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College Admission Counselor Perceptions: The Influences of Extracurricular Activity Involvement on the College Admission Decision

Meghan I. Lentner

The College at Brockport, meghan.lentner@yahoo.com

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Involvement on the College Admission Decision

Meghan I. Lentner

The College at Brockport, State University of New York

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	5
Literature Review.....	6
Extracurricular activities and adolescent development.....	7
Extracurricular activities and educational attainment.....	9
Duration and type of activity involvement.....	12
Current college admission criteria.....	14
The college admission decision.....	14
The role of school counselors.....	16
Conclusion.....	17
Research Questions.....	18
Method.....	19
Setting.....	19
Sample.....	19
Participants.....	19
Materials.....	21
Research Design.....	23
Analysis.....	24
Results.....	24
Conclusion.....	31
Discussion.....	31
Interpretation of findings.....	33
Implications for social change.....	35
Recommendations for counseling practice.....	36
Limitations and recommendations for further study.....	38
Conclusion.....	39

Tables

Table 1: <i>Tuition/Room and Board for Participating Public and Private Institutions</i>	20
Table 2: <i>Importance of Student Characteristics on the College Admission Decision</i>	24
Table 3: <i>The Importance of Specific Criteria in the Admission Decision</i>	25
Table 4: <i>The Significance of Each Category of Extracurricular Activity Involvement on the College Admission Decision</i>	27
Table 5: <i>The Admission Counselors' Belief That Extracurricular Activity Involvement Demonstrates Certain Qualities in an Applicant</i>	29
Table 6: <i>The Importance of Breadth of Involvement in the Admission Decision</i>	30

Appendices

Appendix A: *Letter of consent*

Appendix B: *Sample of survey: extracurricular activity involvement and the college admission decision*

Abstract

The perceptions of college admissions counselors and what importance extracurricular activity involvement has on the college admission decision were examined in this study. A regional study anonymously surveyed admissions counselors of 18 private and public institutions to determine the perceived value of extracurricular activity involvement and its influence on the college admission decision. Compared to other important factors that impact admissions decision, extracurricular activity involvement was perceived to play a moderately important role. Additionally, admissions counselors identify that extracurricular activity involvement implies a student's ability to be successful at a post-secondary institution. Together, these findings reveal that extracurricular activity involvement does play a significant part in how an applicant is viewed by an institution.

Keywords: extracurricular activity, admissions decision, educational attainment

Literature Review

The Digest of Education Statistics reported that about 3,329,000 high school students were expected to graduate during the 2008-2009 academic year (U.S. Department of Education, 2008); this is a large number of students, some of which will enroll in post-secondary institutions. The increasing number of adolescents graduating from high school has led to increased enrollments in post-secondary institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The same report indicated that 19.6 million students would be enrolling in college in the fall of 2009. College enrollment is expected to increase by nine percent from the fall of 2009 through the fall of 2018 (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). Should this trend continue it is expected that competition for admittance into colleges will remain high for the next several years, making admission more difficult to achieve.

Those students who are capable of college-level work, yet lack academic strength, can show merit and achievement in other areas of their life, which can increase their opportunities to attend a post-secondary institution (Killgore, 2009). Sireci, Zanetti and Berger (2003) found that participation in extracurricular activities had greater importance in the college admission decision than it had five years prior to their study. With increasing enrollment in post-secondary institutions across the country, many institutions are changing their admissions policies to place greater influence on personal qualities like participation in extracurricular activities (Sireci et al., 2003). Killgore (2009) found that participation in extracurricular activities is a desirable quality in an applicant. Demonstrating a real interest in an activity shows some admissions counselors that a student has developed and grown from a particular experience, and would be capable of doing the same in a college setting (Killgore, 2009). Recognizing that admissions counselors are looking at extracurricular participation in their admissions decisions, it is important to

specifically identify the value that extracurricular activities have on the admissions decision by admissions counselors.

Extracurricular activities and adolescent development

Extracurricular activity participation fosters healthy personal and social development by providing growth-related experiences in a structured environment (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Hanson, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003; Mahoney, Eccles, & Larson, 2004). Adolescence is a time when young people are exposed to many different experiences that help in skill and identity development (Busseri, Rose-Krasnor, Willoughby & Chalmers, 2006). Busseri et al. (2006) conducted a longitudinal study on the effects of extracurricular activity involvement on positive youth development. The implications of their study showed that involvement in extracurricular activities had a positive impact on youth development because of the relationships formed through activity participation. Their findings were consistent with other studies that found that the relationships with peers and adults formed through extracurricular activities are important in fostering interpersonal competence that leads to higher self-esteem and greater future developmental outcomes (Barber et al., 2003; Mahoney et al., 2003).

The reported benefits of involvement in extracurricular activities include an increase in academic and personal success (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Gardener, Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Larson, 2000). In a longitudinal study, Eccles and Barber (1999) focused only on extracurricular activities that required effort and provided a setting where adolescents could express their identities and passions. They grouped these activities into five broad categories that they identified as prosocial activities, sports teams, performing arts, school involvement, and academic clubs. They hypothesized that participation in extracurricular activities would increase psychological attachment to school, better GPA, improve school attendance rates and result in

higher rates of college attendance. They also reported that involvement in prosocial and performing arts activities were linked to less problem behaviors and less engagement in risky behaviors in 10th grade. Involvement in sports teams were positively linked to an increase in school attachment in both 11th and 12th grade. Involvement in school activities and academic clubs were positively related to school attachment and higher GPAs in 12th grade. The study suggested that participation in extracurricular activities is important in developing friend networks and support groups that decrease the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors while increasing personal identity.

When an adolescent is engaged in an organized activity environment, they are working on building several different skills. Participants in extracurricular activities are required to formulate challenging individual and group goals concerning an activity. They are then required to develop and rehearse strategies to meet the set goals, and then execute these strategies on a regular basis. Because of this goal setting environment, it is believed that adolescents will adapt skills toward future goal setting, especially pertaining to post-secondary education (Mahoney et al., 2003).

The characteristics of structured extracurricular activities include regular participation, utilizing schedules, rule-guided engagement, and direction by one or more adult activity leaders. There is an emphasis on skill development that continually increases in complexity and challenge, requiring active attention and clear feedback on performance (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). These characteristics help to build initiative (Larson, 2000) and positively influence adolescent development, which, in turn, increases adolescent adjustment in academic and social contexts (Darling, Caldwell, & Smith, 2005).

Extracurricular activities and educational attainment

Participation in extracurricular activities has been linked in many ways to increased educational attainment for adolescents (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Fredericks & Eccles, 2006; Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). Adolescents who are involved in extracurricular activities have been found to be more adjusted in social and academic contexts (Darling, 2005; Darling, Caldwell, & Smith, 2005; Fredericks & Eccles, 2006) and have increased positive adult outcomes, including post-secondary education (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002).

Similarly, Larson (2000) reported that participation in organized activities helps students to acquire skills that can lead to positive future adult outcomes. Extracurricular activity involvement helps build skills in several areas of an adolescent's character that include positive development of creativity, leadership, altruism, and civic engagement (Larson, 2000). A study by Gardener et al. (2008) concluded that participation in organized activities during high school was positively associated with educational and civic success in young adulthood. Adolescents with more participation in organized activities demonstrated skills that help them achieve success into adulthood.

Initiative is a developmental factor fostered through involvement in extracurricular activities. Larson (2000) argued that adolescents need structured leisure activities in order to ignite excitement and initiative toward positive development. Initiative is the ability to "be motivated from within to direct attention and effort toward a challenging goal" (Larson, 2000, pp. 170). When an adolescent has initiative to be positively engaged in academic and non-

academic activities they are more likely to be future-oriented and attain higher levels of education after high school (Eccles et al., 2003; Larson, 2000).

In a longitudinal study of adolescents over a 10 year period found that activity participation and duration of involvement, assisted with academic adjustment, provided a peer context, and reduced risky behaviors (Barber, Stone, & Eccles, 2003). Similarly, another longitudinal study (Beal & Crockett, 2010) measured the future-oriented cognitions, young adult educational attainment, and high school activities of 317 adolescents. They found that high school activities and future-oriented cognitions were significantly and positively related to educational attainment. Future-oriented cognitions appeared beneficial to educational attainment because adolescents involved in extracurricular activities were better able to envision their educational future (Beal & Crockett, 2010).

The development of interpersonal competence through extracurricular activities has a positive effect on educational attainment (Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003). Mahoney et al. used data from an ongoing longitudinal study that annually surveyed 695 adolescents, beginning in grade four and ending in grade 12. Interpersonal competence, family economic status, extracurricular activity, educational aspirations, and educational status were measured to determine the outcome of educational attainment in the participants. A synthesis of the data showed that gender and family economic status were not indicators of educational attainment at age 20. Extracurricular activity participation, however, was linked to a reciprocal increase in interpersonal competence, a concept of adolescent development that Mahoney et al. (2003) described as the ability to maintain healthy relationships and avoid conflict. Interpersonal competence was a significant indicator of educational attainment and adolescent adjustment. Consistent with these data were the findings of a longitudinal study by Eccles et al. (2003); they

found that participation in extracurricular activities lead to better educational outcomes, including college attendance. Eccles et al. (2003) also indicated that extracurricular activities showed a positive increase in interpersonal competence and identified it as a factor in positive adolescent development.

The likelihood of completing a degree from a post-secondary institution is more likely for adolescents that participate in extracurricular activities (Barber et al., 2003; Eccles et al., 2003; Gardner et al., 2008). Fredericks and Eccles (2006) found that there was a positive outcome between extracurricular activity involvement and academic expectations. Students who were more involved, both in number of activities and time spent in activities, were more likely to be engaged in school and have higher GPAs. This study also reported that the more time spent in activities predicted that adolescents were more adjusted in young adulthood. These findings also showed that the quality of the experience is directly related to positive future outcomes.

Having a higher GPA gives students more post-secondary educational opportunities because it makes them qualified for more competitive schools (Tam and Sukhatme, 2004). Participation in extracurricular activities was found to increase educational aspirations, enrollment to universities, educational attainment, and school grades (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). They used information from a national database that was inclusive of a six year time span. Participants were interviewed prior to high school, twice during high school, and two years post-high school. The information was synthesized to determine the characteristics of adolescents involved in extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activity participation was greater for students who had achieved higher educational attainment. Similar findings were reported by Zaff, Moore, Papillo, and Williams (2003); 70 % of participants who were involved in at least one extracurricular activity had attended some college two years after graduating from high

school, making them two and a half times more likely to attend college than non-active participants.

Duration and type of activity involvement

Adolescents that participate in an increased number of activities over a long period of time are more likely to attain post-secondary education (Fredericks and Eccles, 2006). The frequency and type of involvement often differs from one adolescent to another because of characteristics of the students, their parents and their families (Barnett, 2008; Fredericks & Eccles, 2006). These three areas (students, parents, and families) contribute to the level of involvement that an adolescent has in a particular activity. An adolescent's personal interests, the level of education of the parents, and the type of family environment they live in, factor into the decisions to be involved in extracurricular activities.

While it is unknown why an adolescent, as an individual, decides which activities are interesting and engaging, parental involvement and family socioeconomic status have been studied as a major factors regarding adolescent activity participation. Parents with a higher level of education often enroll their children in more activities outside of school. Encouragement from parents is often an indicator of higher educational expectations and attainment (Fredericks & Eccles, 2006). Many studies take into account the family educational attainment, as this is often increases the likelihood of the adolescent moving onto post-secondary education (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Beal & Crockett, 2010; Eccles et al., 2003; Fredericks & Eccles, 2006). Parents who have a higher level of education often expect the same of their children, guiding them toward higher educational aspirations (Barnett, 2008). Parents who are educated beyond high school are often more aware of the benefits of extracurricular participation and guide their children to participate in structured activities. Adolescents guided by parents are expected to be

more involved and seek post-secondary education (Fredericks & Eccles, 2006), thus, adolescents with educated parents are more likely to go on to college after graduating high school.

The importance of the type of activity and the frequency of the activity has been studied in the past; both factors have impacted the educational attainment of adolescents. Research has indicated that increased activity involvement could be a predictor of greater attachment to school, higher eleventh grade GPA, increased likelihood of college attendance, and lower rates of alcohol and marijuana use in 12th grade (Barber et al, 2003; Busseri et al., 2006; Fredericks & Eccles, 2006; Gardner et al., 2008). Being involved in more than one activity produces better outcomes than being in only one activity (Barber et al., 2003). More involved adolescents are more likely to have a sense of future goals and educational expectations, making them more likely to attend college after high school.

The amount of time spent in an extracurricular activity also plays a part in the benefits of educational attainment and civic engagement. Gardner et al. (2008) found that adolescents, who participated in an activity, for two years or more, were more likely to acquire positive educational and civic success in young adulthood. The positive associations, with participation intensity and success in young adulthood, suggested that it is important for adolescents to not only participate in extracurricular activities, but be involved in them over a longer period of time. Gardner et al. believed that adolescents who were involved for longer periods of time benefited more because of “greater exposure to the developmental supports and opportunities provided by organized activities” (pp. 820). They argued that adolescents need a certain amount of developmental supports and opportunities before they exhibit positive young adult outcomes. Youth who were involved in more activities over a longer period of time reported less

involvement in risky behavior, had more positive interpersonal relationships, and did better in their academics (Busseri et al., 2006).

Current college admission criteria

College admissions decisions are made based on several factors that identify a student's academic and personal strengths. Grades in college prep courses, strength of curriculum, test scores, and overall Grade Point Average (GPA) are the top factors in the college admission decisions (NACAC, 2009). These factors have remained unchanged for several years, while college enrollment has increased. In a separate survey of college admissions counselors, the top factors influencing admission decisions were grades in college prep courses (74.9%); strength of curriculum (61.5%); admission test scores (54.3%); and grades in all courses (52.1%; NACAC, 2008). Participation in extracurricular activities was *considerably important* (7.4%) or *moderately important* (36.6%) in admission decisions. Though these factors are influential in the admissions decision, the admission pressures and increased competition is leading admissions counselors to seek as much information about an applicant as possible (Gifford, Briceño-Perriott & Mianzo, 2006).

The college admission decision

Pressure is placed on admissions counselors to make the best decisions for their institution's financial well-being by admitting students who have the skills necessary for future graduation (Stern and Briggs, 2001). Admitting students who do not graduate wastes limited educational resources, which can lower the governmental funding received by an institution. Low graduation rates concern public policymakers because many public post-secondary institutions are tax supported (Tam & Sukhatme, 2004). If the graduation rate is low, then less tax money may go to that institution in the future. College admissions counselors are identifying

“predictors of success” that compare one individual student to the next, and determine that candidate’s likelihood of success in college (Gifford et al., 2006).

According to the literature, major predictors of success include high school GPA (Barber, Stone, & Eccles, 2003), interpersonal competence (Mahoney et al., 2003), and test scores (Gifford et al., 2006). Another study examined the application packets of 900 students admitted to a single institution (Mattson, 2007). This study determined three variables that significantly predicted the students’ academic success: GPA, gender, and leadership experience. Scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) were not a strong predictor of academic success, which seems to contradict previous research (Gifford et al., 2006) and the purpose of aptitude tests. Keeping in mind that College Admissions Counselors are pressured to admit only students who will succeed at their institution, it is important to identify what factors may predict college academic success.

If an admission counselor can predict success on an individual basis, it is important for adolescents applying to colleges to highlight their “predictors of success”. Some admissions counselors are beginning to focus on the individual applicant as a whole rather than a series of scores (Sireci et al., 2003; Tam & Sukhatme, 2004). Potential applicants who present more positive characteristics and attributes may have a better chance of being admitted to a competitive institution. Stern and Briggs (2001) support a new model for admissions processes that moves toward a competency-based approach rather than solely on grades and transcripts. The competency approach focuses more on the quality of students’ performances rather than a list of their academic and extracurricular involvement. Stern and Briggs believe that the use of this model will identify and predict the academic success of each applicant.

Kaufman and Gabler (2004) found that it is hard to predict the specific types of skills that are developed in extracurricular activities. They argue that it is less about a competency

approach and more based on the “uniqueness” of an applicant that increases the likelihood of attending college (Kaufman & Gabler, 2004). A study by Sireci et al. (2003) found that although normal admission criteria regarding incoming applicants still plays a large part in the admission decision, admissions counselors appear to want to have as much information as they can about the applicant when making admission decisions. Both of these studies suggest that the individual’s experiences and “uniqueness” are the basis for a more desirable candidate for admission.

The role of school counselors

A school counselor’s role is to facilitate learning opportunities and help build skills to maximize student success through academic, career, and personal-social development experiences (Stone & Dahir, 2006). Professional school counselors are qualified to meet the developmental needs of a diverse student population by helping students establish personal goals and develop post-secondary plans (American School Counselor Association, 2009). Adolescent development is an important concern for school counselors because it can determine what approaches and interventions will make the most impact on a student. The knowledge of adolescent development can aid school counselors in guiding students toward appropriate strategies to reach their goals.

Another part of a high school counselor’s role is to advise students on important college planning factors such as college majors and admission requirements (Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2009). Students begin developing college and career aspirations as early as 8th grade, often valuing a particular occupation that sparks a predisposition to work toward post-secondary education and career goals (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Cabrera and La Nasa suggested that

during early adolescence students need to be informed of college entrance requirements, begin college preparatory classes and be engaged in extracurricular activities to help foster future career and college goals. School counselors play an integral part in guiding students and their families toward making the right decisions to help students achieve post-secondary educational goals and success. Knowing when adolescents will be most developmentally receptive to career guidance curriculum can be useful to school counselors when developing and implementing their programs. An important role of a school counselor is to facilitate planning toward post-secondary education goals through (McDonough, 2008).

School counselors should also be aware of the impact that activity participation has on identity development, and on the college admissions process. If school counselors are aware of how extracurricular activities are used in the college admissions selection process they can share this information with students and parents. School counselors can also tailor their letters of recommendation for students applying to college as it relates to the developmental gains that the students made through their academic and extracurricular involvements. Incorporating how students have developed overtime will provide the admissions counselors the holistic picture of the applicant.

Conclusion

The importance of extracurricular activity involvement on adolescent development has long been studied. Many of the studies on this subject are longitudinal and follow adolescents through their high school careers and into young adulthood (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Barber Et al., 2003; Beal & Crockett, 2010; Busseri Et al., 2006; Gardener Et al., 2008; Hanson Et al., 2003; Mahoney Et al., 2003; Mahoney Et al. , 2004; Larson, 2000).

Many of these studies focused on activity involvement and focus on different variables affected by activity involvement, particularly on extracurricular activity involvement and the impact it has on educational attainment.

Students that stand out as capable of academic success in college are more likely to be offered admission to a post-secondary institution. Admissions counselors are beginning to focus on the applicant as an individual, looking at strengths and experiences as a whole rather than as score on a test. Well-rounded individuals, exhibiting interpersonal competence and leadership experiences, may stand out as a more unique applicant against peers. Students who show strength in academics and leadership experience are more likely to graduate with a college degree, making them a more desirable applicant to post-secondary institutions.

To some extent the benefits of extracurricular activity participation on adolescent educational attainment has been studied. What has not been studied is if the extent to which participation in extracurricular activities makes a difference in the college admission decision locally.

Research questions

Killgore (2009) identified that students who lack academic strength can show merit and achievement in other areas of their life through extracurricular activities. Involvement in extracurricular activities can increase a student's opportunity to attend a post secondary institution. A school counselor who is aware of how extracurricular activities are used in the college admissions selection process can provide students and parents with better information and advice for post-secondary educational planning.

The focus of this study is on the perceptions of college admissions counselors and what importance extracurricular activity involvement has on the college admission decision. The research questions that drive this study are:

(1) compared to other important factors that impact admissions decisions, what level of importance is placed on extracurricular activity involvement? and

(2) what is the perceived value assigned to different types of extracurricular activities by admissions counselors?

Method

Setting

This is a regional study of admission counselors at 5 four-year private and 13 public post-secondary institutions in a mid-sized state located in the Northeastern United States. The 18 institutions are situated in several large cities and some rural towns and villages.

Sample

Eligible participants were determined to be admissions counselors of area institutions because of the nature of their position and the general knowledge of admissions criteria for their institution. The qualified population was determined to be college freshmen admissions counselors employed at four-year colleges in the designated region. Email addresses of 80 eligible participants were obtained from local college website directories and invited to participate in this study.

Participants

Of the 80 admissions counselors sampled, 21 surveys were returned. Of the institutions sampled, 21 admissions counselors from 18 institutions became the participants in this study. Of

the institutions, 5 were private and 13 were public institutions. The chart below details the tuition, including room and board, for each institution. Private institutions in the studied area tend to have higher tuition rates than the public institutions. See Table 1 for a breakdown of tuition/room and board for participating private and public institutions.

Table 1

Tuition/Room and Board for Participating Public and Private Institutions

Tuition/Room and Board for Private Institutions (\$):		Tuition/Room and Board for Public Institutions (\$):	
Institution 1	39,480	Institution 6	25,096
Institution 2	33,186	Institution 7	20,050
Institution 3	33,310	Institution 8	12,730
Institution 4	40,761	Institution 9	3,166
Institution 5	37,360	Institution 10	9,292
Average Private Tuition/Room and Board:			
	\$36,819	Institution 11	4,970
		Institution 12	8,060
		Institution 13	3,100
		Institution 14	21,485
		Institution 15	15,685
		Institution 16	16,221
		Institution 17	18,345
		Institution 18	15,000
		Average Public Tuition/Room and Board:	
		\$13,323	
Overall Average Tuition/Room and Board for all Institutions: \$20,186			

Materials

The materials used for this study included a survey instrument. The instrument was developed based on the literature and knowledge on the topic, as well as, from data collected through the National Association for College Admissions Counseling's Admission Trends Survey. The Admission Trends Survey is not a copyrighted document.

The survey consisted of a series of 10 questions designed to determine what factors were most important to freshman admissions counselors when making admissions decisions. Specific demographic information was requested from the participants in this survey. The criteria included defining if the institution was public or private, as admissions criteria may be different dependent upon this. Additional demographic criteria included the number of full-time, degree seeking undergraduates as well as how many applicants were admitted to each institution, comparing this information determines the competitiveness of the institution. Items one through three on the survey were centered on demographic information.

It was important to determine if the institution considers at least six semesters of transcript data, all grades through junior year of high school, in order to understand if all applicants applying to the institution are evaluated with the same criteria as later admits. Item four and five determined if the criteria was equal for all applicants regardless of when they applied to the institution. This information determined the consistency of the admission decision for each institution. There was less chance for one applicant with more transcript data to be given an advantage over one that has less transcript data if all applicants had been judged on the same criteria.

The sixth item on the survey asked participants, on behalf of their institution, to rate the importance of each factor on a Likert-type scale and identify the factors as having No Importance, Limited Importance, Moderate Importance, or Considerable Importance in the admission decision. Factors were determined through the literature and knowledge on the topic and included factors such as standardized test scores, recommendation letters, transcript grades, extracurricular activities, etc. This information was extremely relevant to this study because it rated the factors that admissions counselors look most closely at when determining which applicants to admit to their institution.

The following item asked participants to rate the importance of student characteristics, in respect to the admission decision, on a Likert-type scale of No Importance, Limited Important, Moderate Important, or Considerable Importance. This item determined whether or not institutions favored certain characteristics (biological, ethnic, financial, etc.) when making an admissions decision. Several of these factors could not be changed by the applicant and therefore could not determine if an applicant's uncontrollable personal situation, rather than those factors that can be controlled like extracurricular activities, plays a role in the admission decision.

Identifying a certain extracurricular activity category that is of greater importance to the admission decision can help to determine what types of activities school counselors can suggest when guiding students to certain areas of involvement. In order to understand what kinds of activities were deemed most important by admissions counselors it was necessary for this study to group extracurricular activities into categories and ask participants to rate the importance of an applicant's involvement in each category. Item eight was developed to help determine the value placed on different categories of involvement.

Based on the literature, involvement in extracurricular activities positively impacts student development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Hanson et al., 2003; Mahoney et al., 2004). Identifying how an institution values applicants' involvement in extracurricular activities can help to determine the significance that involvement has on the admission decision. The remaining items on the survey gave participants three opinion-based choices regarding extracurricular involvement, the researcher can conclude what values are placed on an applicant with extracurricular activity involvement. Additionally, it is important to know the breadth of involvement that looks more favorable on an applicant. When guiding students in the post-secondary planning process it would be helpful for counselors to know if it is more favorable for an applicant to be really involved in only one activity over being loosely involved in several activities.

Research design

The investigator emailed admissions counselors and invited them to participate in an anonymous online survey. The email contained a letter of consent (Appendix A) describing informed consent and a link to the Survey Monkey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com>) survey (Appendix B). The investigator sent a second request for participation two-weeks after the initial invite to encourage additional responses.

The survey data were encrypted and anonymous. The investigator had no direct contact with the participants or their colleges/ universities. It was stated in the cover letter to all subjects at the beginning of the survey that they are under no obligation to participate in this research study and may choose not to complete the survey at any time.

Analysis

The survey results data were analyzed through Survey Monkey's results analysis software. The responses were analyzed by percentage to determine what criterion regarding applicants was most important to the admissions counselors surveyed.

Results

The results of this study are presented in the tables below. The survey data was analyzed in percentages to determine the significance of the participants' responses to each part of the survey.

Table 2

Importance of Student Characteristics on the College Admission Decision

Characteristics	No Importance	Limited Importance	Moderate Importance	Considerable Importance
Race/Ethnicity	65.0%	20.0%	15.0%	0.0%
Gender	71.4%	19.0%	9.5%	0.0%
First-generation status	50.0%	30.0%	20.0%	0.0%
State or county of residence	60.0%	25.0%	15.0%	0.0%
High school attended	42.9%	33.3%	14.3%	9.5%
Alumni relations	55.0%	30.0%	15.0%	0.0%
Ability to pay	90.5%	4.8%	4.8%	0.0%

According to the data in Table 2, demographic and intrinsic characteristics of an applicant have limited to no importance in the college admission decision. Ability to pay had the least importance in the admission decision. The high school that an applicant attended was the only characteristic with considerable importance, however, an insignificant percentage of 9.5% of participants reported this as *considerably important*.

Table 3

The Importance of Specific Criteria in the Admission Decision

Criteria	No Importance	Limited Importance	Moderate Importance	Considerable Importance
Grades in all subjects	0.0%	9.5%	42.9%	47.6%
Grades in college prep courses	0.0%	0.0%	23.8%	76.2%
Strength of curriculum	0.0%	0.0%	19.0%	81.0%
Class rank	15.0%	60.0%	20.0%	5.0%
Admission test scores (SAT, ACT)	4.8%	4.8%	28.6%	61.9%
SAT II scores	90.5%	9.5%	0.0%	0.0%
Other subject test scores (AP, IB)	19.0%	19.0%	52.4%	9.5%
Essay or writing sample	9.5%	19.0%	47.6%	23.8%
Interview	52.4%	38.1%	4.8%	4.8%
Portfolio	42.9%	23.8%	19.0%	14.3%
Work	15.0%	65.0%	15.0%	5.0%
Extracurricular activities	4.8%	38.1%	33.3%	23.8%
State graduation exam scores	0.0%	38.1%	33.3%	28.6%

Counselor recommendation	0.0%	23.8%	47.6%	28.6%
Teacher recommendation	0.0%	23.8%	47.6%	28.6%
Students' interest in attending	0.0%	23.8%	28.6%	47.6%

In table 3, 57.1% of participants consider extracurricular activity involvement, compared to other important factors, to be moderately to considerably important in the college admission decision.

Other important factors that were given considerable importance include grades in all subjects (47.6%), grades in college prep courses (76.2%), strength of curriculum (81.0%), and admission test scores (61.9%).

Table 4

The Significance of Each Category of Extracurricular Activity Involvement on the College Admission Decision

Activity Category	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Prosocial Activities (Participation in volunteer and community service, Church)	25.0%	25.0%	45.0%	5.0%
Team Sports (Participation in one or more teams)	10.0%	25.0%	60.0%	5.0%
Performing Arts (Participation in band, chorus, drama)	15.0%	20.0%	55.0%	10.0%
School Involvement (Participation in Student Government, Cheerleading)	10.0%	25.0%	55.0%	10.0%
Academic Clubs (Participation in Math Club, foreign language clubs, debate club, etc.)	10.0%	25.0%	55.0%	10.0%
Outside school activities (Dance, Karate, Swimming, Scouts, etc.)	10.0%	20.0%	55.0%	15.0%

Table 4 groups activities into categories and reports the admissions counselors' perceived importance of each category in percentages. Participation in team sports was perceived to be the most important category of activity involvement, with 60.0% of admissions counselors rating it as *somewhat important*. Participation in performing arts, school involvement, academic clubs, and outside school activities was given equal importance, each category rated *somewhat*

important by 55.0% of admissions counselors. Prosocial activities were rated 15.0% lower than participation in team sports in the *somewhat important* category. However, 50.0% of admissions counselors consider participation in prosocial activities to be *important* to *very important* in the college admission decision.

Table 5

The Admission Counselors' Belief That Extracurricular Activity Involvement Demonstrates Certain Qualities in an Applicant

Qualities Developed Through Involvement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
An increased likelihood of academic success at the post-secondary level	28.6%	61.9%	9.5%	0.0%
An increased ability in planning and decision making	28.6%	71.4%	0.0%	0.0%
An ability to demonstrate empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills	23.8%	66.7%	9.5%	0.0%
A higher commitment to learning	14.3%	71.4%	14.3%	0.0%
An ability to self-advocate to get the most out of the post-secondary experience	33.3%	57.1%	9.5%	0.0%
A greater ability to identify with the values and goals of the post-secondary institution	23.8%	57.1%	19.0%	0.0%

Table 5 illustrates the perceived qualities developed through involvement in extracurricular activities. The results indicate that 90.5% of admissions counselors surveyed *agree* that involvement in extracurricular activities increases the likelihood of academic success at the post-secondary level, while 90.4% of admissions counselors *agree* that activity

involvement demonstrates an increased ability to self-advocate and get the most out of the post-secondary experience.

Table 6

The Importance of Breadth of Involvement in the Admission Decision

Breadth of Involvement	Percentage of Responses
Really involved in one or two extracurricular activities.	90.0%
Somewhat involved in two to three extracurricular activities.	15.0%
Little involvement in over three extracurricular activities.	5.0%
Involved in no extracurricular activities.	0.0%

A majority, 90.0% of respondents, believe that it is more beneficial for an applicant to be really involved in one or two extra-curricular activities.

Conclusion

Compared to other important factors that received high percentages of importance in the admission decision, 57.1% of respondents considered involvement in extracurricular activities to have *moderate to considerable importance* in the admission decision. Nearly half of respondents believed that involvement in prosocial activities was an *important to very important* activity category for participants to be involved in, while a majority of respondents placed only *moderate importance* on the remaining categories. A majority of respondents placed a higher value on activities related to sports. The results indicate that 90.5% of respondents agreed that involvement in extracurricular activities increases the likelihood of academic success at the post-secondary level, leading the research to conclude that extracurricular activity involvement plays a *moderately significant* role in the college admission decision. Other useful findings conclude that almost all respondents prefer an applicant to be really involved in only one or two activities rather than only somewhat or little involvement in two or more activities.

Discussion

This study was developed and conducted because a review of the literature demonstrated that involvement in extracurricular activities can increase a student's opportunity to attend a post secondary institution (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Fredericks & Eccles, 2006; Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). A school counselor who is aware of how extracurricular activities are used in the college admissions selection process can provide students and parents with better information and advice for post-secondary educational planning. However, there was little information from post-secondary institutions in the researchers' geographic location. This prompted a regional

study of admissions counselor perceptions of extracurricular involvement and how it influences the admission decision.

The first focus of this study was on the perceptions of college admissions counselors and what importance extracurricular activity involvement has on the college admission decision. This study sought to answer questions specific to the impact that extracurricular activity involvement plays in the college admission decision, compared to other important factors. Other studies that focused on the factors of the college admission decision, like the NACAC Admission Trends Survey (2009), document what factors influence the admission decision. The current study sought to determine what factors impact the admission decisions in the institutions in the area of study because the literature suggested that a significant increase in applicants and competition has lead admissions counselors to seek more information about an applicant when making their decision (Gifford, Briceño-Perriott & Mianzo, 2006).

The literature suggested that involvement in extracurricular activities develops certain characteristics in an adolescent that are admirable to post-secondary institutions (Barnett, 2008; Fredericks & Eccles, 2006; Gifford, Briceño-Perriott & Mianzo, 2006). This study sought to define the perceived value assigned to different types of extracurricular activities by admissions counselors in order to determine what types of activities most impact the admission decision.

The findings of this study reported that extracurricular activity involvement plays a moderately significant role in the admission decision as compared to other important factors. Similarly, this study revealed that a majority of the admissions counselors surveyed believe that involvement in extracurricular activities increases an applicant's likelihood of academic success at the post-secondary education level. Additionally, participants rated prosocial activity

involvement most important when looking at extracurricular activities. Participants also identified that breadth of involvement was most favorable when a candidate was genuinely involved in one or two extracurricular activities.

Interpretation of findings

According to research findings, demographic and intrinsic characteristics of an applicant have limited to no importance in the admission decision (Table 2). This leads the researcher to believe that a more important area to focus on is the importance of specific criteria in the admission decision. In table 3, 57.1% of participants consider extracurricular activity involvement, compared to other important factors, to be *moderately* to *considerably important* in the college admission decision. While the 2008 NACAC *College Admission Trends Survey* reported that 44% of participants rated participation in extracurricular activities to be *considerably important* to *moderately important* in admission decisions. This study indicated that extracurricular activity participation plays a more significant role in the college admission decision of local institutions as compared to a national study.

Other important factors that were given considerable importance include grades in all subjects (47.6%), grades in college prep courses (76.2%), strength of curriculum (81.0%), and admission test scores (61.9%). These factors, along with extracurricular activity involvement, suggest that admission counselors are looking at the bigger picture when considering an applicant's admission to their institution. This supports research from Sireci et al. (2003), arguing that admissions counselors appear to want as much information as possible about an applicant when making decisions. Additionally, the findings of this study support Stern and Briggs' (2001) admission process model that focuses on a competency-based approach that

suggests that admissions counselors look at the quality of an applicant's performance rather than just a list of their academics.

The literature indicated that involvement in extracurricular activities leads to an increased attachment to school as well as increased aspirations to attend and be successful in post-secondary education (Eccles & Barber, 1999, Mahoney et al., 2003). Studies in the past have grouped extracurricular activities into broad categories (Eccles & Barber, 1999) but have done little with looking at each broad category. This study took a look at those broad categories and had admissions counselors rate them on their perceived value. The results of this study indicated that admissions counselors perceived different types of extracurricular activities to have a higher value than others. Table 4 indicates that 50.0% of admissions counselors considered participation in prosocial activities to be *important* to *very important* in the college admission decision. Participation in team sports, with 60.0% of admissions counselors rating it as *somewhat important*, was perceived to be another important type of activity. Participation in performing arts, school involvement, academic clubs, and outside school activities was given equal importance, each category rated *somewhat important* by 55.0% of admissions counselors. Though all categories were perceived to have some level of value, those activities that help adolescents to develop skills in teamwork, problem solving and civic engagement were rated higher by admissions counselors.

Table 5 identifies that 90.5% of admissions counselors surveyed agree that involvement in extracurricular activities increases the likelihood of academic success at the post-secondary level, while 90.4% of admissions counselors agreed that activity involvement demonstrates an increased ability to self-advocate and get the most out of the post-secondary experience. This falls in line with the literature that suggested that involvement in extracurricular activities leads

to increased educational attainment for adolescents because of the positive development of interpersonal competence and better adjustment and engagement in post-secondary education (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Fredericks & Eccles, 2006; Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). The literature identified that institutions are pressured to admit students that are more likely to succeed in order to acquire and secure government and donor funding (Tam & Sukhatme, 2004). The results of this study suggested that admissions counselors perceived extracurricular activity involvement to play a positive role in an applicant's future educational success. To expand upon the literature, the researcher can conclude that admissions counselors see extracurricular activity involvement as strength in an applicant, thus making them more favorable to the institution.

Implications for social change

Current trends in the admission process stress that admissions counselors screen prospective students for their likelihood of being successful at the post-secondary level (Sireci et al., 2003; Tam & Sukhatme, 2004). The research supported this trend, as extracurricular activity and other factors are gaining importance in the admission decision. This supports a need for students with a desire to continue their education to strengthen not only academics skills, but social and leadership skills as well. An applicant who is strong in many areas is more desirable for institutions looking for applicants that have the ability to succeed.

The literature reported that adolescents engaging in extracurricular activity are more likely to be successful at the post-secondary level (Beal & Crockett, 2010; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003; Fredericks & Eccles, 2006; Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Mahoney,

Cairns, & Farmer, 2003; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). The admissions counselors that participated in this study expressed that they believe students involved in extracurricular activities are more likely to be successful at their institution and are more likely to be a favorable candidate in the admission process. This leads the researcher to believe that extracurricular activity involvement plays enough of a part in the admission decision to be considered an important aspect of the college planning process.

With the current trends in the admission process and the increasing need for continuing education, it is important to incorporate a more well-rounded experience into middle and secondary schools. The skills that are developed through extracurricular activity involvement are not always the same as those developed in academics. Exposure to different experiences within activity involvement is unique, as it develops a sense of purpose, responsibility and civic engagement that can further an adolescent's self-concept and strengthen self-confidence (Busseri, Rose-Krasnor, Willoughby & Chalmers, 2006). Admissions decisions are swayed based on an applicants' ability to demonstrate these skills, and this study supports that extracurricular activity involvement is one way of highlighting these positive attributes.

Recommendations for counseling practice

An important role of the school counselor is to help students toward aspirations of continuing education. School counselors and career counselors should pay attention to the results of this study as they are beneficial to the post-secondary education planning process. The significant importance placed on extracurricular activity involvement reported in this study concludes that extracurricular activity involvement does play a significant role in the admission

decision. School counselors need to know this information in order to guide students toward deciding to become involved in an extracurricular activity.

Admissions counselors look most favorably on a student who is really involved in one or two activities as opposed to being somewhat involved in many activities. The quality of involvement in extracurricular activities is something that needs to be developed over time, and so taking advantage of the benefits of extracurricular activity involvement should ideally be planned before a student's final year of high school. School counselors need to begin advising students toward extracurricular activity involvement as early as middle school and most importantly in the first two years of high school. If students begin their involvement in an activity at an early age, they can develop and strengthen the skills that help them become more well-rounded and adjusted at a post-secondary institution.

Admissions counselors are accountable for admitting applicants that are the most likely to succeed at a post-secondary institution and therefore look for the skills that tell them an applicant will be successful at their institution. Involvement in extracurricular activities builds skills that lead to well-adjusted and successful students. This study concluded that extracurricular activities that consist of prosocial and sport activities are the types of activities that look most favorable to admissions counselors. School counselors should be aware of the prosocial and sports activities in their district and in the surrounding community. Having knowledge of the activities that are available to students can increase the likelihood that the student will participate in one or more activities.

Additionally, School administrators want students to succeed and go on to college in order to receive funding from state and federal government. When school budgets change and

certain activities are in danger of getting cut from schools it is important that extracurricular activities do not get significantly affected. The results of this study and the literature are in support of extracurricular activity involvement and the significant positive role it plays in the admission decision and adolescent development. This knowledge can help school counselors advocate for keeping extracurricular activities in the budget, supporting the argument that extracurricular activities not only help students grow as individuals, but promote positive experiences that can lead to increased educational attainment.

Limitations and recommendations for further study

Because of the anonymity of the participation in this study, it was impossible to know whether or not the participants who answered the survey questions were actually qualified and knowledgeable enough to accurately answer the questions. Additionally, the researcher found it difficult to obtain a large return of online surveys. Blindly emailing a link to admissions counselors at identified institutions did not lead to a suitable response rate.

Further research should include more than 18 institutions, as the researcher believes that this would reveal a greater understanding of how extracurricular activity participation influences the admission decision. Also, a qualitative study where admissions counselors are interviewed by the researcher may shed more light on how the admissions process works at different institutions. Having more detailed information from admissions counselors would be beneficial to address questions regarding specific applicants and how one applicant is compared to another. Getting more specific examples of the admission decision would give the researcher a better understanding of how the admission process works on a more specific level.

This study did not seek to discover school administrator's perceived importance of extracurricular activity involvement. Administrators often make the decisions to cut certain activities when the budget gets tight, future research should determine how administrators view extracurricular activity involvement and whether they see it as important to the success of students. Having data to support the benefits of activity involvement can help to educate administrators and keep certain extracurricular activities available to students.

Future research should also look more closely at the different kinds of extracurricular activities. It would be beneficial to look more closely at the five categories identified in this study: prosocial activities, sports teams, performing arts, school involvement, and academic clubs. Determining what kinds of skills are developed in each activity and then identifying the skills that lead to educational attainment can help school and career counselors guide students toward the specific activities that can boost their ability and likelihood of attending a post-secondary institution.

Conclusion

The significant findings in this study revealed that extracurricular activity involvement does play a role in the admission decision. This study supported the trend that institutions are requesting more information on applicants in order to gain a better understanding of ability to be successful at a post-secondary institution. The results indicated that admissions counselors perceive extracurricular activity involvement to play a positive role in an applicant's future education success, but whether involvement in extracurricular activities is a deciding factor remains to be seen. What is important to keep in mind is that students need to develop the skills necessary for success in higher education, and these skills are developed beyond academics.

Students, parents, and school counselors can benefit from knowing that extracurricular activity involvement is an important part not only in development, but it is also plays a positive role in a student's acceptance into post-secondary institutions.

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*Appendix A***Letter of consent**

Dear College Admission Counselor,

My name is Meghan Lentner, a Graduate Student in the Department of Counselor Education at the College at Brockport. I am conducting a study on the importance of participation in extracurricular activities on the college admission decision. This study involves a survey of X# of questions that will take approximately X amount of time to complete. The answers to this survey are important because they will identify how much college admissions counselors value extracurricular activities in potential students. The information will be used to inform high schools about the importance of having extracurricular activities available for their students. You are being asked to participate in this study and your answers to the attached survey signify your consent to participate. Please do not write your name on the survey. There will be no way in which you will be connected to this survey, and results will be reported in aggregate form only. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer, and you may stop participating in the survey at any time. It is hoped that approximately 25 people will participate in the study. The results will be used to determine how much college admissions counselors value the involvement in extracurricular activities when making the decision to accept applicants to their institution.

Thank you for your participation in the survey. If you have any questions regarding this study you may contact:

Meghan Lentner
Department of Counselor Education
The College at Brockport
315-380-3263
mlent1@brockport.edu

Dr. Summer Reiner
Department of Counselor Education
The College at Brockport
585-395-5497
sreiner@brockport.edu

*Appendix B***Sample of survey: extracurricular activity involvement and the college admission decision**

1. What is the name of your institution?
2. Is your institution:
 - Private
 - Public
3. What is the total number of full-time, degree-seeking undergraduates for Fall 2009?
4. How many applicants were admitted for Fall 2009?
5. Did your institution admit any applicants for Fall 2010 without at least six semesters of transcript data (i.e. through the end of junior year of high school)?
 - Yes
 - No
6. How were applicants evaluated for admission prior to the start of the senior year of high school?
 - Same criteria as later admits
 - More stringent criteria than later admits
 - Less stringent criteria than later admits
7. How important are the following criteria in admission decisions made at your institution?

	No Importance	Limited Importance	Moderate Importance	Considerable Importance
Grades in all subjects				
Grades in college prep				

courses				
Strength of curriculum				
Class rank				
Admission test scores (SAT, ACT)				
SAT II scores				
Other subject test scores (AP, IB)				
Essay or writing sample				
Interview				
Portfolio				
Work				
Extracurricular activities				
State graduation exam scores				
Counselor recommendation				
Teacher recommendation				

Students' interest in attending				
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8. To what extent do the following student characteristics influence how the above factors in the admission decision are evaluated?

	No Importance	Limited Importance	Moderate Importance	Considerable Importance
Race/Ethnicity				
Gender				
First-generation status				
State or county of residence				
High school attended				
Alumni relations				
Ability to pay				

9. Based on the knowledge of your institutions admissions decision making process please answer the following questions regarding incoming freshman applicants. Please indicate the importance of involvement in the following activities.

	Very Important	Important	Somewhat Important	Not Important
Prosocial Activities (Participation in volunteer and community service, Church)				
Team Sports (Participation in one or more teams)				
Performing Arts (Participation in band, chorus, drama)				
School Involvement (Participation in Student Government, Cheerleading)				
Academic Clubs (Participation in Math Club, foreign language clubs, debate club, etc.)				

Outside school activities (Dance, Karate, Swimming, Scouts, etc.)				
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10. Please answer the following questions regarding incoming applicants. Please indicate if you *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Disagree*, or *Strongly Disagree* with the following. Student involvement in one or more extracurricular activities often demonstrates:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
An increased likelihood of academic success at the post-secondary level				
An increased ability in planning and decision making				
An ability to demonstrate empathy, sensitivity, and friendship skills				
A higher commitment to learning				
An ability to self-advocate to get the most out of the post-secondary experience				
A greater ability to identify with the values and goals of the post-secondary institution				

11. In making a admission decision, what do you look most favorably on:

- Really involved in one or two extra-curricular activities.
- Somewhat involved in two to three extra-curricular activities.
- Little involvement in over three extra-curricular activities.
- Involved in no extra-curricular activities.

This survey was developed with the help of the NACAC College Admission Trends Survey, the current literature, and the knowledge of the investigator.