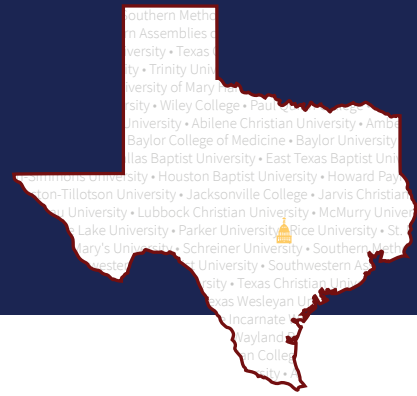


ICUT Issue Brief: College Fit



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Welcome to the second ICUT Issue Brief, where we delve into the world of “college fit” at independent colleges and universities using data from the 2016 and 2017 Ruffalo Noel Levitz *National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Reports*.

What is College Fit?

College fit refers to how well an institution meets a student’s wants and needs where their college experience is concerned. For many, college fit goes beyond matching an institution’s GPA and test score standards. Rather, students and their families gauge college fit based on, among other things, the academic reputation of a college or university, cost of attendance, campus culture and a general feeling of belonging. As a multidimensional concept, challenges arise in quantifying college fit and its effects on students and institutions. Recent literature, however, argues that college fit plays a key role in a student’s enrollment choice and satisfaction with their chosen institution – both of which can affect persistence and degree completion.

Why Does College Fit Matter?

College fit and student satisfaction go hand-in-hand. If good college fit leads to high satisfaction, it follows that high satisfaction may increase the likelihood a student will persist and complete a degree. The 2017 Ruffalo Noel Levitz *National Student Satisfaction and Priorities* survey asserts that student satisfaction is strongly linked with areas such as individual student retention, completion and alumni giving – making the positive outcomes of a good college fit exceptionally large in scope. To better understand college fit we will discuss it from two angles: when students are choosing a school and after they have enrolled.

The College Fit Puzzle and Enrollment Decisions



College fit is like a puzzle: individual pieces interlock to form a cohesive picture.

College Fit & Enrollment Decisions

Students and institutions should consider college fit at multiple points along the college experience timeline, beginning with a student’s decision to enroll at a particular college or university. As institutions of higher education, it is important to ask what factors students consider when making their enrollment decision. Based on survey results from more than 500,000 respondents over three years, the 2015-16 *National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report* identified nine factors that influence students’ enrollment decisions at colleges and universities:

- Financial Aid
- Academic Reputation
- Cost
- Personalized attention prior to enrollment

- Geographic setting
- Campus appearance
- Size of institution
- Recommendations from family and friends
- Opportunity to play sports
- Future employment opportunities

Survey respondents identified which of these factors were most influential to their enrollment decisions. For both public and private four-year institutions the top three factors of influence were financial aid, academic reputation and cost. The weighted importance of these factors, however differed between private and public institutions. At four-year private schools, 81 percent of students listed financial aid as influential to their enrollment decision, 78 percent listed academic reputation and 77 percent listed cost. At four-year public institutions, meanwhile, 83 percent listed cost as influential to their enrollment

decision, while 78 percent listed financial aid and 75 percent listed academic reputation.

The *2015-16 National Student Satisfaction and Priorities* report provides some key insights for how college students gauge institutional fit in order to make an enrollment decision. Generally speaking, a student's initial judgment of college fit is based on surface-level observations of an institution and factors that can be gleaned from a college's website: cost, financial aid options and academic programs. Among these three factors, private college students weighed cost with less importance, but academic reputation and financial aid with greater importance, than students at public institutions.

College Fit & Institutional Satisfaction

The importance of good college fit does not evaporate after enrollment. The 2017 Ruffalo Noel Levitz *National Student Satisfaction and Priorities Report* examines how different areas of the college experience relate to a student's satisfaction with their institution and illuminates the role college fit plays once a student joins a college community.

For students attending private four-year colleges and universities, eleven areas of the campus experience were identified as most important. In order, these are:

1. Institutional effectiveness
2. Academic advising
3. Student-centeredness
4. Safety and security (*tie*)
5. Concern for the individual (*tie*)
6. Campus climate (*tie*)
7. Recruitment and financial aid
8. Registration effectiveness
9. Service excellence
10. Campus support services
11. Campus life

The survey asked which areas of a campus experience matter most to students and how satisfied students are with these areas at their current institutions. Compared to the college fit factors for enrollment decisions, this list is more robust and captures factors students can only assess once enrolled. The top three areas of importance – instructional effectiveness, academic advising, and student-centeredness – reflect the priority private college students gave academics when making enrollment decisions. This

suggests that in general, students at private institutions weigh academic fit with their college heavily within their overall college fit evaluation. Lower on this list are factors such as campus life. Though campus life and culture are frequently regarded as vital to a good college fit, these results suggest that students at private schools are more concerned with their school's academics and academic support services.

The report offers additional analysis of student dissatisfaction with their campus experience. Results suggest some key areas private college students find important to their experience are falling short of their expectations. Satisfaction was particularly low among the following five factors:

1. Ability to register for classes with few conflicts (*53 percent satisfied*)
2. Tuition paid is a worthwhile investment (*44 percent satisfied*)
3. It is enjoyable to be a student on campus (*58 percent satisfied*)
4. Security staff respond quickly in emergencies (*55 percent satisfied*)
5. Adequate financial aid (*45 percent satisfied*)

As the report notes, these factors call attention to low satisfaction in important

areas like course registration, campus climate and safety and financial aid. We may take this to mean that students consider ease of registration, value of tuition, campus safety and other factors to gauge college fit. Institutions should take note that in many cases, students were left wanting in these areas, likely diminishing an overall feeling of fit.

While important in enrollment decisions, college fit considerations do not end once a student selects a school to begin their higher education journey. College fit evolves as students progress through their college experience, with nuances emerging as time goes on. That students at private institutions, like those that make up ICUT's membership, place a high value on academics and financial aid is an important takeaway when discussing college fit.

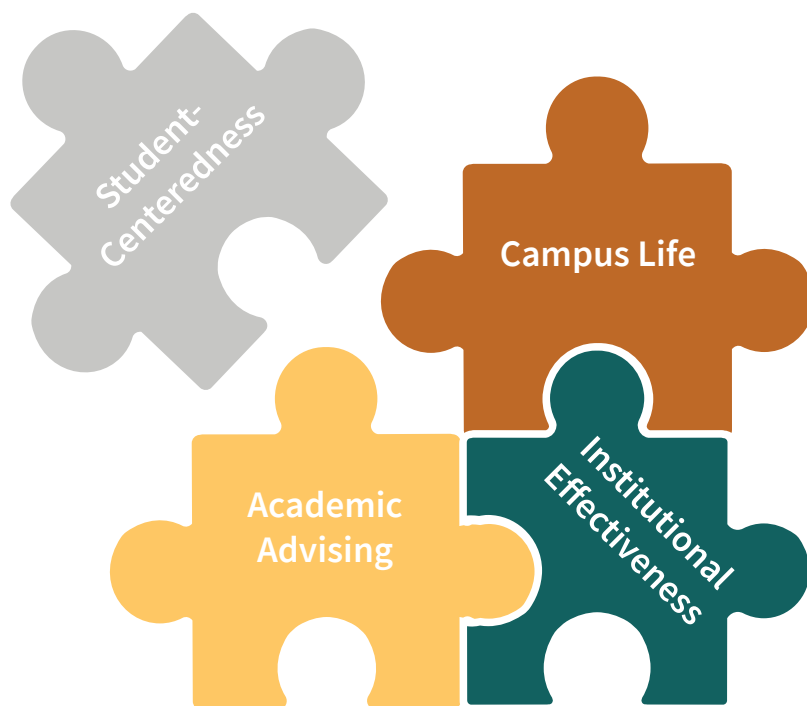
Sources

Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2016). *2015-16 national student satisfaction and priorities report*. Retrieved from www.ruffalonl.com.

Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2017). *2017 national student satisfaction and priorities report*. Retrieved from www.ruffalonl.com.

Graphics adapted from www.flaticon.com and www.freepik.com.

The College Fit Puzzle After Enrollment



College fit matters after enrollment, too, although the pieces of the puzzle evolve.

