FOCUS GROUP RESULTS:
STUDENTS FROM MORGANTOWN
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
WVU has had a decline in applications and deposits from students who attend high school in Morgantown. Two focus groups with freshmen students from Morgantown, WV, who attend WVU were conducted in order to achieve the following objectives:

• To understand students’ thoughts about going to college locally, as well as their perceptions of WVU
• To compare their perceptions to reality
• To understand why high school students do/do not attend WVU’s formal recruiting events
• To determine messaging that will best resonate with prospective students who reside in Morgantown

PARTICIPANTS
The April 25 focus groups consisted of thirteen students – eight females and four males, and one self-classified as “other.” Seven attended Morgantown High School, five attended University High School and one student was from Trinity High School. Their majors at WVU include:

• English/Spanish (minor in Addiction Studies)
• Finance (minor in Sports Communication)
• Management Information System/Hospitality
• Biomedical Engineering
• Criminology
• Psychology
• Global Supply Chain Management
• Mechanical Engineering
• Exercise Physiology
• Aerospace Engineering
• Political Science
• Engineering
• Chemical Engineering
RECOMMENDATIONS

**Promote the unique aspects/advantages of WVU.**
Try as they may to find a reason to go to school elsewhere, many students acknowledged that it made the most sense to attend WVU. WVU offers more scholarships, more aid, more cutting-edge majors, more study abroad opportunities and a more supportive, far-reaching alumni network than other schools.

**Develop an ambassador program.**
Often there is a stark difference between high school students’ expectations about going to school at WVU and the reality of it. WVU freshmen can best speak to this “reality” because they have experienced that difference firsthand, and they are eager and enthusiastic about getting the message out.

**Develop messaging that discusses what WVU does to make the large school feel smaller.**
The 13th grade narrative can best be addressed by speaking to the vast array of opportunities this large school has that allows students to experience new adventures (Adventure WV), environments (Honors College), interests (student organizations) and research opportunities. This will enable students to understand they will be able to quickly expand their current network of friends, as well as be themselves, find themselves and thrive.

**Emphasize the importance of the connection between WVU and the state.**
Generation Z is socially aware and is more interested in making their mark in the world. These students take great pride in the state and some indicated they want to use their education to make a positive difference in WV.
RECOMMENDATIONS

**Ensure that students who visit from their high school receive an exemplary tour.**
A disappointing tour has potential to discourage interested students, as well as those who are undecided and those not familiar with the campus at WVU.

**Do a better job differentiating the purpose of each event.**
Ensure students have a clear understanding of each of the events they are invited to and how they can benefit from attending each. They greatly benefit from spending time on campus and interacting one-on-one with President Gee, deans and/or professors because it helps them start to experience that special feeling that most can’t put into words. It gives them a sense of family and let’s them know that they belong here.

**Build/maintain strong relationships with the local high schools.**
Local high schools strongly encourage their students to attend WVU, so it is essential that the counselors and teachers be kept abreast of the positive changes being made at the University.

**Improve the commuter lounge.**
Students who commute can face struggles on many fronts. The location and lack of ambience in the commuter lounge downtown discourages some commuters from spending time there. At other times, it’s too crowded. In any case, the downtown location is in the basement, difficult to find, cramped and students are unable to see out the windows. The Evansdale campus does not even have a commuter lounge. So it’s important to create a positive and welcoming atmosphere to make it easier for commuters to forge bonds with their cohorts in a comfortable place and not feel alienated.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Use simple designs to break through the clutter. Unsurprisingly, students receive a lot of mail from colleges during the selection period. Eye-catching, quick reads that don’t require students to open an envelope appear to get read more often.
DETAILED FINDINGS
THE COMPETITION

Many of the students’ parents encouraged them to attend WVU, but the majority applied to multiple schools. When asked where WVU ranked among the schools they applied to, it fell in the middle of the pack, at best. Their reasons for applying to other schools include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Alderson &amp; Broaddus</td>
<td>- The application was free</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Univ. of KY</td>
<td>- Best friend went there and loved it</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Good English program</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Ohio State</td>
<td>- Very large, beautiful campus, a large number of student orgs</td>
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<tr>
<td>- James Madison</td>
<td>- Friends attend and love it and they are heavily involved with an org.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>the student was involved w/ in h.s.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Purdue</td>
<td>- Great English program</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Clemson</td>
<td>- Grew up in the state</td>
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<td>- Liberty</td>
<td>- A Christian school</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Duke</td>
<td>- Mother attended</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Ohio University</td>
<td>- Great engineering school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Carnegie Mellon</td>
<td>- Great engineering school; fantastic financial aid package</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Penn State</td>
<td>- Family were alums</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Pitt</td>
<td>- Relatively close; pretty good STEM program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Duke</td>
<td>- Good engineering school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Colorado Univ. Boulder</td>
<td>- Beautiful campus, lifestyle</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Oklahoma State</td>
<td>- Received the National Merit Scholarship</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Elon University</td>
<td>- Loved the campus</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Penn State</td>
<td>- Parents went to grad school there; beautiful campus</td>
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</table>
THE COMPETITION

Those who were ultimately torn between West Virginia University and another school ultimately chose West Virginia University for the following reasons:

- **Ohio State**
  - Would not know anyone at Ohio State

- **Clemson**
  - Did not offer student a scholarship

- **University of South Carolina**
  - Their in-state tuition is more expensive than out-of-state tuition at WVU

- **Duke**
  - Did not offer financial aid

- **Elon University**
  - Does not offer a STEM program

- **Penn State**
  - Great engineering program but they are not known for that program

- **University of Pittsburgh**
  - Did not offer enough financial aid

- **Univer. of Colorado**
  - Most expensive of the options considered

- **Oklahoma**
  - Not that well known for their academic programs
THE COMPETITION
Students were asked how the information they received from WVU compared to that which they received from other schools.

“To me, WVU sent a lot of one pagers instead of letters that I actually needed to open. I threw those away without opening them. WVU’s was interesting. It had colored pictures and information I could read really fast.

“It was quick things, too. We’re doing this Adventure trip.”

“I’m in the middle of the selection process now even though I’m committed to WVU. They have sent me, by far, the most information trying to get me to come here. When I committed to the STEM program, a senior reached out to me and invited me to campus, saying it will be great. I didn’t have that opportunity with the other schools.” (Note: This high school student is taking classes on campus)
THE “PARTY SCHOOL”

WVU’s party school reputation did not deter these students from considering the school. They are self-described non-party types; they didn’t believe their studious-minded approach to school would change in college. (Note: This response may be reflective of the participants. Four live in Honors Hall and four are engineering students).

Several students noticed a positive change in culture at the University. They based it on the following:

- WVU’s R1 status is widely promoted
- There is a greater presence of law enforcement on campus
- There are no longer parties or riots on Grant Avenue
- WVU emphasizes its new academic programs (Launch Lab, etc.)
- WVU implemented the text alert system
LIVING IN MORGANTOWN

Not all students from Morgantown have spent time on or near WVU’s campus. Even those high school students who had been exposed to the campus felt notably different when they stood on campus as a college student.

“We would never go downtown for anything. We would always stay on the outskirts... University Town Center or Cheat Lake. Frank said he never had the desire to go downtown because it’s dirty and there are a lot of homeless. He added, that’s just how it is. And you had to pay for parking.”

“I like how you pointed out how different it is because I would walk from the school to the Mountainlair with my friends. But the first time I was in the lair with my ID during Welcome Week, it was a different experience. I didn’t think it would be, but it was. I thought wow, I’m actually a student here. I’m not just some high schooler walking here after school going to the rec fields and play soccer. When people ask me where I went to school and I tell them 15 minutes away and I would walk here, they think it’s so cool. That’s just what we did, but it really is a different experience now. Being in the lair with my student ID was a completely different experience than just walking there when I was in high school.”
LOCAL HIGH SCHOOLS

One student from University High School reported that her high school pushes WVU more than any other college. The high school offers some courses that streamline students into the University.

“"I’m in the middle of the selection process now even though I’m committed to WVU. They have sent me, by far, the most information trying to get me to come here. When I committed to the STEM program, a senior reached out to me and invited me to campus, saying it will be great. I didn’t have that opportunity with the other schools.””

“I think WVU does a job good trying to keep students in state. WVU is one of the leaders in the state to stop the ‘brain drain.’”

Even a student who moved to Morgantown when he was young and was set on going to college on the West Coast acknowledged that the high schools do a good job funneling students to WVU.

“"Even if you don’t want to go here, they give you so much support and you can integrate pretty seamlessly into college. It’s hard to turn down.””
LOCAL HIGH SCHOOLS
Students who visited WVU with their high school had vastly different experiences.

“I went on the tour and when I got home I told my mom I was not going to WVU! I’m not saying I need a super flashy tour. We walked around downtown campus with minimal description, went to towers, and the football field, and went back. I actually said that I don’t even want to apply. It was upsetting and discouraging to me. I thought I’ll give it a try, maybe I’ll love it and maybe I’ll be more okay with going to WVU and then I went on the tour and I thought, now I’m just sad. My friend thought it was terrible too. A lot of other people who had gone on that tour went just to get their application fee waived.”

“I went on a tour my junior year and they told us where we were and everything. We saw a classroom in Oglebay. We walked around, then took the bus to the Evansdale Campus.”
STUDENTS’ PRECONCEPTIONS
Students acknowledged they initially felt that WVU would be a continuation of high school - just bigger, or that a degree from WVU would not garner enough respect. One student believed that if she went to school at WVU, she would be stuck in Morgantown.

“I wasn’t really aware of how much WVU could offer me as someone from Morgantown. So I had this construct in my head that leaving meant that I was going to a better school even though WVU is a good school. Having grown up here, it was almost as though I was desensitized to it.”

“I thought it was going to be ‘High School Part II.’ A lot of people told me that.”

“My mom went to high school and then went to WVU, here, my aunt and uncle and grandparents did the same thing. So I was like, OMG, I’m going to get stuck!!! I think that was a big part of it. Then, you know how you see in the movies when parents take their kids and drop them off at college; I was thinking, I’m not going to have that. I also thought that it’s really cheap for me to go here and it’s close, so I guess I just have to.”

Another student recounted that his friends who excelled academically believed they needed to go elsewhere to get a good education.

“Definitely growing up there was this certain expectation to leave Morgantown and not go to WVU.”
STUDENTS’ REALITY

Their actual experience as a college student is the antithesis of what many expected. They realized that a campus of 30,000 students gives them the freedom to befriend who they want to and avoid others because of its size and the opportunities afforded to them. Students from Morgantown also now have a sense of pride about attending college in their hometown and realize the vastness of the WVU alumni network.

“I realized that WVU has 30,000 kids and not 1,800. Another thing is, in college, I have a lot more freedom. I can pick who I want to hang out with. I can pick what I want to do with my free time, and I can pick my classes rather than being in the same school with the same people all the time.”

“I thought it was going to be more like, well, it’s really cheap for me to go here and it’s close, so I guess I just have to. But after I got here, I feel more like, yes, I’m a townie and I’m proud of it. I know Morgantown and I love WVU and my parents went here. So I’m more passionate about WVU.”

“It just felt a lot like home and I like the familiarity of it. I wanted to get away from that, but after being immersed and surrounded by that family feel, I said you know what, I can make this a good thing. I realized that WVU is its own entity. I thought, there’s Morgantown but then there’s WVU. It really isn’t the same. I was thinking, I’m just going go to the same school with everyone from high school. I thought it might be like high school but bigger, and it’s completely the opposite of that.”

“You know we were the number one party school and I’m just under that impression that no one would take a degree from WVU seriously. But as I go out and travel, I realized that WVU has such a large network and if you go to WVU, we’re immediately family and we support each other. On a side note, I was in Alaska over spring break, and my aunt was allowed to leave work early because her boss went to WVU, and he said he’d do anything for a fellow Mountaineer. It’s just the little things like that.”
STUDENTS’ REALITY
Some students feel that recognizing people from high school at WVU is a help rather than a hindrance. Having some sort of connection allows them to have a base network from which they can build upon.

“I wanted to prove that I could branch out and didn’t need a safety net. However, college is a big adjustment and it’s a really big place. So having one or two people to talk to really helped me.”
Several students felt coerced to attend WVU, so they looked for reasons to go elsewhere. However, when they considered the facts, they were unable to find a reason not to come here.

“My whole high school career, middle school career, I didn’t want to go to WVU. I wanted to go out of town and experience other things. And I looked at multiple other schools, applied to four other places. And then it kind of came down I had accepted to WVU as one of the last, and just like I don’t want to leave. Like I can’t leave Morgantown. Before I was just looking in from the outside in, “Oh it’s just WVU.” But then I like actually started to look at colleges, and see what WVU had to offer, and I was like “Wow. Why would I want to leave Morgantown?”

“Since there was already a good university in town I didn’t see the point on spending a lot of money to go somewhere that was just wasn’t any better. That couldn’t give me better opportunities.”

“I thought if I went to college here it would be exactly like high school and I hated that idea my sophomore and junior year. I toured two other schools and, in the end, I thought why wouldn’t I come here.”

“I liked Ohio State and their tour a lot but I just couldn’t justify paying more to go there.”

Additionally, the scholarships WVU awards are said to be a very strong draw for local students.
**THEIR DECISION**

Being at WVU was an unexpectedly positive, eye-opening experience for many of them.

“When you’re at Trinity you can’t be yourself. You have to present a certain face. It’s like you’re in a glass box and you have to walk the line. When you’re here, you can be yourself. You should talk about the fact that it is different. When I see people back from high school they ask me if it’s going to be the same because it’s Morgantown. I tell them that’s what I thought but no, no.”

“It’s a different feel here. The minute you step foot on campus, it envelopes you and everyone takes you in. I didn’t feel that at any other campus. I really feel like this is where I’m supposed to do. People wear WVU shirts across the world. It feels like a family and not just a school.”

“Ohio State is a lot colder. I feel like I could walk up to anyone here and ask where something is...no problem. At other places, you don’t get that warm, community feeling like here.”

When they talk to their friends about WVU now, these students use phrases like “great opportunities,” “tremendous pride,” “a great program,” “you’ll love it.” In fact, many offered to act as an ambassador in the high schools so they can tell local, misinformed students how things really are at WVU.

“The first thing I would say is who here doesn’t want to go to WVU because they don’t want to be stuck here, they don’t want to be a townie, the just don’t want to go to WVU. Well I’m here to change your mind because I was the exact same person.”
SUGGESTIONS
Unprompted, these students offered a few important suggestions for incoming freshmen from Morgantown

- Choose a random roommate
- Take an Adventure WV trip

“That Adventure trip made me fall in love with WV. I used to hate WV until I went on that trip and I fell in love with our state.”

“I live in a dorm and had a random roommate. I met my best friend in the whole wide world and that’s a lifechanging thing.”
COMMUTER STUDENTS
Commuters are displeased with the location of the commuter lounge, as well as its environment, because it makes them feel alienated.

“I feel very disconnected from WVU as someone that commutes. I feel completely removed from campus. In the beginning, there were a few things that we had to go to and I almost wish that there were more of those. After the first couple of days, they don’t include us at all. The dorms are where everything happens. That’s where you get all your information, where people reach out to you and where you meet everyone.”

“I went there once. It’s very small and claustrophobic, in a dingy little basement. I think if we made those areas more inviting...there’s all this open space on Evansdale where people can study and talk.”

It’s reportedly very difficult for commuters to get to know each other, making it difficult for them to form friendships.

“I probably would have felt more comfortable going to WVU if there was like a commuter community. I feel really attached to the Honors LLC, so I almost feel if they created a culture like that. There is not a commuter cohort.”
WVU EVENTS
The fact that students received personal attention during University events did not go unnoticed. All the students agreed that when they visit high schools or run local high school tours, it’s important for the University to talk about the programs that make this large school feel smaller.

“Going into high schools is helpful but bringing those aspects with it like the Honors College, study abroad, student orgs, and things along that line that are available to students. Things we can’t hear about other than we’re a university in your hometown. Come visit, come back. It’s just like ‘Why?’ For me personally, I felt like why should I come to your university? Study abroad and the Honors College – things like that – make the scenery smaller. I didn’t know about it until the Honors College reached out to me so I think they need to make themselves more known.”

“I think something that would have made my decision for me immediately is knowing how available study abroad is. I went on a trip over spring break. It’s affordable, it’s amazing. I went to Barcelona. I got back and said I’m going to study abroad for a semester, for the summer between my junior and senior year. I’ve never seen a school who make it so available and so affordable. If I had known about that – snap – I would immediately have made my decision. Several agreed with her.”
WVU EVENTS
Several, but not all the students, were compelled to attend a formal WVU event. Those who attended Decide WVU cited the following reasons:

Decide WVU

**Reason**: Didn’t know enough about the program  
**Benefit**: Provided her with a one-on-one interaction with the deans and President Gee  
**Feeling**: Reassured; felt like part of a family

**Reason**: Wanted to meet President Gee  
**Benefit**: Met someone she admires  
**Feeling**: Sense of connection, belonging

**Reason**: Mom and friend wanted to hang out (student had already chosen WVU)  
**Benefit**: Mom got to speak with the deans  
**Feeling**: Reassurance because of the one-on-one contact

“I liked the fact that WVU Day was beyond just academics. I was afraid of getting stuck with students from my high school, but WVU did a good job of saying, ‘Here are all of your options. Look what you can do here. Look at all of the things you can experience.’”
**WVU EVENTS**

A few others said they attended an event but they couldn’t remember the name of it. Some mentioned attending a reception for Honors. Several others went to Distinguished Scholars Day but were motivated by different things.

“This might sound bad, but I went for the free food and it was during the school day.”

To reiterate, some couldn’t remember the event they attended, including one student who saw no reason to attend more than one event.

“I figured they were all pretty much the same so if I went to one event, I’d be all set. I already got the tour of the Engineering college, so I figured if I went to another event they’d just talk about general information that I thought I already knew.”
DRIVERS
Students were given cards with the following 13 attributes and asked to choose the top three that were most important to them when choosing a college:

- A parent/relative who attended WVU
- Easy admission
- Offers desired program
- Athletic programs/sport teams
- Study abroad opportunities
- WVU’s “spirit”
- Affordability/Overall Cost
- WVU’s size
- Value
- Research Opportunities/R1 status
- Feeling that I would fit in
- Core academic experience
- Availability of social aid
- Core academic experience
- Availability of social aid
- Research Opportunities/R1 status

The attribute(s) they considered most important, along with their rationale, follow. Their major is also noted.

Biomedical Engineering
1) Offers desired program

“I didn’t include the last one because it was important to me but I remember learning that we were an R1 school. To me, that was really impressive. I never heard that until my senior year of high school. That factor made me think, maybe WVU is credible. Maybe it’s a good school.”

English/Spanish
1) Affordability
2) Availability of aid
3) Research opportunities

Management Information Systems
1) Affordability
2) Offers desired program
3) Value

“I value my state and I value my school. I do love the value that WVU places on the state of WV.”

“Biomedical engineering is a very new engineering discipline, so not a lot of universities have a solid biomedical engineering program. They may just offer a minor or a certification. I was considering ivy leagues for a split second and a lot of them didn’t even offer biomedical engineering.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DRIVERS</th>
<th>Biomedical Engineering</th>
<th>Chemical Engineering</th>
<th>Mechanical Engineering</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1) Affordability</td>
<td>1) Core academic experience</td>
<td>1) Affordability/overall cost</td>
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<td>2) Aid</td>
<td>2) Research opportunities</td>
<td>2) Offers my desired program</td>
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<td>3) Offers desired program</td>
<td>3) Scholarships</td>
<td>3) WVU spirit</td>
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<td>“They have biochemical, which is one of the new majors, and that really interested me. Not a lot of schools have that.”</td>
<td>“In terms of scholarships, there are bigger brackets here. At some schools, you have to be absolutely perfect, and that’s a bit unreasonable.”</td>
<td>“The University is so intertwined with the community. It didn’t make sense for me not to come here.”</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanical Engineering</th>
<th>1) Affordability</th>
<th>2) Feeling that I fit in</th>
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<td></td>
<td>“They want to keep people in the state so much. In other states, they will give you money but they can take you or leave you. At WVU, you know they want you here and they are backing that up with their money.”</td>
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<tr>
<th>Political Science</th>
<th>1) Offers desired course</th>
<th>2) Affordability</th>
<th>3) The ability of aid</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It was really easy to get scholarships through CFWV. We were introduced to it in 8th grade and were told we needed to start making our college plans then. I logged on and there were three or four scholarships immediately sitting there.”</td>
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<tr>
<th>Exercise Physiology</th>
<th>1) Affordability/cost</th>
<th>2) Offers desired program</th>
<th>3) Athletic and sports teams</th>
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<td>“The Exercise Physiology program here is excellent and not many other schools offer it. They offer a PT route where they offer a biology. You can go to dental school, medical school, OT, PT. We have the only aquatic program in the country. It’s just a very well-rounded program that not many other schools in the country offer.”</td>
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<td>Program</td>
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| **Finance/Sports Communication** | 1) Internships  
2) WVU spirit  
3) Easy admission/a parent or relative is alum |
|                               | “I want to work for the Pirates and the Black Bears offer internship opportunities which feed into the Pirates.” |

| **Criminology**              | 1) Overall cost  
2) WVU size  
3) Parent/relative is alum |
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<td></td>
<td>“I’m picky when it comes to my friends, so having a big pool to pick from really makes me happy. Especially graduating from MHS where there are 1800 kids. I’m happy to be able to pick who I want to be friends with.”</td>
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| **Psychology**               | 1) Overall cost  
2) Feeling that I would fit in  
3) WVU spirit |
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<td>“My dad worked for the basketball team for 20 years, so I grew up going to basketball and football games. I saw the student section and saw how excited everyone was to be rooting for the same team and cheering for the same thing. I really wanted to be a part of that.”</td>
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| **Global Supply Chain Management** | 1) WVU size  
2) Core academic experience  
3) WVU spirit |
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<td></td>
<td>“I came from a very high achieving high school with great teachers who prepared us very well for college. I think and seeing all these opportunities, like research, and all the majors WVU offers was really important to me.”</td>
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