

ATTRACTING GENERATION Z STUDENTS

ATTRACTING GENERATION Z STUDENTS TO HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

by

Marcelyn Nauman

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Liberty University, School of Business

May 2021

Abstract

U.S. Higher Education institutions (HEIs) have faced declining enrollment since 2011. At the same time, the generational cohort of first-time freshman changed from Millennials to Gen Z students, bringing with them a change in wants, needs, and values. A qualitative multiple case study was conducted to understand how to attract Gen Z students to Higher Education Institutions. The two research questions were: 1) What marketing strategies are successful HEIs using to attract Generation Z students? and 2) What are they doing differently to attract Gen Z compared to Gen X or Y? This study was based on marketing theory, generational theory, and the concept of higher education. Marketing theory suggests that product, price, place, and promotion along with a target market are necessary for success. Generational theory suggests that what worked in the past will not necessarily be effective today due to the changing values and desires of a generation. To identify learnings, marketing staff were interviewed from five institutions which have successfully increased their enrollment of Gen Z students since 2013. The findings from the research indicate that the Four P's of marketing remain critical components in attracting this audience. Additionally, a focus on utilizing data to develop marketing strategies was found to be effective, along with a collaborative culture. Institutions can apply learnings by implementing data sharing across campus, cultivating a collaborative culture, using data to develop specific target markets, creating a clear brand, and investing in digital marketing strategies such as website and social media. In conclusion, the results of the study describe how successful HEIs are attracting Gen Z students. The learnings can be implemented at other institutions to help them fulfill their purpose of educating and training students.

Keywords: marketing, higher education, Gen Z, digital marketing

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Approvals

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Date

Chris Huseman, Ph.D., Dissertation Chair

Date

Kendrick Brunson, D.B.A., Committee Member

Date

Edward M. Moore, Ph.D., Director of Doctoral Programs

Date

Dedication

To my children, Annelise and Jackson, may you understand the value of education, perseverance, and chasing after your dreams. I hope I have led by example.

To my parents, Michael and Betsy, who instilled the value of education in me at an early age, and who, through your own academic dreams, inspired me to pursue my own.

And to my husband, Chad, who comforted me in my moments of despair, felt the burden of my frustrations, pushed me to keep going, and celebrated every little victory with me. I could not have done this without you.

All praise and Glory to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.” Ephesians 3: 21-21

Acknowledgments

This research is the direct result of the efforts of countless individuals who have invested in me throughout this journey.

I would like to thank my chair, Dr. Chris Huseman, for your guidance, support, and encouragement along this journey. I would also like to thank Dr. Moore, Dr. Brunson, and the faculty at Liberty University for providing direction and guidance throughout this program. Thank you for giving of your time to help me succeed.

Thank you to my classmates, Elissa, Katie, and Tracy, who encouraged me every step of the way. You are my partners in crime, my sounding board, my encouragers. I would never have made it to the end without you. You have blessed me beyond measure.

To my friend, Dr. Michael Ritter, who ignited a fire in me to embark on this journey. You made me believe I could do this. Your encouragement, support, and friendship are invaluable to me. And hey – I beat you.

To Professor David Marold who helped me recognize my gift of writing. You probably did not realize at the time how much this would impact my life, but I do not think I would have had the courage to take on a dissertation without it. Thank you for believing in me.

To all of the participants who gave up their time – thank you. I know how busy you were trying to enroll students during COVID-19, yet you found value in participating in this study. That means everything to me.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The Fall 2018 Enrollment report by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2018) illustrates an 8-year decline in college and university enrollment in the United States which coincides with a generational shift in traditional undergraduate students from Millennials to Generation Z. Millennials sought universities with a strong reputation and high job placement rates as well as a new approach to education such as online programs (Munisamy et al., 2014). This required marketers to focus on brand reputation and collaborate with departments across campus to identify and promote alumni in successful careers. Now, just as higher education institutions (HEI's) have become comfortable with Millennials, Generation Z is moving in, and HEI's have not yet figured out how to adapt.

The continual decline in enrollment (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018) has intensified competition and the need for marketers to develop strategic ways to attract these new students (de Haan, 2015). Recent literature agrees that a shift in approach is needed (Loveland, 2014). Some institutions have successfully adjusted strategies to attract Generation Z students and increase enrollment while others have tried and failed. However, literature has not described how HEI's can successfully adapt marketing strategies to attract Generation Z students. Therefore, a qualitative multiple case study approach was conducted to uncover learnings from successful HEIs through interviews and document review.

There are three concepts that are foundational to this study. Marketing theory, generational theory, and the concept of higher education intersect to answer the research question of how successful higher education institutions have adapted marketing strategies to attract Gen Z students, and how they differ from strategies used to attract previous generations. This study addressed a gap in literature related to the specific business problem so that marketers at similar

institutions can better understand how to adapt their strategies to be more effective. Additionally, this study addressed the Biblical principles of stewardship, wisdom, and loving one another. Finally, this study informs marketers by exploring how knowledge of the target market can be transformed into actionable strategies to successfully meet organizational goals.

Background of the Problem

Higher education institutions in the United States are facing declining enrollment, resulting in lost revenue. The fall 2018 Enrollment report by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center illustrates an 8-year decline in college and university enrollment in the United States. This decline coincides with a generational shift in traditional undergraduate students from Millennials to Generation Z along with a reduced population of 18-year olds. Generational Theory suggests there may be differences in how each generation approaches the same issues based on their specific experiences (Van Rossem, 2019). Historically, this change can be seen when comparing how students in previous generations chose a college compared to students in the 1990s, the 2000s, and now the 2010s and 2020s. Just a few decades ago, college marketers focused on the functional aspects of higher education (Munisamy et al., 2014) with a traditional Four P's approach to marketing (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Degree programs, price, and physical location played a major role in student choice. In the 1990s, marketers began to embrace a relationship marketing model to attract students (Gyure & Arnold, 2001) with beautiful, printed materials that focused on the entire student experience. Millennials sought universities with a strong reputation and high job placement rates as well as a new approach to education such as online programs (Munisamy et al., 2014). This required marketers to focus on brand reputation, collaborate with departments across campus to identify and promote alumni in successful careers, and learn how to attract students to online programs. Now, just as HEI's have

become comfortable with Millennials, Generation Z is moving in, and HEI's have not yet figured out how to adapt, as evidenced by the increasing number of studies aimed at better understanding the characteristics and behaviors of this generation.

Early research shows this new generation is cost-conscious, desires to learn practical skills, are entrepreneurial, and have a more global perspective (Loveland, 2017). The decline in enrollment followed the economic downturn of 2008 in the United States, causing potential students to be wary of a high-cost investment like traditional higher education without guarantees of future employment. Additionally, Gen Z's global perspective combined with advancing technology that makes education more accessible creates additional competition from international and online schools.

The continual decline in enrollment (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018) along with a decline in population has intensified competition and the need for marketers to develop strategic ways to attract these new students (de Haan, 2015), especially as state funding has declined and schools have become more dependent on tuition dollars (Vander Schee, 2009; Williams, 2019). Some higher education institutions have merged in order to compete more effectively (Boiling et al., 2017), while others have developed online programs, lowered costs, or increased on-campus services to appeal to the new generation (Loveland, 2014). Despite these changes, enrollment is still declining.

Recent literature suggests that the traditional approach to attracting students via printed viewbooks and magazine ads have given way to new strategies that involve multiple departments within the institution (Vander Schee, 2009). The relatively new enrollment management team is a campus-wide effort that includes program development, financial aid, instructional technology, admissions, marketing, athletics, and the alumni office, who all participate in managing the

customer relationship and attracting students through activities such as student communication, promotional activities, making college affordable through financial aid, and offering attractive degree programs. The marketing department once operated independently but must now work with all of these departments to deliver a cohesive brand message that appeals to Generation Z students and incorporate their desire for a personalized approach while balancing their desire for privacy (Loveland, 2014).

This new world of higher education marketing is complicated. It is well documented that Generation Z is bringing new challenges to marketers (Zorn, 2017). Current literature clearly agrees that a shift in approach is needed (Loveland, 2014). However, literature is not yet able to describe how HEI's can successfully adapt marketing strategies to attract Generation Z students.

Problem Statement

The general business problem that is addressed is that marketers in U.S. higher education institutions do not fully understand how to attract Generation Z students, resulting in lost revenue and wasted resources spent on ineffective marketing strategies. As Millennials move out of college and Generation Z moves in, they bring with them a challenge in understanding how to attract this new group of students (Zorn, 2017). Successful marketing strategies result in financial profitability and improved customer engagement (de Haan, 2015; Morgan, 2012; Yohn, 2019). An 8-year national decline in higher education enrollment (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018) has intensified competition and the need for marketers to develop strategic ways to attract this new generation of students (de Haan, 2015). According to Generational Theory, what worked for previous generations will not necessarily apply to a new generation (Van Rossem, 2019). Therefore, marketers at colleges and universities must adapt their strategies to attract this new generation of students. The specific problem that is addressed

is the uncertainty of how to effectively adapt marketing strategies to attract Generation Z students to HEIs.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand how marketing strategies have been employed at successful HEIs to effectively attract Generation Z students. This study filled a gap in existing literature on how to attract this new generation to HEIs as well as inform institutions as they develop future marketing campaigns. The larger question of attracting Generation Z students to HEIs was explored through an in-depth study of how successful universities have adjusted their product, price, place, and promotion strategies to attract this new population.

For the purpose of this study, a successful HEI has had an increase in enrollment among the Generation Z population during a time when national enrollment has experienced an 8-year decline. The institution cases are able to attribute this success, in some part, to the marketing strategies employed, such as increase in potential student inquiry, increased number of campus visits, increased number of applications, brand reputation score, and increase in applicant quality.

Nature of the Study

The goal of this case study was to understand how to adapt marketing strategies to attract Generation Z students to higher education institutions. Because the research problem involves answering “how” questions, a qualitative study was proposed. Specifically, a qualitative case study was proposed to learn how successful institutions have adapted marketing strategies to attract Generation Z students.

Discussion of Method

The researcher sought to learn how to adapt marketing strategies to attract Generation Z students to HEIs. Pratt (2009) stated that qualitative studies are best for addressing “how” questions and for the analysis of processes. Additionally, qualitative studies are best for understanding and making sense of a phenomenon (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). Quantitative studies differ in that they are best for identifying relationships between variables, testing theories, and applying learnings to the larger population (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Quantitative studies isolate the context and conduct studies when the context is controlled. Qualitative studies, on the other hand, explore the context in order to search for learnings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, the context provided critical data to understand the changing conditions in which higher education institutions operate. The researcher began the study without any theories to test, minimal information about the research question, and sought to understand how to respond to the phenomenon of a changing generation. Therefore, a qualitative study was preferable to quantitative. A mixed methods study would also have been an appropriate approach in order to test learnings across a larger population (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, time constraints limited the researcher to focusing on the qualitative aspect without generalizing learnings. Therefore, a qualitative study was proposed to understand how higher education institutions effectively adapted marketing strategies in order to attract Generation Z students.

Discussion of Design

Yin (2014) stated that a case study is best for uncovering learnings from a real-world case when the context provides relevant data. For this study, the context in which the institutions operate, including the competitive landscape, market conditions, and organizational environment, was of critical importance in order to learn from institutions that have successfully

increased enrollment while others have seen declining enrollment. The focus was on the learnings from successful institutions, not on the lived experience of a group or an intention to develop a theory, which suggested that a case study would be the best approach. Case studies are already popular in business as a way to learn from the success and failures of others (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015), which lends further credibility to this research design.

The researcher conducted an intensive case study by identifying 5 cases to which she would have sufficient access. An intensive approach allows for a deeper analysis and understanding of the research problem through a small number of cases compared to an extensive case study which would search for common learnings from a larger number of cases, much like in a quantitative study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015). While these learnings may be more generalizable in developing theory, a deeper understanding through intensive study allows the researcher to focus on a few cases and identify learnings related to what makes these cases uniquely successful when others are not.

The researcher collected data through the use of interviews and document review as suggested by Yin (2014), to conduct an in-depth analysis of what marketing strategies the institutions are using to attract Generation Z students and how these strategies are different from previous generations. The phenomenon studied was the generational change in the student population and how higher education institutions have had to adapt their marketing strategies to attract Generation Z students. The cases were 5 universities that experienced growth among Generation Z during a time when national enrollment was down and could attribute this growth, in part, to marketing strategies.

Summary of the Nature of the Study

Based on Yin's (2014) teachings, a qualitative case study is the best approach for answering "how" questions, such as the identified research problem. This approach uncovered learnings from successful higher education institutions through interviews and document review. A small multiple case study was utilized to allow a deeper understanding of the uniqueness of the cases and how they have been successful in responding to the phenomenon being studied. These learnings effectively answered the question of how higher education institutions have successfully adapted marketing strategies to attract Generation Z students.

Research Questions

Two research questions were proposed to address the specific problem. The answers provided insight into what marketing strategies are effectively attracting Generation Z students and how these strategies are different from previous generations. Sub questions were proposed to understand why these strategies were chosen and why they were successful. The proposed research questions were:

RQ1: What marketing strategies are successful HEIs using to attract Generation Z students?

RQ1a: Why were these strategies chosen?

RQ1b: Why are these new strategies more successful?

RQ2: What are they doing differently to attract Gen Z compared to Gen X or Y?

Conceptual Framework

There are three concepts that were foundational to this study. The first was marketing theory, which suggests that in order to achieve its goals, a company must engage in activities "and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have

value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large” (American Marketing Association, 2013). The way a company does this is through what has been labeled the marketing mix or the Four P’s of marketing: product, price, place, and promotion (Anderson & Taylor, 1995). The second concept was generational theory, which suggests that a new generation will not have the same response to the same situation or concepts as previous generations (Van Rossem, 2019). This idea that generational cohorts share common values, wants and needs regarding their buying behavior and interaction with brands was a foundational element to this study. Third, the application of marketing in higher education was a relatively new concept, studied extensively in the 1990s and early 2000s (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). The interaction of marketing concepts with generational theory to attract students to colleges and universities was critical in understanding why and how marketing tactics must evolve to attract a new generation of students.

Marketing Theory

As Hunt (2018) stated in his review of marketing theory, a guiding definition or framework is missing from marketing theory. While marketing was taught in universities in the early 1900s, it was not until 1912 that the concept was discussed in academic literature and not until the 1950s that it was brought into prominence (Hunt, 2018). E. Jerome McCarthy’s development of the Four P’s of marketing in 1960 to conceptualize Borden’s marketing mix set the stage for significant growth in the discussion of marketing theory in modern literature (Anderson & Taylor, 1995). In his book, McCarthy stated,

A marketing strategy consists of two facets: (1) the definition of the target market – the selection of the market segment (the group of consumers) to whom the company wishes

to appeal. (2) The development of a ‘marketing mix’ – the choice of the tools which the company intends to combine in order to satisfy this target group. (McCarthy, 1960, p. 37)

As McCarthy stated, the establishment of a target market is central to marketing theory and is supported by marketing research to understand the needs of the consumer (Hunt, 2018). Marketing activities, specifically McCarthy’s concepts of product, price, place, and promotion, focus the organization on meeting the needs of the specified target market. Product encompasses the product itself, including its benefits and offerings that meet the needs of the customer. Price is the cost to acquire the product and may include non-financial costs such as opportunity or social costs. Place is the accessibility of the product and includes decisions such as whether to sell direct or through retailers. Promotion includes the sales function as well as advertising, public relations, digital and social media, and relationship management (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Moorman & Day, 2016; Yudelson, 1999). These Four P’s and their application to HEIs is discussed later in this section under Higher Education.

Originally developed to describe the variables that must be considered to sell a physical goods, marketing theory has evolved and is now applied to the service industry and the betterment of society. This has given rise to academic literature discussing marketing theory in new contexts such as social marketing and higher education (Kotler, 1979). Despite these changes, McCarthy’s Four P’s remain a cornerstone of modern marketing thought as a general approach to the big picture of marketing theory. Given the significance of the Four P’s in marketing theory, the activities of price, product, place, and promotion were the focus of the study to understand how a change in these variables led to increased enrollment.

Generational Theory

Generational theory suggests that birth-year cohorts share characteristics and values based on important events and the political and social climate in which they grew up (Cox et al., 2019). Mannheim (1952), the father of generation theory, stated that individuals in the same birth-year cohort held “a common location in the social and historical process, and thereby limit them to a specific range of potential experience, predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action” (p. 291). Other scholars expanded the theory to suggest that sharing common experiences such as media, pop culture, and parents shape collective memories and experiences which lead to shared values and attitudes (Van Rossem, 2019). Research indicates that while there is not an agreed upon classification scheme for grouping the birth-year cohorts, generational attributes are sufficient enough to be measured and can therefore be applied to predict outcomes (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Based on this theory, an individual who is 20 today is not necessarily similar to someone who was 20 three decades ago but would share similarities with others in the same birth-year cohort.

The generations of significance to this study include the Baby Boomers, born between 1944 and 1960; Generation X, born between 1961 and 1979; Generation Y or Millennials, born between 1980 and 1994; and Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2010 (Twenge & Donnelly, 2016). Cox et al. (2019) generally categorize Boomers as being loyal and hardworking, Gen X as valuing work-life balance and flexibility, and Millennials as being optimistic and desiring a sense of purpose. Seemiller and Grace (2016) described Generation Z as skeptical, entrepreneurial, and desiring social change. A key differentiator of interest within this study is that Gen Z came of age post-recession and are therefore skeptical of high-cost investments such as college. They

have also witnessed the generation before them struggle to find jobs post-graduation, which adds to their skepticism (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Higher Education

Higher education is a general term to describe post-secondary education and includes degree and non-degree granting institutions, public and private, for-profit and not-for-profit, 2-year and 4-year institutions. Higher education institutions have been in existence since the 1700s (Platt et al., 2017) with the general purpose of increasing knowledge within their students and preparing them for future careers. In order to sustain these institutions, revenue from multiple sources is required. Public institutions receive state funding, while private institutions rely on alumni donors. Most American institutions rely on tuition dollars as a significant source of income, thus emphasizing the need for effective marketing and recruitment of new students.

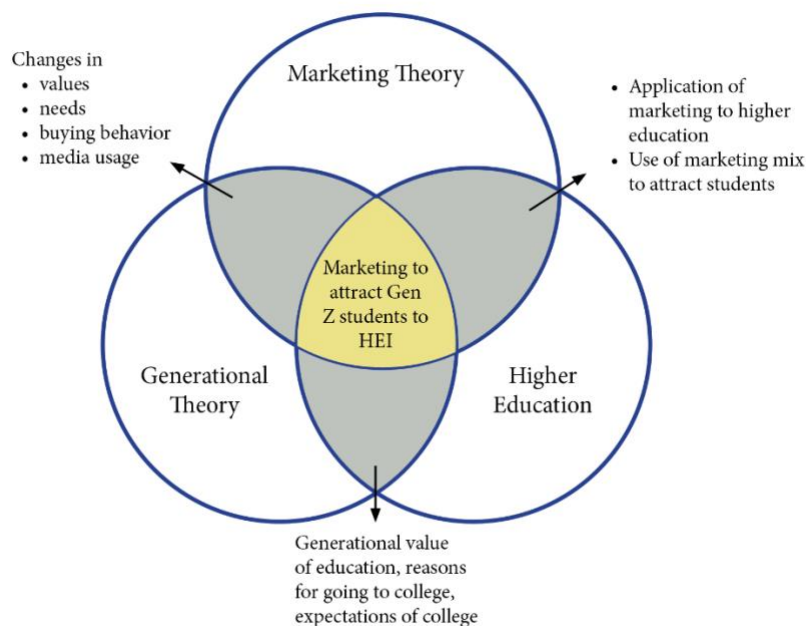
Higher education institutions have proven to be adaptable during times of change. For example, in times of economic depression, recession, or panic, higher education institutions adapted by merging with other institutions or by changing names, such as college to university, to appeal to a larger audience (Platt et al., 2017). Marketing departments at higher education institutions have also been known to adapt to changes in media consumption and brand engagement as they shifted from printed materials to digital and from transactional to relational (Gyure & Arnold, 2001).

Kotler (1979) acknowledged the use of McCarthy's Four P's of marketing in higher education when he noted that colleges "search for prospects (students), develop products (courses), price them (tuition and fees), distribute them (announce time and place) and promote them (college catalogues)" (p. 41). In recent years, HEI marketing has developed into a broader enrollment management team where each department plays a role in attracting new students

(Vander Schee, 2009). The theory of enrollment management states that any factor which influences a potential students' decision to attend or continue to attend an institution falls within strategic enrollment management (Vander Schee, 2009). In practice, the admissions team acts as the sales arm to actively recruit students and engage in relationship marketing, while administration develops programs and pricing, and the marketing department engages in promotional activities and brand management. Some institutions utilize athletic recruitment with separate marketing functions and/or alumni programs to encourage word of mouth marketing and attract children of alumni to the school. Combined, these marketing activities across campus are responsible for attracting new students.

Figure 1

Relationships Between Concepts



Interrelationship of Marketing, Generations, and Higher Education

Identifying a target market is critical to marketing theory (McCarthy, 1960), and marketing activities are determined based on that target market. Most colleges and universities

seek to recruit 18-year-old students as a major target market for their undergraduate programs (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Because generation theory suggests that modern 18-year-olds have different values and attitudes than the generations before, marketers in higher education must use marketing activities that appeal to the current generation of 18-year-olds.

Twenge and Donnelly (2016) found that the reasons for attending college has shifted in generations. Baby Boomers attended college for more intrinsic motives of valuing education whereas modern generations, beginning with Gen X, are more extrinsically motivated to attend college in order to earn more money. This change has led to a consumer mentality that allows potential students to select an institution that meets their specific needs.

Given the general decline in enrollment and shift in generational values and attitudes, HEI's and the marketers within them must adapt their strategies to align with the perceived needs of the target market in order to effectively recruit students. To address the research questions of what marketing strategies successful HEIs are using to attract Generation Z students and how they differ from previous generations, an understanding of how marketing intersects with generational theory and the current organizational, economic and market conditions in which higher education exists was required as illustrated in Figure 1. These concepts provided a foundation for the study to better understand the context and complexity of the study.

Summary

Marketing theory, generational theory and the concept of higher education intersect to answer the research question of how a successful higher education institution has adapted marketing strategies to attract Gen Z students, and how they differ from previous generations. Marketing theory states that marketing activities of product, price, place and promotion attract the target market, which for this study was the 18-year-old leaving high school. Changes in the

higher education landscape have led to an integration of product, price, place, and promotion within the larger enrollment management team. Generational theory suggests that this new cohort of students will have different values and attitudes than previous generations. The results of the study demonstrated that in order to be successful, marketing must play a larger role in working with the enrollment management team, with a consistent message that appeals to the target audience. The study also revealed a shift in the Four P's of marketing as the researched institutions evaluated and adapted its product, price, place and promotion activities.

Definition of Terms

Enrollment management. Enrollment management is a comprehensive, campus-wide marketing approach to student acquisition and retention beginning with the student's initial contact "through graduation or departure from the institution" (Vander Schee, 2009, p. 2). This includes "new student recruitment and financial aid, student support services, curriculum development, and other academic areas that affect enrollments, student persistence, and student outcomes from college" (Hossler & Bean, 1990, p. 5).

Four P's of marketing. McCarthy's Four P's of marketing refers to the marketing mix of product, price, place, and promotion, with the customer as the focal point of marketing decisions (Anderson & Taylor, 1995).

Generation X. Seemiller and Grace (2016) described Generation X as those born between 1965 and 1980.

Generation Y or Millennials. Seemiller and Grace (2016) described Generation Y as those born between 1980 and 1994.

Generation Z. Seemiller and Grace (2016) identified this generation as those who were born 1995 and later.

Higher education institutions (HEI). HEI stands for higher education institution and is used by those in the industry when referring to colleges and universities (Wazed & Ng, 2015).

Assumptions, Limitations, Delimitations

Assumptions

The assumptions of this study were that participants would be open and honest in their answers and forthcoming with related information. Participants found value in this qualitative case study research on understanding how to adapt marketing strategies to attract Generation Z students to higher education institutions. As such, they were forthcoming with access to marketing information. Additionally, it was assumed that participating institutions would have marketing knowledge to be able to discuss and document how marketing strategies have changed over time. Finally, it was assumed that participants would have a general understanding of marketing theory and sufficient skills to discuss marketing strategies and strategy development.

Limitations

The most significant limitation was that this is a qualitative case study and as such, learnings were dependent on the specific contexts of the cases. The context and behavior of the participating institutions may not be reflective of other institutions and thus cannot be generalized and applied to other institutions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While learnings may be helpful to similar institutions, additional studies would be required to generalize learnings. A second limitation was that participants had limited data and materials to support verbal discussion of historical strategies and decision making.

Delimitations

The case study was limited to five higher education institutions with a recent 7-year history of increasing undergraduate enrollment. HEI's with a shorter history were discarded

despite potential learnings. Departments involved in decision-making regarding the Four P's of marketing include academic affairs, admissions, marketing, financial aid, and student success. However, analysis and learnings was limited to the activities within the control of the marketing department.

Significance of the Study

Existing literature is scarce regarding how marketing teams can adapt their strategies to attract Generation Z. Existing literature explores attitudes and concepts and posits theories about future buying behavior for Gen Z (Ariker & Toksoy, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2016), but little research explores the success of marketing higher education to this cohort (Guilbault, 2016). This study added to existing literature and addressed a gap in literature related to the specific business problem so that marketers at similar institutions can better understand how to adapt their strategies to be more effective. Additionally, this study addressed the Biblical principles of stewardship, wisdom and knowledge, and loving one another. Finally, this study informs marketers by exploring how knowledge of the target market can be transformed into actionable strategies to successfully meet organizational goals.

Reduction of Gaps

Existing studies (Seemiller & Grace, 2016) of marketing to Generation Z have focused primarily on generational values and attitudes. These studies provide some insight into how Gen Z differs from previous generations but lack the application to real-world scenarios. Additional research (Ariker & Toksoy, 2017) has focused on marketing products to this generation. Of the studies focusing on Generation Z and higher education, focus has been primarily on learning styles in order to adapt teaching methods and modalities (Mohr & Mohr, 2017; Schlee et al., 2019; Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Zorn, 2017). Because this age group just recently moved onto

college campuses, no case studies currently exist examining this shift in marketing strategies to target this specific market. This leaves a gap in research regarding the adaptation of existing marketing strategies to attract Generation Z students to colleges and universities, specifically case studies focusing on institutions that have been successful during a time period when competitors have faced declining enrollment.

Given that this generation will be the primary target market for colleges and universities over the next ten years, research must be expanded in this area to better understand how marketers in HEI's can successfully attract these students. Existing research in the areas of marketing, Generation Z, and higher education may inform higher education marketers about theories about this generation. However, a case study provides specific learnings from institutions that have implemented strategies successfully. Academic research in this area also informs marketers who may otherwise rely on less rigorous data provided by vendors seeking to earn their business.

Implication for Biblical Integration

This study supports the Biblical principles of good stewardship, discussed in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30, English Standard Version) and when Peter states "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace" (1 Peter 4:10). Higher education institutions were designed to educate students and prepare them for future careers (Platt et al., 2017). While they must operate as a business in order to accomplish their purpose and grow as an institution to meet changing needs of students and society, they must also be good stewards of their resources and invest in marketing strategies that are likely to be effective. By better understanding what strategies are most effective for reaching this audience, the institution can allocate dollars to those strategies and not be wasteful. This frees up

resources to be invested in other strategic areas to better the institution as well as its students and staff.

Last, when the institution prospers, so do its workers and the community in which they live, which is pleasing to God. This idea of loving one another is discussed throughout the Bible, including, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4), “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God” (Hebrews 13:16), and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Galatians 5:14). Christians are called to carry on the work that the Lord began and invest in other people (Keller & Alsdorf, 2016). While HEIs are businesses, their purpose is first and foremost to educate and equip students for future careers (Platt et al., 2017). This study examines successful HEIs for the purpose of informing marketers in hopes it will help them succeed in attracting students to their higher education institution. When an institution is successful in meeting its enrollment goals, staff and faculty prosper by continuing to earn a paycheck which is reinvested in the community, supporting the local economy. Students prosper by gaining an education that will develop their skills and lead to employment so they can be contributing members of society.

Relationship to Field of Study

Business practitioners widely accept the concept of competitive advantage in operating a successful business. According to Porter (1996), competitive advantage is what makes a product or service better than its competitors and is dependent on what the customer values. A marketer’s job is to understand what the competitive advantage is and create strategies to communicate that advantage to the target market in order to generate sales (Srivastava et al., 2001).

In higher education, the competitive advantage could be price, reputation, quality of education, athletic performance, career outcomes, or any number of other things. Existing

literature shows the attitudes and values of Generation Z differ from previous generations in regard to finances, brand engagement, technology, media, and employment (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Therefore, higher education marketers must understand what the generation values and how the institution creates a competitive advantage for this new generation. This knowledge must then be used to create successful marketing strategies. This study explored how successful institutions applied their knowledge of Generation Z values, attitudes, and buying behavior to create marketing strategies that resulted in increased enrollment.

The application of marketing concepts to higher education institutions is a fairly new concept, studied extensively in the 1990s and early 2000s (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006), though further research as to its effectiveness is needed (Guilbault, 2016). The marketing of higher education to attract students involves all of the Four P's of marketing. Wasmer et al. (1997) described the product as the entire collegiate experience, encompassing the degree offered, faculty, facilities, support staff, and athletics, among others. Price is what the student pays to attend and includes financial aid opportunities. Place could be an on-campus or online degree or whether campus is located in a city or rural setting. It could also mean the physical appearance of the campus such as dorm rooms and classrooms where the degree is earned. Promotion, like in other industries, includes traditional advertising, social media and digital marketing, online presence, brand image, and external messaging. It is all of the activities that inform the target audience of the service being offered. The Four P's involve not just the marketing department, but also admissions, academic affairs, and financial aid (Gyure & Arnold, 2001). This study focused on the activities within the control of the marketing department, identifying how these activities have changed to attract the new population, while exploring how the activities of other departments aid or hinder marketing efforts.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

A review of academic and professional literature was conducted in order to fully understand the relationship between generational theory, marketing theory, and higher education, and identify themes that may be apparent in the proposed case study. This review is broken into three sections which align with the concepts identified in the conceptual framework. The researcher reviewed existing literature with an emphasis on specific relevance to the study, peer-reviewed, and literature published within the past five years. Literature related to Gen X and Gen Y outside of the five years were accepted due to relevance. This process helped ensure this study was not duplicative of existing work and that recent literature was thoroughly reviewed in order to adequately inform the study. The first section explores the background of generational theory, how it is used in marketing, and identifies the values and attitudes of Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z, especially as it pertains to higher education and marketing. The second section reviews marketing theory and its application in higher education. The third section explores higher education, specifically its current challenges, how institutions are attempting to overcome these challenges, and the role of marketing within enrollment management and the institution as a whole. The final section discusses the potential and discovered themes and perceptions for the case study. By understanding each of these concepts and their relationship to each other, higher education marketing academics and practitioners will have a better understanding of the problem that the research has proposed to study.

Generational Theory

Generational theory suggests that birth-year cohorts share characteristics and values based on important events and the political and social climate in which they grew up (Cox et al., 2019). Other scholars expanded the theory to suggest that sharing common experiences such as

media, pop culture, and parents shape collective memories and experiences which lead to shared values and attitudes (Van Rossem, 2019). Social scientists generally agree that birth-year cohorts are formed due to shared experiences such as world events, culture, and technology. These groups become known as generations and result in predictable attitudes and behaviors. The generations most relevant to this study are Gen X, born between 1965 and 1980 (Seemiller & Grace, 2016), Gen Y, also known as Millennials, born 1980 – 1994 (Seemiller & Grace, 2016), and Gen Z, born in 1995 and later (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). There is currently no identified generation beyond Gen Z because the potential cohort is too young to be impacted by shared experiences. However, some suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic will be the generation-defining event that separates Gen Z from a new generational cohort that some are naming Gen C (Hoffower, 2020).

Research regarding the differences in generations grew significantly during the Millennial's coming of age and cover topics like buying behavior, relationship with technology, attitude toward social issues, and attitudes toward other generations. While most researchers acknowledge differences in values, actions and worldview based on birth-year cohorts, others argue that differences are actually very small (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010). A review of the literature identified the values and attitudes of each of these generations, their views toward higher education, and trends regarding marketing tactics and media usage.

Overview of Generational Theory. Generational theory suggests that birth-year cohorts can be grouped based on shared experiences that result in shared meaning and predictable behaviors and attitudes (Cox et al., 2019). In Karl Mannheim's seminal work, *The Problem of Generations* (1952), he identified two critical criteria for generation cohort identification. The first is that the cohort must share a location in time. The second is they must create shared

meaning of events and experiences. This leads to a cultural identity based on birth-year cohorts that share values, attitudes and have predictable behaviors. This identity is shared by individuals within the cohort regardless of race, gender, or class, and continues through the generation's lifetime (Cox et al., 2019). However, not all individuals within the cohort share the same experience, which can lead to regional and cultural differences, as well as difference at the individual level (Lyons & Kuron, 2014).

While most researchers acknowledge differences in values, actions and worldview based on birth-year cohorts, some argue that differences are actually very small and may not be as significant as originally thought. Research by Trzesniewski and Donnellan (2010) found statistically insignificant changes in egotism, trust, cynicism, or feelings of self-worth between generations ranging from the 1970s to the 2000s. This was in contradiction to Twenge's (2006) research that posited that Millennials were drastically different from previous generations.

Generational theory is used in marketing practice to identify and understand the target market and develop product, pricing and promotion that appeal to the target market. Strutton et al. (2011) discovered that Gen X and Gen Y engage in electronic word of mouth advertising differently based on generational differences in use of technology. Similarly, McAlexander et al. (2016) found that applying marketing principles in segmenting alumni by generational cohort was effective in soliciting philanthropic funds. Fernández-Durán (2016) suggested the use generational cohorts in developing advertising that emphasize the specific values of the cohort, such as the use of nostalgia for an older generation or focusing on the need for independence for a younger cohort.

Generation X. In addition to being dubbed the latchkey generation, Generation X is described as the “sandwich generation” (Urlick, 2017, p. 73) as they are smaller than both

Boomers and Millennials, bookended by each on the timeline, and often exhibit characteristics of both generations. Gen Xers remember a time before prevalent technology, a time after, and find value in both. This sandwich effect is evidenced in the overall values of Generation X, their views of higher education, and the marketing strategies most effective for reaching this generation. Compared to Boomers and Millennials, this generation has been relatively ignored in research. However, existing literature agrees on many of the characteristics that define this generation.

Values and Attitudes. Gen X experienced high divorce rates among their parents, recessions in the 1980s and 1990s, the September 11th attacks, and the Enron scandal (Lissitsa & Kol, 2016; Stich, 2017). These events led to the predominant values of individualism and self-reliance, prioritization of family, and a general distrust of organizations and businesses. The next few paragraphs further explore these values and their impact on this generation's worldview.

Individualism and self-reliance is a key trait. Generation X grew up without a lot of parental supervision due to high divorce rates and an influx of women in the workforce, hence the term "latchkey generation." This led to independence and innovation as kids were left to care for themselves and handle whatever challenges arose (Lissitsa & Kol, 2016). The sense of individualism and self-reliance they developed as adolescents resulted in adults who preferred to do things on their own and take control of their own future (Stich, 2017). Unlike the succeeding generation, Gen X is neither collaborative nor team-oriented (Williams et al., 2010). While they look for peer acceptance, they seek it from their friends and family only and not necessarily their larger social sphere.

Family is important. Growing up in an era with high divorce rates, Gen Xers dated cautiously and began delaying marriage and family (Tamborini & Iams, 2010). Despite delaying

marriage and parenthood, this generation valued family first, with family including not just spouse and children, but also parents, siblings, stepparents, close friends, and partners. This generation remembered growing up without parental supervision due to career-driven parents. As adults, they were unwilling to give up family and personal time for the sake of their careers, which made Gen X the first generation to place a high value on work-life balance (Williams et al., 2010).

Distrust is a defining characteristic. Research (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010) indicates a decline in trust among generations as early as the 1940s, so distrust was not unique to Gen X. It was, however, a defining theme. This generation witnessed their career-driven parents lose jobs during economic downturns which led to a general distrust of organizations and more frequent job changes than their parents. Research by Ismail (2016) revealed that a sense of security had a strong influence on the career goals of Gen X. This generation's distrust along with their self-reliance made Gen X entrepreneurial, accounting for 70% of new businesses in the U.S. (Williams et al., 2010).

Views Toward Higher Education. Research by Johnson et al. (2016) revealed that Gen X students viewed college as a way to have a happy and successful life. College was a way to get a well-paying job that would provide financial security. Due to this more transactional approach to higher education, college selection was based primarily on availability of majors that would lead to successful careers (Johnson et al., 2016). College enrollment increased during the 1980s and 1990s while Generation X was in attendance, along with tuition and student loan debt. Despite the financial costs of a college education, the majority of Gen X students felt that a college education was worth the investment (Johnson et al., 2016).

Marketing and Media. Gen X's location between Boomers and Millennials, analog and technology, makes marketing to them challenging (Slootweg & Rowson, 2018). Additionally, Gen X's skepticism make them wary of advertising and aware when they are being sold to. Gen X utilizes their self-reliance to engage in product research before purchasing to bypass marketing messages and ensure they find the best product for the best price (Slootweg & Rowson, 2018). Social media and mobile phones were not mainstream until this generation were adults, but they did have access to personal computers and the internet during their adolescence which they used for socialization, entertainment, and productivity. Marketing to this generation as young adults typically consisted of what is now known as traditional media – print advertisements, television and radio commercials, billboards, and direct mail (Strutton et al., 2011). Gen X continues to respond to this type of advertising, especially when utilizing humor or personalization. They also respond well to email marketing and word of mouth marketing, especially from people they trust (Strutton et al., 2011).

Generation Y. Generation Y is the most studied generational cohort due to the dramatic difference in characteristics compared to previous generations (Phillips & Trainor, 2014). Gen Y or Millennials grew up with technology, lived through 9/11 and the Columbine shootings, were best friends with their parents, and read Harry Potter books (Struckell, 2019). Early studies described this cohort with negative attributes such as self-centered, egotistical, un-trusting, fragile, and lazy (Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010). By contrast, Howe and Strauss (2007) identified seven traits of Millennials, including, “special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, conventional, pressured, and achieving” (p. 59).

Extensive research of Generation Y as they entered college provided insight into their expectations of higher education and led to significant changes in the higher education industry.

Additionally, marketing research informed marketers how to connect product and services with the generation's values and led to a rise in social marketing and changes in how brands connected with their audience.

Values and Attitudes. Some of the key traits that describe Millennials are “technologically advanced, achievement oriented, politically/socially conscious, diverse” (Nelson et al., 2017, p. 387) and team-oriented (DeVaney, 2015). These attributes differentiate Gen Y from previous generations and is part of what has made this generation so popular among researchers.

Technology is a key differentiator. Generation Y are often referred to as digital natives due to fact they were born into a technologically rich world. Their early interactions with technology set them apart from previous generations that had to learn to adapt to new tech. Instead, Gen Y are early adopters of new technology and dependent on tech in almost every aspect of their lives (Calvo-Porrall et al., 2019). This has led to some concern around mobile addiction and negative consequences such as an increase in anxiety and decrease in social interaction (Ahn & Jung, 2016). However, Gen Y's dependence on technology has led to innovations in communication, finances, and education, as businesses have had to adapt to attract and engage this generation (The digital native, 2017). But not all cohort members engage with technology the same way. Research by Calco-Porrall et al. (2019) uncovered five segments among the Gen Y cohort that better describe their technology behavior, “technology devotees, technology spectators, circumspects, technology adverse users, and productivity enhancers” (p. 231). These sub-groups range from the devotees, who represent almost a quarter of the participants and indicate high-level use of technology for social interaction and information seeking, to adverse users, who account for 19% and generally see technology negatively. These

five sub-groups within Gen Y demonstrate non-homogenous technology behaviors and attitudes among the digital natives.

Gen Y is achievement oriented. Growing up with a lot of parental oversight, Gen Ys were pressured to succeed and take advantage of any opportunities that were offered (Howe & Strauss, 2007; Romsa et al., 2017). In the academic arena, Gen Y require both structure and flexibility (Maxey, 2017), use technology differently (Rickles, 2009), and value continual feedback and mentorship (Phillips & Trainor, 2014). Additionally, Gen Y was involved in a lot of organized activities in their youth which led them to trust and depend on authority and structure, which is vastly different from Gen X. A lack of structure can then lead Gen Y individuals to feel lost (Romsa et al., 2017), so Gen Y are excellent rule-followers (Howe & Strauss, 2007). To achieve their tasks, Gen Y are exceptional multitaskers, juggling academic, professional, and personal activities. They also are open about seeking assistance when needed (Rickles, 2009).

Gen Y is socially conscious. A strong value attributed to Generation Y is their concern for social justice. Shadpour (2018) found that 71% of surveyed Gen Y individuals said they prefer to do business with brands that “drive social and environmental change” (para. 2). Retailers, restaurants and companies seeking to win Generation Y as a loyal customer began adding social justice issues to their brand identity and were rewarded for it. Some examples of this include Chipotle, which serves responsibly sourced products, Toms Shoes, which donates a pair of shoes to needy children for every pair purchased, and Dove, which created powerful marketing pieces promoting female empowerment and authentic imagery (Fleck, 2018). Not only does Gen Y desire to do business with brands that have a higher purpose, but they also desire a sense of purpose for themselves, often seeking meaning in their work. This sense of purpose is stronger than this generation’s desire for financial gains (Cox et al., 2019).

Diversity is a key trait. American Generation Y has a global perspective, perhaps due to Gen Y being more racially diverse than previous generations (Johnson et al., 2016). In embracing diversity, Gen Y sees the specialness of people groups, which may partially explain their desire for social justice and their passion for seeking rights for traditionally marginalized people groups. Unlike their grandparents and parents who fought racial wars, Gen Y sees all people as having equal value regardless of cultural, economic, or geographic backgrounds (Black, 2010).

Gen Y is team oriented. Growing up in organized team sports and other activities, Gen Y is team-oriented and highly motivated to work together to achieve success, whether it be academic or social (Romsa et al., 2017). Research has shown a decrease in self-reliance and an increase in collaboration among Gen Y (Howe & Strauss, 2007). Gen Y also seeks belonging and is socially oriented, often seeking peer approval (Cox et al., 2019). This peer approval seeking behavior has led Gen Y to make decisions that will lead to peer acceptance or be better for the group as opposed to making decisions that make the individual happy (Howe & Strauss, 2007).

Views Toward Higher Education. Generation Y has been studied extensively by researchers and practitioners in higher education and marketing. Howe and Strauss' (2007) seminal book about how colleges must adapt to Millennials in terms of recruiting, admissions, campus life, and teaching style influenced additional research on the topic. Trzesniewski and Donnellan (2010) suggested that Generation Y as seniors in high school did not differ dramatically from previous generations in terms of thoughts, feelings, or behavior, but did find this generation had high expectation of higher education. The authors suggested this was due to an expectation that a college degree was necessary to secure employment. This idea is supported

by Twenge and Donnelly (2016) whose research suggests a shift to extrinsic motivations for attending college, most notably to get a higher-paying job. In the same study, Twenge and Donnelly suggests this focus on outcomes has led to a devaluing of education for the sake of learning.

Contrary to Trzesniewski and Donnellan (2010) and Twenge and Donnelly (2016), Johnson et al. (2016) found that Generation Y attended college for social capital-related reasons, such as influence and networking. Studies show that this applies to employment as well, with Generation Y preferring jobs with personal satisfaction rather than a higher salary (Johnson et al., 2016). This is likely related to this cohort's value of social justice and desire for peer acceptance. This may explain the shift from transactional relationships to personal relationship with brands and HEI's. During Generation Y's enrollment in college, brand reputation began to play a larger role in college selection (Hoover, 2014).

A positive enrollment trend that began with Gen X continued with Gen Y, with many institutions experiencing record enrollments leading up to 2007 (National Student Clearing, 2018). This can be attributed to a larger available population of college-aged students as well as the belief that a college education would lead to a well-paying job (Johnson et al., 2016). When the Great Recession hit in 2008, these students began to doubt whether that was true, and enrollment began to decline.

Marketing Methods and Media. Gen Y's dependence on technology, passion for social consciousness, and desire for peer acceptance has changed the way marketers connect with this audience, including the technology used. Social media has played a key role in reaching and attracting this generation (How to reach, 2018). Other technology like blogs, user-generated content, and delayed viewing has changed how Millennials interact with brands (Ana & Istudor,

2019; How to reach, 2018; Serazio, 2015). Finally, Gen Y's demand for authenticity has forced brands to change their messages and strategies to engage customers and create brand loyalty (Williams et al., 2010).

Social media usage is significant. Peer-acceptance is a key value for Gen Y, which is why as consumers, they often care more about what their friends think than their own opinions (Slootweg & Rowson, 2018). While word of mouth marketing has always been an effective form of advertising, social media has created an opportunity for customers to share their opinion, good or bad, about a product, service, or brand easily and share it with hundreds or, in some cases, thousands of people with the click of a button. While Gen X tends to value the opinions of people they know, Gen Y values opinions of anyone they view as a peer, regardless of whether they are personally known to them (Williams et al., 2010). For marketing, this created opportunities to utilize social media influencers to attract Gen Y as consumers, but it also had the potential to backfire in the case of negative opinions, or if the customer believes their peers would not approve of the product or brand being endorsed.

Technology usage is a key differentiator. In addition to social media, Gen Y utilized other technology for socialization and information gathering. This generation enjoys creating their own content (Zhang et al., 2017). The prevalence of blogs has increased dramatically among Generation Y. Blogs provide an opportunity for individuals to share their thoughts and opinions online via text, or via video, known as vlogs. Bloggers or vloggers develop a relationship with their followers and sometimes use that opportunity to promote products, services, movies, political candidates, etc. Some brands have capitalized on this phenomenon and encouraged users to create content to be used in marketing campaigns (Ana & Istudor, 2019), or partnered with influencers to promote their products (How to reach, 2018).

The popularity of delayed viewing has changed the way advertisers connect with Gen Y as well as Gen X. As more and more users have abandoned traditional television viewing and switched to mobile networks like Netflix and Hulu, advertisers have had a more difficult time reaching their audience (Serazio, 2015). Some platforms embed commercials as a way to generate profit while offering the platform free to subscribers. Others charge a fee and remove commercials altogether. This has created a challenge for marketers who have to find new ways of reaching the audience.

Authenticity is important. Much like Gen X, Gen Y is skeptical of advertising and instead seeks an authentic message from brands that incorporates social consciousness (Williams et al., 2010). If a brand is found to be dishonest, they will have lost their customer. On the other hand, Gen Y are curators of their own brand, and at times stretch the truth or photo shop images to present an image of themselves they believe will be better accepted by their peers. This duality is an accepted part of their search for identity.

Generation Z. Born in 1995 through approximately 2010, Gen Z was born into a world of technology. Information, entertainment and digital connectedness has always been available to them. They were too young to remember much of 9/11 or have it affect their worldview, but this generation has grown up in a country that has always been at war. They experienced the impact of the Great Recession of 2008 and have had active shooter drills in their schools (Turner, 2015). They are the most racially diverse generation to date with non-Hispanic Caucasians now in the minority (Fry & Parker, 2019; Shatto & Erwin, 2016). These experiences have shaped their lives and worldview. Gen Z is still relatively young with the oldest just turning 26 in 2021 and the youngest still a pre-teen. This young age means that researchers are just starting to learn what makes this generation different from their predecessors. The values identified will likely evolve

as this generation ages into full adulthood (Dimock, 2019), yet what is known now still provides insight into how marketers can best reach this cohort. Additionally, since the first wave of Gen Z has already matriculated, their views of higher education are already becoming apparent.

Values and Attitudes. Research thus far has already identified some common values among this cohort (Seemiller & Grace, 2016; Williams, 2015). As children of primarily Gen X parents, Gen Z seems to share commonalities with its parents. Primarily, Gen Z is thought to have returned to traditional values. Additionally, they are self-reliant, financially conservative, and pragmatic (Lanier, 2017). Like Millennials, they want to make an impact on the world (Loveland, 2017), but tend to take a more hands-on approach.

Gen Z has returned to traditional values. Research thus far finds Gen Z to hold more traditional values than Gen Y. They strongly value family, whether biological or social, much like their Gen X parents, are financially conservative like the Boomers, and are generally more responsible than Gen Y (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). This generation has also returned to religion, with almost half participating in organized religion. That is more than double Millennials and Gen Z at the same age (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). Some researchers (Williams, 2015) liken Gen Z to the Greatest Generation or the Silent Generation. The Greatest Generation grew up during the Depression while the Silent Generation grew up during World War Two, when family and financial security were priorities. Like them, Gen Z values personal responsibility, strong work ethic, and self-sufficiency.

Gen Z is highly entrepreneurial. Unlike Gen Y, this generation does not necessarily want structure or rules; they want to do things their own way. They are self-reliant like their Gen X parents. When they see a problem, they seek to fix it. If they see an opportunity to do something better, they take it. Therefore, they do not seek traditional jobs. Instead, they are looking for

opportunities to use their individual talents and skills to work for themselves. As teens, this group generated income through self-employment such as selling hand-made goods and providing services, rather than the traditional jobs that previous generations worked (The Center for Generational Kinetics, 2018).

Gen Z are advocates. This cohort is motivated to help and please others; they want to work on something they believe in (Loveland, 2017). Gen Z are advocates for those who are not treated fairly. While Gen Y was socially conscious, Gen Z is more focused on equality rather than the broader approach of the previous generation (Schroth, 2019), with a focus on gender, economic, and racial issues. Compared to Gen Y, this generation is more action-oriented in their advocacy. While Gen Y supported businesses engaged in social issues such as fair trade products, supporting humanitarian efforts, or fair labor practices, Gen Z is leading marches, changing policies, and finding tangible solutions.

Gen Z is notably pragmatic (Lanier, 2017). Of the four most recent generations, they are the least likely to believe in the American dream, with the second least likely being their Gen X parents. They believe that jobs are not guaranteed, and that it takes more than hard work to be successful, but they are willing to do what it takes. Unlike Millennials who had a sense of altruism when it came to social good, Gen Z views corporate social responsibility activities as a win-win, understanding that it benefits the company as well as society. They are less likely to pay more for a brand that promotes social good, unless the brand is also of high quality and warrants a higher price tag (Gutfreund, 2016).

Views of Higher Education. While Gen Z is still relatively young, they are currently enrolling in higher education at a higher rate than Millennials at the same age and are on track to be the most educated generation (Fry & Parker, 2019). However, they are concerned about the

rising costs of college (Hope, 2016). They witnessed the Millennials struggle with student debt while underemployed after the 2008 recession. This combined with their financial conservatism and pragmatism makes Gen Z wary of taking on significant debt with no guarantee of a job. Therefore, when selecting an institution, they ask questions about starting salaries, average student loan debt, and loan default rates (Loveland, 2017).

In terms of selecting an HEI, Stephenson et al. (2016) found that individuals narrowed down their selection based on size, type (public vs. private vs. religious), and whether friends or family attended, with the latter being a significant decision mediator (Loveland, 2017). Once narrowed down, the ultimate decision on where to attend was dependent on a combination of the availability of major of study, affordability, whether they had visited, perceptions of others, size and location, campus aesthetics, and friendliness of campus (Stephenson et al., 2016). From a marketing perspective, it is important to note these determining factors so that resources can be appropriately allocated. For example, focusing on engaging students in campus visits and marketing the entire college experience, not just a major.

Gen Z also has different preferences for learning. While Gen Y preferred group projects, Gen Z prefers to work at their own pace in regard to learning and information gathering and collaborate with peers and their professor later (Schlee et al., 2019). They are also seeking a practical education that will help them solve real problems (Loveland, 2017). While it is still too early to know how this might impact higher education, this practical approach may create a need for changes in degree offerings, learning opportunities and internships, and modalities.

Marketing Methods and Media. Research on Gen Z buying behaviors is still being conducted as this cohort becomes young adults. One study by Ariker and Toksoy (2017) suggests that the dominant factor in purchase decisions for Gen Z is affordable price. It has also

been suggested that Gen Z will be brand switchers, especially if the brand does not deliver quality and speed at a great price (Swati, 2019). Following the trend of previous generations, Gen Z is distrustful of marketers in general, but is most likely to trust ads on YouTube than any other form of advertising (The Center for Generational Kinetics, 2018). A review of technology and social media usage makes the marketing challenge more clear.

Technology is critically important. While Millennials are typically thought of as digital natives, Gen Z was the first generation born into a world when the internet, Wi-Fi, and mobile technology was already mainstream (Lanier, 2017). This generation consumes information faster than any other generation and has an eight second attention span, down from 12 seconds among Gen Y (Shatto & Erwin, 2016). Like Millennials, Gen Z consumes entertainment when it is convenient to them from a mobile device – they are not limited by time or location like their parents were (Shatto & Erwin, 2016; Turner, 2015). Current research shows that this generation is not only dependent on technology, but they might also be addicted (Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015). For marketers, this means technology-related avenues may be the best way to reach Gen Z, but not in a traditional format. It is also important to note that some research suggests that this generation also value face-to-face interactions (Loveland, 2017). While technology is clearly an important part of communicating with Gen Z, the more traditional approach of building face-to-face relationships should not be overlooked.

Social media is important. The top social sites for Gen Z include YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok, but they are pragmatic in their use and use social media apps for different reasons (The Center for Generational Kinetics, 2018). Gen Z follows brands on Instagram, curates their own brand on Instagram and Snapchat, follow influencers on YouTube, and create or check-in to events on Facebook. Marketers seeking to influence this generation will need to

invest in multiple social channels for different purposes in order to most effectively reach this generation (The Center for Generational Kinetics, 2018). It is important to note that Gen Z values privacy on social media, despite their desire to be influencers. Platforms like Snapchat in which content disappears quickly, are popular among this cohort (Vitelar, 2019). Brands seeking to engage Gen Z via social media must be careful in how they use data as to not create distrust among Gen Z consumers.

Summary. Generation Z shares values and attitudes with their Gen X parents as well as the Millennials before them. A trend of increased educational attainment and technology usage can be seen, as well as a distrust of traditional marketing. Social justice issues remain important to Gen Z but are less influential in their purchasing decisions compared to Millennials. Gen Z is more practical in their approach to life, so higher education marketers may need to shift gears from a relational approach with Millennials to strategies that focus on the more practical side of education and how it will help Gen Z accomplish their goals, especially in the areas of entrepreneurship and tangibly solving social problems like inequalities.

Marketing Theory

As Hunt (2018) stated in his review of marketing theory, a guiding definition or framework is missing from marketing theory. E. Jerome McCarthy's development of the Four P's of marketing in 1960 to conceptualize Borden's marketing mix set the stage for significant growth in the discussion of marketing theory in modern literature (Anderson & Taylor, 1995). In his book, McCarthy stated,

A marketing strategy consists of two facets: (1) the definition of the target market – the selection of the market segment (the group of consumers) to whom the company wishes

to appeal. (2) The development of a “marketing mix” – the choice of the tools which the company intends to combine in order to satisfy this target group. (McCarthy, 1960, p. 37)

As McCarthy stated, the establishment of a target market is central to marketing theory and is supported by marketing research to understand the needs of the consumer (Hunt, 2018). Marketing activities, specifically McCarthy’s concepts of product, price, place, and promotion, focus the organization on meeting the needs of the specified target market. Product encompasses the product itself, including its benefits and offerings that meet the needs of the customer. Price is the cost to acquire the product and may include non-financial costs such as opportunity or social costs. Place is the accessibility of the product and includes decisions such as whether to sell direct or through retailers. Promotion includes the sales function as well as advertising, public relations, digital and social media, and relationship management (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Moorman & Day, 2016; Yudelsohn, 1999).

Originally developed to describe the variables that must be considered to sell a physical goods, marketing theory has evolved and is now applied to higher education. The next sections will discuss how marketing theory is applied to higher education, including how the Four P’s of marketing are adjusted to account for the service aspect of higher education. Finally, literature is reviewed and discussed to learn the current marketing challenges in higher education.

Application of Marketing Theory to Higher Education. The application of marketing theory to HEIs is a relatively new phenomenon and came about as increased competition both in the U.S. and internationally challenged institutions to differentiate themselves in order to attract and retain students (Ramachandran, 2010). Given the significance of a target market (McCarthy, 1960), it is important to note there has been some debate regarding defining the customer. Some take the stance of the student as the customer, as the institution provides a service to the student

by providing education in exchange for money. On the other hand, others take the approach of student as the product, with business and organizations as the customer because the HEI prepares students for future careers through relevant programming. The generally accepted approach is the former, with the student as customer (Ramachandran, 2010). However, unlike in traditional business, a student as the customer is not guaranteed an education based on their ability to pay. There is additional criteria the student must meet in order to become a customer of a particular institution, such as grade point average, volunteerism, and test scores, among others.

Four P's of Marketing in Higher Education. The Four P's of marketing: product, place, promotion, and price, also known as the marketing mix, can be applied to higher education with minor adjustments. Some literature has suggested alternative or additional words to describe the same concepts. However, none have strong support (Anderson & Taylor, 1995), and therefore, McCarthy's marketing mix remain an appropriate approach to applying marketing theory in higher education. This discussion assumes the student as customer, as discussed in the previous section.

Product. McCarthy (1960) described product as the physical product with its functional and aesthetic attributes, plus all of the accessories, packaging, and services that leads to the customer's needs being satisfied. In higher education, there is not a tangible product or a specific service, it is more of an intangible product (Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). The application of product to HEI is an all-encompassing experience that includes the degree earned, faculty quality and interactions, student support services, athletics, and the entire student experience (Wasmer et al., 1997). Many HEI's offer products beyond the traditional undergraduate degree, such as continuing education and professional development programs that may not include a degree or

certificate (Ramachandran, 2010). Therefore, higher education product is not just degree offered, but is the entire experience.

Place. Place has traditionally referred to the availability of the product or service when and where the customer needs it (McCarthy, 1960). This includes decisions related to manufacturing, distribution, and retailers. Place can be applied to Higher Education in a couple of ways. First is the modality of the college education. Whether the program is offered on a physical campus or online can be considered place because that it how the student would access the service (Mahajan & Golahit, 2019; Wasmer et al., 1997). The decision to offer programs online or face-to-face is important depending on the target customer. A working adult, for example, may require education be available online in order to fit in into a busy schedule, whereas an 18-year-old may want a traditional on-campus experience. Place could also refer to the campus setting – whether rural, suburban or urban, and geographical location (Anderson & Taylor, 1995; Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). For students who are more cost-conscious, the geographic location can be a determining factor (Loveland, 2017) as they consider total cost of attendance.

Promotion. McCarthy (1960) described promotion as a combination of personal selling, or direct sales, and mass selling, or advertising. Promotion in higher education uses a more modern integrated marketing communications approach and refers to the marketing communication activities that generate interest and enrollment in the institution (Mahajan & Golahit, 2019), but includes personal and mass selling. Promotion is not limited to the activities that come out of the marketing department. Similar to traditional business where interactions with sales personnel, customer service, and marketing messages all contribute to the perception and eventual sale of the product, students interact with HEIs through marketing messages, other

students, staff, athletes, and faculty (Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). Therefore, promotion could be considered to include all of the information that is shared between the institution, the student, and their parents (Yudelso, 1999), to include marketing, admissions, financial aid, housing, academic departments, and athletics.

Higher education promotions is complex and often includes highlighting features of the institution, quality of programming, and success of its graduates (Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). The admissions team often uses personal selling when hosting campus visits and giving campus tours. The marketing team often focuses on mass selling, utilizing advertisements, public relations, event promotion, digital marketing and social media to promote the institution. These promotional tools can all be utilized as a blended approach to market the institution to potential students and lead to enrollment (Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). It is also important to note that promotion is not limited to sales activities but can include broader goals of brand image and reputation, which supports sales efforts and other aspects of the business.

Price. Pricing strategies can be complicated and is used in marketing to generate the most potential revenue. McCarthy (1960) described pricing strategies such as list price, sale price, discounts, and describes price as a qualifying factor for sales. That is, price may not be the determining factor, but if the product is priced higher than what is considered reasonable, the customer will not buy it. In higher education, price is viewed more as affordability and value, and includes total cost of attendance such as tuition, fees, room and board, and day-to-day expenses (Mahajan & Golahit, 2019). A potential student might expect to pay more for a prestigious school like Harvard compared to state school and may feel there is value in attending Harvard. However, if she is unable to afford to attend, then she will not enroll.

Higher education utilizes some of the same pricing strategies described by McCarthy (1960). Cost of higher education also includes discounts such as financial aid. Financial aid programs can be a critical marketing tool to incentivize students who may not otherwise be able to afford to attend (Wasmer et al., 1997). It has been common practice in recent years for the stated price to be significantly more than the average discounted rate, creating confusion for students and their parents, and potentially resulting in the exclusion of potential customers (Seltzer, 2019). This will be discussed in more detail in the section on current challenges in higher education.

Marketing Challenges in Higher Education. Marketers in higher education face a variety of challenges. First, the change in generational values has challenged marketers to re-evaluate messaging and marketing strategies as discussed in the section on Gen Z. Second, globalization has increased competition and challenges marketers to differentiate the institutional brand in order to stand out (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). Third, a reduction in resources has required marketers to do more with less (Delcours & Carmona, 2019; Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016; Seltzer, 2017). These challenges are further explored in the next few paragraphs.

Marketing Messages and Strategies. As already discussed, Gen Z has different values than Millennials, with an emphasis on what is practical. HEI marketers are challenged to develop new messaging that will resonate with this new generation. This generation is looking for an education that will help them achieve their goals without financially risking their future. This has led to a change in the way tuition and costs are presented in marketing materials (Davis et al., 2019). Additionally, marketers have begun to collect data related to average student loan debt, average starting salary of graduates, and average loan default rates as students ask savvier questions than previous generations (Loveland, 2017). The marketing channels previously

utilized have also begun to shift as marketers are challenged to find the best methods for connecting with a generation that is simultaneously tech dependent, private, and distrustful of marketing.

Branding is important, but difficult. As with for-profit businesses, increased competition in higher education requires differentiation (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). In order for an institution to stand out, they often seek to differentiate themselves through institutional branding (Chapleo, 2015; Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). Potential students have access to educational institutions around the globe and online, which makes institutional reputation, image, and identity increasingly important for enrolling students. Research suggests that a successful brand results in higher profitability and performance (Chapleo, 2015). For HEI's, branding activities are typically related to prestige and/or athletic and academic rankings, though some schools are shifting to other differentiation strategies (Chapleo, 2015).

Establishing a differentiated brand is a challenge for HEIs due to the institutional culture at most HEIs not being open to branding, and unclear expectations of who manages the brand, including the role of marketing in the branding process (Chapleo, 2015). Another challenge is in decisions regarding a single overall brand for the institution or sub-brands for the schools within the institution (Chapleo, 2015). If these challenges can be overcome, a deeper understanding of institutional brand would assist with marketing decisions and the allocation of available resources (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016).

Resources are an issue. Federal and state funding has declined since the Great Recession, which, combined with declining enrollment, has left HEIs with lower revenues despite raising tuition costs (Delcours & Carmona, 2019; Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016; Seltzer, 2017). For many HEIs, this decline in revenue results in budget cuts and/or downsizing in order to remain in

business (Bontrager, 2004; Heisler, 2019; Sanders-Dewey & Liszewski, 2017). Marketing departments are no exception, with most having fewer resources to allocate to marketing strategies (Seltzer, 2017). So, marketers have had to become strategically creative in allocating their resources to attempt to attract students. Given the challenges with marketing messages, marketing channels, and increased competition as already discussed, doing less with more is a significant challenge to overcome.

Summary. Marketing principles are increasingly being applied to higher education as competition increases and enrollment decreases. In theory, by aligning product, price, place, and promotion strategies with the target market, the institution should see an increase in enrollment and retention. However, HEIs are facing challenges in applying marketing principles to attract Gen Z students. HEI marketers are still struggling to adjust their messaging and marketing channels to reach Gen Z. Additionally, they are facing challenges relating to differentiating themselves through branding, while trying to implement strategies with fewer resources due to budget constraints.

Higher Education

Higher education in 2021 is a challenging time. Historically, successful HEI's have had to adapt to changes in demographics and external forces (Baker & Baldwin, 2015). From an organizational perspective, the role of marketing has evolved and is often integrated within an enrollment management team, which is a relatively new development in higher education (Vander Schee, 2009). Enrollment and government funding are declining while competition is increasing (Delcours & Carmona, 2019). In order to bolster revenues and stay in business, HEIs are merging, seeking out partnerships to enhance degree offerings, and adapting their marketing efforts to reach a new generation. This section will discuss the role of marketing within higher

education and the larger enrollment management team. Additionally, current challenges facing many HEIs as well as strategies they are implementing to attempt to mitigate these challenges are discussed.

The Role of Marketing in Higher Education. As already discussed, marketing activities include the Four P's of the marketing mix: produce, place, price, and promotion. Marketing helps develop the right product for the target market, distribution strategies for proper placement, determines the optimum price that will generate the most income, and promotes the product or service (McCarthy, 1960). The same is true within higher education, but the specific strategies differ. The following paragraphs will discuss the key activities of an HEI marketing department, including market research, branding, and promotion.

Market Research. Market research provides valuable information regarding the target markets for the institution (Schreane, 2019). Marketing departments at HEIs are in a strong position to gather information about potential students' values and preferences, new opportunities for academic offerings, competitor information, institutional perceptions, and potential risks (Ramachandran, 2010). Marketing departments have access to survey data, industry reports, website analytics, enrollment records, and alumni databases to provide data for strategic decisions (Bahr, 2019). Given their access to information, marketing departments are gaining an important role within the organization. They are contributing to discussions around academic programing, institutional priorities and strategies, program pricing, and brand reputation (Ramachandran, 2010).

Institutional Branding. Marketing plays a key role in institutional branding, which is important in cultivating a long-term relationship with potential students, beginning with recruitment efforts and continuing with alumni engagement and support (Dennis et al., 2016).

Munisamy et al. (2013) agreed and posited that a positive reputation will drive enrollment and retention. Branding is a collection of the positive or negative assumptions of the university and/or its programs and its perceived image (Munisamy et al., 2013). Marketing works to cultivate institutional brand image through public relations, community events, and promotion, but ultimately institutional brand resides in the mind of the individual and cannot be completely controlled by the institution. Dennis et al. (2016) suggested that HEI marketers may focus too much on building prestige when they should be focusing on building a reputation based on things that matter to students. However, it is also noted that what matters to undergraduate students will differ from what matters to graduate students, alumni and other stakeholders (Dennis et al., 2016). Therefore, a broad marketing approach is needed to engage various audiences with the brand and build on existing relationships.

Promotion. HEI promotional activities include advertising, public relations, events, direct marketing, personal selling, digital marketing, and word of mouth marketing (Smedescu et al., 2016). In their article, Smedescu et al. (2016) described how HEIs use these promotional tools. HEIs routinely advertise through printed brochures, outdoor billboards, media outlets, and more recently, using digital strategies. Public relations is a key activity for building and maintaining a positive image with various stakeholders and includes pitching stories to news outlets, offering community workshops, and printing magazines. Events, such as college visit days, on-campus concerts, and targeted camps for high school students are routinely used to bring potential students to campus. Admissions offices routinely work with marketing to draft email and printed letters to send to prospective students and their parents to share information about the institution as a form of direct marketing. Admissions also use direct selling when they attend college fairs and/or conduct outreach to potential students. Digital marketing tools are used such as the

institution's website and social media channels to engage potential students and facilitate information sharing about the institution and its features. These are great opportunities to differentiate the institution from competitors and communicate institutional values (Bahr, 2019). Last, word of mouth marketing is utilized through social media but also through alumni, staff, and faculty. While this list is not exhaustive, it provides an idea of the activities that the marketing departments engage in for promotion. It is also important to note that promotion is not used solely to attract students but is also used to promote the institution and its programs for other audiences like engaging alumni and donors and recruiting faculty (Heisler, 2019).

A recent survey (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019) states that website content is the most influential marketing promotion tool available, followed by financial information and personal contact from an admissions counselor. Students indicated that ease of use to find relevant information is critical, followed by a simple inquiry form to request more information from an institution. In response, they expect to receive mailed brochures or an email or text with personalized information regarding their stated interests. They also utilize social media, specifically Instagram, and to a lesser extent Facebook and YouTube, to research schools. Social media usage typically involves understanding what it is like to attend the institution, so students are looking for videos and photography to provide an authentic glimpse into campus life. In order to meet the needs of potential students and have content available when and where they seek it out, marketers must invest in digital strategies to ensure the institutional website and social media accounts are fresh, relevant, and authentic with rich visuals (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019).

Enrollment Management. Enrollment management departments were formed as a response to a decline in enrollment and reduced resources in the 1970s (Bontrager, 2004). While

each institution structures their enrollment management team according to their specific needs and available resources, most combine admissions, marketing, financial aid, student success, and academics with a goal of attracting, enrolling, and retaining a targeted group of students (Bontrager, 2004). At the heart of enrollment management is the institutional mission, which drives decisions around how to accomplish strategic goals, including,

establishing clear goals for the number and types of students needed to fulfill the institutional mission; promoting academic success by improving student access, transition, persistence, and graduation; determining, achieving, and maintaining optimum enrollment; enabling the delivery of effective academic programs; generating added net revenue for the institution; enabling effective financial planning; increasing process and organizational efficiency; improving service levels to all stakeholders; creating a data-rich environment to inform decisions and evaluate strategies; creating and continuously strengthening linkages with functions and activities across the campus. (Bontrager, 2004, p. 12)

Stated more broadly, enrollment management involves “any factor that influences a student’s decision to attend or continue enrolling” (Vander Schee, 2009, p. 3) at an institution. A review of the literature clarifies the goals of enrollment management as well as marketing’s relationship to enrollment management.

Goals. The overall goal of the enrollment management department is to align enrollment with the institution’s strategic initiatives (Bontrager, 2004). Therefore, the quantity and quality of students that the enrollment management team seeks to enroll and retain will be dependent on the mission and vision of the individual institution. An institution focused on achieving the highest of academic excellence will likely have lower enrollment with higher performing

students. Discounting of tuition will depend on whether the HEI seeks to enroll lower-income, high performing students, or only students who are able to pay full price. Institutions seeking to increase diversity will make different decisions regarding admissions criteria, academic programming, marketing messages, and pricing strategies to attract students from different populations. These decisions will influence marketing strategies, financial aid packages, admissions criteria, academic programming, and student support services in order to attract students in the target market. Enrollment management activities impact the entire institution and therefore necessitates a campus-wide effort (Vander Schee, 2009).

Relationship to Marketing. Marketing activities related to branding, personal selling, and digital marketing are often shared with other departments within the enrollment management team (Stoner, 2019). The shared ownership allows the departments closest to the stakeholder, for example, the admissions office, to manage relationships with their key audiences, while collaborating with marketing to ensure effective on-brand messaging. It also allows the marketing department to manage the brand for multiple stakeholders while ensuring messaging used in all instances remains on target (Stoner, 2019).

Current Challenges. Higher education is facing several challenges. The first, which is the focus of this study, is declining enrollment (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). Second is a decrease in state and federal funding (Delcours & Carmona, 2019). Last is an increase in competition from online and global educational programs (James-MacEachern, 2018). These issues pose challenges to the institution as a whole, and place pressure on marketing to overcome the challenges.

Declining Enrollment. As already stated, higher education enrollment has been in a decline for the past eight years (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018). There

are several reasons for this discussed in literature. The first is a response to the economy, with enrollment generally increasing when the economy declines and declining when the economy is improving (Conick, 2017). This generally occurs because unemployed or under-employed individuals may choose to enroll in college as a way to improve their potential earnings. A second reason is a decline in population among high school graduates, which shrinks the pool of potential students (Conick, 2017). However, a declining population does not necessarily lead to a decline in higher education enrollment. A decline in population occurred in the 1990s, but enrollment stayed high due to a positive shift in the perceived necessity of a college degree (Cox et al., 2019). Last, the digital revolution of learning and a shifting perception of the need for a traditional education has prompted students to learn in non-traditional ways, such as MOOCS, international institutions, and other non-degree granting online programs (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016).

Reduced Funding. Since the recession in 2008, tuition dollars have become an increasingly significant portion of total revenue as state and federal funding has decreased as well as endowments (Han, 2014). As government revenues declined, budgets for education have been cut, putting greater pressure on public institutions to raise tuition dollars. Tuition increases combined with a need for higher enrollment challenges marketing to demonstrate the value of a college education to attract potential students. At the same, private institutions, which were already dependent on tuition dollars as revenue, faced a decline in alumni giving and endowments as individuals have cut back on their giving. This has led to a greater need to engage in fundraising activities, and an increased level of importance to manage the institutional brand to engage potential donors (Dennis et al., 2016). Advancement departments generally lead these efforts but collaborate with marketing on messaging and content creation (Stoner, 2019).

Increased Competition. As already discussed, external threats from schools around the world have created significant competition (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016). Students have more options than ever before. Massive online open enrollment courses are available from prestigious schools and allow anyone to learn skills without paying the tuition dollars associated with earning a degree. Additionally, third party sites offer courses in specialized skills, available at a fraction of the cost of college tuition. Students can also attend school internationally or attend online to reduce total cost of attendance. This competition has put pressure on marketing departments to differentiate the institution through careful brand reputation management and demonstrate value (Dennis et al., 2016). Given the changing perceptions of potential students regarding the traditional approach to higher education, as already discussed in the section on Gen Z, this can be a significant challenge (Pucciarelli & Kaplan, 2016).

How HEI's are Handling Challenges. Higher education institutions are utilizing different approaches to handle these challenges. Some institutions are choosing to merge with other institutions in order to combine resources while others are engaging in partnerships to enhance programs (Pinheiro et al., 2016). Many schools are offering greater discounts to potential students to make school more affordable, and some are choosing more transparency in their tuition to attract more students (Duesterhaus, 2015). Finally, some schools are investing in new marketing strategies to increase awareness and image, focusing on the features that are thought to attract students (Baker & Baldwin, 2015).

Mergers and Partnerships. As a response to increased global competition, many schools have merged with others to alleviate financial challenges by pooling resources to better serve the combined student body, faculty, and staff (Pinheiro et al., 2016). Others, like Albion College, identified partnership opportunities to offer unique programming (Baker & Baldwin, 2015).

Albion formed partnerships that facilitated a global experience for faculty and staff, which was identified as an important factor to students. Another partnership brought diversity, sustainability, and wellness to the institution while creating opportunities for students to engage in volunteer efforts. These were also identified as important values for their target students. A case study by Hilbun and Mamiseishvili (2015) discussed how one institution forged partnerships to create learning experiences outside the classroom, which helped the institution grow enrollment by 40% in less than 10 years. The same study discussed another institution that made changes to curriculum, tuition, and staff size but ultimately merged with a local institution due to insurmountable debt and declining enrollment. This merger allowed students to continue their studies and remaining staff and faculty to retain their positions.

Other research (Kalafatis et al., 2016; Naidoo & Hollebeek, 2016) suggested that alliances between two HEIs can successfully attract students and create positive brand image for the alliance when selecting partnerships carefully. When a highly ranked institution forms a partnership with a lower ranked institution, the benefit is usually limited to the lower ranked institution, and there is no benefit when two low-ranked institutions create a partnership. However, when two high-ranked institutions form a partnership, both brands benefit (Kalafatis et al., 2016). Naidoo and Hollebeek (2016) suggested that to prevent damaging brand image, partnerships should be entered into with the goal of creating value for the student through the identification of good partnership fits.

Tuition Discounting and Transparency. Private institutions that have historically relied on tuition dollars as a significant source of revenue engage in what is known as discounting by offering a combination of scholarships and grants that effectively reduce the price per student (Duesterhaus, 2015). At the same time, tuition has been rising among both private and public

institutions, an increase of 244% between 1980 and 2011 (Naylor, 2016), resulting in a significant price tag for higher education that may be out of reach for many students. First time students and their parents may not be aware of discounting, and therefore remove consideration of that institution based on an unaffordable price (Hemelt & Marcotte, 2016). For the institution, this means fewer applications and fewer enrollments. This has led some institutions to reduce tuition and discounting and publish a lower price tag (Duesterhaus, 2015).

For public institutions, discounting may not be as much of an issue, though they do offer some discounting. However, pricing transparency is an issue, as tuition pricing on websites may not include extra fees and costs, resulting in a higher price than anticipated (Davis et al., 2019). Literature has established that students select a college by comparing benefits to cost to determine value (Davis et al., 2019). When the information received does not match reality, students choose to not persist at that institution.

A study (Davis et al., 2019) of institutional website and pricing information found that information about financial aid and scholarships was often not on the same page as pricing information. Additionally, information about fees and mandatory room and board policies were buried on the website, and the net price calculator, which is a federal requirement for institutions that qualify for federal aid (Davis et al., 2019), often did not take into account all of the available financial aid opportunities, were outdated, or did not match pricing stated on the website. This lack of transparency regarding cost of attendance is an ongoing discussion in the higher education industry, and there are not currently any widely accepted solutions to this issue (Davis et al., 2019). However, it is clear that marketing can play a role in how cost of attendance is communicated on the institutional website.

Marketing Strategies. Marketing strategies have changed in the past 10 years to attract students during the national decline. Branding, segmentation, and communication are key factors (Han, 2014). Branding, as discussed in the section on the role of marketing in higher education, has become increasingly popular to develop distinctive personalities and create a positive reputation, which has traditionally been a significant factor in college selection (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Stephenson et al., 2016). Target segmentation has also become increasingly popular and valuable as institutions seek to identify new potential pools of students. HEIs are increasingly utilizing their data to identify common characteristics of existing students to establish target markets as well as compile external research about new target markets that align with institutional mission and strategies (Conick, 2017). New communication strategies include an increasing focus on authenticity, campus life, outcomes, and branding messaging (Conick, 2017; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019; Shields & Peruta, 2019).

A study by Conick (2017) explored how two institutions, University of Alabama and George Mason, used branding, segmentation, and communication to increase enrollment. When the University of Alabama saw a decline in in-state student applications, they changed their marketing strategies to target students outside their state as a way to boost enrollment. Their athletics performance gave the institution strong brand awareness across the country, which aided in their efforts. In order to determine their target market segments, they dug into data and created customized communications to attract those students. They also attributed success to digital marketing strategies that allowed them to target students inexpensively. Finally, they expanded their admissions team to place recruiters in multiple states and hold events across the country. This allowed the institution to engage with potential students on an individual, personal basis. George Mason also increased recruitment using data to segment target markets and by

ensuring messaging was authentic, reflective of the brand, and unified across the institution (Conick, 2017). The institution used data to determine regional areas they were most likely to recruit students, and placed recruiters in those areas. Recognizing that messaging needed to be consistent regardless of region, and also recognizing that the further away from their state of Virginia, the less brand recognition they had, the marketing department worked to create branding messages that would attract potential students. A more recent study (Delcours & Carmona, 2019) supports these learnings.

Potential and Discovered Themes and Perceptions

There were five potential themes identified through this literature review as being an important part of the study. They are establishing clearly identified markets, institutional branding, pricing strategies, authenticity in messages, and digital marketing strategies. All five were found to be significant themes. In addition, a theme of targeting first-generation students was discovered, though not discussed in the literature review. These themes are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Clearly Identified Target Markets. A primary concept in marketing theory is identifying the target market (Hunt, 2018; McCarthy, 1960). When target markets are identified, marketers are able to adapt the marketing mix to appeal to the market. In higher education, institutions have a lot of potential data regarding the students who are most successful. Institutions that are able to access and analyze the data are in a good position to identify common characteristics among successful students to create target markets (Conick, 2017). It was anticipated that institutions with clearly identified target markets would be more successful in attracting their students.

Institutional Brand. Branding is a key theme in current higher education literature due to a strong relationship between institutional brand and enrollment, retention, and alumni engagement (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Stephenson et al., 2016). Some literature (Munisamy et al., 2013) suggests that institutions with a prestigious brand are less affected by external forces, but other research (Dennis et al., 2016) suggests that institutions need to focus less on building prestige and focus more on developing a brand that delivers what students want. It was anticipated that a successful institution would have a well-developed brand that permeates campus culture and external messaging, and that branding would be a main discussion point in the study.

Pricing Strategies. Gen Z students are price-conscious and wary of high-price institutions that do not demonstrate value (Hope, 2016). Additionally, HEIs are struggling with tuition transparency issues and the industry is starting to see a shift to lower price points combined with lower discounting (Davis et al., 2019). Pricing strategies and messaging was identified as likely being a key discussion point in the study.

Authenticity in Messaging. As generations have become more and more wary of marketing tactics (Slootweg & Rowson, 2018), marketers have re-focused on authenticity in promotions. Gen Z students are seeking authentic relationships (Loveland, 2017), and when engaging with HEIs, look for true, accurate representation of what campus life is like and what outcomes are likely (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019). It was anticipated that the subject of the study would have a focus on authentic messaging.

Digital Marketing Strategies. A major change in recent years is a shift in the use of technology when engaging with brands. Gen Z uses social media and website content differently than previous generations (Center for Generational Kinetics, 2018). The higher education

industry has struggled to develop and manage websites for multiple audiences including, potential students, their parents, current students, alumni, and other stakeholders. Large institutions have greater difficulty due to academic departments managing sub-sites (Davis et al., 2019). For HEI marketers, this means they need to create new strategies for optimizing these communication tools. The use of digital strategies including how they have been optimized to promote the institution for their target market was identified as being a key component of the study, which it was.

First-Generation Students. Current studies indicate that first-generation students are accounting for a large percentage of incoming freshman, especially among ethnic minorities (RTI International, 2019). Given this increase, it makes sense that HEIs would have specific strategies in place to attract and enroll these students' help institutions succeed in meeting their enrollment goals. This increase has also led to an influx of research related to this cohort. Recent studies have examined first-generation students' understanding of financial aid (Taylor & Bicak, 2020), college readiness (Cataldi et al., 2018; Wahleithner, 2020), the first year experience (Roksa et al., 2020; Schwartz et al., 2018), and perceived career barriers (Toyokawa & DeWald, 2020). While most of these studies discuss the benefits implementing strategies targeting this cohort, one study by Wildhagen (2015) discussed how these strategies can be detrimental to the student even though it can benefit the institution.

This study is based on the application of marketing theory to solve the higher education challenge of attracting Gen Z students. The change in how this generation interacts with technology and brands means that HEIs must adapt their marketing strategies. The concepts of target markets, institutional brand, pricing, authentic messaging, and digital strategies are key

components of the study in order to understand what has made the five participating institutions successful during a national decline.

Summary

The first section explored the background of generational theory, how it is used in marketing, and identified the values and attitudes of Gen X, Gen Y, and Gen Z. Gen Z has returned to traditional values, especially with regards to finances, are entrepreneurial, advocates for the oppressed, and highly pragmatic. They are also enrolling in higher education at a higher rate than millennials. The second section reviewed marketing theory and its application in higher education. The four Ps of marketing - product, place, price, and promotion - can be applied to higher education marketing. However, HEI marketing departments face challenges related to branding, developing effective marketing messages, and access to resources. The third section explored higher education, specifically the role of marketing within enrollment management, current challenges, and a few ways that institutions are attempting to overcome these challenges. Marketing can help overcome challenges by applying their knowledge of the target market to the product, place, price, and promotion of the institution. The final section identified potential themes and perceptions for the case study as well as the discovered themes. It was expected that the concepts of target markets, institutional brand, pricing, authentic messaging, and digital strategies would be key components of the study, which they were.

Transition and Summary

A qualitative case study was proposed to describe how HEIs can successfully adapt marketing strategies to attract Generation Z students and address the challenge of declining enrollment. Existing literature agrees that a shift in approach is needed (Loveland, 2014) since Generation Z has different wants and needs from higher education and responds to marketing

messages differently than previous generations. An intensive case study allows the researcher to focus on a few cases and identify learnings related to what makes these cases successful when others are not. Studying how five institutions have successfully adapted their marketing strategies to attract Gen Z students addressed a gap in literature so marketers at similar institutions can better understand how to adapt their strategies to be more effective. Additionally, this study integrated the Biblical principles of stewardship, knowledge, and loving one another. Finally, this study informs marketers by exploring how knowledge of the target market can be transformed into actionable strategies to successfully meet organizational goals.

The next section will present a discussion of research method and design, the participant selection process, the data collection method and a description of the data analysis process. Section 3 presents the findings of the study including a discussion of themes and learnings, application to professional practice, and recommendations for action and further study. The dissertation concludes with a summary of findings, followed by references, tables, and charts.

Section 2: The Project

This qualitative multiple case study was conducted to understand how marketing strategies have been employed at successful HEIs to effectively attract Generation Z students. Section 2 establishes the project methodology and data collection tools most appropriate for the study. This section discusses the researcher's role in conducting the study, the participants of the study, how the researcher gained access to the participants and how they worked together. A review of case study methodology is discussed along with why this was selected as the most appropriate methodology for this study. The researcher discusses the proposed population from which the samples were selected, eligibility criteria, sample size, and relevance to the study. The interview guide, including main and follow-up questions, the types of data that were reviewed, data organization and analysis is also included. Finally, reliability and validity of the study is reviewed.

This section establishes the methodology for conducting the study and was used to gain IRB approval. Ethical and Biblical considerations are discussed throughout. It is important to use appropriate methodology and tools for addressing the problem statement, and also important that the needs and welfare of human participants be considered so the study does not harm participants in any way.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how marketing strategies have been employed at successful HEIs in the United States to effectively attract Generation Z students. This study fills a gap in existing literature on how to attract this new generation to HEIs as well as inform institutions as they develop future marketing campaigns. The larger question of attracting Generation Z students to HEIs was explored through an in-depth study of how the

marketing department at five successful universities have adjusted their strategies to attract this new population. For the purpose of this study, a successful HEI has had an increase in enrollment among the Generation Z population during a time when national enrollment has experienced an 8-year decline.

Role of the Researcher

In a qualitative case study, the researcher “is the primary source for data collection and analysis” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017, p. 8). Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that the researcher must determine if a case study is appropriate, identify the intent and select the case, develop a process for collecting multiple data sources, specify the type of analysis, and report the case and lessons learned in written form. Yin (2014) added that the researcher must ask good questions, be a good listener, be willing to adapt, have a solid understanding of the issues being studied, avoid bias, and conduct research ethically.

In this case study, the researcher has already discussed why a case study is the best approach for answering the research question. The researcher selected the cases based on the institution meeting the criteria of experiencing an increase in Gen Z students during the time between 2011 and 2019 and the researcher’s access. Multiple data sources were used, including in-depth interviews, an optional survey, and a review of institutional websites, social media accounts, and promotional materials. How the data were analyzed is discussed later in chapter two.

The researcher created an interview guide listing the questions to be asked during personal interviews. The interview guide is available in Appendix A. During the interviews, the researcher actively listened to understand what was being communicated from the perspective of the participant. The researcher remained adaptive and refrained from bias to remain open to new

opportunities and perspectives. The literature review and professional experience equipped the researcher with sufficient understanding of the research questions and issues being explored. Last, the researcher was committed to conducting ethical research, beginning with informing participants of the intent of the study and maintaining an observer role. Additional discussion on ethical research processes is included in the following section on participants.

The researcher invited all members of the marketing team to participate in the study, regardless of role, therefore removing bias from participant selection. The interview guide was created by the researcher, and she was responsible for ensuring that it was followed consistently throughout the study. The researcher set up interviews with the participants, moderated the semi-structured interviews, and used initial responses to generate follow up questions. The researcher also reviewed print and digital materials, taking thorough notes. Data from interviews and materials were combined, coded, and analyzed by the researcher to generate insights.

Participants

Participants in this case study included members of the marketing department at the participating institutions. The researcher identified participants according to their roles within the marketing team and with sufficient length of time within their role, “whose knowledge and opinions may provide important insights regarding the research questions” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017, p. 46). Once individuals were identified, the researcher made contact and requested participation.

As previously stated, the researcher informed participants of the intent of study for full transparency. She asked for consent prior to conducting the interview and did not conduct the interview if consent was not given. If at any time during the interview a participant asked to stop the interview, the researcher immediately ceased questioning.

Protection of participants is a critical concern in a case study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The researcher abided by all guidelines and requirements set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure participants and the organization were protected. The researcher ensured confidentiality and anonymity by not using names or identifying data in her notes and write up; She used pseudonyms and ensured identifying information was removed from the final report. The researcher strictly followed the interview guide and refrained from asking personal questions or questions that might burden the participant. She did not share information from interviews with other participants and data collected were stored on a password-protected personal computer. The only people with access to confidential data were the researcher, her dissertation chair, committee members, and the doctoral program director.

Research Method and Design

A qualitative multiple case study was conducted to answer the research question. The following section describes the method and design of the case study, as well as justification for why it was the most appropriate to address the research questions and purpose of the study. Current literature is consulted to discuss methods and designs along with justification for selecting the qualitative multiple case study.

Discussion of Method

The purpose of this study is to understand how higher education institutions have adapted marketing strategies to attract Generation Z students. This study answered two research questions: “What marketing strategies are successful HEIs using to attract Generation Z students?” and “What are they doing differently to attract Gen Z compared to Gen X or Y?” A qualitative study was conducted to answer these questions.

Unlike quantitative studies which control the context, qualitative studies explore the context in order to search for learnings (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and allow the researcher to explore the research problems in depth to gain a greater understanding of the issue (Stake, 2010). For this study, research focused on five institutions which have been effective in attracting Gen Z students while most schools nationwide were seeing a decline. The context provides critical data to understand the changing conditions in which higher education institutions operate, as well as the culture, processes, and organizational structure that may play a role in success. Pratt (2009) stated that qualitative studies are best for addressing “how” questions and for the analysis of processes. In this case, the researcher placed an emphasis on learning how each institution was successful, further suggesting a qualitative study was the best approach.

In addition to exploration of context and answering “how” questions, a qualitative study provides an opportunity to investigate multiple data sources for a broader understanding of the issue. Common qualitative methods for collecting data include interviews, observations, and data analysis (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Using a variety of data sources provides for greater depth of understanding and lends credibility to findings. Therefore, a qualitative study was proposed to understand how higher education institutions effectively adapted marketing strategies in order to attract Generation Z students.

Discussion of Design

Yin (2014) stated that a case study is best for uncovering learnings from a real-world case when the context provides relevant data. For this study, the context in which the institutions operate, including the competitive landscape, market conditions, and organizational environment, was of critical importance in order to learn from institutions that have successfully increased enrollment while others have seen declining enrollment, which suggested that a case

study would be the best approach. Case studies are already popular in business as a way to learn from the success and failures of others (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2015), and have been used to study marketing topics in higher education (Ortagus & Tanner, 2019; Polkinghorne et al., 2019), generational values (Torsello, 2019), and how organizations adapt to attract Gen Z workers (Knapp et al., 2017), which lends further credibility to this research design.

The qualitative case study design allowed the researcher to study the complexities of the issue within its context while focusing on a few cases in order to fully understand what made these cases successful when others were not (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In conducting the case study, the researcher collected data through the use of interviews and document review as suggested by Yin (2014) and Hancock and Algozzine (2017), to conduct an in-depth analysis of what marketing strategies the institutions are using to attract Generation Z students and how these strategies are different from previous generations. The next section will describe the population under study, how the cases were selected, and discuss sampling strategies used to identify individual participants from the selected cases.

Summary of Research Method and Design

The researcher posited a qualitative case study is the best approach for answering the “how” questions proposed in this study, and is an established method and design used in related research. The qualitative methodology allowed the researcher to gain deep insight into the issue being studied (Stake, 2010) while the case study design allowed the researcher to focus on how just a few case have been successful in responding to the phenomenon being studied (Yin, 2014). The researcher conducted the qualitative case study through interviews and document review as supported by Hancock and Algozzine (2017). The learnings from the research answer the

question of how higher education institutions have successfully adapted marketing strategies to attract Generation Z students.

Population and Sampling

U.S. higher education institutions that have experienced an increase in undergraduate enrollment since 2013, when Gen Z students first arrived on campus, were the population base of this study. 2011-2018 was a time of national decline in college enrollment (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018), so institutions that increased enrollment during this time make an interesting case. Five institutions were selected from this population as the cases under study. Individual participants were then selected from the population using a purposeful method to engage in interviews or survey.

Population

Higher education institutions that have experienced an increase in undergraduate enrollment since 2013, when Gen Z students first arrived on campus, were the population under study. More specifically, higher education institutions in the United States offering at least bachelor-level degrees with a physical campus were included. This removed associate-level community colleges, trade schools, international schools, and online-only institutions from the population under study. While these institutions may experience similar difficulties attracting Gen Z students, the inherent variables related to degree attainment, location, and modality made it necessary to reduce the population to a more homogenous group.

Because the cases must be of significance, the population was further narrowed to include those that saw an increase in undergraduate enrollment at least five of the six academic years since 2013 according to the National Student Clearinghouse, which was reporting data through fall 2018. The researcher referenced enrollment data from the National Student Clearinghouse,

which meant that only institutions that provide enrollment data to the National Student Clearinghouse were included in the population. According to National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.), specific data, including fall enrollment, is mandatory for institutions participating in federal financial assistance, and is optional for non-participating institutions. Institutions that did not report enrollment data on an annual basis during the 2013-2020 timeframe were excluded from the population due to the researcher's inability to consistently verify enrollment among institutions.

Sampling

The sample, or individual cases, were selected using purposeful sampling method (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Individual participants were selected from the marketing department at the higher education institutions being studied using a purposeful method. The sample should be representative of the department in order to provide a holistic view of the issue being studied and consider multiple perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Employees within these departments included vice presidents, managers, and individual contributors. Their breadth of knowledge varied based on experience, length of service, and role.

To be included, the participant must have been employed at the institution for at least one year. They must have also had sufficient knowledge of the challenges facing higher education as it relates to enrollment and be willing to discuss how their institution has successfully enrolled Gen Z students. Length of service at the institution ensured the participant has been within the role for at least one admission cycle. This experience allowed the participant to provide sufficient insight into the reasons for institutional success.

Data Collection

The goal of a case study was to investigate an issue within its natural, specific context through the use of multiple data sources to gain a deep understanding of the issue being studied (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). When conducting a qualitative case study, the rigor and ability to triangulate data is critical to ensure scientific validity (Yin, 2014). Using multiple data collection methods supports this process. The qualitative case study relies on the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection for all methods used, though other instruments are utilized. The following paragraphs provide insight into the instruments used along with data collection and organization techniques.

Instruments

The instruments used for this case study include the researcher, an interview guide, audio recordings, and note taking. The researcher conducted the interviews and reviewed documents. The specifics of data collection techniques are discussed in the next section.

Researcher as an Instrument. Researchers are the primary data collection instrument in qualitative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Due to the nature of qualitative data and the need for flexibility and careful analysis, the researcher must be able to “ask good questions, be a good listener, stay adaptive, have a firm grasp of the issues being studied, and avoid bias” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017, p. 72). The researcher used these skills to set up and conduct interviews, ask follow-up questions, take notes, review documents, analyze data, and secure the confidentiality of participants.

Interview Guide. The interview guide, found in Appendix A, outlines the structure for each individual interview including the main questions that were asked. The first few questions established that the individual was qualified to participate in the study, with the remaining

questions related to the study itself and the issue being studied. The questions were designed to address the research problem and questions established in Section 1. However, it is important to note that the questions were not intended to represent every question asked in the interviews. A semi-structured interview allowed the researcher to ask follow-up questions as necessary to gain the depth of understanding required for this study (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). The questions from the interview guide were used to create the optional survey for participants wishing to provide written responses.

Audio Recordings. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend that audio recordings are utilized during interviews. Based on this recommendation, semi-structured interviews with participants were audio recorded in order to capture information that could be lost if relying solely on memory or written notes (Taylor et al., 2016). The researcher notified participants that the interview was being recorded and gained their approval. Because interviewees had already agreed to being audio recorded when scheduling an interview, this was not a problem (Taylor et al., 2016). After the interview, the researcher transcribed the recordings for future review and noted any details that may have been missed. This allowed the researcher to focus on responses during the interview in order to ask follow-up questions.

Note Taking. The researcher took notes during interviews and document analysis, each time noting the date and location along with both descriptive and reflective notes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is recommended that researchers take extensive and detailed field notes, even when the encounter does not seem to add to the study, because the value and meaning of field encounters are unknown until the analysis phase (Taylor et al., 2016). Additionally, the researcher took notes as she reviewed marketing materials as she sought to understand how

strategy, messaging, and visual elements have changed to attract Gen Z students. These notes were collected and organized as discussed in the data analysis section.

Data Collection Techniques

This case study relied on data collected through interviews and document review, as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018). Interviews are considered to be the primary data collection method in qualitative case studies (Yin, 2014), so the collection techniques must be rigorous to ensure sufficient and accurate data are uncovered and understood. Document review helps triangulate the data and provide support for the learnings uncovered in interviews (Yin, 2014).

Interviews. The first step in conducting an interview is selecting participants (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017), which was discussed in the section on population and sampling. Once the participants were selected, the researcher set up individual interviews. The researcher conducted interviews one-on-one with participants over the phone to gather in-depth information that addressed the research questions. Due to COVID-19 and participant preferences, a digital survey format was provided as an alternative to a personal interview.

The interviews were conducted over the phone because most institutions were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and to ensure the researcher was following CDC guidelines regarding social distancing. The interview guide found in Appendix A was used to direct the interview, though follow-up questions were used to gain a deeper understanding of the issue being studied. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed.

The digital qualitative survey was created using Microsoft forms and emailed to participants upon request. The answers were transferred to a Microsoft Word document in a

similar format as interview transcriptions in order to upload responses into the data analysis software for coding.

Document Review. The final stage of research is document review. Documentation review is suggested for most qualitative case studies to corroborate information collected from other sources, such as interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2014). During this process, the researcher reviewed marketing materials such as websites, social media channels, and other promotional materials. Only materials used to attract recent high school graduates were reviewed as that was the subject of inquiry. She took notes related to imagery, messaging, and medium used. This allowed the researcher to analyze the changes to appeal to a new generation, such as how cost and financial aid is discussed.

Data Organization

The data collected included written notes, audio files and transcriptions, and copies of marketing materials. These materials were safeguarded on a password-protected computer and pseudonyms were used to replace identifying information in order to protect the privacy of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Physical materials were stored in a locked filing cabinet to which only the researcher had access.

At the start of the study, the researcher established a naming pattern for digital files to ensure they were easy to locate and access during analysis as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018). Additionally, the researcher maintained a spreadsheet with the file name, participant pseudonym, date, and data type for easy reference (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is suggested that data are organized based on centrality to the study in order to focus on the most relevant information (Yin, 2014). Data were organized by institution and cross-referenced by the relevant aspects of the marketing mix. This helped the researcher identify common themes based on the

role within the organization as well as themes among the Four P's of Marketing. For example, the researcher identified themes related to promotional content on social media and also themes related to pricing. These themes were identified during the coding process used in data analysis. The researcher used computer software to track codes and the relevant data associated with each code such as quotes.

Summary of Data Collection

The researcher acted as the primary instrument to collect data for this qualitative case study. She used interviews and document review to gain a deep understanding of the issue being studied as suggested by Yin (2014). These methods allowed the researcher to fully answer the research questions with reliability and validity. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over the phone and the researcher utilized the interview guide to direct the interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When requested, interview questions were provided as a qualitative survey for participants to complete. She also reviewed marketing materials to further understand the issue, corroborate data from other sources, and help answer the research questions. The use of a recording device was utilized to ensure nothing is missed (Taylor et al., 2016). Audio recordings, transcriptions, and notes were categorized and stored on a secured computer for future analysis. The use of multiple data collection methods supported the validity and reliability of the study.

Data Analysis

Data analysis of a qualitative case study involves three stages: organization, theme development, and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Beyond these recommendations, there is not a set guideline for the specifics of how to analyze data for a qualitative case study due to the dependence on the abilities and perspective of the researcher (Yin, 2014). As a qualitative study, the researcher's interpretation of the data and consideration of alternative interpretations

impacted theme development and learnings. Her perceptions and interpretation during data collection determined follow-up questions and her interpretations during analysis determined how data were coded. Additionally, data were analyzed within the context of the cases in the specific timeframe of this study, so the researchers timing of conducting the study could have impacted results.

The data collected during the study was organized in such a way as to answer the research questions, grouped together by research question and code. The use of Quirkos qualitative data analysis software aided in the organization and coding process, though the researcher added the human element to the analysis (Taylor et al., 2016; Yin, 2014). The combination of organization and coding allowed the researcher to develop themes and generate meaningful learnings.

Coding Process

Coding involves segmenting data both granularly and broadly into meaningful groups. For this study, the researcher anticipated granular segments such as affordability and scholarships. These segments were named as codes and then grouped into a larger segment, or theme, such as “pricing” (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher utilized Quirkos qualitative data analysis software to facilitate this process as it allowed her to easily add data points to multiple codes and then group codes together into themes. Some researchers suggest writing notes in margins, or highlighting specific information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Quirkos is a modern version that allowed the researcher to upload field notes, transcripts, and images, select text or entire files, and drop them into one or more segments.

The researcher began analysis immediately after data collection, beginning with reading and re-reading data to establish initial codes (Taylor et al., 2016). She used a lean coding process

(Creswell & Poth, 2018) by identifying a short list of anticipated codes based on the literature review and early reflections on the research. Each code used a short word to represent the idea and had a longer description included in a master list. She uploaded data to Quirkos, reviewed the data, and assigned phrases and quotes to codes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As new codes emerged, they were added to the code list. She then reviewed codes to determine if any should be combined or separated before finalizing the code list. The researcher compiled a list of codes, definitions, and examples, in a final codebook. The codebook helped with interpretation and provided information for peer review of this study.

Interpretation

Once the codebook was complete and data had been assigned to codes, the researcher reviewed the codes to identify themes, as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018). An inductive approach was used to look for patterns among codes in order to gain insights and develop themes (Yin, 2014). To do this, the researcher asked herself questions such as “what is going on here,” “What do these quotes have in common,” and “How do these themes relate to each other?” (Taylor et al., 2016). The researcher analyzed the frequency of themes in the data, with the most frequently mentioned themes considered to be significant (Taylor et al., 2016). Additionally, centrality of themes to the research questions was also be considered, with themes outside the scope of research set aside for later review and analysis to determine their relevance and significance (Taylor et al., 2016). The final themes are discussed in a narrative format to answer the research questions in Section 3.

Summary of Data Analysis

During the data analysis phase, the researcher carefully reviewed the data to properly code data and develop themes. She did this by creating a code book based on anticipated codes

from literature and early analysis. New codes that emerged during analysis were added to the code book. Quirkos software assisted the researcher with identifying, consolidating, separating, and grouping codes in order to develop themes. The researcher selected major themes based on frequency, centrality to the study, and by asking herself questions to determine thematic relevance, relationships, and patterns. The final themes are discussed in a narrative format in Section 3 in order to answer the research questions.

Reliability and Validity

Qualitative researchers seek to fully understand a phenomenon, and in doing so, ask themselves if their report is accurate and trustworthy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These terms are known as reliability and validity in research and are a critical component to academic research. Reliability means the data were collected in a consistent manner throughout the study and that it could be repeated by future researchers to generate similar results. For qualitative studies, replication of the study is not as important as using a consistent process because data are subjective and open to interpretation (Cypress, 2017). Validity means the findings accurately represents the intention of the participants and answers the research question. Specific strategies are used in qualitative studies to ensure that the research is both reliable and valid. This section discusses the reliability and validity strategies used in this study.

Reliability

In quantitative research, reliability refers to the consistency of the study so it could be duplicated with similar results, often utilizing statistical methods to demonstrate consistency (Noble & Smith, 2015). However, this cannot be applied to qualitative research due to the inherent differences in the human experience and subjectivity (Cypress, 2017; Taylor, 2020). In qualitative research, reliability refers to consistency in the research processes and the

appropriateness of the method to answer the research question (Cypress, 2017; Noble & Smith, 2015). The researcher used specific strategies to ensure that the study was consistent throughout the research project, including utilizing an interview guide to ask questions the same way for all participants, consistent coding during the analysis phase, and a code book to guide the analysis. These processes and guides ensured all participants had the same experience in their interviews and codes were applied in the same way throughout the study.

Interview Guide. The interview guide provided in Appendix A was used when conducting the interviews to ensure that all participants are asked the same initial questions in the same way to support reliability and consistency (Noble & Smith, 2015). Questions were worded to avoid ambiguity and were asked in the same order for consistency. The questions have been reviewed by others in the field to ensure they address the questions and are appropriate for the study. This ensured the research was conducted consistently throughout the study and would help a future researcher conduct interviews the same way to duplicate the study.

Consistent Coding. A second strategy used for reliability is consistent coding throughout the research study. The researcher established and defined codes based on the literature review and initial review of the interview transcripts. The researcher applied those codes during data analysis using Quirkos software. Any new codes that arose during the analysis phase were documented, defined, and applied consistently to all pieces of data. The consistent use of codes established reliability by applying the same codes in the same way throughout the study (Noble & Smith, 2015).

Code Book. The researcher maintained a final codebook with code names, definitions, and examples. This code book was reviewed and revised throughout the process with a final check at the end of the data analysis process to ensure it was complete and accurate. This further

established reliability by providing a final code check between the code book and data analysis for complete transparency and ensured interpretation of data was consistent throughout the study (Noble & Smith, 2015).

Validity

Validity in research means the data are accurate, comprehensive (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and trustworthy (Cypress, 2017). Accuracy refers to the data reflecting the intention of participants, while comprehensiveness refers to enough data being collected to ensure that it is true among multiple sources and sufficient data have been collected. Trustworthiness refers to the degree of confidence in the results. Creswell (2016) recommended using validity strategies from four lenses: Reviewer, participant, reviewer, and reader. For this study, the researcher utilized triangulation, saturation, member checking, peer debriefing and a thick description to ensure the results of the study were valid.

Triangulation. Triangulation is utilized from the researchers' lens to ensure validity of the study. Triangulation is the process of collecting data from multiple sources to ensure that many viewpoints are included (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). For this study, the researcher used interviews and document review. Five institutions were included in the sample, with multiple individuals from each institution as participants. Marketing materials were also reviewed to offer support to findings from interviews or to offer disconfirming evidence (Creswell, 2016).

Saturation. For the participants' lens, the researcher spent time in the field until she reached the point of saturation (Creswell, 2016). Saturation occurs when a sufficient amount of data has been collected to the point that new data are not collected through continuous study. For this study, interviews and document review continued until new information was no longer able to be collected. By spending enough time in the field to reach saturation, the researcher was

better able to understand the context of the individual cases so that the themes and overall story were enhanced, which supports the validity of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Member Checking. The researcher sought participant feedback as another validity check from the participants' lens (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and was considered to be vital to qualitative research (Stake, 2010). The researcher compiled data, analysis and interpretations and presented it to the participants for review. This allowed participants the opportunity to offer clarification and feedback related to the accuracy of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While member checking does not guarantee that the information is correct, it reduces errors and further protects participants by ensuring they are not misrepresented (Stake, 2010).

Peer Debriefing. Seeking the feedback of peers familiar with the subject of the study is a way to support validity of the study through the reviewer's lens (Creswell, 2016). By engaging peers, individuals familiar with the subject matter and research design have an opportunity to ask questions regarding the study methodology, challenge themes, and identify gaps (Creswell, 2016). For this study, the researcher's dissertation committee has reviewed and challenged the study from the very beginning, offering guidance and asking hard questions to ensure that the study was valid. The researcher worked closely with her dissertation chair to refine and improve the study throughout the process.

Thick Description. The final validation strategy was to utilize thick description in the final dissertation report. This process is included as a validation strategy from the reader's lens (Creswell, 2016). Thick description refers to the use of language to make the reader feel they are experiencing the phenomenon being studied. It also allowed the reader to have sufficient information to make determinations as to the trustworthiness of the findings. The use of quotes

and detailed descriptions of the setting, activities and themes creates a level of transparency and trustworthiness that supports validity.

Summary of Reliability and Validity

Ensuring the study was both reliable and valid were of utmost importance to the researcher. Without reliability and validity, the study would not be able to successfully add to existing literature or inform higher education marketers as the findings would not be able to be trusted or applied to other institutions. Therefore, the researcher utilized multiple strategies to ensure her study was both reliable and valid.

To ensure reliability, or consistency, the researcher documented her interview questions in an interview guide and used it to conduct interviews. This process ensured that each participant was asked the same initial questions the same way. Additionally, the researcher thoroughly documented the codes used to create themes, with titles, descriptions, and examples. She included all of these codes in an official codebook to guide analysis of all data collected.

To support validity, the researcher utilized strategies from the researchers, participants, reviewers, and readers' lenses (Creswell, 2016). These included utilizing multiple data sources for triangulation, spending enough time in the field to reach saturation, utilizing member checking, seeking peer debriefing, and using thick description. The use of these strategies resulted in the findings deemed accurate, comprehensive, and trustworthy (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Cypress, 2017).

Transition and Summary

This section discussed the research method and design, participant selection process, data collection method, data analysis process, and the research and validity strategies used in the study. For this qualitative multiple-case study, institutions were selected based on their

enrollment of Gen Z students and individual participants were selected from the marketing team using purposeful sampling. The researcher conducted interviews and reviewed marketing materials used to attract Gen Z students, using a coding procedure to look for themes during analysis. She ensured reliability and validity through the use of several strategies including consistency in interviewing and coding, and the use of triangulation and saturation. The next section will present the findings of the study including a discussion of themes and learnings, application to professional practice, and recommendations for action and further study.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

In this section, the culmination of the qualitative case study, the significance of the study and the steps taken to complete the study are reviewed and the results of the study are discussed in detail to answer the research questions posited in Section 1. Application to professional practice is presented along with recommendations based on the results of the study. Last, the researcher shares personal reflections on the research and summarizes conclusions.

Overview of the Study

The general business problem to be addressed with this study is that marketers in U.S. higher education institutions do not fully understand how to attract Generation Z students, resulting in lost revenue and wasted resources spent on ineffective marketing strategies. As Millennials move out of college and Generation Z moves in, they bring with them a challenge in understanding how to attract this new group of students (Zorn, 2017). An 8-year national decline in higher education enrollment (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2018) has intensified competition and the need for marketers to develop strategic ways to attract this new generation of students (de Haan, 2015). This study is based partially on Generational Theory which states that what worked for previous generations will not necessarily apply to a new generation (Van Rossem, 2019).

With this study, the researcher sought to learn from successful institutions in order to address the uncertainty of how to effectively adapt marketing strategies to attract Generation Z students to HEIs. A qualitative multiple-site case study research design was selected in which five higher education institutions were selected based on their success in attracting Gen Z students. This research design was selected due to the exploratory nature and significance of the

context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 2010). Personal interviews and document review were conducted to answer two research questions:

RQ1: What marketing strategies are successful HEIs using to attract Generation Z students?

RQ1a: Why were these strategies chosen?

RQ1b: Why are these new strategies more successful?

RQ2: What are they doing differently to attract Gen Z compared to Gen X or Y?

How the Study was Conducted

Qualitative data were collected from interviews and document review, specifically marketing materials, social media content, and institutional websites. These data allowed the researcher to identify common themes related to the Four P's of marketing and understand how successful institutions are adapting their marketing strategies to attract Gen Z students. These techniques are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Selection of Sites and Participants. Potential institutions were selected using data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The researcher ran a report to identify institutions that have reported enrollment on an annual basis to the NCES since 2013. 764 institutions met this criteria. Then, the researcher identified institutions which have had an increase in enrollment at least five of the six years since 2013. The researcher excluded institutions which had less than 1,000 students in this segment to prevent skewed results due to the smaller institution size. A final list of 99 institutions made up the initial pool of cases from which to choose.

The researcher contacted each institution to seek permission to conduct research with staff – beginning with the Director of Marketing and then seeking IRB approval. Seven total

institutions agreed to participate. The researcher identified individual participants based on their roles within the marketing team who could provide insights regarding the research questions. The researcher contacted each potential participant to invite them to participate in the study. In total, 11 participants from five institutions agreed to participate. Of the five institutions, four are public and one is private and none of the five are from the same state.

Interviews. The researcher contacted participants to set up a time to conduct a personal interview or provide a link to the survey. The interviews were conducted via Zoom because most institutions were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic and to ensure the researcher is following CDC guidelines regarding social distancing. The interview guide found in Appendix A was used to direct the interview, though follow-up questions were used to gain a deeper understanding of the issue being studied. This allowed the researcher to follow the same format for each interview and ask each participant the same questions whether personal interview or survey.

Document Review. After the interviews were completed, the researcher collected and reviewed marketing materials that participating institutions used to attract Gen Z students, including website, advertisements, and social media. She reviewed and analyzed the materials utilizing the codes identified in the interview analysis phase. By doing so, she was able to confirm the data that was uncovered during interviews.

Saturation

The researcher utilized personal interviews as the primary data collection method and ceased upon achieving data saturation. Saturation was considered to be the point at which no new information was obtained through participant interviews in light of the research question in accordance with Creswell (2016). The 11 participants represent five institutions, each one markedly different in location, brand, and organizational structure. Despite these differences,

common themes quickly developed, and later interviews revealed no new information.

Therefore, the researcher is confident that saturation was achieved.

Triangulation

Triangulation is the process of collecting data from multiple sources to ensure that many viewpoints are included (Hancock & Algozzine, 2017). Triangulation was addressed by conducting interviews with marketing staff in different roles and by confirming interview data with marketing materials, social media, and website content. The roles of participants included writer, graphic designer, strategist, webmaster, social media specialist, and leadership roles. These various roles provided differing perspectives of the problem being addressed and how their respective institutions are overcoming the problem. Additionally, each participant was provided an opportunity to review a draft version of the findings to confirm or challenge the learnings.

Presentation of the Findings

The data collected through interviews and marketing material review led to the development of themes that help answer the research questions. This section provides an analysis of the data including detailed description of the themes and supporting excerpts from interview transcripts and document review. During analysis, the researcher compared participant responses and supporting marketing materials with academic literature to generate the themes.

As discussed during the literature review, the researcher anticipated uncovering themes related to clearly identified target markets, strong institutional brand, pricing strategies, authenticity in messaging, and a strong emphasis on digital marketing strategies. As will be discussed in the following pages, all of these themes emerged from interviews. Both pricing

strategies and authenticity evolved differently than expected, with pricing relating mostly to affordability and value, and authenticity relating to promoting the full student experience.

Several additional themes were identified based on the data collected. The themes answer the research questions established early on in this study as well as address the overarching problem of higher education institutions being unable to attract Gen Z students. In addition, the themes answered the sub-research questions associated with this study. Finally, the themes were directly related to marketing theory and generational theory in relation to higher education. The themes clearly indicated that each institution is using a variety of promotional strategies to attract Gen Z students, with each chosen based on research data and in collaboration with other departments.

Nine themes developed from the research findings are explained in detail in the next sections, organized by research question. Each theme is supported by the data collected from the interviews and review of marketing materials, including social media channels, viewbooks, and websites. Additionally, the themes are supported by the scholarly and professional literature as discussed in each section. The researcher analyzed the data to identify common ideas and then validated the data using available marketing material. The nine themes assisted in answering the research questions established within this study to solve the identified business problem.

Research Question 1

To answer the first question, “What marketing strategies are successful HEIs using to attract Generation Z students?” themes emerged relating to the Four P’s of Marketing: product, price, place, and promotion (McCarthy, 1960). Sub-themes were organized into the four P’s of marketing in order to fully address which marketing strategies these institutions are using to attract Gen Z students. Because participants were selected from the marketing department, the

greatest insight was in the area of promotions, but each participant discussed campus-wide initiatives related to each of the 4 P's of Marketing. By categorizing according to the four P's, it is easier to understand the role of each area in attracting Gen Z students and why institutions should develop strategies for all four areas.

Theme 1: Product. The key common themes related to product include the institutional brand, student experience, academic offerings, and student success. Branding was mentioned by each of the institutions as being a significant focus for the marketing department followed by a focus on the overall student experience, meaning promoting a true and accurate look at student life on campus. Academic offerings, whether the breadth of offerings or a focus on specialized programs, and student success, which is a focus on both outcomes as well as programs designed to help students matriculate, were also significant themes. These themes are directly related to research by Wasmer et al. (1997) which discussed the product of HEI as an all-encompassing experience that includes the degree earned, faculty expertise and interactions, student support services, athletics, and the entire student experience. These themes are discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Sub-Theme 1: Brand. The brand has to do with the reputation of the college, which has traditionally been a significant factor in college selection (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Stephenson et al., 2016). Due to increased competition in a global marketplace, Vitelar (2019) states, "it may have never been more important to differentiate from your possible main competitors" (p. 259). The marketing department works to cultivate institutional brand image through public relations, community events, and promotion. Two of the institutions discussed a recent re-branding effort and a third discussed having a strong brand that attracts students and their efforts to maximize their efforts.

Table 1*Selected Examples of Significant Statements related to Brand*

| Statement |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “Our brand is well-known and streamlined and is utilized in all of our messaging.” |
| “As our reputation grows then I think more people want to be part of a University that they've heard of” |
| “We have just firmed up our brand messaging and we really are giving students something to stand behind” |
| “students are looking for a school with a good reputation” |
| “Our job is getting the positive image of the university out to our constituents.” |

Participants discussed brand as having a positive reputation in their community, in industries related to their academic programming, and among their alumni. One participant discussed going through a branding exercise in which they conducted research internally to determine their own strengths. Participant 10 said,

When we debuted the [redacted] campaign in 2015 we really approached that message as we are here, we have established our place in higher education, we don't need to prove ourselves but here is what we're doing and here's why we continue to be a national leader, so really just taking on a more defined identity. We really started to come into our own with that campaign and all of the materials that have been developed in the recent years align with that campaign.

In reviewing this institution's website, it was clear that their brand was clearly defined. Their homepage features rankings and accolades that demonstrate their academic excellence and student outcomes. The other institutions also maximize their brand on their website, inviting future students to become a [mascot redacted] and featuring recent news about faculty and students. Research by Shields and Peruta (2019) indicated that these branding efforts are effective for generating awareness of an institution, which is the first step in the enrollment

process. The same study indicates that branding is not as influential in the final college selection but remains an integral part of the overall marketing strategy, especially in regard to alumni engagement and word of mouth marketing.

Sub-Theme 2: Student Experience. Student experience encompasses the lived experience of a student attending the university – from housing to clubs to classes to research. From a marketing perspective, it represents the student’s ability to imagine themselves on campus. “Universities should be aware that they are selling a holistic package and not just an education” (Stephenson et al., 2016, p. 500).

Table 2

Selected Examples of Significant Statements Related to Student Experience

| Statement |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “We take social media accounts and actually go out and showcase what it's like to be a student.” |
| “We want our prospective students to look at our marketing materials and see themselves here.” |
| “We share with them the real research that's happening here in the way that it changes lives.” |
| “They want the opportunity to work alongside faculty and kind of get their hands dirty and get some practical experience.” |

Participants from each of the five institutions mentioned student experience as an area of focus and a key point shared in marketing activities. Whether providing hands-on research, showcasing student life behind the scenes, or being intentional to share real, authentic student moments in the dorms and classrooms, these institutions emphasize the authentic student experience.

Institutional website and social media accounts focus on the student experience, with videos and images to help potential students get a glimpse into campus life. Each institution features pages about student life on their websites and links to virtual tours and/or campus visits. These concepts align with research by Loveland (2017) who stated that authenticity was key for

Gen Z students. Additionally, research from Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2019) found that Gen Z students were looking for an accurate representation of what campus is like. It is important to note that while each institution approached student experience from a similar perspective, the results were different because each institution is unique. Photo and video styles and the way information is presented was distinctly unique to the institution and aligned with branding efforts. One institution has a feature which allows the student to create a custom viewbook, a promotional booklet used for recruiting students, based on his or her interests and preferences.

Sub-Theme 3: Academic offerings. The theme of academic offerings refers to having a wide variety of academic majors, having specific programs that are attractive to Gen Z students, and offering support programs like internships and hands-on research. Participants from each institution discussed having strong academic programs and hands-on opportunities for students outside the classroom.

Table 3

Selected Examples of Significant Statements Related to Academic Offerings

| Statement |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “We have top quality programs.” |
| “The strength of our health programs and corresponding job placement, and high job-placement rates for our College of Technology programs are attractive to many students.” |
| “We offer research opportunities and academic options that really span the full spectrum of talents.” |
| “...vast amount of degree offering we have available.” |
| “While students are earning their degrees, they're also gaining that practical experience at internships through co-ops through assistantships... so they build their resumes as they go.” |

Participants from four of the institutions discussed academic offerings as being important in their ability to attract Gen Z students, which is supported by Stephenson et al. (2016) who found that availability of the student’s desired major was a determining factor in college

selection. There was a difference in application, though. Participants from two institutions discussed a general feeling that their institution's breadth of degree programs were appealing. Participants from two other institutions discussed having key programs that are attractive to Gen Z. The fifth institution mentioned academic offerings as being important but did not discuss academic offerings as being a key feature for attracting Gen Z students. Stephenson et al. (2016) describes having an honors college as a highly attractive feature, but none of the institutions mentioned their honors programs as being significant.

Sub-Theme 4: Student Success. Student success refers to matriculation and outcomes, where outcomes refers to job placement or acceptance into post-graduate programs. From a marketing perspective, this looks like featuring stories of student research and accomplishments. Institutionally, this means implementing support programs for students to ensure they succeed.

Table 4

Selected Examples of Significant Statements Related to Student Success

| Statement |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| "...a commitment at the presidential level to help more people graduate." |
| "Students really want results so they're very interested in outcomes which is a lot of the reason we talk so much about research and what they will actually get to understand as part of their education." |
| "We have proven that students from any background can succeed at equal levels and that's very attractive to students." |
| "We digitally track and use analytics to see when students are going off course in their classes and then we're able to make recommendations immediately - so we're really right there to pick them back up when they derail and put them back on course." |

Participants from each of the five institutions mentioned having a campus-wide effort related to student success and helping students graduate. Two of the institutions discussed using data to identify struggling students so they could reach out and offer support. One institution discussed being known for their student success program and felt it helped support their brand

and attract Gen Z students. In review of institutional websites, it was immediately clear that student success is a top priority for all five of the institutions. Each featured student success stories on their home page. This focus on achieving outcomes is supported by literature (Hope, 2016; Loveland, 2017) that states that outcomes are important to Gen Z students who do not want to spend money on a degree with no guarantee of success. Participants from each institution discussed their student success at length and with pride, but the results of the success programs are the main focus in marketing strategies rather than the details of the programs themselves.

Summary of Theme 1. Product encompasses the student's experience – the community of which they will be a part, the degree they will earn, and the outcomes they can expect. Participants discussed how marketing efforts manage the brand and share stories that support the product of the institution. However, they indicated that decisions related to academic offerings did not fall within the marketing department. That being said, they discussed working with college partners to help tell the stories of the academic departments such as student research opportunities and alumni features that promote positive student outcomes.

Theme 2: Price. Research shows that Gen Z are price-conscious (Hope, 2016; Stephenson et al., 2016), and this study revealed that higher education marketers agree. Participants from each of the five institutions discussed affordability and/or overall value as being significant factors in attracting Gen Z. This aligns with research by Mahajan and Golahit (2019) who state that in higher education, price is viewed more as affordability and value, and includes total cost of attendance such as tuition, fees, room and board, and day-to-day expenses. The concepts of affordability and value are discussed in more detail in the next few paragraphs.

Sub-Theme 5: Affordability. Affordability is a fairly general, subjective term used by students depending on their personal circumstances. However, participants from four of the five

institutions discussed affordability in more concrete terms such as lower tuition than competitors or the availability of financial aid. Their examples are listed below.

Table 5

Selected Examples of Significant Statements Related to Affordability

| Statement |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “It costs less to come here.” |
| “We have done a really good job of providing that value for students by keeping our costs affordable” |
| “92% of our students who demonstrate some sort of a need receive tuition assistance” |
| “Our price is fairly competitive” |

The higher education industry has begun lowering stated tuition costs while reducing discounting for improved cost transparency (Davis et al., 2019). This allows institutions to promote lower costs to appeal to cost-conscious students. Gen Z students are concerned about the rising costs of college (Hope, 2016) and are wary of taking on student loan debt with no guarantee of a job, making scholarships and grants a stronger financial appeal to Gen Z students because those do not have to be repaid. Stephenson et al. (2016) found that students are willing to forgo their top choice of institution due to price, demonstrating the significance of promoting affordability in marketing materials. Participant 7 stated, “I think Gen Z students are looking for a definite career path and trying to get out of school with as little debt as possible.”

One institution, the private institution, did not discuss affordability as being a priority or something they focused on in their marketing materials, other than noting they felt that it was something that Gen Z is seeking. However, their website includes financial aid statistics on their home page with affordability as a subheading under admissions, indicating that the institution recognizes the significance of affordability and has incorporated strategies to address the issue. The other institutions also feature tuition and financial aid on their websites in a prominent

location on their home page. Only one of the institutions requires more than one click to find cost of attendance, and all five place information about financial aid alongside the cost of attendance.

Sub-Theme 6: Value. Like affordability, value is also a subjective term for students.

Participants discussed value as demonstrating that the time and resources spent in earning a degree at their institution as being ultimately beneficial and worth the investment. From a marketing perspective, this means featuring student outcomes and statistics to demonstrate that students are successful in launching a career and earning a high enough income to make a college education a worthwhile investment.

Table 6

Selected Examples of Significant Statements Related to Value

| Statement |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “...want to make sure the degree will benefit them in the long run” |
| “...Looking for a school that can assure that they're going to have postgraduate value.” |
| “...shows that getting a degree actually will help them.” |
| “...a school that says you know when you leave this university with your degree your mid-year salary is 55,000 or your 20 year net return is \$80,000 they're looking for what can benefit them down the road because it's an investment” |

As was already discussed, Gen Z students are price-conscious and wary of high-price institutions that do not demonstrate value (Hope, 2016). Literature has established that students select a college by comparing benefits to cost to determine value (Davis et al., 2019).

Participants from three of the five institutions discussed value – meaning, that the financial cost of the degree is worth it. Participant 9 said,

I think that just speaking on the industry as a whole there is a lot of question nowadays to the value of higher education. Why should we be paying all this money to get this education and I think [redacted] has done a really good job of providing that value for

students by keeping our costs affordable and we've implemented a lot of programs to help students succeed.

They also discussed how they demonstrate value – through student outcomes, graduation statistics, and student success strategies. Participant 10 stated,

We find that our prospective students want to see it from another student's perspective ...so, instead of just spelling out a statistic, we frame it in the form of a student's success story so we might have a testimonial from a student who says, 'I graduated in three years because I used the recommendations of the graduation progression success monitor when I got off course in biology my sophomore year.'

These stories and statistics are prominent throughout the institutional websites, on social media channels and in news stories. Three of the five institution's website homepages feature rankings and accolades as a seemingly permanent fixture of the homepage. Content changes frequently so the researcher cannot definitively state that these items are always present, or that the other two do not feature these items. All five homepages prominently share a lot of information about COVID and returning to campus, so the researcher cannot confirm what was typically prominent on the homepage pre-pandemic. The researcher is able to confirm that news stories about student success and national rankings are shared not only on website news pages, but also on social media channels.

Summary of Price. Value and affordability are both subjective terms, yet almost every participant discussed the importance of being affordable and being able to demonstrate value. Like with academics, participants indicated that the marketing team had little to do with pricing strategies but were involved with communicating value to prospective students. In addition, they

indicated that sharing information about scholarship opportunities and deadlines for financial aid were an important part of their communication strategies.

Theme 3: Place. The location and amenities of the school encompass the place.

Participants discussed featuring the beautiful location, physical features of the buildings, as well as proximity to city or industry. A selection of quotes are listed in Table 7.

Table 7

Selected Examples of Significant Statements Related to Place

| Statement |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “A lot of attention has been given to our bricks and mortar to include welcoming spaces and state-of-the-art facilities. We have open places for students to gather and the classrooms are top-notch learning environments.” |
| “...highlight our great location, beautiful campus...” |
| “You can drive by the University and see... how pretty the campus is 'cause we are obviously very proud of how cool the campus looks...” |
| “Students want a university that's in a well-connected location [close to industry and cultural activities].” |

Place did not come up in research, however, it was a common theme among four of the five institutions. Two discussed their physical campus as being a priority with resources allocated to new buildings and the overall physical environment, while the others discussed featuring the physical aspects of their campus in marketing materials. Research by Stephenson et al. (2016) lists physical aspects of campus, including size, location and aesthetics, as important factors to Gen Z in the final selection of which institution to attend.

Interestingly, none of the institutions share the same state or climate, though four are in major metropolitan areas. The only institution that did not discuss place as an important part of the marketing strategy is a public institution which discussed other state schools as their major competitors. Perhaps this is why place was less important – if most students come from in-state

and competitors have the same place advantage, the physical attribute may be less important than the degree programs and overall student experience. However, when reviewing the institution's Instagram account, it was clear that place was included in their marketing strategy - much of the content shared related to campus aesthetics, similar to the other four institutions.

Summary of Place. Place relates to the location and physical attributes of campus. The researcher expected that online programs would be part of the discussion, but this did not come up in any of the interviews. Instead, it was clear that participants were proud of their campus and discussed the location either in terms of climate or proximity to industry. Participants also discussed buildings or aesthetics in terms of being attractive to students. Literature (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2018) suggests that campus visits are highly effective at attracting potential students and have high rates of enrollment among students who visit campus. This suggests that strategies related to place are significant in attracting Gen Z students.

Theme 4: Promotion. Participants from these five institutions indicated they use a variety of promotional strategies to attract Gen Z. All five discussed having a strong focus on digital while still using print and more traditional media when appropriate. They indicated a heavy emphasis on social media, brand image, website, sharing information in an easy-to-understand way (digestible copy), and using internal and external data to target specific audiences. These are discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

Sub-Theme 7: Social Media. Social media marketing is not new – it has been used heavily since Millennials came of age. However, the platforms have changed and the way in which HEIs connect with students has changed. It is now a primary source of information for students, as described by many of the research participants (Table 8), which means higher education marketers are investing significant resources into this promotional tool.

Table 8*Selected Examples of Significant Statements Related to Social Media*

| Statement |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “...give them the options to find us where they are.” |
| “Our social media has blossomed over the past four years.” |
| “Our office has beefed up our social media platforms and worked to communicate with Gen Z students in the forums and mediums they prefer.” |
| “...buying ad space on a platform like Tik Tock or you know creating a custom frame on a platform like Snapchat...” |
| “...if you're going to get a postcard that tells you how to apply for FAFSA you are also going to see that on social media with a very animated 3 easy steps to FAFSA because we know that that's where our students are spending their time.” |
| “Social media is a go-to source for information.” |

Current literature clearly states that marketers need to utilize multiple social media channels to effectively reach Gen Z (The Center for Generational Kinetics, 2018). Most of the participants indicated that staying on top of trends and determining which platforms the current generation was using was important to their success.

Participant 3 stated,

There's a shift in the platforms that they're using to communicate and content that maybe worked for previous generations isn't content that's resonating with this generation so whether that's like buying add space on a platform like Tik Tok or you know creating a custom frame on a platform like Snapchat - that's something that they tend to use more than previous generations - that's been something that we've focused on.

In addition to focusing on different social media platforms, several participants discussed increasing staff to focus on social media. Participant 5 said “we put more people onto both social media and the website to fulfill the need for a more modern and more useful digital presence”

and Participant 4 indicated their social media presence has increased significantly over the past four years with staff dedicated solely to social media.

Literature suggests that potential students use social media to understand what it is like to attend the institution. Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2019) states that students are looking for videos and photography to provide an authentic glimpse into campus life. Participants seemed to agree and discussed using a broad strategy that includes promoting the physical campus, athletics, student activities, degree programs, student features, and reminders about important deadlines – all using data to drive strategic decisions on what to share. For example, Participant 3 said,

Based on what I've seen in terms of like success with content that we posted and sort of seeing like the reaction that we get from students they really seem to be looking for what the experience is like at the University that they're coming to, what's it going to be like living on campus, what's it going to be like interacting socially, what's my class going to be like, you know, what is campus like - those are some big driving factors. They sort of want to try on the shoes before they buy them.

In reviewing social media channels of the five institutions, it is clear they use a broad approach to showcase the student experience and touch on many of the areas already discussed: product, price, and place. Campus buildings and scenery are common as are student activities – athletics are prominent among the institutions with a strong athletic brand. Images include real students interacting on campus or feature a student quote. Reminders about financial aid, the FAFSA, and COVID updates are also included. For the institutions which utilize a slogan or hashtag, these are used consistently in content along with brand colors.

Sub-Theme 8: Website. Not surprisingly, the most widely discussed promotional tool discussed by participants was the institutional website. This aligns with a recent survey of

undergraduate college students (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019) which revealed that website content is the most influential marketing promotion tool available to higher education marketers. Given the context of this study – attracting Gen Z students to Higher Education Institutions – participants’ responses were focused on the homepage and pages dedicated to admissions. Some of their responses are shared in Table 9.

Table 9

Selected Examples of Significant Statements Related to Website

| Statement |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “...chat bot is 24/7 and can help students - we've had a lot of success with that...” |
| “...our main webpage is geared toward entering students...” |
| “We put more people onto both social media and the website to fulfill the need for a more modern and more useful digital presence.” |
| “I do special things for admissions so that their stuff is fancier than everything else and it's newer and more modern - it changes quite a bit because we don't want to look out of date on the admissions if that's their first contact.” |
| “...there's a lot of interactivity on the website...” |

Participants overwhelmingly discussed how the institutional homepage is targeted to prospective students. Given that higher education institutions have multiple audiences, such as current students, parents, alumni, donors, faculty and staff, and the community, selecting this one segment as the primary audience is significant. In reviewing the five institutional websites, all five included prominent buttons to visit campus and to apply. Four also feature prominent quick links to explore majors or estimate costs. Additional content varies among institutions and includes COVID-related info, news, events, and links for other institutional information.

Three institutions discussed recent upgrades to their institutional websites which they felt provided a better user experience through consistent formatting, content, and messaging.

Participant 5 said,

The old site was really difficult to find information on because it was done by so many different people and locations - it was all organized differently. It was just difficult from an outsiders and newcomers' perspective to find information. Starting around 2010 we pretty aggressively took hold of that and purchased a content management system and started bit by bit working with the colleges and the divisions of various offices to go through their content and delete redundant content, get rid of old content, and push it into a consistent templated format so somebody who isn't a deep insider could find the information that they needed.

Participant 9 discussed an overhaul of the website in terms of content aligning with a new institutional campaign. "We changed over the entire admissions website, all of the printed collateral, as well as anything digital all to be in the framework of the [campaign redacted]."

Several participants discussed interactivity and cutting edge features used on admissions pages to appeal to prospective students. Three specifically mentioned the use of a chatbot to help students find information quickly. Participants from all five institutions indicated that the main pages of the website, including the homepage and the main admissions page, were managed by the marketing department in collaboration with admissions and other related departments and colleges.

Sub-Theme 9: Digestible Copy. The theme of digestible copy means that the content that is shared is easy to understand and presented in a way that is relatable to the audience. While this strategy did not come up in the literature review, participants from four of the institutions discussed this theme in at least some capacity, demonstrating the significance of language and content presentation. While one institution did not mention digestible copy, it should not be

implied that it is not important to their overall strategy. Some excerpts from the interviews are shared in Table 10.

Table 10

Selected Examples of Significant Statements Related to Digestible Copy

| Statement |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>“If University housing wants to promote all of the housing communities we have and the pricing options, we know that our students and prospective students want to see pictures of the dorms - they don't want a blueprint or a chart that lists bathrooms and fees and things like that...”</p> <p>“I turn giant pools of content into digestible look books.”</p> <p>“We have to put things in terms that make sense to them and organize things in terms that make sense to them - making the information that people want to find, making that accessible to them...”</p> <p>“...accurate and compelling content to keep people engaged.”</p> |

One of the most compelling examples of intentionally making content digestible came from Participant 10, who shared how, in recognizing that prospective students do not want large charts showing room dimensions, bathrooms, and fees, they use photos to showcase rooms instead so the students can picture themselves living on campus. This example should not suggest that such charts are not utilized elsewhere, but for marketing purposes, because they are looking to attract the student, the details are less important than the bigger picture of the student imagining themselves there. Others shared details about being intentional about word choice and how academic wording is not the best style to attract high school juniors and seniors. Participant 11 said, “We try to focus a lot on the quality of our visuals with quick and informative copy.” Another participant discussed content in terms of website organization, and how their website is not based on organizational structure, but in a way that makes sense for the user so they can easily find the information they are looking for. This last example is supported by a recent survey in which students indicated that ease of use on an institutional website to find relevant

information is critical (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019). The theme of digestible copy is also heavily related to the theme of identifying a target market because language and visual presentation is tailored to the audience.

Sub-Theme 10: Targeted Marketing. As discussed in the literature review, a primary concept in marketing theory is identifying the target market (Hunt, 2018; McCarthy, 1960). In the case of HEIs, when target markets are identified, marketers are able to adapt their strategies to appeal to the market. It was evident during the interviews that the participating institutions have a lot of data regarding the types of students who are most likely to enroll at the institution, usually held by the admissions department. This concept aligns with literature that states that HEIs are increasingly utilizing their data to identify common characteristics of existing students to establish target markets (Conick, 2017). Excerpts regarding how these marketers are tailoring their marketing strategies to a target audience are included in Table 11.

Table 11

Selected Examples of Significant Statements Related to Targeted Marketing

| Statement |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “We started using more data mining more digital tools to speak directly to students.” |
| “We have very targeted direct mail campaigns...” |
| “We have strategists who work closely with our campus partners and communication experts in those schools and colleges to sort of figure out what they have to say and then figure out the best way to say it...we create content and target those audiences.” |
| “You have to be aware of the audience you're trying to reach, and you have to try to gear things to that audience.” |
| “A few years ago, we launched a series of personalized videos that we sent out to students who were accepted to get them excited to come.” |

Participants from each of the five institutions discussed using targeted marketing strategies to reach specific audiences. It was clear from the interviews that target markets were created using data from the Admissions department and other campus partners. This is discussed

in more detail in the collaboration and research sections in the sub questions. One participant shared that they use software to help identify personas. Personas are a fictional representation of an audience based on data segmenting that can include demographic information as well as behaviors and motivation (Edwards, 2020). By identifying personas, the marketing department can develop strategies to appeal to those specific personas and move them toward a desired behavior, such as signing up for a campus visit or enrolling at the institution.

The other participants shared how they are using target markets in their marketing strategies. One participant discussed sending personalized videos to accepted students while another discussed working with academic departments to identify relevant content to share with potential students interested in a specific major. This theme is heavily related to the previous theme of digestible copy, that is, using language and visual presentations that appeal to the specific audience the marketers are trying to reach.

Summary of Promotion. Participants discussed many strategies used for marketing promotions with a strong focus on social media, website, and using language that is accurate, concise, and clear to the intended audience. What was most evident regarding promotions is that these marketers are using a full arsenal of tactics depending on what is appropriate for their target market. They discussed using postcards, billboards, radio ads, television ads, and email marketing, among others. The key point being that they have clearly identified target markets and chose promotional tools based on the audience and goals of the promotional campaign.

Sub Questions

The sub-questions, “Why were these strategies chosen?” and “Why are these new strategies more successful?” led to themes related to research and cross-campus collaboration. Most participants indicated that overarching strategies are determined by leadership and trickles

down to the departmental level. However, within those overarching institutional strategies, participants indicated that specific marketing strategies are selected based on research. When answering why they have been successful, most participants pointed to collaboration across the campus in choosing and implementing effective strategies.

Theme 5: Research. Participants from each of the institutions spoke about utilizing research to determine marketing strategies. Because the participants have varied job functions, it was significant that each recognized how data from research impacted their specific role. Also of note was that research in this context included both external research about their target audiences as well as internal research gathered from marketing, admissions, and institutional research.

Table 12

Selected Examples of Significant Statements Related to Research

| Statement |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “We have focus groups operating all the time around campus to determine what is best.” |
| “...a lot of our success is based on constant research data.” |
| “...there was some research conducted with alumni, with people just in the community, and throughout the US about what they thought about our institution, if they had heard of us, what they had heard, and so we do use that kind of market research to inform decisions.” |
| “We use data from our social media posts to help guide decision making.” |

Literature suggests that marketing departments have access to survey data, industry reports, website analytics, enrollment records, and alumni databases to provide data for strategic decisions (Bahr, 2019). While participants did not go into detail regarding their individual access to data, they did indicate it was a mix of institutional data coming from admissions and other departments, external data from consultants and industry reports, as well as data collected by the marketing department, for example, popular social media content or website content. “We try

different things on our website and if they don't get the kind of hits that we expect then they can iterate and change that, and it includes every kind of metric” (Participant 6).

In gathering and combining these data, participants indicated they are better able to make strategic decisions regarding their marketing promotions. Participant 5 indicated that research data help their institution with creating personas and determining which marketing strategies to use to attract students who match the persona. This concept aligns with Schreane (2019) who states that market research provides valuable information regarding the target markets for the institution. Participant 6 stated directly that their success is based, in part, on constant research data, and later shared that they have ongoing research on campus with students while also utilizing research among alumni and the larger community. These data inform decisions across the entire institution and especially the areas of marketing.

Summary of Research. While most of the participants indicated that overarching strategies were handed down from institutional leaders, specific strategies for their areas of expertise were determined based on available research. Participants indicated using external and internal data to inform their decisions. They also use data to determine efficacy of strategies so they can pivot and make changes as needed. This iterative approach leads to more successful outcomes.

Theme 6: Collaboration. A significant theme from all of the participants was cross-campus collaboration, though the working relationships varied among participants. Every participant mentioned working closely with admissions, and most also discussed working with campus partners such as deans and program directors. They also discussed internal collaboration within the marketing department. Some examples are shared in Table 13.

Table 13*Selected Examples of Significant Statements Related to Collaboration*

| Statement |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “...we certainly collaborate with financial aid and we definitely collaborate with admissions.” |
| “The more collaboration there is between the academic side the admission recruiting side and the marketing communication side the stronger we are as a whole.” |
| “We work with many areas such as Admissions, our 14 colleges, housing, etc.” |
| “Our PR marketing Department has a really great relationship with admissions and we kind of feel like we're all one big team.” |
| “...really well rounded group of people who play off one another's ideas bring a lot of different backgrounds and age ranges to the table and can really tap into a lot of different audiences.” |
| “We work with a lot of the Deans and program directors and program coordinators to really try to tell the academic story that they're trying to tell.” |

The idea of a formalized enrollment management team was discussed in the literature review, yet it did not come up during interviews. Three of the five institutions have staff who oversee “enrollment management” but again, it was never labeled as such by individual participants. The researcher expected a more prominent discussion of an enrollment management team among these institutions based on her prior experience and research. Despite the difference in terminology, it was clear that each of the five institutions represented have a good working relationship with admissions as well as others across campus. This aligns with the earlier definition of enrollment management - a comprehensive, campus-wide marketing approach to student acquisition and retention beginning with the student’s initial contact “through graduation or departure from the institution” (Vander Schee, 2009, p. 2).

The level of collaboration varied between institutions. For example, one participant discussed that the marketing team controls all social media accounts whereas other participants discussed a mix of control. Most stated that it was a back and forth with open collaboration to ensure they acted on the best ideas. Participant 7 stated, “We are also working more

collaboratively with recruitment, financial aid and the individual colleges to have a more cohesive strategy to attract students.” Participant 11 shared, “We work with many areas such as Admissions, our 14 colleges, housing, etc.” Two specific quotes were key takeaways from this theme. First, Participant 9 said, “our PR marketing department has a really great relationship with admissions and we kind of feel like we're all one big team and you don't always see that.” Similarly, Participant 6 stated “The more collaboration there is between the academic side the admission recruiting side and the marketing communication side the stronger we are as a whole.”

Summary of Collaboration. The cross-campus collaboration was evident from every single participant. Each had a clearly defined role and understood their place among the team and how they contribute to institutional success. Participants also spoke about collaboration among the marketing department, describing how different backgrounds, experience, and demographics lead to more successful outcomes. This collaborative approach allows the best ideas to develop into strategies and leads to positive results and a positive work culture.

Research Question 2

The second research question “What are they doing differently to attract Gen Z compared to Gen X or Y?” had mixed results that reflected learnings from the first research question. Most of the participants had not been in the industry or in their role long enough to make a comparison. To best answer this question, the researcher compared the strategies identified in the previous pages to what was uncovered during the literature review about the different generations.

Theme 7: Focus on Digital Marketing. In comparing to the literature review, some of the key differences are a focus on digital marketing, especially social media and website. These media were used heavily in attracting Millennials, but HEI marketers are diligently following

trends to keep up with the current generation. A more detailed discussion can be found in the previous section on promotions, but some samples are included in table 14 as a reminder of how significant this theme is in attracting a new generation.

Table 14

Selected Examples of Significant Statements Related to Digital Marketing

| Statement |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| “...evolution of social media starting with Facebook and from that time forward we have tried to stay on trend with social media” |
| “Our office has beefed up our social media platforms and worked to communicate with Gen Z students in the forums and mediums they prefer” |
| “Our social media has blossomed over the past four years.” |
| “...our main webpage is geared toward entering students...” |
| “We put more people onto both social media and the website to fulfill the need for a more modern and more useful digital presence.” |
| “I feel like in recent years, particularly the last five to 10 years, the whole direction changed - that we should have a clear easy to understand website and it should be externally focused and we should be helpful to people - and all that facilitates people who would like to enroll enrolling.” |

Summary of Digital Marketing. This theme is somewhat redundant to the themes of social media and website, but specifically addresses research question two – how are HEI’s attracting Gen Z compared to previous generations. Participants felt like in general, it was fairly similar that the student experience was important, that social media and website content has been important for a long time. However, it was also clear that social media and websites have changed over time – the content is different, the approach is different. Each of these institutions have websites that primarily focus on the prospective students, and several indicated this was a new approach. While participants indicated still using traditional media, they overwhelmingly felt that digital has taken a prominent place in their marketing strategies to attract Gen Z.

Theme 8: Focus on First Generation Students. Participants from three of the schools discussed focusing on first generation students. They stated that these students do not have the support to help navigate the college search process – they do not know where to start or what to look for when searching for a college. Due to this challenge, these schools have shifted to make it easy for students to get information they need and apply. These schools have specific strategies in place to attract these students and help guide them through the process, which results in greater enrollment among these students.

Participant 10 stated,

A lot of first generation students just don't have the economic backing to attend college or the bandwidth to know how that process works. So, we're right there offering that financial support and the steps - before you actually apply to university, we're right there providing that information through publications and campaigns and really reach out and say, if you express an interest, we will hold your hand.

This focus on first-generation students was not discussed in the literature review and was not an anticipated theme. However, it is a popular area of research. Recent studies have examined first-generation students' understanding of financial aid (Taylor & Bicak, 2020), college readiness (Cataldi et al., 2018; Wahleithner, 2020), the first year experience (Roksa et al., 2020; Schwartz et al., 2018), and perceived career barriers (Toyokawa & DeWald, 2020). Additionally, current studies indicate that first-generation students are accounting for a large percentage of incoming freshman, especially among ethnic minorities (RTI International, 2019). Given this information, it is not surprising to learn that these institutions have specific strategies in place to attract and enroll these students and help them succeed.

Summary of First-Generation Students. As stated, this theme was unexpected, yet not surprising. Current research (RTI International, 2019) indicates that first-generation students are accounting for an increasing percentage of first year student enrollment. Therefore, it is not surprising to learn that three of these five institutions discussed this group specifically as an important segment of their target market.

Theme 9: Authenticity in Marketing. As discussed in the literature review and identified as a potential theme, current literature states that authenticity in marketing is important to Gen Z. HEI marketers are aware and showcasing the real student experience, featuring student research, student life, and student success. More so they are doing so with authenticity – sharing real stories. Participant 3 said,

They are looking for what the experience is like at the University that they're coming to - what's it going to be like living on campus, what's it going to be like interacting socially, what's my class going to be like, you know what is campus like.

As Gen Z has become wary of marketing, HEI marketers have not only transitioned to sharing more student stories – they are carefully selecting where, how, and when to share those stories. As an example, The Center for Generational Kinetics (2018) found that Gen Z is most likely to trust ads on YouTube than any other form of advertising. At the same time, influencer marketing has become popular and is a way that some marketers have tried to authentically reach Gen Z, though the effectiveness of this practice is debated in literature (Taylor, 2020). The bottom line is as Participant 6 states, “we can't fool them into coming here - we have to really share with them what this place is about so create an authentic experience for them to engage.”

Summary of Authenticity. Literature indicated that authenticity is important to Gen Z, and they are wary of marketing tactics (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019). This is not necessarily

different from previous generations, but marketers are increasingly finding new avenues to engage Gen Z and promote an authentic student experience (Williams et al., 2010). Participants discussed featuring real student stories and using photos and videos of actual students and their experiences. It is also common practice to use current students for campus tours. This lends credibility to the marketing message, especially because Gen Z is more likely to believe their peers than a marketing message on a website or advertisement.

Summary of Findings

In summary, several themes were identified by analyzing the data collected from interviews and marketing materials and comparing to scholarly and professional literature. These themes answered the stated research questions and are listed in Table 15. The research questions are:

RQ1: What marketing strategies are successful HEIs using to attract Generation Z students?

RQ1a: Why were these strategies chosen?

RQ1b: Why are these new strategies more successful?

RQ2: What are they doing differently to attract Gen Z compared to Gen X or Y?

The consensus among participants was that while Gen Z is different from previous generations, strategies used in prior years are still applicable but must be adapted. For example, staying on top of social media trends has been important since Facebook became popular in the mid-2000s. The same is true of institutional websites – they remain an important communication tool, but the content and organization has had to change. All of these institutions are still using more traditional media like printed materials when appropriate but are selecting strategies using their entire marketing toolkit based on the specific market. As Participant 3 said, “we look at

everything that we want to do, and we look at every goal and then figure out what will help us best succeed for that goal.” There is a lot more focus on research and data. There is also a general consensus that strategies around product, price, place, and promotion are all important and play significant roles in attracting the Gen Z student.

Table 15

Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes in Relation to Research Questions

| Theme | Research Question |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Theme 1: Product | RQ1 |
| Sub-Theme 1: Brand | RQ1 |
| Sub-Theme 2: Student Experience | RQ1 |
| Sub-Theme 3: Academic offerings | RQ1 |
| Sub-Theme 4: Student Success | RQ1 |
| Theme 2: Price | RQ1 |
| Sub-Theme 5: Affordability | RQ1 |
| Sub-Theme 6: Value | RQ1 |
| Theme 3: Place | RQ1 |
| Theme 4: Promotion | RQ1 |
| Sub-Theme 7: Social Media | RQ1 |
| Sub-Theme 8: Website | RQ1 |
| Sub-Theme 9: Digestible Copy | RQ1 |
| Sub-Theme 10: Targeted Marketing | RQ1 |
| Theme 5: Research | RQ1a & RQ1b |
| Theme 6: Collaboration | RQ1a & RQ1b |
| Theme 7: Digital Marketing | RQ2 |
| Theme 8: First-Generation Students | RQ2 |
| Theme 9: Authenticity | RQ2 |

In reviewing the research, what became most evident was the existence of cross-campus collaboration and an institutional commitment to student success. Every participant discussed how their specific role contributed to the institution’s overall success, but each recognized that

they were part of a larger team that all worked together to meet their goals. It was heartening to hear the marketing team speak highly of the admissions team and other campus partners.

The learnings generated from these themes can be used to summarize answers to the stated research questions. What marketing strategies are successful HEIs using to attract Generation Z students? It was clear that successful institutions are utilizing every marketing tool available to attract Gen Z students, with a focus on digital. None of the participants felt any one strategy was the reason for their success, but rather their broad 360 degree approach in reaching Gen Z students utilizing a variety of complementary strategies. Why were these strategies chosen and why are they more successful? These institutions are using data and the expertise of their campus partners to make strategic decisions. This method inherently leads to better outcomes. Last, what are they doing differently to attract Gen Z compared to Gen X or Gen Y? Many of the strategies are the same – get the message out to the prospective student where they are – but Gen Z requires a much broader scope than previous generations with an emphasis on digital marketing. There is also a greater focus on attracting first-generation students due to this market's increasing enrollment in Higher Education Institutions. A focus on authenticity in messaging has also changed – less marketing jargon and more focus on the entire student experience, from enrollment to matriculation, with an emphasis on outcomes. These answers and application to business practices are explored in more detail in the next section.

Application to Professional Practice

After reviewing the data and completing the analysis, the next step is to apply learnings to professional practice. The general business problem to be addressed with this study is that marketers in U.S. higher education institutions do not fully understand how to attract Gen Z students, resulting in lost revenue and wasted resources spent on ineffective marketing strategies.

This section will review how learnings can be applied to address the general business problem. While this study focused on traditional, brick and mortar, bachelor-degree granting institutions, other types of institutions, such as online or associates-degree granting, may also be able to apply these learnings to more effectively attract Gen Z students.

Improving General Business Practice

This section discusses the application of the findings to the field of higher education and the professional practice of marketing. Specifically, the results of this study can improve general business practice for marketers in higher education. The data analysis supports the concepts of the four P's of marketing and its application in higher education marketing. This study found that the use of the four P's of marketing in conjunction with the development of strategies to attract a specific audience was found to positively impact a higher education's ability to attract Gen Z students. As such, the findings are directly applicable to higher education marketers.

Higher Education Marketing. Despite the national decline in higher education enrollment (NES, 2018), some institutions have been successful in increasing enrollment among Gen Z students, such as the institutions that participated in this study. The results of this study suggest that marketing strategies play a significant role in attracting Gen Z students, as supported by literature. Research by The Center for Generational Kinetics (2018) suggests that the change in generational values has challenged marketers to re-evaluate messaging and marketing strategies. Participants shared that continually evaluating what channels and messaging to use based on both internal and external data are critical to reaching this audience.

Four P's of Marketing. This study demonstrates that the marketing of higher education to attract Gen Z students involves all of the Four P's of marketing. The results also demonstrate the Four P's involve not just the marketing department, but also admissions, academic affairs,

and other departments across campus, which is supported by literature (Gyure & Arnold, 2001). The establishment of a target market is central to marketing theory and is supported by marketing research to understand the needs of the consumer (Hunt, 2018). Marketing activities, specifically McCarthy's (1960) concepts of product, price, place, and promotion, focus the organization on meeting the needs of the specified target market. Participants indicated that understanding the target market is a challenging but necessary task in order to be effective in attracting and enrolling Gen Z students. HEIs are increasingly utilizing their internal data to identify common characteristics of existing students as well as compile external research to identify target markets that align with institutional mission and strategies (Conick, 2017). This study demonstrates that establishing target markets utilizing data is important when developing effective marketing strategies.

Branding. Increased competition in higher education means many colleges are using branding strategies to differentiate themselves (Chapleo, 2015; Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). Branding has become increasingly popular to develop distinctive personalities and create a positive reputation, which research shows to be a significant factor in college selection (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Stephenson et al., 2016). Results of this study support the concept that institutional brand can positively impact the University's ability to attract Gen Z. However, establishing a differentiated brand can be a challenge for HEIs. Chapleo (2015) stated that these challenges can be due to the institutional culture at most HEIs not being open to branding as well as unclear expectations of who manages the brand, including the role of marketing in the branding process (Chapleo, 2015). Hemsley-Brown et al. (2016) stated that if these challenges can be overcome, a deeper understanding of institutional brand would assist with marketing decisions and the allocation of available resources. Results of this study reveal that branding efforts among these

institutions are managed by the marketing office. Participants' responses differed regarding how their offices managed the brand specifically – some had large brand management teams with staff dedicated to public relations and institutional communications. Others operated with much smaller teams but still held branding responsibilities. This study shows that brand management responsibilities can effectively reside within the marketing department and can be applied differently depending on the resources available.

Competitive Advantage. Business practitioners widely accept the concept of competitive advantage in operating a successful business. According to Porter (1996), competitive advantage is what makes a product or service better than its competitors and is dependent on what the customer values. A marketer's job is to understand what the competitive advantage is and create strategies to communicate that advantage to the target market in order to generate sales (Srivastava et al., 2001). Participants in this study supported this idea of creating strategies to communicate competitive advantage to potential students. In higher education, the competitive advantage could be price, reputation, quality of education, athletic performance, career outcomes, or a combination of things. The results of this study suggest that a clear understanding of the competitive advantage is beneficial to branding efforts and in developing marketing strategies.

Summary. This study is highly related to the business practice of marketing, specifically higher education marketing. Results support the concept of the Four P's of marketing in higher education, the practice of branding, and the identification of an institution's competitive advantage to inform marketing decisions. The next section will address how these learnings can be practically applied at a higher education institution.

Potential Application Strategies

The learnings from this study lead to several possible applications in the field of higher education marketing. The researcher has identified five potential applications, though the reader may see more within the data results. Practitioners should review these strategies and determine if there are opportunities to implement them at their institution. The results of this study have the potential to impact the abilities of higher education institutions to effectively attract Gen Z students.

Develop Data Sharing Strategies. This study revealed that the sharing of data across campus is critical to effectively attract Gen Z students. Literature supports the usage of data to inform marketing decisions (Bahr, 2019; Schreane, 2019). Participants discussed a positive working relationship with campus partners, specifically the Admissions team, that facilitates the sharing of data. These data are then used to create marketing strategies related to website content and organization, social media content, and advertising. Participants also discussed using external data available from industry publications and consultants. These data can be helpful in better understanding the target audience and in identifying potential new programs and prioritizing organizational goals.

The collection, distribution, and application of data is easier said than done. It is important that leadership understands what data to collect, how to use it, and how to share it with those who can maximize it. Internal data may include information about potential and current students, website and social media analytics, results of focus groups, and advertising-related data. These data can be used to inform marketing decisions. Participants in this study discussed using internal data from focus groups, surveys, and digital analytics to inform recruitment and

communication strategies. Data may be collected from multiple departments, so the close partnerships between these departments is important to maximize the available data.

Leadership must also understand where to find reliable external data and how to act on this information. Several participants discussed using information from consultants to understand trends in the industry. Like with internal data, reliable external data should also be shared in order to use it effectively.

Collaborate. The results of this study indicate that cross-campus collaboration is critical, especially between the sales side (admissions) and marketing. Institutional leadership needs to understand that attracting Gen Z students is not up to a single department but is a campus-wide effort. As already discussed in the previous paragraphs, data are collected by multiple departments and should be shared with others. In addition, it must be understood that knowledge of the audience also resides with individuals in departments outside of marketing, for example, in academic departments, student success, and financial aid. Participants discussed having a collaborative relationship with admissions and an understanding that both departments had worthwhile ideas about how to effectively reach their audience. Some also discussed utilizing the expertise among campus partners to develop marketing strategies. Therefore, it is important to create a collaborative culture where everyone is working together to accomplish the same goals.

Identify Target Markets. The crux of marketing strategies discussed in this research is the identification and understanding of the target market in order to develop marketing strategies, as suggested by (McCarthy, 1960). While Gen Z may be a target market, further segmentation may be necessary in order to be effective. Wants and needs vary by demographics and psychographics, so data must be utilized to determine segments for effective marketing strategies. One participant discussed how her department created personas to illustrate their

specific target markets. Personas are fictitious representations of a target market. This helped them personalize their audience and develop specific strategies to reach them. For example, first generation students was cited as a specific audience for several of the institutions, as discussed in the presentation of findings. Higher education marketers should take time to carefully identify their target audiences and conduct a thorough understanding of the wants and needs of these audiences to inform marketing strategies. However, marketers should be cautioned that it is not a one-time activity. It is important to remember that these audiences should be reviewed and adjusted as the business or external environment changes and then adjust strategies as needed.

Develop a Clear Brand. Results of this study revealed the importance of branding efforts in attracting Gen Z students. Everyone – staff, students, alumni, the community, and potential students - need to understand the institution’s brand. Additionally, these same audiences need to have buy-in with the brand. When potential students have buy-in of the brand, they engage and enroll in the institution, as discussed by Participants 4 and 8. When current students and alumni have buy-in, they help champion the brand. When staff have buy-in, they are more fully engaged in their work which supports a collaborative environment.

The process of undergoing branding exercises can be long and involves a lot of hard work, but participants state it is worth it. Participants discussed some branding efforts like determining their institutions strengths by talking to alumni, students, and their community. They also discussed having a clear ideas of what their brand represents. Once the brand has been identified, brand imagery and messaging should be developed and monitored for consistency. Potential students will need to have consistent interactions with the institution in order for branding efforts to be effective.

Invest in Digital Marketing. Results of this study clearly demonstrate that Gen Z potential students are going to digital sources like the website and social media for information about potential colleges and universities. This is supported by a recent survey by Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2019). Therefore, it is important that higher education leaders develop strategies to maximize digital resources.

The website was discussed as being a significant source of information sharing. Participants shared how their webpages are focused on potential students as the main audience, with content and site organization geared toward this audience. In addition to focusing on potential students, HEIs should review their websites and ensure there are opportunities to maximize student interactions to develop their sales funnel and ensure that key information is easy to find and understand.

Similarly, higher education marketers should carefully review their social media marketing strategies to ensure they are sharing content that resonates with their target audience. They can utilize data analytics as many of the respondents discussed, to determine what types of content perform well. Additionally, they should consider sharing important information like deadlines and tips that are specific to the audience, much like Participant 10 discussed when trying to attract first generation students.

Beyond the website and social media, institutional leaders should be actively seeking digital opportunities knowing that Gen Z students are digital natives. While not discussed in this study, online learning opportunities have become increasingly popular and almost necessary due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Finding ways to integrate digital tools with other aspects of the college experience will be a good business practice as Gen Z continues to enroll in college.

Summary. The results of this study have the potential to help HEIs improve their ability to effectively attract Gen Z students. HEI leadership and marketing professionals can implement the five potential applications discussed in this section. First, they should seek out opportunities to collect and share relevant data with departments across campus who can use it to improve their ability to attract Gen Z students. Second, HEIs should create a collaborative culture if they do not already have one, especially with the departments directly involved with communicating with Gen Z students. Third, marketing, in collaboration with admissions and other campus partners, should identify their target markets using both internal and external data in order to develop more effective marketing strategies. Fourth, the institution must develop and communicate a clear brand. The marketing department should establish processes in which they can monitor brand assets to ensure that all departments and individuals communicate the brand consistently. Last, HEIs must invest in digital marketing. Because digital channels are the most heavily utilized information resources, institutions need to invest financial and time resources to ensure they are being utilized effectively.

Recommendations for Further Study

This qualitative multiple case study revealed several learnings that may benefit from further research. The researcher recommends five specific areas of further study to better understand the business problem. The reader may see additional opportunities for research.

A Single Case Study

This study utilized data from five institutions to generalize learnings that can be applied to other HEIs. A single case study with an institution willing to share specific strategies they use to attract Gen Z students could be beneficial to similar institutions and provide highly specific

application ideas. Because case studies are popular in business as a way to learn from each other, this would be an appropriate approach to further research for more detailed learnings.

Study of Retention Strategies

While retention is not specifically related to attraction, they are important for keeping enrollment numbers up so that HEIs can fulfill their purpose. Knowing that Gen Z are brand-switchers (Swati, 2019), further research on how successful institutions are retaining Gen Z students would be beneficial to other institutions. This was touched on a little bit in the learnings related to student success and affordability but warrants further research.

Student Research

This study relied on the expert opinions of 11 individuals from five institutions to learn how to attract Gen Z students. Gaining a student's perspective would add value to determine if the learnings are the same from both perspectives. Some early research has already been conducted in this area (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2019; Seemiller & Grace, 2016), but the researcher feels that ongoing research in this area would be beneficial to determine if the wants and needs of this generation change over time.

Digital Strategies

The findings of this study revealed that digital strategies are important for attracting Gen Z students. Participants provided examples of how they are using their websites and social media to communicate with potential students. Further research that examines specific digital marketing strategies used by successful HEIs to generate leads is recommended. However, because this area of marketing changes quickly, fast-turnaround would be necessary in order to act on the learnings.

Effects of COVID-19

This study was conducted in the first six-months of the COVID-19 pandemic and used previous years' information to generate learnings (i.e., previous year's enrollment data and marketing strategies). As the pandemic continues, further research is needed to determine if these learnings change over time. For example, students' wants and needs may change due to the pandemic and could potentially require additional adaptations by the marketing team. While the researcher does not foresee a change in the importance of digital marketing or the use of data, collaboration, branding, or target markets, topics such as financial aid, safety precautions, and online vs in-person instruction could become more significant for this generation and their parents.

Reflections

This next section offers insight into the researcher's thoughts upon completion of this research, specifically in the areas of personal and professional growth. This includes discussion of personal bias and changes in thinking. The researcher's perspectives on the Biblical principles addressed in this study are also discussed.

Personal & Professional Growth

The researcher embarked on this study having previously worked in higher education marketing and while beginning the college search process with her daughter. Realizing that her own college selection journey was vastly different from both her daughter's journey and her own experience in attracting Millennials to the University at which she worked, the researcher was curious to know how successful institutions were so effective. Given her personal and professional experience with the topic of the study, the researcher would be remiss to think she did not have preconceived notions or biases.

As a marketer, the researcher had preconceived ideas about the potential answers to the interview questions. As such, it is possible that this affected her follow-up questions, with less questions related to ideas she felt she already understood. The interview guide was used to ensure each participant had the opportunity to answer the same questions. However, clarification questions were asked to better understand responses and may have been impacted by the researcher's bias. To mitigate the issue, the researcher provided a draft of her findings to each participant for feedback. This allowed participants the opportunity to question the validity of the results. None of the participants provided feedback other than to provide minor corrections to their quotes, so the researcher feels confident that no bias or preconceived ideas significantly impacted the results of the study.

The researcher is hopeful to return to the higher education industry as a marketer and this study provided her with knowledge and insight that would be beneficial in this role. She is also seeking opportunities to teach and the findings also help her better understand the Gen Z student. Last, the process of completing this research study has helped the researcher learn to be patient, clear in communication, inquisitive, and analytical. Patience is a Biblical virtue that the researcher struggles with. This study required patience at every point due to the nature of working with others for whom this study is not a priority. Through this, she has learned to recognize the sacrifice of others that is necessary to complete this kind of project which has led to more patience and gratitude. Communication has always been viewed as important and valuable to the researcher, but she learned of her own deficiencies in this area when receiving feedback on her study. This led her to go back and review her writing to ensure that she was clear in her meaning. Not surprisingly, this process led the researcher to be more inquisitive. While she had preconceived ideas, she had to set them aside in order to fully learn from the

participants. Then, she had to learn to fully analyze the data to avoid confirmation bias. The researcher is typically a quick thinker so she had to learn to slow down and conduct the analysis following a scientific process.

As a marketer and formerly a higher education marketer, many of the learnings were not surprising. However, her professional experience was strictly related to the promotions side of things. She understood the importance of product, price, and place in addition to promotions, but felt promotions was the key ingredient in successfully attracting Gen Z students. She learned from this study that promotions depends greatly on the other three P's – more so than she had previously realized. Many of the participants felt their role was solely in promotions, but they had a solid understanding of the impact of the other areas and spoke highly of their institution's strategies related to product, price, and place. This solidifies the belief of the researcher that marketing should be represented in HEI leadership when decisions are being made as it impacts the institutions ability to attract students.

Biblical Perspective

Several Biblical principles are significant to this study. First, the basis of this study is to help HEIs accomplish their purpose of educating students which relates to the Biblical principles of knowledge and wisdom. Second, the Biblical principle of stewardship is related to HEIs using their available resources efficiently. Third, Jesus provides an example of marketing promotions when he commands his followers to spread the Good News. While it is not the intention to compare higher education to Jesus, it is related in that it sets an example of connecting people with things they need, which is what marketing is at its foundation. Last, while not the intention of the study, the Biblical principle of loving one another was apparent in conducting this study. These concepts are discussed in the next few paragraphs.

Knowledge. Wisdom and learning are common themes in the Bible. In Exodus 31:1-3, The Lord tells Moses how he filled Bezalel with wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, suggesting that wisdom and knowledge are gifts from God. Smith (2017) posited that as Christians, we must seek out an understanding of our world. While the Bible provides knowledge about God, it is not an exhaustive book of learning on every topic – we must seek knowledge from others, which is the purpose of higher education. Therefore, the ability to attract and enroll students is critical for sharing wisdom and knowledge. “The heart of the discerning acquires knowledge, for the ears of the wise seek it out” (Proverbs 18:15, New International Version).

Stewardship. Stewardship is discussed in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) and when Peter states “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace” (1 Peter 4:10, English Standard Version). Higher education institutions were designed to educate students and prepare them for future careers (Platt et al., 2017). While they must operate as a business in order to accomplish their purpose and grow as an institution to meet changing needs of students and society, they must also be good stewards of their resources and invest in marketing strategies that are likely to be effective. This study examined how marketers can be good stewards of their resources by investing in strategies that are successful in attracting students.

Marketing. Jesus commanded his Disciples to make disciples, baptizing them, and teaching them to follow His commandments (Matthew 28:16-20). They went town to town to tell others about the Good News. This sets an example of connecting people with things they need – which is the most basic premise of marketing. It is not the intention of the researcher to compare eternal salvation and higher education. However, it cannot be overlooked that Jesus and his disciples frequently connected people with what they needed physically and emotionally before

making them believers (Matthew 4:23, John 5, Acts 4). In the case of higher education, marketing connects students with an institution that will help them grow and develop personally and professionally. The learnings from this study should help these marketers fulfill their purpose.

Love One Another. Christians are called to carry on the work that the Lord began and invest in other people (Keller & Alsdorf, 2016). “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4), “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God” (Hebrews 13:16), and ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (Galatians 5:14). This supports the sharing of knowledge with others, much like the goal of this study. It also speaks to the participants of this study who so clearly expressed how much they care about the students they are trying to reach. The researcher was heartened to hear from participants how much they are invested in students. They are committed to using ethical and moral marketing practices and exhibited joy when discussing how their institution seeks to ensure student success.

Summary

The reflections section offered insight into the researcher’s thoughts upon completion of this research, specifically in the areas of personal and professional growth. She discussed her personal reasons for embarking on this study and discussed how she attempted to overcome her preconceived ideas and bias. The researcher’s perspectives on the Biblical principles addressed in this study were also discussed in the areas of knowledge, stewardship, marketing, and one another.

Summary of Section 3

In Section 3, the culmination of this qualitative case study, results of the study and the application to professional practice was presented along with recommendations based on the results of the study. Several themes were identified and the consensus among participants was that while Gen Z is different from previous generations, strategies used in prior years are still applicable but must be adapted, especially as it pertains to using research data to segment the target market and develop content for digital media. There is also a general consensus that strategies around product, price, place, and promotion are all important and play significant roles in attracting the Gen Z student, as does cross-campus collaboration and an institutional commitment to student success. The learnings generated from these themes can be used to answers the stated research questions. Additionally, several potential applications were proposed to help HEIs improve their ability to effectively attract Gen Z students.

Last, the researcher shared her thoughts upon completion of the research, including her personal reasons for embarking on this study and how she attempted to overcome her preconceived ideas and bias. She also discussed how this study is related to the Biblical principles of knowledge, stewardship, marketing, and loving one another. Hebrews 13:16 stands out as a guiding verse in study, “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” Many individuals made sacrifices in contribution to this study with the intention of sharing knowledge with others, and for that, the researcher is eternally grateful.

Summary and Study Conclusions

In conclusion, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how marketing strategies have been employed at successful HEIs in the United States to effectively attract

Generation Z students. This study filled a gap in literature on how to attract this new generation to HEIs as well as inform institutions as they develop future marketing campaigns. To fulfill this purpose, eleven higher education marketers from five institutions that have demonstrated success in attracting Gen Z students were interviewed and marketing materials were reviewed.

Nine themes and 10 sub-themes were identified by analyzing the data collected from interviews and marketing materials and comparing to scholarly and professional literature. It became clear that these institutions prioritize research and utilize available data to determine marketing strategies. Additionally, participants felt that strategies around product, price, place, and promotion are all important and play significant roles in attracting the Gen Z student. A significant contributing factor to their success is cross-campus collaboration and an institutional commitment to student success. Every participant discussed how their specific role contributed to the institution's overall success, but each recognized that they were part of a larger team that all worked together to meet their goals.

The results of this study can be applied at other HEIs and help fill a gap in literature. Institutions can apply learnings by implementing data sharing across campus, cultivating a collaborative culture, using data to develop specific target markets, creating a clear brand, and investing in digital marketing strategies such as website and social media. Gen Z is still relatively young and have been entering higher education institutions for a short time. Therefore, research on this cohort is still ongoing. While many studies have been done on their buying patterns, few have been conducted as to how they select a college. Even fewer have been conducted from the perspective of the institution. This study helps to fill this gap. Recommendations for future study include a deeper look at successful strategies through a single case study and specifically at effective utilization of digital strategies, a study of retention strategies, additional student

research, and research to determine if the COVID-19 impacts the learnings uncovered in this study.

To close out the study, a quote from Seth Godin, a best-selling author and marketing expert, feels highly relevant. He said, “Our job is to connect to people, to interact with them in a way that leaves them better than we found them, more able to get where they’d like to go.” This is the goal of marketing and also a goal of higher education. It is the researcher’s hope that the learnings from this study will empower higher education marketers to develop strategies that connect with students and facilitate the life-changing journey that is higher education.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Thank you for meeting with me today. As a reminder, I am Marci Nauman, a doctoral candidate at Liberty University. The purpose of this study is to understand how successful higher education universities have adapted their marketing to attract Gen Z students. The results of this study will add to existing literature and inform other higher education institutions as they develop future marketing campaigns.

Participation is voluntary. You may refrain from answering any question if you are uncomfortable. You may also end our interview at any time.

Our interview will be recorded for the purpose of helping me ensure I did not miss anything you share and will be transcribed upon completion of the interview. The information shared in this interview will be kept confidential and secure.

You have already signed the consent form and sent me a copy. Do you have any questions about the informed consent form or the study? If not, we will begin.

- 1) Please help me confirm your qualifications for participating in this study by answering the following questions:
 - a) Are you currently serving as a full-time employee of the researched institution? If so, have you served full-time for at least one year?
 - b) Have you participated in discussions related to academic programs, pricing, course modality, and/or marketing promotions for one or more admission cycles while at the institution?
 - c) Do you agree to share your perspectives and experiences in an honest and detailed manner?

- 2) Please describe what you think Gen Z students, those currently age 10-25, are looking for in a college/university? [RQ1]
- 3) Why do you think your institution has been so successful in attracting Gen Z students while so many other institutions have struggled? [RQ1]
- 4) Could you describe your experience with establishing strategies to attract Gen Z students as it relates to academic programs/tuition and costs/course modality/marketing promotion? [RQ1]
- 5) What is the process for establishing these strategies? [RQ1]
 - a) What data are used to make decisions?
 - b) What other departments are involved?
 - c) How is a strategy selected?
- 6) What strategies are you currently using to attract Gen Z students? [RQ1]
- 7) How does your role/department impact the institutions ability to achieve enrollment growth? [RQ1]
- 8) How does the organization's structure and culture support the institutions ability to achieve enrollment growth? [RQ2]
- 9) Is there anything else you would like to share?

That concludes our interview. Thank you for your time and willingness to share your thoughts and experiences with me. May I contact you again if I have additional questions later?

If you think of anything else that you would like to share, please do not hesitate to contact me.