

Graduate Program Considerations: Which Factors Matter to Students?

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Abstract: Graduate enrollment rates are increasing, but research investigating which factors matter in the decision process is lacking. The results of this quantitative study suggest that first-generation students and students of Color interested in educational counseling and student affairs approach the master's college choice process differently than continuing-generation students and White students. Program characteristics, personal factors, ease of entrance, input from others, and benefits to others emerged as important features of the process for historically marginalized student groups. Implications for practice and research are discussed which include examining admissions policies and program structures.

Keywords: first-generation students, students of Color, college choice, graduate admissions, college-going, masters' program, entrance exams college attendance

The number of graduate students enrolling in higher education institutions in the United States has increased significantly in recent years (McFarland et al., 2017). Of graduate students, master's degree seekers comprise the majority. The most recent data released by the National Center for Education Statistics reports (NCES) reports that universities conferred 820,000 master's degrees in the 2017-2018 academic year (NCES, 2020).

The number of students of Color enrolled in master's degree programs is rising with the general increase, and students of Color now make up a more significant percentage of the total graduate student population than they have in the past. Asian Pacific Islanders and Hispanic populations have increased the most (Aud et al., 2010). Statistically, first-generation undergraduate students are more likely to come from underrepresented backgrounds than continuing-generation students (Postsecondary National Policy Institute [PNPI], 2016; Redford et al., 2017), and it is logical that the same is true of graduate students.

The NCES consistently maintains numbers on national enrollment, attainment, and composition. The data indicates an increase in the number of first-generation students enrolling, but also a disparity in graduation rates between first-generation college students and those who are continuing-generation (Lauff & Ingels, 2015). While a standard definition of first-generation does not exist in the literature, Peralta and Klonowski (2017) have studied how other scholars in leading higher education journals have written and understood the term. Peralta and Klonowski (2017) suggest "...defining the term *first-generation college student* as an individual who is pursuing a higher education degree and whose parents or guardians do not have a postsecondary degree" (p. 635).

Beyond national enrollment data, it is essential that institutions of higher education understand how students make decisions about which colleges and programs to attend (Kranzow, 2019). In prior decades the focus has been on the undergraduate college choice process rather than graduate student college choice (English & Umbach, 2016). Scholars have a limited understanding of the unique graduate choice process of first-generation or students of Color (Jisha & Pitts, 2004; Ramirez, 2013), and very little is known about how students in student affairs and other helping fields make decisions about programs. Despite the significant rise in master's degree program enrollment, the research guiding many practices related to graduate students lags woefully behind (Hegarty, 2011; Kranzow, 2019).

The purpose of this research is to extend our awareness of the factors related to graduate program consideration for graduate students in a cohort-based master's degree program related to student affairs administration and educational counseling. The college decision-making process, more often referred to as the college choice process, can be defined as "a complex, multistage process during which an individual develops aspirations to continue formal education beyond high school, followed later by a decision to attend a specific college, university or institution of advanced vocational training" (Hossler et al., 1989, p. 234). This definition has been effective in describing the undergraduate decision-making process. Scholars have also used the term "college choice" to describe the decision-making process for graduate students (Kallio, 1995). The authors sought to study the influence of multiple factors influencing the choice process into an educational counseling and student affairs master's program and examine any differences related to generational status (first-generation versus continuing) and ethnicity.

The remaining portions of this article will explore the research questions, related literature, the conceptual framework and methods used, findings, and consideration for the future. Findings from this study will contribute to the body of literature related to the graduate decision-making process for master's students and inform the work of those recruiting and working with graduate students.

Relevant Literature

Multiple streams of research informed this study, and each will be examined briefly to provide insight into the way the authors conceptualized the present study. These areas include information about who enters this (and related helping) professions, student college choice models, graduate college choice, and literature related to graduate school for first-generation students and students of Color.

Motivation to Enter the Profession

Research regarding who enters the profession of student affairs or educational counseling is not extensive. However, the small body of literature suggests that individuals enter the field out of a desire to work with college students in their transition to adulthood, to provide support programs and services to students, to engage in lifelong learning, and to contribute to society and the lives of others in meaningful ways (Oxendine et al., 2018; Taub & McEwen, 2006). In addition, mentoring by a professional in the field has influenced

many to pursue student affairs and educational counseling graduate training (Taub & McEwen, 2006).

As many students in the present study were focused on community college counseling careers (and were less interested in more traditional student affairs roles), it was also important to consider why students enter counseling and other helping fields. Financially, these professions are not as lucrative as most other professions (Carnevale et al., 2015), so other factors drive the choice. Hanson and McCullagh (1995) identified reasons for students to study social work, and they found the motivations were similar to those entering student affairs – a desire to help and wanting to make a difference. Duffy and Dik (2009) note that a desire to improve the world is a significant motivator for many in selecting careers, and those in educational counseling often seem to be seeking this sense of meaning.

Student College Choice

The research on college choice and selection is dominated by discussions of the process used by undergraduate students (English & Umbach, 2016). Three significant models of undergraduate college choice proposed in the 1980s – Chapman (1981), Litten (1982), and Hossler and Gallagher (1987) have been the central models used to consider the ways students make decisions about college. These models examined student background characteristics, external influences, population differences, and the linear process from college consideration to choice of programs. Scholars later examined the influence of race and ethnicity on the choice process (McDonough et al., 1997) as well as the impact of financial aid policies (St. John & Noell, 1989), and these factors became important lenses through which to view the undergraduate college choice process (Perna, 2000; Perna et al., 2017).

College Choice Process for Graduate Students

It is unclear whether students who apply to a graduate program engage in similar considerations as undergraduates seeking to select a campus (English & Umbach, 2016). Graduate students may have considerations related to life stages that impact college choices. Prospective applicants may be considering new perspectives not present for undergraduates, such as a partner, an employer's input, or children. These can impact if or where to attend graduate school (Jisha & Pitts, 2004; Kallio, 1995; Nevill & Chen, 2007).

Considerations for Students of Color

Consideration of the process from the perspective of students of Color suggests that the pipeline to graduate school can be impacted by student background characteristics (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2017; Holloway-Friesen, 2018b, 2021, 2023; Kranzow, 2019, Kranzow & Hyland, 2011; Meyers, 2017; Morelon-Quainoo et al., 2009). In addition, influencing factors include location/residence, financial assistance, the influence of significant others, program faculty, the reputation of the program, and characteristics of the graduate program (Holloway-Friesen, 2018a; 2021; Kranzow & Hyland, 2011; Ramirez, 2013).

Unfortunately, in the majority of research examining graduate student choice, participants are composed highly or exclusively of doctoral students (Kranzow, 2019; Poock & Love,

2001), and studies which differentiate based on level of graduate study (master's compared to doctoral) is dearth (English & Umbach, 2016). This study uses exclusively master's degree students and offers clarity in this regard.

Graduate College Choice - First-Generation Graduate Students and Students of Color

Recruiting diverse populations into student affairs and other helping professions is important to the fields for the sake of equal access to professions, strengthening the professions with diverse perspectives, and the ability to support the growing diversity of populations seeking more representation on campus (Holloway-Friesen, 2018a, 2022, Jones et al. 2002; Oxendine et al., 2018; Taub & McEwan, 2006; Vasquez et al., 2006). Research related to recruiting more diverse populations into various helping field graduate degree programs is becoming more common (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2017; Meyers, 2017; Vasquez et al., 2006). Examining how to recruit diverse groups of students into the helping professions provides understanding about what these students need and are looking for in terms of professional support. Overall, a better understanding of the impact of ethnicity and generation status on specific graduate school considerations is needed. (Perna, 2004). While information regarding graduate college choice (in general) is limited, research on students of Color and first-generation graduate student college choice is even more so (Kranzow, 2019; Ramirez, 2013; Tate et al., 2015). Part of this is that until the last decade, many studies failed to examine race, gender, and class issues in the graduate decision process (Ramirez, 2013), and the same holds for generational status (Kranzow, 2019). Literature does recognize that students whose parents did not earn a bachelor's degree attend graduate school at lower rates (Nevill & Chen, 2007; Redford et al., 2017).

There is evidence to suggest that first-generation students consider many of the same factors as continuing-generation students when selecting a graduate program – program quality, faculty, institutional reputation, cost, financial aid, institutional location, faculty-interactions, climate, and sense of belonging (Holloway-Friesen, 2018b, 2018c, 2023; Jisha & Pitts, 2004; Morelon-Quainoo et al., 2009; Ramirez, 2013).

Much like first-generation students at the undergraduate level, a lack of accurate information related to graduate education exists for first-generation graduate students (Meyers, 2017). Some of the critical information relates to funding, aid, and student debt. Morelon-Quainoo et al. (2009) examined program cost concerning aid and noted its role in determining not only where but whether to attend graduate school. Lunceford (2011) notes the importance of mentors to guide students through the “seemingly convoluted” process (p. 16).

Tate et al. (2015) examined underrepresented, low-income, first-generation students and their intention to complete graduate school and found family values influential. Research by Hipolito-Delgado et al. (2021) notes the importance of external support for graduate students of Color in counselor education. While success once admitted and admissions decisions are not the same, these findings seem to justify further the need for more research on the importance of family on graduate school decisions (Olson, 1992; Tate et al., 2015).

A small body of literature connects first-generation students and students of Color to the factors that motivate them in pursuing their education at both undergraduate and graduate levels (Holloway-Friesen, 2022, 2023; Olive, 2014; Simmons et al., 2018). These factors include a desire to help others, a sense of calling, giving back, and career satisfaction (Olive, 2014; Simmons et al., 2018). Importantly, prior research shows that first generation students and students of Color have both independent (personal satisfaction and career goals) and interdependent (helping others, setting an example for others) reasons for enrolling, while continuing generation students largely provide reasons which are primarily independent (Holloway-Friesen, 2022).

A subcategory of motivation speaks of students' desires to benefit others as a reason for attaining a graduate degree. This connection appears under examined in the literature for first-generation and students of Color. Of sources identified, two key aspects of benefiting others were noted. Knutson et al. (2010) found that one reason first-generation students desired to complete their degree is due to a desire to help others, especially family members and those in their community who lack the opportunity to achieve a college degree. This type of benefiting others is different from a desire to help others more generally (as one would naturally do in the helping professions). First-generation students desire to help parents and siblings specifically by creating more financial freedom, opportunity, and social mobility (Parrott, 2019). Another aspect which relates to benefiting others is that attaining an advanced degree sets a good example for others in the family and community to follow (Lewis, 2016; Nickelberry, 2012). This relationship between helping and benefiting others is worthy of further examination, and the current study should lend insight in this regard.

Conceptual Framework

As this study is concerned with better understanding the factors impacting the graduate choice process for students in general as well as first-generation students and students of Color specifically, the authors elected to use Iloh's (2018) model of college-going (which intentionally avoids the word "choice"). This three-pronged model considers the current landscape of diverse populations and examines college-going through a lens of information, opportunity, and time.

Information refers to the availability of various data which can influence a student's decision to attend a particular institution or program. Iloh (2018) notes that information from various sources (including teachers, mentors, family, and marketing sources) is not available equally to all prospective students and therefore influences the choices made in educational selection. Opportunity refers to both the real and perceived opportunities (and barriers) that students have to attend specific institutions. For example, a potential real barrier might be a program only accepts students with a very high undergraduate grade point average. A possible perceived opportunity on the other hand might include a flexible graduate entrance exam policy. The third aspect of the model is time which "...draws attention to the social, educational, and historical events that may have led to a particular college decision or path" (Iloh, 2018, p. 237). Time encompasses many dimensions from the number of resources available at any given point in time to how much time a student

has been in or away from college. It also includes elements such as the amount of time it takes to earn a degree, the time it takes to arrive on campus, and the times at which courses are offered.

Like earlier models, this model focuses on undergraduate decision-making. However, this recent model is an appropriate framework for examining graduate college-going in that it considers that many students have non-traditional paths, are adult learners, and cannot “choose” in the traditional sense that prior models assumed. It further examines the student “ecosystem” in college considerations and allows for consideration of the complexities in the process (Iloh 2018; 2009). Since this model removed the term “choice,” the remainder of this article will primarily use the term college-going (consistent with the selected framework) except when referring to earlier research that used the word “choice.”

Research Question

The primary research question for the study was: Are there significant differences between factors considered in the college-going process for first-generation graduate students compared to students who are not first-generation status? The study also explored differences between students of Color and White students to understand features relevant to their unique college-going decisions. The authors hypothesized that there would be significant differences in factors considered in the college-going process by generational status and ethnicity. Further, the authors expected that program characteristics, input from others, and benefiting others would influence the master’s program-going process.

Method

The present study examined differences between first-generation and continuing-generation master's degree seekers and their college-going process. Furthermore, it explored the unique factors distinguishing the college-going process between students of Color and White students. The present study serves as a follow-up study suggested by Poock and Love (2001) to understand the unique factors influencing graduate students' college-going process at one institution. In addition, the present study contributes to the college-going literature related explicitly to master's degree seekers over previous studies with doctoral students. Lastly, the study contributes to the scant empirical research on the college-going process for graduate students of Color (Jisha & Pitts, 2004; Poock & Love, 2001; Ramirez, 2013).

Participants and Procedure

The study took place at a mid-sized, urban, faith-based university located in an ethnically diverse community in the West. The authors selected the site because of its broad representation of master’s degree-seeking students (3,948 graduate students; 86% Master’s and 14% doctoral students). The researchers invited students from a master's degree program to prepare graduates for roles in educational counseling and student affairs administration to participate in the study. Data collection occurred in two separate week-long administrations over 18 months through classroom visits and follow-up emails. The authors distributed the survey to 173 students. One hundred and thirty-seven students completed the survey with an overall response rate of 79%. Two-thirds of the sample were

the first person in their family to complete a bachelor's degree, and 70% were students of Color. Of respondents, 75% reported full-time status. The institution boasts a relatively diverse graduate student body, with nearly two-thirds of the graduate population hailing from historically underrepresented groups (28% Latinx, 12% Asian and Asian American, 8% Black or African American, 35% White, 12% ethnicity unknown, and 3% other).

Program features. Students within the study enrolled in a 45-unit master's degree in educational counseling and student affairs administration. At the time of the study, the program provided opportunities for all first-year master's students to obtain an on-campus student affairs-related assistantship, which offered a \$6000 stipend to offset student expenses. Moreover, students who opted to participate in the assistantship program also received a 50% tuition scholarship. Eighty percent of the first-year students participated in the on-campus assistantship and scholarship program.

Measures

Students completed one standardized instrument, one locally-designed instrument, and a brief demographic questionnaire.

The Program Choice Questionnaire. The Program Choice Questionnaire (PCQ, Pooch 1999) identifies the ratings of the most prominent factors influencing the decision to enroll in a graduate program. The authors selected the PCQ because of its complements with Iloh's (2018) three-pronged college-going model. The PCQ developer originally designed the scale for ethnically diverse doctoral students in a higher administration program (Pooch, 1997), and Iloh's (2018) model was developed specifically to include diverse populations that are critical to consider in college-going models. Based on a scale of 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*very important*), higher scores reflect greater importance attributed to factors related to college-going decisions. The PCQ demonstrates test-retest reliability and face and content validity with ethnically diverse doctoral students (Jisha & Pitts, 2004; Pooch, 1999).

To establish the content validity of the PCQ with master's degree seekers, the authors incorporated cognitive interviews into the survey refinement process. Cognitive interviewing involves face-to-face interactions to review survey items in detail with participants representing the target population (Rickards et al., 2012). The authors conducted cognitive interviews with 30 students enrolled in a master's program who provided feedback on question and response wording to ensure the appropriateness of survey items with master's degree seekers. The present study builds on the initial steps of establishing content validity by Jisha & Pitts (2004), who piloted the survey with 50 master's degree seekers.

Previous studies using the PCQ with doctoral students grouped the 62 variables into the following six categories for ease of presentation:

- institutional characteristics
- program characteristics
- personal factors

- marketing/recruiting factors
- input from other people
- financial aid considerations (Jisha, & Pitts, 2004; Poock, 2000).

The present study's content validation process resulted in a slight revision of the grouping categories. The revised categories include institutional characteristics, program characteristics, personal factors, *ease of program entrance*, marketing/recruiting, input from other people, and financial aid considerations (new category shown in italics). The authors divided the category of program characteristics into two revised groupings: "program characteristics" and "ease of program entrance." Variables that focused on elements of the program itself (i.e., course scheduling, time to complete the degree, internship opportunities) remained in the "program characteristics" category. In addition, the researchers categorized items associated with supporting program admission under "ease of entrance." Below is a description of each category and its integration within Iloh's (2018) conceptual framework. A more expanded elaboration of Iloh's three-pronged model and its association with the scale's categories is made in the discussion.

Institutional characteristics. The institutional characteristics category attempts to measure the degree to which campus features influence master's degree seekers' college-going. It examines variables related to the geographic region of the institution, closeness to home, and academic accreditations, concepts related to time and opportunity within Iloh's (2018) model. The subscale produced an acceptable Cronbach's alpha of .79 (George & Mallery, 2003).

Program characteristics. Program characteristics address areas including the program's reputation, availability of evening classes, flexible program requirements, length of time to complete the program, and internship or practicum experiences. These characteristics speak to Iloh's (2018) concept of non-traditional students' actual and perceived opportunities related to their choice process. They also address features of time and their impact on students' college going decisions. The researchers obtained an acceptable Cronbach's alpha for the subscale ($\alpha = .73$) (George & Mallery, 2003).

Personal factors. Personal factors measure elements related to the students' personal lives, including the cost of living in the area, relatives living in the area, friends attending the institution, spouse/partner's educational plans, job availability for spouse/partner, and the students' ability to continue working in their current job while pursuing their master's education. These concepts relate to the viability of graduate school selection and attendance in light of students' opportunities and time constraints (Iloh, 2018). The present study obtained an acceptable alpha level of .72 (George & Mallery, 2003).

Ease of entrance. Ease of entrance measures factors that reduce barriers to the application process. It includes items related to rolling admission deadlines and making entrance exams optional. Extended deadlines and removal of exams provide students with more time to consider graduate school options and eliminates the perceived and actual barriers imposed by required tests (Iloh, 2018). Reliability analysis produced an acceptable alpha of .76 for the current study (George & Mallery, 2003).

Marketing/recruiting. The marketing/recruiting category includes variables related to positive interactions with faculty, unsolicited contact with faculty, and campus visits. It represents the delivery of and access to quality information from institutional agents (Iloh, 2018). Reliability testing resulted in a good alpha rating of .88 for the subscale (George & Mallery, 2003).

Input from other people. Input from other people describes the input and knowledge obtained through the master's degree seeker's close relationships influencing the graduate program-going process. The category includes the students' input from spouses/partners, parents, alumni, current students in the program, and professional colleagues, touching on all three dimensions of Iloh's (2018) model. The Cronbach's alpha analysis produced a good alpha level of .81 for the subscale (George & Mallery, 2003).

Benefits to others. Existing instruments that assess the college-going process lack mention of the potential benefit to others, a salient motivator of historically marginalized students. The authors developed a locally designed instrument to measure a latent "benefit to others" construct. The construct measured students' commitment to contribute to their families and communities by sharing college knowledge, mentoring, and providing future financial support. Sample items included, "I attended this graduate program to give my family a better life," and "Being a role model to my community motivated me to attend this graduate program." To establish content validity, the authors incorporated an expert review process with outside researchers. They also engaged in cognitive interviews with 30 master's degree-seeking students to refine survey items. Furthermore, the authors piloted the scale with 45 students from the targeted population, and selected items were revised based on pilot results.

Analysis plan. The authors conducted reliability analyses to determine the internal consistency of the PCQ survey instrument. The analysis revealed that the overall instrument was internally consistent at an acceptable level ($\alpha = .79$) (George & Mallery, 2003). Missing value analysis determined that 4.9% of the data were missing one or more variables under examination. Listwise deletion was implemented to handle the missing cases, within Schafer's (1999) recommended cutoff for using the technique. The missing data were determined to be missing completely at random (MCAR) using the Little's (1988) MCAR test, $\chi^2 = 3995.78$ ($df = 4669$; $p = 1.00$). With MCAR data, there are no patterns in the missing data, and missing values are not related to any variables under study (Acock, 2005).

The researchers aimed to understand differences in college-going considerations between first-generation and continuing-generation students. The study also explored differences between students of Color with White students. Student generation status (first-generation: no=0; yes = 1) and ethnicity (student of Color: no = 0; yes = 1) served as the independent variables in the analyses. The dependent variables included institutional characteristics, program characteristics, personal factors, financial aid considerations, ease of entrance requirements, input from others, and benefits to others.

The authors conducted independent sample *t*-tests to answer the research questions. An independent samples *t*-test assesses whether the means of two groups are statistically different from each other (Crano et al., 2015; Warner, 2007). Warner (2007) identified independent samples *t*-tests as appropriate for comparing naturally occurring groups in nonexperimental research. The authors implemented similar research design methods and statistical analyses to replicate and expand prior studies comparing factors related to college-going (Jisha & Pitts, 2004; Poock, 2000; Poock & Love, 2001). Furthermore, the researchers calculated effect sizes to determine the practical significance of the *t*-test results under review (Lakens, 2013).

Results

Mean Differences Between Groups

Table 1 presents the mean scores of the eight dependent variables for the sample of respondents. Levene's Test for Equality of Variances confirmed the homogeneity of variance for the variables under review. The independent samples *t*-tests revealed that first-generation students and students of Color reported statistically significantly higher means for program characteristics, ease of entrance, input from others, and benefits to others (See Table 1).

More specifically, first-generation students reported greater importance to program characteristics ($\mu = 41.88$, $SD = 4.92$, $n = 90$) than continuing-generation students ($\mu = 37.52$, $SD = 4.79$, $n = 36$), $t(111) = 4.23$, $p < .001$, $d = .89$. Likewise, students of Color ranked program characteristics ($\mu = 43.37$, $SD = 5.30$, $n = 79$) more highly than White students ($\mu = 39.09$, $SD = 4.84$, $n = 36$), $t(111) = 2.15$, $p = .03$, $d = .44$.

Significant differences emerged related to input from others between first-generation ($\mu = 11.30$, $SD = 2.07$, $n = 90$) and continuing generation students ($\mu = 8.44$, $SD = 2.01$, $n = 36$) in college-going decisions $t(124) = 5.17$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.02$. Similar differences emerged between students of Color ($\mu = 11.17$, $SD = 3.06$, $n = 91$) and White students ($\mu = 8.77$, $SD = 2.45$, $n = 37$) $t(124) = 4.17$, $p < .001$, $d = .82$.

First-generation students ranked benefits to others ($\mu = 23.74$, $SD = 4.12$, $n = 87$) as more important in college-going decisions than continuing generation students ($\mu = 17.56$, $SD = 4.35$, $n = 36$), $t(121) = 7.41$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.50$. Likewise, students of Color valued benefits to others ($\mu = 23.52$, $SD = 4.33$, $n = 87$) more than White students ($\mu = 18.11$, $SD = 4.57$, $n = 36$) in their college choice processes $t(121) = 6.17$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.23$.

First-generation students also ranked personal factors ($\mu = 8.76$, $SD = 1.57$, $n = 90$) more highly than continuing-generation students ($\mu = 8.09$, $SD = 1.22$, $n = 36$), $t(123) = 2.26$, $p = .025$, $d = .45$. No differences emerged for institutional characteristics, financial aid considerations, or marketing/recruiting factors based on student generation status or ethnicity.

Table 1. Comparison Category Scores Between First-Generation with Continuing Generation and Students of Color with White Students (Means, Standard Deviations, and Effect Sizes)

Influences	First Generation Students		Continuing Generation Students		Effect Size	Students of Color		White Students		Effect Size
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>d</i>
Institutional Characteristics	6.19	1.08	5.81	1.21	.34	6.18	1.15	5.84	1.07	.30
Program Characteristics	41.88**	4.92	37.52	4.79	.89	41.37*	5.30	39.09	4.84	.44
Personal Factors	8.76*	1.57	8.09	1.22	.45	8.72	1.56	8.17	1.32	.37
Financial Aid	3.23	0.79	3.51	0.78	.36	3.27	0.80	3.41	0.77	.16
Ease of Entrance	14.36*	3.09	12.86	3.33	.47	14.34*	3.11	12.92	3.30	.45
Marketing/ Recruiting	7.69	2.16	7.43	2.16	.12	7.69	2.17	7.43	1.96	.12
Input from Others	11.30**	2.07	8.44	2.01	1.02	11.17**	3.06	8.77	2.45	.82
Benefits to Others	23.74**	4.12	17.56	4.35	1.50	23.52**	4.33	18.11	4.57	1.23

Note: *t*-tests were used to compare means, and scores in bold represent the significantly higher scores and large effect sizes.

M = Mean. *SD* = Standard Deviation. Ease of Entrance = Students' preference for simplified entrance requirements.

p* < .05. *p* < .001.

Important to note, the effect size of the differences between first and continuing generation students' perceptions of program characteristics ($d = .89$), input from others ($d = 1.02$), and benefits to others ($d = 1.50$) were found to exceed Cohen's (1988) convention for a large effect ($d = .80$). Furthermore, large effect sizes emerged between students of Color and White students relating to input from others ($d = .82$) and benefits to others ($d = 1.23$). The results suggest a high practical significance related to program and relational factors for the historically marginalized groups.

Program characteristics and ease of entrance. To elaborate further, first-generation and students of Color rated program characteristics and ease of entrance more highly than continuing-generation and White students. The results suggest that institutions that offer simplified entrance plans with accelerated program tracks, evening course offerings, and career training provide enhanced real and perceived opportunities for marginalized students (Iloh, 2018).

Benefit to others, input from others, and personal factors. Motivational factors connected with students' relationships (input from others and benefits to others) proved to be among the most highly valued elements in the college-going process. First-generation students and students of Color in our sample relied more heavily on information shared by trusted others in their college-going decision-making than their peers (Iloh, 2018). Results also demonstrated that first-generation and students of Color desired to use their educational experiences to contribute college knowledge and information back to their communities.

The present study results suggest that first-generation students and students of Color may involve informational, opportunity, and time-related elements, including economic, occupational, and relational factors, in their college-going process more than in other groups. Program characteristics, entrance support, and personal and relational factors may more profoundly influence the master's degree-seeking process for historically marginalized students. In contrast, factors that apply more broadly to the college-going process, including institutional, financial aid, and recruiting efforts, appear important to all student groups in the study.

Discussion

This study sought to inform our understanding of the master's degree college-going process by comparing first-generation and continuing-generation students for significant differences. More specifically, this research examined how generation status, ethnicity, institutional characteristics, program characteristics, personal factors, ease of program entrance, marketing, input from others, benefiting others, and financial aid considerations influence the decision-making process.

In support of Iloh's (2018) model, the findings revealed several significant differences in the college-going process depending on generation status and ethnicity. In terms of the reasons for pursuing graduate education, first-generation students and students of Color considered the importance of both graduate education and a master's degree for their desired careers. They specifically considered its ability to serve as the means to an end more than their cohort peers (who were more likely to seek the degree as a way to further

knowledge). Consistent with Simmons et al. (2018), the majority of sampled first-generation students and students of Color sought a master's degree to advance their access to their desired profession and improve both their future and their families' opportunities.

Institutional Policies and Practices

Kallio's (1995) research on graduate choice decisions identified admissions policies and practices as significant in the choice process. Further, Kranzow and Hyland (2011) identify many structural barriers, including traditional course times and standardized tests for students of Color and first-generation students. Findings from this study substantiate the concept in Iloh's (2018) model (precisely the element of real and perceived barriers to opportunities) and confirm earlier literature findings suggesting that application processes and policies (identified as ease of entrance in this study) impact college-going at multiple levels (Ramirez, 2013). Importantly, aspects of the application process influenced first-generation and students of Color more significantly than other students. These results are consistent with research on recruiting graduate students of Color in other disciplines (Vasquez et al., 2006). Being able to gain admission in a clear and unencumbered way is perhaps more important for students who see additional requirements (such as firm admission deadlines and standardized tests) as barriers to opportunities within specific programs. This awareness has implications for those seeking supportive policies for first-generation students and students of Color (Holloway-Friesen, 2022; in press).

Another finding consistent with earlier literature is that first-generation students were more concerned with program characteristics, both time to degree and the specific times of course delivery, than their continuing-generation counterparts; this was true for students of Color as well. Since first-generation students and students of Color frequently indicated that a reason for pursuing the master's degree was entry into a profession (and presumably employment), it is logical that they would want to complete their degree as quickly as possible. This is aligned with both opportunity and time elements of Iloh's (2018) model. Institutions may wish to consider that program characteristics, including accelerated programs with shorter timelines to career entry, compelled first-generation and diverse student populations in this study to apply to this particular program.

Research indicates that first-generation and underrepresented students often work significant hours (PNPI, 2016). First-generation and students of Color in this study more often indicated that evening course scheduling was an influential factor in their college-going decision. It may be that students of Color and first-generation graduate students (many who have family members to support) have secure jobs which they are unable or unwilling to leave -- and therefore, this population may be more likely to seek classes in the evenings or non-traditional formats (Kranzow & Hyland, 2011). This structuring of course format relates to Iloh's (2018) opportunity dimension as students may perceive evening opportunities as accessible. Those in positions to influence course schedules might consider the course format and examine its attractiveness to students of Color and first-generation graduate students. Future research should explore admissions requirements, class, and program structures to determine how they affect different populations seeking a master's degree program.

Input of Others

Consistent with the literature (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Iloh, 2018; Litten, 1982), student background impacted how students approached and made choices about which master's degree program to attend. Family was the driving consideration in the college-going process for first-generation students and students of Color. Background characteristics, particularly generation status, were indicative of the degree to which personal factors (staying in the area for a spouse/partner, continuing in the current job, consideration of the proximity of relatives) were important factors in college-going. This finding is consistent with Tate et al. (2015) and Olson (1992), who identified the family as a significant influencer in the choice process for first-generation students. It is also in harmony with the concepts of time (due to considerations of distance from family) and opportunity (to relocate and/or uproot others) that Iloh's (2018) model takes into consideration.

Future research might further explore the relationship between students of Color and first-generation graduate students and their understanding of various types of information. As Ramirez (2011) found, those who are the first in their family to attend graduate school may not recognize the advantage of particular elements of graduate programs (for example the reputation of the faculty or finding a program that is the best fit versus one that is merely accessible) and therefore rely on other components more heavily (ease of entrance, program and personal characteristics). As the college-going model suggests, information is a critical element of how individuals make college-going decisions, and students will examine programs based on what they know (Iloh, 2018). It is also possible that first-generation graduate students' ecosystems influence them in such a way that accessibility and location are more likely to motivate college-going than other factors that continuing-generation students consider.

Non-Significant Findings

Three categories were determined to be insignificant in the present study. Namely, financial aid considerations, marketing/recruiting, and institutional characteristics did not vary by generational status or ethnicity. The variables of financial aid and marketing are somewhat surprising as they are not consistent with the model or prior literature related to first-generation and students of Color (Iloh, 2018; St. John & Noell, 1989). It is possible that financial aid considerations were very important to all groups, thus a difference was not significant. It is also possible that location and perceived opportunity were extremely limited such that financial aid did not weigh as heavily because "choice" was not present. In terms of marketing and recruitment, perhaps the program did not do a significant amount of marketing and recruitment to any group of students. This program historically has drawn many through word-of-mouth referral by mentors, teachers, and colleagues, and it is likely that this was the case for many students who participated. The results identifying no difference between groups in terms of institutional characteristics is likely due to students putting more emphasis on program characteristics. For undergraduate students, perhaps this finding would be different, but at the graduate level, it is not surprising that students were more focused on the program than the institution.

Limitations

As with any study, there were some limitations. First, this was a study conducted with students in one particular master's program on one campus. Program consideration may look very different for other types of master's degree programs; further research should explore other master's programs on other campuses and include quantitative and qualitative approaches. Another challenge in research related to graduate college-going is that the participants are those who enrolled in this particular program. The factors that drew students to this particular master's program are identified in this research. However, data was not captured from those who decided not to enroll or those who decided to enroll elsewhere (either programmatically or institutionally).

A significant limitation to note is that this study did not examine the role of gender, and the participants were disproportionately female. The literature on the factors related to gender and college choice are varied, with some findings indicating gender impacts college choice (Hearn, 1987; Malaney, 1987) and other scholars suggesting otherwise (English & Umbach, 2016; Kallio, 1995). Further insight and research on the role gender plays in graduate student college-going in general and specifically pertaining to first-generation and later generation students would be helpful.

Finally, we did not compare opinions over time from one cohort to the next. This factor could be significant since asking students in the second year to recall their choice process clearly could have confounded the data. Further studies might gather data early in the first semester to capture it when student recall is likely to be sharp.

Concluding Thoughts

While there remains a great deal that we do not understand about the factors involved in graduate student college-going decision process, this study offers additional insight into factors important for those seeking a master's degree in a specific field at a particular campus. Additionally, this study sheds light on some of the apparent differences in the considerations between students of Color, first-generation students, and continuing-generation students applying to a master's program. As master's degree programs seek to attract and retain first-generation students and students of Color, it is essential that educators understand those elements of college-going that are most important to them, and that they provide the information and opportunities needed for them to succeed.

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