Using Focus Group Research to Evaluate Recruitment Publications

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Jennifer J. Bomholt

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Daryl Adrian

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana
May 1997

Date of Graduation
May 10, 1997
Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the use of focus group marketing research in the evaluation of college recruitment publications. It includes background information on both the use of recruitment publication and focus group research. Furthermore, this paper details the planning, organization, and results of an actual focus group research project conducted in conjunction with the Ball State University Office of Admissions. This study involved one hundred and forty-seven college-bound students who were selected at random to participate in this focus group project. These students evaluated recruitment publications from nineteen colleges and universities, including Ball State. This thesis examines the effectiveness of this particular focus group study.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the following people for making this project possible.

Elaine Cotner, for her guidance and dedication to the project

Dr. Daryl Adrian, my thesis advisor, for his continuous support, patience, advice, and encouragement

Penny Bundy, for the countless hours she spent traveling with me and communicating with high schools

Marcia Ressler, for traveling with me

The entire admissions staff at Ball State University for their support and contributions

And my parents, Mike and Judy Bomholt, and my fiancee, Brandon Bute, for supporting me throughout the course of this project
Introduction

College and university officials around the nation would agree that the market for prospective students has become increasingly competitive, and more and more institutions are beginning to re-evaluate the methods they currently use to attract students and are considering the implementation of the latest techniques to target their desired audience. In the late nineteen-nineties, “college fairs are out, and sophisticated marketing is in” (Sanoff 119). Among the experimental techniques and innovative ideas remains an “old standard” in the admissions profession, the admissions publication. Brochures, pamphlets, flyers, search pieces, viewbooks, no matter the name-- the importance of publications in the student recruitment process is undeniable. However, the growing competition for students has caused admissions officials to take a second look at their current publications, realizing that these publications must address the timely issues of today’s students, as well as be visually attractive. In order to ensure this, numerous institutions have begun to rely upon marketing research to review the effectiveness of their recruitment strategies, especially their publications.

The flourishing popularity of marketing research in higher education is directly related to increasing competition for students: “colleges want to be what their constituents want them to be” (Nicklin A25). One marketing research method that enables institutions to obtain valuable feedback is the focus group. Focus groups are easy to organize, relatively inexpensive, and allow direct communication with the consumer. They are especially effective in evaluating admissions publications and can be used to gather the opinions of potential students, their family members, and even high school guidance counselors; and so their newly-found popularity in the field of higher education makes perfect sense.

I therefore decided to utilize focus group research to evaluate the
effectiveness of current admissions publications from eighteen colleges and universities in Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio willing to provide publications for this research project. One hundred and forty-seven students from seven high schools in Indiana and Illinois were selected at random to participate as subjects in this focus group research project. In this paper I will explain the organization of my project, outline the actual focus groups sessions, draw conclusions from the findings, and compare this particular project to traditional definitions of focus group research.

The Competitive Market

In recent years colleges and universities have developed a new zeal to attract students and, “as the pool of high school graduates shrinks, admissions officials say that recruiting efforts are reaching a fever pitch” (Wilson A1). In the midst of such fierce competition, many institutions of higher education are beginning to operate more like business corporations than like traditional universities (Sanoff 119). While most admissions officers agree that the growth in competition has affected recruitment strategies, many feel that some of the new techniques are too extravagant and expensive. For instance, some colleges and universities have begun sending personalized videos, providing paid weekend visits to campus, sponsoring boating parties, and offering to pay the entire travel bill for out-of-state students to visit campus (Wilson A34). Some admissions officials are deeply concerned that such recruitment strategies will cause students to expect such lavish treatment from all colleges and universities and thus the academic aspects of education will be lost in the midst of these outlandish recruitment strategies (Wilson A34). However, everyone seems to agree that competition has ignited the movement to evaluate, reform, and update recruiting practices; some strategies are just more extreme than others. As Richard
Beredzen, President of American University, stated, "The bottom line is that schools have just become more aggressive" (Wilson A34).

**Importance of Publications**

Colleges and universities faced with such great competition have been forced to re-evaluate how they communicate with prospective students (Sugarman 14). Viewbooks and other types of recruitment publications are often the first view that students get of an institution and, therefore, provide the initial and essential communication link (Martino A61). Publications may be used to contact students who are already familiar with an institution, but more importantly, they can be used to arouse curiosity in students who have not yet decided what type of school they want to attend (Treadwell and Keller 24). Whatever the case, publications can help to define the image of a university: "viewbooks have become metaphors for the essence of the institutions" (Martino A61). In some cases, making some simple changes in their admissions publications can help many institutions reach their intended audience much more efficiently and effectively (Martino A61).

Recruitment publications "are the only means you have to introduce your institution to the largest possible group of potential students" (Treadwell and Keller 26). The successful combination of both words and images is essential, yet extremely difficult to achieve, and ineffective publications can result in wasted time, energy, and money-- resources which no institution can spare (Treadwell and Keller 24-26). Admissions offices use both mass and selective mailings to contact prospective students. As a result, students are "showered" with brochures, catalogues, letters, flyers, and postcards-- many of which are from institutions in which the students have not even expressed an interest (Jorgensen B3). Some students, and their families, are annoyed by this overload of information, and much of the information they receive is discarded unread or unopened; reading all the
information would be impossible (Jorgensen B3). For these reasons admissions officials must conquer the challenge of creating unique and appealing publications, a task not easily accomplished. Originality does not come easily; what one admissions office thinks is unique, someone else has already tried. Dan Jorgensen, an admissions official at St. Olaf College and father of a high school senior, shares his experiences in speaking with an admissions officer facing this dilemma. "Our search piece is a special size," one admissions officer told me. But in the stack I have labeled 'odd sizes,' more than 150 colleges and universities are represented" (Jorgensen B4).

Institutions across the nation are pursuing efforts to improve and update their publications. Many offices are trying to avoid worn buzzwords like "quality," "commitment," and "excellence," and are concentrating on reflecting the individual character of the institution (Treadwell and Keller 25). New viewbook table of contents headings like "respect" and "independence" are replacing wearisome headings such as "campus life" and "academics" (Martino A61). Publication writers are learning to simplify without the risk of oversimplification, and writers and designers are working closely to ensure that they create the same message (Treadwell and Keller 25-26). Furthermore, many schools are using more symbolism and graphic design elements in place of picturesque photographs of the campus (Martino A61). Some institutions are even designing viewbooks with a pictureless cover. As Thomas Enders of Whittier College explains, "By not having a picture on the cover, we are saying, 'Turn the page and go deeper into who we are'" (Martino A61).

Despite these noble efforts, many institutions still struggle to create publications that address the topics most pertinent to prospective students. In order to develop recruitment publications that are both appealing and unique, many institutions are engaging in marketing research, specifically focus group research,
and are finding it well worth the time and effort. As Hulda Romera explains, “Too many viewbooks look and sound alike. To stand apart, find out through focus groups what students think about your campus and address whatever concerns or misconceptions they may have” (13).

**Use of Marketing**

For institutions of higher education, marketing research, including the use of focus groups, has become paramount and is one of the most significant trends affecting today’s admissions publications (Sugarman 14). As officials of higher education focus increasingly on the concepts of marketing and strategic planning, they are “beckoned” to conduct some type of marketing research (Topor 5). In fact, numerous institutions have begun to hire independent firms to evaluate their recruitment strategies, and higher-education consulting has become a $100 million dollar-a-year business. Consultants, many of whom are former college admissions officials, are called upon to analyze everything from statistics and demographics to campus visitations days and publications (Sanoff 119). These consultants help institutions determine the geodemographic backgrounds from which they should recruit students (Sanoff 120). The use of geodemographics allows universities to target prospective students whose economic and lifestyle characteristics are similar to those of the students already enrolled (Sanoff 122). Consultants for Educational Resources and Research (CERR) of Washington, D.C., for example, helps institutions target clusters such as “down on the farm,” “white picket fences,” and “new mainstream.” This allows clients to send a different type of message to each different geodemographic group (Sanoff 120). Firms such as CERR also teach college officials the fundamental practice of smarter spending (Sugarman 17). Consulting firms help clients by “offering advice on how to meet enrollment
targets, attract the best students, and get the maximum in tuition dollars, while not spending any more on financial aid than they must” (Sanoff 121).

While higher-education consulting continues to grow, some institutions are planning and organizing their own marketing research projects. Consultants may help to determine the look of publications by advising the use of language and photographs, but many schools have also begun to conduct focus group research to evaluate the effectiveness of their publications (Sanoff 119). This focus group research has proven to bring valuable results. At Buena Vista University in Iowa, for instance, enrollment increased by eight percent in 1994 after the admissions office researched and revamped its publications (Sugarman 15). Although such positive results are common, “fewer than ten percent of the nation’s colleges and universities conduct off-campus focus group research to test the effectiveness of their publications” (Treadwell and Keller 24). This fact is ironic because focus group research is easy to organize, relatively inexpensive, and can even be planned and conducted without the use of an outside firm. An institution can learn how to plan and conduct its own focus group project by investigating general information about focus groups and their relationship to higher education.

**Focus groups: Background and Definition**

Although focus groups are currently gaining popularity in the realm of higher education, they have been used in business and marketing for years. They originated in the field of psychology and are based upon the idea that people who have something in common are more willing to share their ideas “amid the security of others who may have similar interests, concerns, experiences, or expectations” (Topor 6). A focus group is a structured discussion on a specific topic that is led by a neutral moderator with several members of a target audience (Bonnett 33). These group discussions are designed to be informal and relaxed, so that
participants may feel comfortable expressing both their thoughts and their feelings about a particular subject; they are therefore a more personable alternative to quantitative research methods like surveys (Topor 5-6). In addition, they provide more opportunities for greater depth of response than most forms of quantitative research do. Since focus groups allow for direct contact with members of a target audience, researchers can explore the rationale and emotions behind certain ideas and opinions (Topor 7).

“A focus group is, by definition, a representative sample of a larger group” (Topor 18). Traditional focus groups consist of a small sample, usually at least five and no more than twelve participants, because small groups are usually more effective and produce better results (Topor 20). In larger groups of twelve or more, time is more limited, and the moderator is forced to give more direction rather than to let the conversation “flow” naturally between the respondents. Furthermore, large groups encourage the occurrence of side conversations and may cause frustration for respondents who do not have the chance to share their ideas (Topor 20). The ultimate goals of any focus group session are to allow each person the opportunity to participate and to bring information to life by adding a humanistic touch (Topor 7).

The Use of Focus Groups in Higher Education

“Focus group marketing research can be used to explore attitudes and feelings college-bound high school students have toward your institution. These groups could be very valuable in determining how your programs are perceived as compared to other institutions” (Topor 13). Focus groups may be used to screen a plethora of ideas and topics and can help any institution or admissions office to better understand its target audience (Topor 6). Many institutions use focus groups to determine their positions in the competitive marketplace and to gather
information about their competitors. Focus groups are also invaluable to the generation of ideas; they are used to spawn new ideas, techniques, and approaches and to explore the status quo for the purpose of eliciting unique concepts.

They are also useful in evaluating an institution's image and in testing ideas for new programs and events. For instance, an institution considering a major change in curriculum can use focus group research to investigate the pros and cons of the newly-proposed program before too much time and money are invested. In addition, focus groups are used in the control and prevention of campus crises; an institution that experiences a major crime on campus may use focus groups to evaluate student reactions and to gather input on the prevention of future crimes. Such information would also be helpful in determining how prospective students may react to the publicity surrounding such a situation. Finally, institutions of higher education use focus groups to test a variety of promotional techniques, including recruitment publications (Topor 9-10).

Pre-testing publications through the use of focus groups eliminates the risk of wasting time and money on ineffective publications. A university that chooses to redesign a viewbook or a search piece will find that conducting focus group research to obtain feedback from prospective students, the families of prospective students, and even high school guidance counselors is well worth the effort (Topor 9). During each session participants can "investigate new concepts, approaches, editorial ideas, illustrations, formats, photographs, and layout designs" (Topor 9). Participants have the opportunity to react to the materials, and the moderator can probe issues and opinions that arise during the session (Sevier 4). Most importantly, focus groups allow admissions officials to check their assumptions and to ensure that approaches to new publications are not too far off base (Bonnett 34). Asking audience members what they think about text and design saves "the expense of producing ineffective publications" (Bonnett 34).
Planning a Focus Group Research Project

Once an institution has determined which areas to explore, the steps to planning a focus group project may begin. Impeccable planning and organization are vital to the success of any project, as poor planning can jeopardize an entire study (Topor 13). First and foremost, the overall purpose of the study must be determined. An institution or admissions office must evaluate what events led to the use of focus group research and decide what questions or issues each focus group session will address. The objectives of the study should be defined as clearly and specifically as possible to avoid confusion and to ensure that the goals of the project are met (Topor 13-14). Next, the number of participants to be used in each session should be established. Such a judgment is largely based upon the purpose of the study. A study that involves general questions can use larger groups, but a study that deals with specific issues should use smaller groups. Researchers should keep in mind that an ideal focus group session allows for input from each participant (Topor 20-21). Planners will then determine how many individual sessions to conduct, since a single group cannot possibly cover every issue and effectively represent a target audience. Conducting several sessions primarily prevents the overgeneralization of information. Most studies consist of three to four sessions, but these numbers may vary according to the nature of the project (Topor 19).

The next step in the planning process is to define the target audience and to begin the recruitment and selection of participants. The audience definition will include factors such as age, sex, and economic status and will be dependent upon the purpose of the project. A tighter definition will ensure the success of each session and the relevance of the information gathered (Topor 18). In order to recruit participants who accurately represent the target audience, many researchers will screen prospective participants to determine whether they fit the audience
definition (Topor 17). This practice is key to successful research and assures that each individual focus group is a “microcosm of the larger group it represents” (Topor 25). Participants may be recruited by letter or by telephone and may be asked a variety of questions to determine their value to the specific study. The screening questions used for participants varies from study to study (Topor 26). A common method used to encourage people to volunteer for focus groups is the offering of some type of compensation. Some researches offer financial compensation, but colleges and universities can use alternatives forms, such as coupons to campus bookstores or free tickets to athletic events. Such added incentives are also a way to express gratitude to participants for their time and effort (Topor 21).

Finding facilities in which to hold the actual focus group sessions is another essential part of the planning process. Holding sessions at a facility on campus is inexpensive but may not be the wisest choice. This practice can lead to bias and can “skew” findings; therefore, it is generally recommended to use neutral facilities (Topor 23). Research firms and organizations will often provide space for focus group projects. These facilities usually consist of a living room style room with a table and chairs and sometimes have a two-way mirror at one end (Topor 25). When participants arrive at the facility on the day of the session, they are kept in some kind of “holding area” where they may be given additional forms or questionnaires that serve as a final screening. This type of ultimate screening may be used to ensure the quality and homogeneity of the group. Once the final screening is completed, the selected participants are escorted into the session room where they will wait for the session to begin, and the weeks of careful planning will be put into action (Topor 23).
**Conducting a Successful and Productive Focus Group Session**

The most essential element of a successful focus group session is a skilled moderator. The moderator has the power to "make or break" the entire session (Topor 42). Running a focus group requires exceptional skill, as the moderator must "be sensitive to people, be emotionally uninvolved with the subject, and make sure that the directions of conversation achieve what needs to be accomplished" (Topor 22). In order to create a non-threatening environment, moderators must convey warmth, establish rapport without indicating preferences, and give reassurances when participants share their thoughts (Topor 42). An experienced moderator has the ability to probe and paraphrase and can elicit responses from every participant (Topor 43). Many experts recommend hiring a professional moderator to ensure a high skill-level and to eliminate the possibility of bias toward the college or university sponsoring the project (Topor 22). The primary pitfall of using a moderator from inside the institution is the habit of "listening for what you want to hear and tuning out what you don’t want to hear" (Bonnett 36). However, if an "outside" moderator is hired, he or she must be fully aware of the goals of the project and must have knowledge of any other information relative to the project (Topor 22). Using an "inside" moderator can be effective in some cases, especially since someone inside the university is more likely to have a clear understanding of the purpose of the study. Choosing a moderator who is not directly involved with the programs under discussion is very important (Bonnett 36). For instance, if the focus groups will evaluate current recruitment publications, the moderator should never be someone who writes or designs these same publications; a moderator with no personal stakes will be much more effective.

Most moderators use some type of outline or moderator’s guide to conduct the sessions. This guide should be developed jointly with the moderator and the project’s primary decision-maker to ensure that the goals of the sessions will be
met (Topor 44). A standard guide consists of a basic outline that includes general topics and specific issues and provides a flexible sequence for the discussion. Flexibility is a key factor because “too much planning results in robot-like sessions” (Topor 45). In addition, the sequence of the discussion should allow one idea to “flow” to the next, so that participation will be natural and conversational in style (Topor 45).

Most focus group sessions can follow a typical order of events that includes an opening, a warm-up period, a time for in-depth investigation, and a definite closing. The moderator opens the session by introducing him or herself and explaining the rules and rationale for the session (Topor 33). A thorough explanation of the reason the group has been assembled will increase cooperation (Topor 36). The moderator should also make any disclosures concerning the recording of the session, the use of a two-way mirror, and other issues of confidentiality at this time (Topor 33). He or she can begin to establish rapport with the group through self-disclosure and by relating to the members of the audience (Topor 37). The early establishment of rapport will make the participants more relaxed and will begin to create a sense of cohesion (Topor 34). Asking participants to introduce themselves and to share some personal information will contribute to the sense of cohesion and decrease anxiety by giving participants their first opportunity to speak in front of the group (Topor 35-36).

After opening the session, a skilled moderator will begin a short warm-up period designed to ease participants into the discussion. Most moderators will begin with simple questions and gradually increase the intensity as the session progresses (Topor 38). During this warm-up period the moderator’s most essential function is to show interest without steering the discussion. He or she should offer encouraging comments that will keep the session going, without influencing the group in any way; however, the moderator is also responsible for making sure that
the ultimate goals of the session are being met. In addition, he or she must monitor the responses of each participant to be certain that each person is contributing to the discussion (Topor 40).

As the intensity of the session builds, the moderator will begin the in-depth investigation. He or she will probe for clarity, make sure each new idea has been thoroughly explored before moving on, and elicit responses that directly address the reason for the session (Topor 40-41). The thoughts and opinions most relevant and beneficial to the overall study will undoubtedly come from this portion of the discussion. The purpose of the in-depth investigation is to search "underlying attitudes, feelings, and ideas" and to make connections between the participants' responses and the goals of the research project (Topor 41). As he or she draws the session to a conclusion, the moderator should summarize the ideas presented, check to see that the participants agree with the summary, and, of course, thank the respondents for sharing their time and opinions (Topor 41).

The final skill necessary to run a productive focus group session is the ability to recognize and handle the problems that may arise. A common predicament in focus group research is the tendency for conformity. Participants are often quick to jump on the bandwagon; however, a moderator can remedy this by emphasizing the freedom to disagree with others and the need to respect all opinions (Topor 54). Problems can occur when the session becomes dull and respondents become bored or uninterested. In order to prevent this, the moderator should remain upbeat at all times and may also consider scheduling a short break in the middle of the session (Topor 54). Problems can also occur with specific individuals in the group. For example, one person may attempt to take control of the session, and the moderator may have to step in and re-establish his or her authority (Topor 57). In contrast, the group may include a shy individual who calls for special attention. The moderator can help this person to open-up by asking
questions that are non-threatening. Some of the best ideas come from people who appear quiet and uninformed (Topor 56). A qualified moderator is prepared to handle any of these unexpected difficulties and will ensure that such situations are not detrimental to the overall purpose of the session.

The Pros and Cons of Focus Group Research

The greatest advantage of conducting focus group research is that it "brings providers and users of service together in one place at one time" (Topor 8). In the case of admissions publications, the opinions of prospective students can be heard by university and admissions officials. Focus groups allow for more in-depth understanding of motives and rationale and provide more opportunities for probing than do any forms of quantitative research (Topor 15-16). Furthermore, the interaction between participants sparks ideas and allows respondents to "bounce" ideas off one another. Focus groups provide a controlled environment; the moderator has the power to reveal or conceal as much or as little information as he or she desires (Topor 8).

Focus group research is especially appropriate for use by colleges and universities because it can be organized quickly, thus allowing results to be implemented sooner (Sevier 5). It provides solid information on which admissions offices can act (Sevier 4). For instance, a focus group study of recruitment publications can be conducted in the months immediately prior to yearly revisions of publications so that the next group of publications may be changed on the basis of the research conclusions. Finally, focus group research is one of the most moderately priced means of evaluating publications.

Although the positive aspects of focus group research are abundant, this form of research has several drawbacks as well. Patti Crane, founder of the Education Group of Communicorp, a marketing and consulting firm, believes that
"focus groups are widely used and widely abused in colleges" (Nicklin A25). Some colleges are spending excessive amounts of money to hire outside firms for their projects; whereas others are using inexperienced moderators who adversely affect the results of the research (Nicklin A25-26). Furthermore, marketing experts caution that focus group research should be only one aspect of a comprehensive marketing plan (Nicklin A25). Some universities have a tendency to overgeneralize the data obtained from a small population (Sevier 5). In order to avoid generalizing the opinions of a few, qualitative research must often be supported by some form of quantitative research such as a survey (Bonnett 34). This may require an additional research project, a fact that many colleges and universities fail to recognize. Finally, another disadvantage of focus group research is that the recruitment of willing and qualified participants can be difficult and time-consuming (Sevier 5). All in all, universities or admissions offices considering focus group research should study this form of research thoroughly before making a final decision. What works for one institution may not work for another.

**Organizing and Planning My Focus Group Research Project**

In the spring of 1996, I began the preliminary plans for my own focus group research project to be conducted in conjunction with Ball State University's Office of Admissions. I was searching for a topic for my senior thesis for Ball State's Honors College. After my two years of experience as a summer orientation leader, I knew that I wanted to research a subject related to university admissions and/or student recruitment. Through a process of networking, I contacted Elaine Cotner, Associate Director of Admissions at Ball State. She explained to me that the Office of Admissions had conducted focus group sessions with high school students about six years ago to evaluate their recruitment publications. The office
found the results of the research valuable, and Elaine, who participates in the creation of the recruitment publications, wanted to conduct another similar project. Due to the demanding duties of admissions representatives, the office could not spare a staff member to take charge of such a large project, so Cotner suggested that I undertake the study and use it to fulfill the requirement for Honors 499, my senior thesis.

Before beginning my research, I first had to obtain approval of my thesis topic from the Honors College and had to find a faculty member willing to serve as my academic advisor throughout the progression of the project. I consulted Dr. Daryl Adrian, a professor of English, because he knew of my interest in the admissions profession, and he eagerly agreed to serve as my advisor. Dr. Adrian also encouraged me to apply for an Undergraduate Fellow research grant to support my work. With Dr. Adrian’s assistance, I applied for and was awarded a grant that would allow me to work on my project for two semesters. Finally, I met with Dr. Joanne Edmonds, Assistant Dean of the Honors College, who approved my Honors 499 topic. Dr. Edmonds and I agreed that both Cotner and Dr. Adrian would advise me through the completion of the study.

In August of 1996, Cotner and I started to form concrete plans for the organization of the project. I worked closely with Cotner because she had previous experience with focus group research, but I also studied other information about focus groups independently. We began by establishing our overall goal and objectives for the study. Our overall goal was simple: to evaluate Ball State University’s admissions and recruitment publications in comparison to similar publications from other institutions, by conducting focus group sessions at several high schools. One of our primary objectives was to include recruitment publications from several other institutions in the study, including publications from many of Ball State’s “competitors.” We wanted to involve several other
Indiana universities, several Illinois universities, and several Mid-American conference schools. Another objective was to travel to a total of six to eight high schools in Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio in order to utilize a large and diverse sample of college-bound participants. Our final objective was to be able to draw some conclusions about Ball State's admissions publications, based on the reactions and opinions of high school students.

Contacting other institutions of higher education and requesting their subsequent participation in the study proved to be the easiest step in the planning process. Cotner and I created an initial list of twenty-six schools to contact and assumed that only a few would respond. I drafted a letter to be sent to each university's admissions office; it explained the project and requested copies of each institution's search piece and viewbook (see Appendix A). To our surprise, the response to the letter was overwhelming; seventeen schools replied and were eager to be included in the study. In fact, a few institutions contacted me after the designated reply date, and I had to deny their inclusion in the study. The following is a list of the institutions that agreed to participate.

Butler University
DePauw University
Earlham College
Hanover College
Indiana State University
Purdue University
Tri-State University
Eastern Illinois University
University of Illinois
Northern Illinois University
Southern Illinois University
University of Akron
Bowling Green State University
Kent State University
Miami University
Ohio University
University of Toledo
My next step was to determine which high schools to visit and to schedule appointments with those schools. I collaborated with Cotner and the rest of the admissions staff in an effort to include a variety of schools of differing sizes, both public and private. The admissions staff recommended specific high schools from their travel regions that already had good relationships with Ball State and would be likely to participate. Penny Bundy, an assistant director of admissions, became my primary travel partner because she also participates in the creation of publications, and she agreed to contact the designated high schools to schedule our visits. Of the schools she contacted, seven agreed to participate, and she made appointments to visit six high schools in Indiana and one in Illinois. When phoning each high school, Bundy explained the nature of the project and requested permission to visit a classroom. In order to make the visits convenient for both students and teachers, she requested that the visits be made to study halls, English classes, or journalism classes, and that the students in these classes be representative of the high school’s college-bound population. We did not want students to have to get special permission to leave class for the project, so we asked to visit established classes. In addition, Bundy stressed the importance of our anonymity to her contact person, usually a school principal or guidance counselor, at each school. She explained that the students could not know that we were visiting from Ball State because this would taint the results of the research. All seven high schools were extremely cooperative in dealing with this issue. Only the contact person and teacher of the class we planned to visit knew that we were from Ball State.

While Bundy worked diligently to schedule our high school visits, Cotner and I developed the instruments and the general script to be used at each session. We decided to develop a series of worksheets that students could use to record their reactions to each publication. We wanted students to write down their
reactions and predicted that this practice might increase their likeness to participate in the discussion. For instance, if students were not willing to actively talk, we could simply ask them to read what they had recorded on their worksheets. Since so many institutions had contributed their publications for the project, we also had to divide the number of publications to be evaluated at each high school. We created three different sets of handouts that included nine institutions and used each handout at either two or three schools (see Appendix B). This system assured that every publication would be evaluated by at least two sets of students.

Next, we developed a general outline and script for the order of each session (see Appendix C). I was designated as the moderator for the sessions because I was familiar with the goals of the project but had no vested interest in its outcome. In addition, Cotner and I believed that my young age might enable me to better relate to the high school participants. I developed a general introductory script for the sessions which included an explanation of the project and allowed me to establish some rapport with the audience. Cotner and I then outlined the sequence for the remainder of the session, making sure that participants had time to complete handouts in the beginning and to participate in a discussion at the end. We gave careful attention to the questions that I would use during the discussion because we had to ensure that the questions were vague and open-ended so that they would spark conversation among the participants (see Appendix D). Once all of this was completed, I submitted these materials to Ball State’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), a board designed to establish and enforce guidelines for any research project involving human subjects (see Appendix E). Our instruments were quickly approved since they do not involve the use of personal information volunteered by subjects. The IRB’s approval of the materials signified that I could begin to travel and conduct the actual focus group sessions.
Conducting the Focus Group Sessions

After only my first visit to a high school, I realized that moderating a focus group session looks much easier on paper than it actually is. Although Cotner and I had planned every detail of the project, I still encountered a few minor problems along the way. I began my travels on December 2, 1996, and concluded them on December 16. During that short span of time, I, along with a member of the admissions staff, traveled to all seven designated high schools. The admissions staff member came along to assist me by distributing handouts and taking copious notes during the discussion portion of each session.

I began each focus group session with a brief introduction in which I explained the project, previewed the sequence of the session, and assured participants that all of their responses would remain completely anonymous (see Appendix C for details). Furthermore, I stressed the importance of judging the publications themselves and not the institutions that produced them. I anticipated that this issue might be a problem because students would inevitably hold some preconceived opinions of certain institutions. With that said, I asked the participants to complete a short survey, after which I began the evaluation of publications. I distributed the first handout and clarified the steps of the first exercise. Next, I displayed a copy of a search piece from one institution and asked students to write down the first word or phrase that came to their minds when viewing the cover. I repeated this for all nine publications and then asked students to put the first handout aside while I distributed the second.

This second exercise took more time than the first because it allowed students to look through a viewbook from each institution and record their reactions to the publication. Each student was given a copy of one viewbook and would then trade with another student when he or she was finished. Once this was completed, I facilitated a discussion that gave students the opportunity to express
their opinions about the viewbooks they had just reviewed. We talked about which books they liked the best and the least, which covers attracted their attention, which colors and photographs they found most appealing, as well as any other relevant issues that arose.

Although the sessions were ultimately successful in producing valuable information, I did encounter some difficulties. First and foremost, I noticed that many students were unable to separate their opinions of a particular institution from their opinions about the publications. I found myself constantly reminding groups to try to ignore the name of the school and to evaluate only the elements of the publication. The formal classroom setting in which I conducted the sessions also posed some unique problems. It made the trading of materials among students somewhat difficult and caused me to feel more like an instructor than a moderator. In addition, although visiting classrooms made the scheduling of appointments more convenient, it caused time constraints since each session could last only as long as one class period. At most schools my time limit was approximately fifty minutes; this short amount of time did not allow for a significant amount of discussion.

*Why My Research Project is Unique*

Although the methods I used to plan, organize, and conduct my study share some similarities with the techniques used in traditional focus group research, my project is unique in several aspects. As with any research project, my study had established goals to achieve and guidelines to follow. In addition, I, as the moderator, was diligent in remaining unbiased and anonymous in order to ensure the accuracy of my findings. Most importantly, the primary goal of my research was to probe deeper into the opinions of prospective students; this level of in-depth inquiry is what makes focus groups so valuable. However, these commonalities
shared with traditional focus group projects are far outweighed by the efforts I made to conduct a unique study.

The most significant factor that separates my project from traditional focus group projects is the size of the groups with which I worked. By strict definition a focus group does not usually exceed twelve participants; however, the size of the groups with which I worked averaged twenty-one students. This fact is a direct result of the process that Cotner and I used to select participants. We did not find it necessary to screen participants to determine their qualifications because we already knew that almost any college-bound senior fits the definition of Ball State University's target audience. We were able to avoid the hassle of screening participants by simply asking to visit high school classrooms. Although this practice was convenient and cost-effective, it did result in large numbers of respondents in each group. Furthermore, my classroom visits allowed me to work with participants who already knew one another and who were fairly comfortable in their familiar classroom surroundings; therefore, I did not have to spend much time at the beginning of my sessions establishing a friendly atmosphere because it already existed. In addition, I perceived that the students were at ease with me as the moderator because I was close to their age. One disadvantage of the classroom visits was that I often felt more like an instructor than a moderator. I had to actively facilitate the students' participation in the discussion rather than allowing conversation to flow freely as it would in a traditional focus group.

Another unique aspect of my project is the use of handouts. Cotner and I anticipated the need for worksheets so that students could record their reactions. This practice is not common in traditional focus group research, but we knew that discussion time would be limited and that the handouts would allow me to evaluate comments even after the sessions had concluded. Moreover, we chose not to record the sessions with video or audio equipment. Instead, a member of the
admissions staff took notes during the discussion portion of each session. This provided me with yet another source of information to review after the sessions and saved the time and effort of transcribing an audio or video recording.

Findings

When Cotner and I planned this research project, we purposefully contacted several different types and sizes of high schools in order to assure a large and diverse sample of students. I fully expected to find some significant differences between the responses and reactions from students at one type of high school as compared to those of students from a different type of high school. For instance, I assumed that honors students at a private school would react differently than cross-section students at a large urban school. On the contrary, I discovered quite the opposite. The significant differences that I discovered existed between individual students rather than between high schools. In fact, students at all seven schools responded in surprisingly similar fashions, considering that each school and class I visited was unique. The following is a list of the seven high schools to which I traveled as well as a description of the type of class I visited at each school.

Harrison High School in Lafayette, IN--I visited a senior English class of 24 students with both high and low academic ability.

Bishop-Dwenger High School in Fort Wayne, IN--I visited a senior-level honors English class of 23 students, 14 females and 9 males.

Crown Point High School in Crown Point, IN--I visited a journalism class of 21 students, 18 females and 3 males. The class included students from all four grade levels, but only one senior.

Mitchell High School in Mitchell, IN--I visited a general senior English class of 20 students, 8 females and 12 males.
James Whitcomb Riley High School in South Bend, IN--I visited a senior English class of 17 students, 12 females and 5 males.

Barrington High School in Barrington, IL--I visited a journalism class of 19 students, 11 females and 8 males, that included all four grade levels.

North Central High School in Indianapolis, IN--I visited a junior English class of 23 students, 12 females and 11 males.

Due to the large size of my focus groups, the large number of publications to be evaluated, and the time constraints posed when conducting classroom visits, the participants were unable to explore and react to each and every publication in an in-depth manner. Therefore, my findings are based upon the general patterns that I identified when reviewing and analyzing the completed handouts and discussion notes from each focus group session. However, I was able to find and will cite specific examples from publications that demonstrate each pattern.

After reviewing the search piece handouts, on which respondents indicated the first word that came to mind when viewing the cover of each piece, I detected a definite relationship between the type of cover used and the type of responses elicited by each cover. For example, different types of photographs used on the cover elicited different types of reactions. Search pieces with campus snapshots or with pictures of campus buildings on the cover tended to get reactions from students concerning the actual campus itself or even the history and/or tradition of a particular institution. For example, both Butler’s and Indiana State’s publications show snapshots of specific campus sites on the cover, so student responses tended to focus on the campus environment. Concerning Butler’s piece, students commonly wrote comments such as “nice campus,” “warm atmosphere,” “small school,” and “small campus.” In reaction to Indiana State University’s piece, students commonly wrote phrases like “large campus,” “urban,” and
“city-oriented.” Both Hanover College and Miami University use photos of a campus building on their covers. These photographs caused students to focus on the tradition and stature of these schools. After viewing Hanover’s publication, respondents typically wrote comments such as “conservative,” “wealthy,” “traditional,” “religious,” “prestigious,” and “uppity.” Common responses to the Miami piece included “old-fashioned,” “colonial,” “expensive,” “preppy,” “historic,” and “distinguished.”

In contrast, search pieces that portray photographs of students on the cover caused respondents to draw conclusions about the social environment of the institutions. These reactions, like any of the others, may be viewed as positive or negative, depending upon what type of image the university is trying to convey. Ball State’s search piece cover shows three students, one of whom is African-American, talking and smiling as they walk to class. Common responses to this picture were phrases such as “friends,” “friendly atmosphere,” “socializing,” “social life,” “people going to a party,” “not centered on education,” “multi-cultural,” and “diverse.” Similarly, Earlham College’s search piece cover shows a picture of four students of differing ethnic backgrounds laughing as they walk through campus. Responses to this piece included “social,” “friendly,” “new relationships,” and “people of all races having fun together.” Finally, Purdue University’s search piece has a picture of two students rollerblading on the cover, and, therefore, elicited reactions quite different from those of Ball State or Earlham. Phrases such as “fun,” “togetherness,” “recreation,” “leisure-based,” “friends,” “paid vacation,” and “students that have spare time” were used to describe this piece.

Search pieces without a photograph on the cover or with a photograph that is different from any other tended to provoke more creative or thoughtful responses than those with photographs of campus or of students. For instance, DePauw
University's search piece has no pictures on its cover. Instead, it has the following quotation.

“Our graduates include the CEO of General Mills, an astronaut, a best-selling fiction writer, a Vice President, an international opera singer, a Rhodes Scholar, the founder of ESPN, a member of the National Academy of Science, a civil rights leader. Do you want to succeed?”

Responses to this search piece included phrases like “success,” “success-oriented,” “proud of its accomplishments,” “academics,” and “future.” University of Toledo’s search piece has an entirely different cover but elicited responses somewhat similar to DePauw’s. This piece shows a graduation photo of a student shaking hands with a university official and the phrase, “Let’s get to the point.” “Graduation,” “we all graduate here,” and “leads you to a successful future” were among the most common responses to the Toledo piece.

Meanwhile, search pieces from University of Illinois and Tri-State University use design elements that provoke a certain type of reaction. Illinois’s cover is quite simplistic with a faded photograph in the background, two smaller pictures in the corner, and several lines, boxes, and other design elements. Common responses to this piece included “technology,” “technical,” and “the information highway.” Tri-State’s cover depicts an engineering blueprint on a multi-colored background. “Technical,” “engineering,” and “creative focus” were all typical phrases written about this piece.

The decision to omit a cover photograph is a somewhat risky one. Although these particular publications generated many positive responses, just as many students found these same publications “boring,” “bland,” or “plain.” DePauw’s piece also received comments such as “for the extremely intelligent only” and “have to be smart to go here.”
All in all, Ball State University may want to consider a different type of search piece cover. The photograph currently used generated reactions geared almost entirely to the social aspect of the university. Although these reactions are not necessarily negative, Ball State has been struggling to rid itself of a "party school" image. Therefore, a cover with a different type of photo or with no photo at all could take away from this social focus.

The participants' responses to the viewbooks were much more difficult to generalize than the responses to the search pieces. Since students had time to actually browse through each viewbook and record comments, this resulted in reactions that varied widely and sometimes even contradicted one another. However, I was able to trace several major patterns concerning what students look for in these publications.

First of all, respondents had a strong preference for publications in which information was easy to find, read, and assimilate. For example, students specifically noted that they liked the tables of contents found in viewbooks from University of Illinois and University of Akron. Illinois's contents page includes headings and subheadings for a number of categories and also provides a brief explanation of each section. Akron's table of contents is much more simplistic, but it lists eighteen different sections. Students also commented on publications that use page titles and/or headings that attract attention and are easy to read. Students specifically stated that viewbooks from Indiana State University, DePauw University, and Ball State University contained such titles and headings. Indiana State University uses bright blue headings, and DePauw's viewbook uses a question as the heading for each section. Furthermore, students at five of the seven schools indicated that the way Ball State uses headings to divide its book into sections, including a section for each academic college, is particularly effective.
Students at every school indicated that they liked viewbooks with big chunks of information. For instance, a number of students commented on Miami’s publication, indicating that they liked the small, colorful boxes that summarize the important points for each section. Hanover College attracted many respondents’ attention through the use of “short, choppy, paragraphs.” University of Illinois’s viewbook contains pie graphs that visually demonstrate class size, financial aid information, and the academic interest of current undergraduates; many of the participants liked this form of visual presentation. Bowling Green State University’s “At a Glance” page was also extremely popular. This page contains information such as faculty information, enrollment statistics, and student life statistics in a bulleted form. Finally, Ohio University’s publication includes a financial aid question and answer section that was also popular with many students.

Respondents were also perceptive about the organization and order of the information in all the viewbooks. Many noticed that some of the most vital information, including admissions criteria, cost data, and financial aid information, is usually placed at the end of the book. A large number of students commented that this information is too hard to find and should be moved to the front.

The reactions to the nineteen different viewbooks also indicated that prospective students expect to get a sense of the campus from these publications. These students obviously enjoyed seeing all types of photographs, including indoor pictures, outdoor pictures, classroom pictures, and campus life pictures, because they commented favorably on the pictures in every publication. They especially liked the full-page color photographs used by Ball State, Butler, DePauw, Earlham, Hanover, and Southern Illinois. In addition, they specifically mentioned that they liked the overhead photographs of campus used by Miami, Northern Illinois, and Earlham.
Campus maps were another popular item; students inevitably noticed if a viewbook did not include a campus map. Publications from both Butler and DePauw were often cited for their lack of a campus map. Students specifically indicated that they liked the large, colorful maps used by Eastern Illinois, Hanover, Miami, Purdue, and Toledo.

The student profiles included in several publications, including DePauw's, Indiana State's, Northern Illinois's, and Purdue's, got mixed reactions from students at every high school. Some students really liked them, and others did not like them at all. Most student profiles consist of a small photograph of a current or former undergraduate student with a quotation from the student concerning the institution underneath. Respondents gave varied reactions, such as "like to know what others think," "just reading from others' experience," and "I won't go somewhere just because someone else says that it's good."

Finally, the visual appeal of these publications was also important to these prospective students. For instance, certain design elements like color and fonts had a definite effect on whether students even read a publication. Bright colors were effective in attracting attention but were sometimes too overbearing. An extremely large number of students stated that the bright yellow used in Ball State's and Eastern Illinois's viewbooks was "distracting," "disturbing," and simply "too much." Many students also disliked the bright orange print used in Earlham's publication.

The students also responded to the use of certain color combinations and font sizes. For example, students specifically indicated that they did not like the color combinations used by Tri-State (blue and yellow), University of Illinois (purple and peach), and Eastern Illinois (light blue and dark blue). The font(s) used in certain publications also received a number of comments. For example, many respondents liked the large fonts used in DePauw's publication. In contrast,
they cited Kent and Purdue as using fonts that are too small. They stated that these fonts are “difficult to read,” “seem too wordy,” and “take too much effort to read.”

Finally, student reactions clearly indicated that using a unique design element can have positive effects. For instance, Ball State’s viewbook cover, which does not depict a traditional photograph but has a bright red, orange, and yellow design on a black background, attracted the attention of students at every school. Respondents were also attracted to publications that open in unusual ways. For example, DePauw’s viewbook has a spiral binding and includes “flaps” that readers can open for additional information, and Kent’s viewbook has its binding at the small end so that it opens differently from all of the others.

All in all, Ball State’s viewbook received innumerable positive comments, but also some negative ones that should be considered when designing future viewbooks. For instance, students generally reacted positively to the bright colors used, especially those on the cover; however, they found the large number of yellow pages at the beginning of the book too overwhelming. In addition, students liked the design of Ball State’s viewbook, but failed to comment on some important elements, such as its table of contents or campus map. Furthermore, Ball State may want to consider adding some of the positive features that students liked in other publications, such as short paragraphs, large chunks of information, and student profiles. There may also be other features identified in the above findings that should be considered by Ball State when designing search pieces, viewbooks, and related recruitment publications.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Although this research project was an overall success, I would make several recommendations which should be considered the next time that the University conducts this type of focus group research on recruitment publications.
First and foremost, I would recommend using smaller focus groups and fewer publications. Even though I was able to draw a number of specific conclusions from the information I obtained, smaller groups and fewer publications would allow for more in-depth exploration of the viewbooks and search pieces. This would also allow a larger amount of time for discussion. The discussion notes from this project were not as useful as they could have been, because I did not have time to probe participants about specific points and issues. Although the completed handouts were valuable, I believe that fewer handouts and more discussion time would be even more valuable. As I read through the handouts, many questions came to mind, but I could not ask students what they meant by specific phrases or comments, because the sessions were already over. If the sessions became more discussion-focused, I would recommend tape recording each session in addition to taking discussion notes. Finally, I believe that conducting this type of research with different audiences would be worthwhile. For instance, asking families of prospective students or high school guidance counselors to review admissions publications would inevitably produce useful results.

Summary and Conclusions

Audiences continually change in nature and perspective, and so it is essential that Ball State University's recruitment publications be designed to communicate effectively and engagingly to its changing audiences—college-bound students and their families. The focus group research strategies used in this project are an effective means of identifying the publication features to which current audiences will respond, either positively or negatively. In addition to the engaging messages in recruitment publications, features such as the photographs and colors used, the layout of the publications, and the kind of information included can, to a large extent, determine the image of the institution conveyed in the recruitment
publications, and thus the overall effectiveness of the publications. I therefore would recommend that Ball State University continue to conduct focus group research of its recruitment publications on a consistent basis so that these publications will be as effective as possible and will communicate the desired image of Ball State to all intended audiences.
Works Cited

### Appendices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A</td>
<td>Letter sent to universities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B</td>
<td>Handouts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C</td>
<td>Session outline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D</td>
<td>Discussion questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E</td>
<td>Institutional Review Board</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
October 17, 1996

"Full Name"
"Title"
"Institution"
"Address"
"City/Zip"

Dear "Name",

My name is Jennifer Bomholt, and I am a senior at Ball State University. I am presently working on a research project that will serve as my senior thesis for the university’s Honors College, and I am requesting your assistance.

My project involves focus group research and its usefulness as a marketing tool in higher education. I will specifically concentrate on the various recruitment publications used by colleges and universities and how prospective students react to such publications.

I will be visiting approximately eight high schools in Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio and conducting focus groups. These focus groups will consist of students chosen by their guidance counselors as representative of their school’s college bound population. These students will be asked to review and react to a variety of admissions publications from institutions in Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio. The students will not know that I am from Ball State until the session is concluded so that they may feel free to express ideas and opinions.

The goals of this project are to evaluate the practicality of focus groups as a form of marketing research in higher education and to determine what improvements may be made and/or what techniques are effective in college admissions publications. You and your institution can aid me in attaining these goals by agreeing to participate in this project.

If you would like to be a part of this project, please send me copies of your viewbook, undergraduate application, and search brochure by November 1, 1996. If you agree to participate, you will be informed of all findings of my research upon its completion in late spring. This information can be valuable to your institution because it will allow you to see what prospective students enjoy about your materials as well as what they criticize.

I am excited about this project and look forward to your response. If you have questions, feel free to contact me by phone at 1-800-482-4BSU. Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Bomholt
201 South Dill St.
Muncie, IN 47303
**SEARCH PIECES**

*Please write down the first word that comes to mind when you see each brochure*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>First word that comes to mind</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ball State University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butler University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DePaul University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Illinois University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miami University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Illinois University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purdue University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Illinois University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Illinois</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SEARCH PIECES

Please write down the first word that comes to mind when you see each brochure

Institution: Ball State University
First word that comes to mind:

Institution: Bowling Green State University
First word that comes to mind:

Institution: Hanover College
First word that comes to mind:

Institution: Kent State University
First word that comes to mind:

Institution: Miami University
First word that comes to mind:

Institution: Ohio University
First word that comes to mind:

Institution: Purdue University
First word that comes to mind:

Institution: University of Akron
First word that comes to mind:

Institution: University of Toledo
First word that comes to mind:
SEARCH PIECES

Please write down the first word that comes to mind when you see each brochure

Institution: Ball State University
First word that comes to mind:

Institution: Butler University
First word that comes to mind:

Institution: DePauw University
First word that comes to mind:

Institution: Earlham College
First word that comes to mind:

Institution: Hanover College
First word that comes to mind:

Institution: Indiana State University
First word that comes to mind:

Institution: Miami University
First word that comes to mind:

Institution: Purdue University
First word that comes to mind:

Institution: Tri-State University
First word that comes to mind:
VIEWBOOKS

Please browse through each publication and indicate what you like and dislike

Title/Institution: Ball State University

Like       Dislike

Title/Institution: Butler University

Like       Dislike

Title/Institution: DePauw University

Like       Dislike

Title/Institution: Eastern Illinois University

Like       Dislike

Title/Institution: Miami University

Like       Dislike
Title/Institution: Northern Illinois University

Like Dislike

Title/Institution: Purdue University

Like Dislike

Title/Institution: Southern Illinois University

Like Dislike

Title/Institution: University of Illinois

Like Dislike
VIEWBOOKS

*Please browse through each publication and indicate what you like and dislike*

Title/Institution: Ball State University

Like  Dislike

Title/Institution: Bowling Green State University

Like  Dislike

Title/Institution: Hanover College

Like  Dislike

Title/Institution: Kent State University

Like  Dislike

Title/Institution: Miami University

Like  Dislike
Title/Institution: Ohio University

Like          Dislike

Title/Institution: Purdue University

Like          Dislike

Title/Institution: University of Akron

Like          Dislike

Title/Institution: University of Toledo

Like          Dislike
VIEWBOOKS

Please browse through each publication and indicate what you like and dislike

Title/Institution: Ball State University

Like       Dislike

Title/Institution: Butler University

Like       Dislike

Title/Institution: DePauw University

Like       Dislike

Title/Institution: Earlham College

Like       Dislike

Title/Institution: Hanover College

Like       Dislike
Title/Institution: Indiana State University

Like  Dislike

Title/Institution: Miami University

Like  Dislike

Title/Institution: Purdue University

Like  Dislike

Title/Institution: Tri-State University

Like  Dislike
FOCUS GROUP OUTLINE

Introduction
* name, college senior, working on my honors thesis project
* how many juniors/seniors--many of you in middle of college search or soon will be
* you'll encounter many types of publications during your search
* I'm studying what makes some of these materials more effective than others
* asking you to review publications from 9 different schools
* you may be more familiar with some than others, please judge the publications alone and try to put aside opinions you may have concerning any of these institutions
* some work on paper, then group discussion
* all responses will remain complete anonymous, so do not put your name on any worksheets
* please feel free to stop me if you have any questions

Search piece
* distribute handouts
* explain exercise
* hold up each piece

Viewbook
* distribute handouts
* explain--you will have about 2 minutes to flip through each book and write down likes and dislikes--I'll tell you when to switch

Discussion
* see handout for questions

Conclusion
* thank you
* reveal my college--Ball State pass out cups
FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

*For use during discussion*

♦ Which of these publications stand out? Why?

♦ Which of these publications do you like the least? Why?

♦ What pictures or photographs do you like the most? the least?

♦ What colors do you like the most? least?

♦ Would any of these publications prompt you to make a campus visit? Which ones?

♦ Which publications were the easiest to read (in terms of layout, font, vocabulary, etc.)?

♦ What questions do you still have about these institutions? Was there information left out that you feel should have been included?

♦ Which covers attract your attention?
Using Focus Groups to Evaluate Admissions Publications

Over the course of the next few months I will be working closely with the Office of Admissions on a research project that will allow Ball State University to receive both positive and negative feedback concerning its admissions publications. This project will allow prospective college students to review publications from eighteen institutions, including Ball State, and express their opinions on the effectiveness of these materials.

I, along with an admissions representative, will travel to a total of nine high schools in Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio and conduct focus groups. At each school a representative from the guidance office will choose a group of fifteen to twenty students who are representative of the school’s college bound population to participate in the session. During the fifty minutes that I spend with these students I will ask them to review and react to a variety of materials. Some of their responses will be written (see attached instruments) and others will be given during a group discussion. All responses shall remain anonymous and confidential, as we are recording absolutely no demographic information during these sessions. Our primary goal is to assess the effectiveness of our current recruitment publications.

Upon the completion of my research, I will report all findings to those universities who agreed to participate. Names of students will not be mentioned in these findings. In addition, this project will serve to fulfill the requirements for Honors 499, my senior thesis project for the Honors College.
My name is Jennifer Bomholt, and I am a college senior currently working on my senior honors project. Today I am requesting your help on my project. Over the next hour I will ask you to review materials published by several different colleges and universities. You will then be asked to give your opinions on these publications—what you like and dislike, etc. Your participation in this project is voluntary, and all of your responses will remain completely anonymous, so please feel free to express your opinions openly. Also, please feel free to stop me at any time if you have questions or concerns about my project.