (vol. XXI, p.117), 2006, Springer .

Citing previous research, Perna and Titus explain how social and cultural capital can affect a student's college choice:

Like human and physical capital, social and cultural capital are resources that may be invested to enhance productivity and facilitate upward mobility. Whereas cultural capital refers to the system of factors derived from one's parents that define an individual's class status, social capital refers to social networks and the ways in which social connections are sustained. Social capital may also be understood as a tool for describing how individuals gain access to other forms of capital, including human capital and cultural capital, as well as institutional resources and support. Research suggests that parental involvement, a measure of social capital, is an important predictor of college enrollment. (2004, p. 506)

Perna's model reinforces prior research that indicates college choice decisions can be influenced by contextual factors such as significant persons in a student's life, organizational characteristics, or local culture and norms (Chapman, 1981). The body of knowledge about community college students coupled with the Perna model of college choice provide the initial framework to design a survey mechanism to explore the layers of social and demographic context university brand marketers can theoretically use to move students through the enrollment funnel, from inquiry to enrolled student.

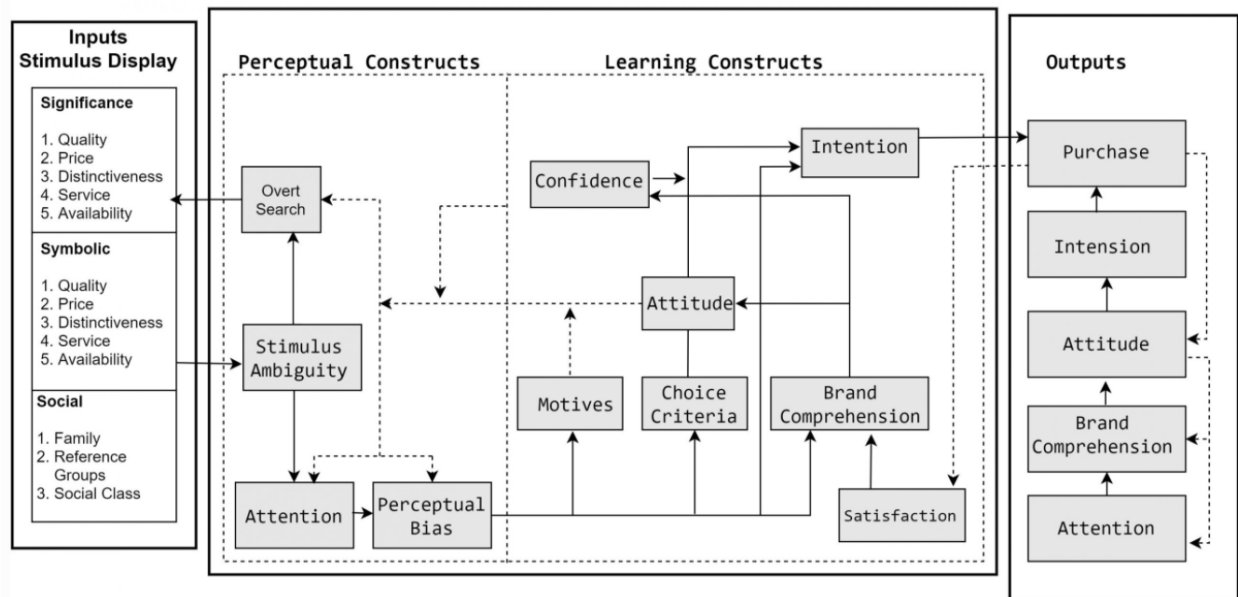
### **Howard Sheth Consumer Buying Behavior Model**

Brand marketers have been able to use motivational and need-based strategies effectively in creating brand awareness, changing brand perceptions, and motivating consumer action, by connecting their messaging and brand strategies to attributes of their target market—the

consumers they are trying to entice to engage with their product or service (Rajagopal, 2018). According to Maslow’s Theory of Motivation these needs include, in order of importance, psychological (survival), safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization (Jisana, 2014). These motivations not only play a psychological role in the college choice process, they affect consumer buying behavior, as illustrated by the Howard-Sheth Model of Consumer Buying Behavior (1969) in Fig. 1.2 below that uses the concept of stimulus-response in order to explain buyer’s brand choice behavior over a period of time. In a higher education context and in the context of this manuscript, the behavior at hand is ultimately enrolling at the University of Mississippi.

**Figure. 1.2**

*Howard Sheth Model of Consumer Buying Behavior*



Howard Sheth Model of Consumer Behaviour – Definition, Levels, Variables. (n.d.).

*Input variables* are stimuli from the environment—informational cues about the five major dimensions of a brand: quality, price, distinctiveness, service and availability (Jisana, 2014). In a university brand context, a prospective student could derive these cues from a wide

array of mediums—an online experience on a college website; a chat with a current student or Alumnus about their personal experience at a college; the university’s printed promotional materials; a news story they read online about a college; a social media post from a friend, describing his or her college experience; a guided tour of the college or experience at a university-sponsored event; and/or an interaction with an admissions counselor at a college fair, just to name a few. While significant stimuli are the actual elements constituting a brand that the buyer confronts—price, quality, service, availability—that influence the consumer directly through the brand's attributes, symbolic stimuli are created by the brand’s representation of their products or service in symbolic form through advertisement or publicity, influencing the consumer in an indirect way. Social stimuli are created by the social environment, like reference groups and social classes, reflected in layer one, two, and four in the Perna model. These are influences that are internalized by the consumer before they can affect the decision process (Jisana, 2014). In application to higher education marketing, university brand marketers who utilize targeted engagement and messaging that specifically acknowledge the segmented social and cultural context of prospective students should theoretically have a better chance of affecting perceptual and learning constructs that spur positive engagement with the university brand.

The five output variables of the model are buyer's observable responses to stimulus inputs, arranged in order from *attention* to *actual purchase*. These output variables coincide with the prospective students’ path to enrolling at a university, arranged in order from prospect (attention) to inquiry, to applicant, to admit, to deposit, and lastly, to enroll (actual purchase). The purchase, or in a higher education context, a student’s initial enrollment, is the actual, overt act of buying and is the progressive result of the attention (buyers total response to information intake), brand perception (based on brand comprehension and brand attitude) and the buyer

intention—a confirmation made in the light of the above externalizing factors that the preferred brand will be bought the next time the buying is necessitated, or in a higher education context, a student’s ultimate college choice.

Input stimuli, including significative and symbolic product attributes, personality variables, culture, social class, and financial status, inform two hypothetical constructs—perceptual and learning—before the consumer takes an action with a brand. In the perceptual construct, consumers make meaning of brand stimuli, integrating their personal biases and accounting for lack of stimulus consistency. Brands can get stuck in this perceptual construct when they do not provide consistent messaging, causing the consumer to experience cognitive dissonance, a phenomenon occurs when one's ideas, beliefs, or behaviors contradict each other (Harmon-Jones, E., Harmon-Jones, C., & Levy, 2015). Based on the consumer’s motives, choice criteria, brand comprehension, intention, and confidence associated with their purchase involved the learning construct, the consumer will ultimately move through the sales funnel, or in a higher education context, the enrollment funnel. Since *choice criteria* is part of the learning construct in the Howard-Sheth Model of Consumer Buying Behavior, Perna’s model of college choice explains how prospective students come to develop an individual cost-benefit analysis for attending a university before forming an attitude about their future enrollment.

### **Use of Conceptual Framework**

I will be using the elements from the Howard-Sheth model in analyzing the data from the participants, providing a consumer behavior lens through which to view community college transfers’ college choice process and providing a framework from which university brand marketers can build their efforts to move prospective community college students through the enrollment funnel. As I analyze the data provided by community college transfer students about

their perception of the University of Mississippi brand and their greatest considerations in the college choice process, I will explore demographic data related to the Perna model, including social context. I will use the knowledge of community college students to first understand the audience and the Perna model of college choice to listen to and interpret the data. Ultimately, I will make meaning of the results through the lens of Howard-Sheth model, helping organize the data to apply the consumer buying behavior model in the context of higher education and recommend future research.

### **Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate**

The Doctor of Education program in Higher Education at the University of Mississippi is affiliated with the Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate (CPED). CPED states “The professional doctorate in education prepares educators for the application of appropriate and specific practices, the generation of new knowledge, and for the stewardship of the profession” (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2021). CPED programs ask practitioners to approach complex problems of practice which advance equity, social justice, and ethics (The Framework, n.d.). I will discuss the relationship of each of these principles to my dissertation in the sections below.

#### **Equity**

This DiP explores the relationship, if any, between community college transfer students’ perception of the state’s flagship university brand and their college choice. Since community colleges serve a large number of minority, first-generation, low-income, and adult students (Ma & Baum, 2016), understanding their college choice process and how university branding affects that choice is of particular significance for me as a CPED scholar. As a publicly funded university, UM presumably works to equitably offer higher education to students of diverse



backgrounds from across the state of Mississippi. As a leader, I would use this data to better inform the way public institutions use branding for outreach to the historically underrepresented populations among community college transfers.

### **Social Justice**

The University of Mississippi has issues in race relations that impact enrollment, particularly enrollment of students of color. The university is still troubled by public perception surrounding a contentious integration in the 1960s and historically marginal efforts made by the university to improve the campus climate for students of color. Real progress in race relations did not begin at the university until Chancellor Robert Khayat took office in 1995, when the university began systematically dismantling public perception of racism by removing racist symbols from public events, like banning sticks at university sporting events to prevent the confederate flag from being waved in 1996 and removing Colonel Reb, who was perceived widely as a plantation owner, as the school's official athletic mascot in 2003. During Chancellor Dan Jones' term in office from 2009-2015, he undertook a major initiative to promote diversity across all university campuses by adding the promotion of diversity and inclusion to university strategic planning. In 2016, Chancellor Jeffrey Vitter released a formal plan to improve diversity measures across the university, including increasing the enrollment and graduation rate of minorities (University of Mississippi, 2016).

The university reports that more recent strategic university-wide efforts designed to improve diversity and inclusion have contributed to an improvement in minority enrollment over the last ten years (University of Mississippi, 2016). With an all-time high of 25% in the 2012-13 academic year, minority (IHL) enrollment makes up 23% of the student body today. From 2008 to 2012, African American student enrollment increased 48%. Ultimately the university is

striving to not only improve enrollment, but also better reflect the racial diversity in the state, according to Whittington (R. Whittington, personal interview, 2018, October 29). Until the university reflects the racial diversity of the state, there is still work to be done before the university can truly “serv[e] as a beacon of diversity and inclusion” (University of Mississippi, 2016) while meeting its enrollment goals. As a leader, I will use this information to better inform university branding efforts designed to affect the college choice process for a more diverse student body.

### **Ethics**

While it is estimated that up to 80% of community college students intend to transfer to a four-year institution, a mere 23% successfully do so within six academic years (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). While there are myriad issues at play in this discrepancy, public universities, in an effort to improve access and equity, must examine every aspect of their institution that could work to improve this rate, including brand marketing and outreach to community college students with an intention to transfer to a four-year college. According to the conceptual framework, a university brand that resonates with a target market’s perceptions and values will have a better chance of affecting behavioral response. As a leader, I will use the information gleaned from this study to highlight aspects of brand personality and college choice reasoning that resonate with community college students in any branding or communications efforts.

## **Leadership Statement**

I have mentioned several times throughout this manuscript how I would use this study as a leader at the University of Mississippi to improve diversity, equity and inclusion and make the university a more financially stable institution by increasing enrollment of community college students. In the following section, I will describe my overall leadership approach, general leadership principles, my leadership approach to this problem of practice, and the leadership values that guide this study and the personal changes I have encountered throughout the creation of this DiP.

### **General Principles of Leadership**

Leadership is the process of building a shared vision and an inclusive culture that guides, supports, inspires, and empowers others to work ethically toward a common objective for the good of the organization and community at large. Exemplary leaders exercise fortitude as visionary change agents; they review systems, policies, practices, and situations—sustainably restructuring through continual, contextual, and transparent evaluation and assessment—to advocate for access, equity, and social justice. As an exemplary leader, I strive to avoid the pitfalls of bureaucracy—an authoritative, hierarchical chain of command that is built on a functionalist framework and is designed to get things done with little to no regard for the human beings conducting the work at hand. This inflexible, rigid, structured approach to leadership or management is more concerned with process than organizational mission and human resources. Averse to disruption and apprehensive to change, bureaucrats are transactional and disinterested in creativity, critical thinking, and innovation. Transactional, inaccessible, and often siloed from a greater collaborative vision, bureaucrats promote compliance and are less likely to consider data through a qualitative lens, if they consider data at all. They may only consider quantitative

research as a legitimate source of data for decision making or adopt previous processes or the status quo to establish their own idea of proper procedure.

### *Transformational Servant Leader*

I am a transformational servant (Burns, 1978; Greenleaf, 1970) leader currently serving as Manager of Marketing and Communications in the School of Applied Sciences at the University of Mississippi. I lead by example and help those I work with achieve their personal and professional goals, all the while keeping in mind a clear vision of the future state of my organization. In my transformational leadership capacity, I play the role of a social architect who communicates direction that transforms organizational values and norms (Northouse, 2019). At this pivotal time in our nation's history, this progressive leadership style best serves an increasingly diverse student body, professoriate, and staff emerging across our school, state, and nation by celebrating the values of access, equity, and social justice I have personally cultivated through this CPED Ed.D. program. With proper continued training in cultural competence and language, I envision leading at an institution of higher learning or in public policy capacity. I am measured in my choices and consider both qualitative and quantitative data in my decision making, using a 360-degree lens to make sure all stakeholders have a voice in organizational or institutional decisions I make.

With regard to students, my leadership style inspires a sense of belonging, regardless of academic preparedness or social background. My leadership style is closely linked to my teaching philosophy that is rooted in social constructivism. Social constructivism teaches that "real understanding is only constructed based on learners' previous experience and background knowledge. Students create or construct their own understandings or knowledge through the interaction of what they already believe and the ideas, events, and activities with which they

come into contact” (Ültanır, 2012). My learning philosophy is rooted in the theory of social constructivism, best described by Piaget’s theoretical model of cognitive development, or scheme, theory wherein “essential functions of the mind are formed by developing a foundation consisting of understanding and innovation and constructing reality” (Piaget, 1971). I follow Dewey’s progressive approach to “facilitate the naturally developing tendencies and potential of the child” (Matthews, 2003) by “building the idea of individualist development instead of top-down forcing; embracing behavioral freedom, or democracy, as opposed to practice external discipline; practicing active education instead of passive learning from teachers and texts; embracing the thought of learning to use skills and techniques as a means to achieve one’s goal instead of isolated learning” (Dewey, 1998).

My leadership philosophy is inspired by transformational servant leaders among faculty and staff, both past and present, in the Office of Undergraduate Admissions and the Schools of Journalism and New Media, Business, Applied Sciences, and Education at the University of Mississippi; Northwest Mississippi Community College; the Mississippi School for Math and Science; and the Mississippi School for the Arts.

### **Leadership Approach to the Problem of Practice**

With the information gleaned from this dissertation in practice, I would make appropriate changes to recruitment and marketing processes that better reflect the positive attributes of the University of Mississippi brand that are illuminated from the qualitative data captured. I would use the information to better segment the community college student market by demographic variables, in order to establish a stronger connection with the brand. I would be able to connect the university brand perceptions to the college choice process in order to get the right information to prospective students using the appropriate brand personality attributes. I would be

able to establish if brand perceptions indeed influence the college choice process as they play out in several of Perna's layers of context. I would share the knowledge gained from this DiP with brand managers in the Office of Admissions and University Marketing and Communications, so they will be able to adjust publications, mailings, email, social media interactions, and recruiting practices accordingly. Leaders using this analysis need to think about the findings in their local context, including political climate, rurality, and the recent movement in popular culture to dismiss the value of higher education.

### **Reflection**

As a result of engaging in the DiP process, I have learned a lot about myself generally and as a more reflective scholar practitioner. The process of writing this DiP has changed the way I understand the importance and relevance of improving diversity, equity, and inclusion at the University of Mississippi at a time when racial disparities between the composition of the university student body and the state of Mississippi need improvement. Prior to writing this DiP, I did not understand the full extent to which the University of Mississippi was lacking in diversity, but I now know that the school's racial make-up still has room for improvement to better reflect the demographics of the state. Before this DiP, I considered community college students to have the same general backgrounds as traditional students with the same college choice process. I have learned about the college choice process for community college students and am prepared to lead in a way that better caters to their unique needs. Finally, I have learned about the input variables and perceptual and learning constructs leading to outputs, or ultimate college choice for community college students, that should help me as a leader improve the enrollment rate for this population.

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## **Appendix**

## Appendix A: Survey Questions



THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI®

You are being invited to volunteer for a research study. The purpose of this research is to understand the perceptions of community college students about the University of Mississippi and their college choice process. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.

You will be asked to participate in a survey and an optional interview. It is expected that your participation will last 10 minutes for the survey and 30 minutes for the optional interview.

There is minimal risk involved in participating in this research.

Your participation will help the transfer process for future community college students considering attending the University of Mississippi.

Do you agree to participate?

- Yes
- No



THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSISSIPPI®

Are you 18 years of age or older?

- Yes
- No







What is your age?

Has anyone in your immediate family ever attended college?

- Yes
- No

Please specify your race/ethnicity.

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- White
- Two or more races
- Prefer not to say

Please indicate your gender.

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / third gender
- Prefer not to say

7. Please recall the time when you were considering transferring to a four-year college. Imagine the University of Mississippi as a person and list five personality traits of that person (e.g. successful, friendly, athletic) and then rank the five personality traits you listed by level of importance to you when making a final decision on which college to attend.

	1 -most important	2	3	4	5 -least important
Click to write Statement 1 <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Click to write Statement 2 <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Click to write Statement 3 <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Click to write Statement 4 <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Click to write Statement 5 <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. Once again, please answer this question keeping in mind a time when you were considering transferring to a four-year college. List five attributes that you associated with the University of Mississippi brand (e.g. strong academics, competitive athletics, vibrant student life) and then rank those five attributes that you associated with the University of Mississippi by level of importance to you when making a final decision about which college to attend.

	1 - most important	2	3	4	5 - least important
Click to write Statement 1 <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Click to write Statement 2 <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Click to write Statement 3 <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Click to write Statement 4 <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Click to write Statement 5 <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

11. Like the question before it, this question asks you to recall a time when you were considering transferring to a four-year college. List five factors that you considered in picking which college to attend (e.g. affordability, credits transfer, close to home) and then rank those five factors that you associated with the University of Mississippi by level of importance to you when making a final decision about which college to attend.

	1 - most important	2	3	4	5 - least important
Click to write Statement 1 <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Click to write Statement 2 <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Click to write Statement 3 <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Click to write Statement 4 <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Click to write Statement 5 <input type="text"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Would you be willing to participate in a 30-minute interview via Zoom to help provide a richer understanding of your perceptions of the University of Mississippi prior to transfer and your college choice process?

- Yes
- No

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

I am studying community college transfer students' perception of the University of Mississippi and their college choice process. I will ask you questions about your own experiences and interactions with the University of Mississippi, or Ole Miss, brand, as well as considerations you made in deciding ultimately on which four-year college you would attend after attending community college. Remember, your answers are right because they are your answers. You may notice some similarities between the survey and the interview, but I can't associate any of that data with your interview. Once you participate in this interview, I can develop a richer understanding of the subject matter.

1. Think back to before you transferred to the University of Mississippi, or Ole Miss. Describe the institution as you knew it then as you were considering it as a transfer institution.
  - a. Describe the university's reputation as you knew it before transferring.
2. Still thinking back to before you transferred to the University of Mississippi, or Ole Miss, if you could describe the university as a person, what would that person be like?
3. Describe the qualities that were important to you when you were deciding which four-year college to attend.
4. Of those qualities, describe the one that was most important to you and why when you were deciding which four-year college to attend.
5. Describe how your perceptions of the University influenced your decision to transfer to UM.

**Sarah Christopher Sapp**  
**Curriculum Vitae**

**Experience**

**Adjunct Instructional Assistant Professor**

University of Mississippi (UM) | Jan. 2019-present

IMC 205: Writing for Integrated Marketing Communications

IMC 390: Advanced Writing for Integrated Marketing

IMC 304: Account Planning

**Manager of Marketing and Communications**

UM School of Applied Sciences | July 2017 – Present

Responsible for all school-wide and departmental integrated marketing communications, including research, media and marketing writing, design, production, implementation, and evaluation. Mentor and manage all communications interns and graduate assistants and their creative productions.

**Director of Communications**

Northwest MS Community College | August 2010-July 2016

Responsible for college's internal and external integrated marketing communications research, branding, media and marketing writing, design, production, media buying, implementation, and evaluation. Mentor and manage all communications interns. Editor for Student Media Center, including newspaper and yearbook.

**Admissions and Enrollment Management**

UM Office of Admissions | July 2005-July 2010

Served as Regional Admissions Counselor (direct sales), Coordinator of Special Visit Programs and Telecounseling (event planning and phone sales), and Assistant Director of Admissions for Communications, where I was responsible for design, implementation, and evaluation of recruiting and communications strategy for university-wide undergraduate recruitment.

**Special Projects Coordinator**

Mississippi School of the Arts | July 2003-July 2005

Responsible for state-wide recruiting, giving presentations and maintaining communications with prospective students and other stakeholders. Coordinated auditions and portfolio review. Brookhaven, Mississippi

## **Education and Research**

### **Ed.D. Higher Education**

University of Mississippi  
2017-2021

Dissertation in Practice: Exploring Current Community College Transfer Students' Perceptions of the University of Mississippi Brand and Potential Connections To College Choice

### **M.A. in Journalism**

University of Mississippi  
2006-2009

Thesis: Undergraduate Recruitment Marketing and the Millennial Mindset

### **B.B.A. in Marketing Communications**

University of Mississippi  
1999-2004

## **Certifications**

University of Mississippi eLearning Endorsement Program

## **Technology Competencies**

Adobe Creative Suite  
Microsoft Office  
SPSS  
Google Classroom  
Blackboard

## **Skills**

Research  
Project Management  
Content Marketing  
Content Writing  
Video Production  
Enrollment Management  
Web Development  
Digital Marketing  
Agency Operations  
Recruiting  
Photography  
Social Media Marketing  
Graphic Design  
Public Relations

Editing  
Email Marketing

### **Service and Committee Work**

#### **UM School of Applied Sciences**

Dean's Leadership Council  
Communications Liaison for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

#### **University Marketing and Communications**

Communicators Network  
Communicators Council  
Co-chair, UM Marketing Affinity Group

#### **UM School of Journalism and New Media**

Ongoing mentorship for IMC and Journalism students

#### **Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science**

### **Honors and Awards**

#### **50+ statewide, regional, and national awards**

Work in higher education public relations and marketing across magazine; print, digital, and broadcast advertising; public relations; web design; and direct mail mediums from the National Council for Marketing and Public Relations, College Public Relations Association of Mississippi, and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education

#### **Kappa Tau Honor Society**

Recognized as top journalism student in Master's program