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## Research notes

# Making the choice: University and program selection factors for undergraduate management education in Maritime Canada



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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the criteria by which university students chose a particular university for their undergraduate management education. With a data set of 456 first-year millennial undergraduate business students, from four institutions located in Canada's Maritime Provinces, exploratory factor analysis helped identify the drivers of decision-making reported by females and males, and in-province and out-of-province students. A MANOVA analysis found statistically significant differences in certain selection factors between females and males, and between in-province and out-of-province students. These results suggest that a contingency-based approach to the recruitment and admissions strategies of undergraduate university administration and recruitment officials may be beneficial in enhancing confirmation and enrollment rates.

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## 1. On the importance of university selection

As the clock ticked down to the start of another new academic year, we gazed over the freshman class and shared a common thought. What circumstances unfolded such that this particular group of students came together at the same time, to the same school, in the same program? Each with their own educational experiences, socio-cultural backgrounds, and extra-curricular interests yet all of whom, in spite of these differences, choosing to attend this university and enroll in our business program. Within the context of university selection, were our students fundamentally the same as students in freshman management classes at other schools, or did they differ in some appreciable way? We decided we wanted to know more, not just because the answers might be of benefit to our university's recruitment and admissions team, but because fundamentally, students are the lifeblood of our livelihood and to understand them better, helps us reflect on who we are as professors, what our role is as their instructors, and how we might better contribute to the academic mission of our universities.

The research objectives for this article were as follows:

1. To identify the factors millennial university students use in selecting among post-secondary institutions for their business studies;
2. To determine whether respondents of different genders employ the same selection criteria; and

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3. To determine whether respondents from the same province employ the same selection criteria as those students applying from out-of-province.

For convenience purposes, we chose to study university and academic program in Maritime Canada. The region consists of the provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, for which there are sixteen universities, accounting for 70,817 registered full-time and part-time students in 2011, of which eleven offer undergraduate commerce and administration programs (MPHEC., 2012). Using a focus group of 24 students, followed by a pilot survey and then a general survey, we identified 32 criteria related to the importance in students' decision-making as to which university to attend. We then asked first-year business students attending four of the sixteen universities in the region to assess the performance of their chosen university, and their business program, according to these criteria. Using factor analysis, we assessed the results of our importance–performance analysis and found differences in selection factors between female and male students, and between students originating from within their province of study and students who relocated from elsewhere within Canada, with our results significant at the 95% and 99% level of confidence. This research topic is of importance to university administrators, deans and recruiters who wish to stabilize or grow their undergraduate business program enrollments based upon a deeper understanding of university selection criteria.

## 2. What we know about university selection

As the purpose of this study was to examine millennials' selection factors in choosing universities and academic programs in Maritime Canada, a number of criteria were used in defining the scope of the literature review. A generational divide was used to segment the literature: studies were separated between those that studied millennial populations – those students born between 1980 and 2000 (Howe & Strauss, 2000), who would start entering university in 1997 at the age of seventeen – and those studies that focused on earlier generations. The focal population of the extant literature was limited to studies of undergraduate students for the purposes of comparison; this includes studies of high school students intending to pursue post-secondary education (“prospective selection studies”), and studies of university students who were asked to reflect upon the factors they considered in their choice of post-secondary institution and program (“retrospective selection studies”). Our literature review involved empirical studies listed in Business Source Complete or ABI/Inform for student samples beginning in the year 2000. For comparative purposes, we also included two students of pre-millennial students that occurred near the turn of the century. In terms of academic programs, our article focuses upon business administration, though in terms of this literature review, all programs of study were included. There was no pre-defined limit to the geographic scope of the review. The table below is a representative sample of the types of studies found in the literature according to this generational and prospective/retrospective separation (see Table 1).

Much research on college choice/university selection has been undertaken. Indeed, Henrickson (2002, 400–402) noted that approximately 1900 articles had been written on the subject in the four decades previous based upon an analysis of the Educational Resources Information Center database. However, a small fraction, some 162 articles, actually emphasized a modeling approach to the university selection issue, and of these articles, less than 70% were empirical in nature. Of the methodological approaches, factor analysis – the method employed in this article – represented just 20% of the extant statistical methods-based approaches to the topic, with other methodological techniques including probability functions (50%) and multivariate regression or descriptive statistics (Ibid, 406). Henrickson's agent-based model, drawing on the work of McDonough (1997), employed a national data set of 237,777 students from 461 American colleges and universities to produce a four–item typology of selection criteria. These include the individual student's *capital endowment*, representing factors such as gender, ethnicity, parental education levels, family income, etc.; *past capital accumulation*, including secondary school grade averages, standardized test scores, and so forth; *college choice behaviors*, such as the number of applications submitted, motivations for pursuing post-secondary education, availability of financial aid; and *anticipated capital returns*, such as career and lifestyle expectations (Ibid, 409). These categories are premised around 72 distinct variables. We drew on this article to examine whether this form of conceptualization was consistent with the experience of Maritime Canadian post-secondary institutions, in particular with millennial students, to discover if findings from the literature were consistent in a different geographical context, or whether some unique and meaningful attributes were involved in the Canadian context.

Indeed, the geographic focus of the empirical college choice/university selection literature on millennials is varied. Such recent research has included Chinese students studying in New Zealand (Kim-Choy, Holdsworth, Li, & Kim-Shyan, 2009); Indian students selecting among business schools in their home country (Reddy, 2011); as well as studies in Egypt (Roushdy,

**Table 1**

A sample of comparative research on university selection.

Type of study	Pre-millennial studies	Millennial studies
Students already enrolled in a post-secondary institution (“retrospective selection studies”)	Salim (1995)	Yamamoto (2006); Daily, Farewell, and Kumar (2010); Reddy (2011); Roushdy (2012); Fuller and Delorey (2016).
High school students intending to pursue post-secondary education (“prospective selection studies”)	Henrickson (2002)	Veloutsou, Lewis, and Paton (2004); Keskinenm Tiuraniemi, and Liimola (2008); Lang (2009).

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