2019 Maryland Counties Focus Group_FINAL.04.17.19

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FOCUS GROUPS:
STUDENTS FROM SELECT COUNTIES IN MARYLAND

April 2019
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Objectives:

- To understand students’ initial perceptions of West Virginia and WVU
- To understand the factors that led them to consider WVU
- To understand their decision-making process
- To determine advertising recall for WVU/competitors
- To determine messaging that will best resonate with prospective students who reside in those counties

Target:

- Males & females
- Freshmen or sophomores
- Mix of ethnicities
- Mix of majors
- From Anne Arundel, Howard or Carroll counties
RECOMMENDATIONS

West Virginia University is not mentioned in Maryland schools. WVU is virtually unknown in Anne Arundel, Howard and Carroll counties in Maryland. Students are strongly encouraged to go to an in-state college, and the University of Maryland is considered the gold standard. WVU’s absence in high schools in those areas is detrimental to recruiting prospective students. Admissions should develop a strategy for a strong in-person presence in the high schools and at college fairs.

WVU’s party school image is alive and well. Those who are aware of WVU seem to view it with disdain. In order to change this marred reputation, it’s critical to promote the University’s R1 status, as well as its research and academic achievements. The University should consider targeting press coverage and advertising in those areas in Maryland where WVU has had a decline in apps and deposits.

Negative images of the state of West Virginia prevail. When referencing WVU, it’s important to focus on the school’s location in Morgantown – just 1.5 hours from Pittsburgh, PA and 3.5 hours from Washington, D.C. It’s also important to note the city’s favorable rankings: the Business Insider ranked Morgantown among the Top 20 Best College Towns and Flipkey.com named it as a “Top Campus Worth Traveling For,” etc.

These students apply to multiple schools. It can be difficult for students who apply to a large number of schools to differentiate between them. A unique feature WVU boasts is its Adventure-based trips for freshmen, which can be leveraged to a greater extent.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Affordability was a very important factor in choosing WVU. Broadcast WVU’s affordability, as well as the record number of college scholarships available. These factors would likely command the attention of students who are concerned about paying high in-state tuition in Maryland. The text below on WVU’s website seems to capture the important talking points.

- “Dream first and worry about tuition last. We offer a quality education at a great price, and aid programs that make our price tag even better. And in 2016-17, we disbursed $87 million in scholarships.”

Students want to know that they can fit it at a college. Historically, WVU has promoted a small percentage of its nearly 500 students organizations. It’s important for students to hear about these opportunities early in their selection process so they can see that there are a variety of things they can get involved with that will help them fit in and branch out.
FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS
The focus groups consisted of seven students. Their class, counties and majors are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Industrial Engineering</td>
<td>Carroll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Biology &amp; Psychology</td>
<td>Carroll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Immunology</td>
<td>Carroll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>Anne Arundel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Sports Psychology</td>
<td>Anne Arundel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Biochemical Engineering</td>
<td>Howard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Chemical Engineering</td>
<td>Howard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

COUNTY INFORMATION
- Carroll County – rural area of the state that is less than an hour from Frederick, MD
- Howard County – between Baltimore and Washington, D.C.; a growing, affluent, urban area that is very diverse
- Anne Arundel County – third-highest-income county in Maryland by income per capita that has a relatively stagnant population that is not very diverse
PERCEPTIONS ABOUT WEST VIRGINIA
These students’ initial perceptions of West Virginia were less than positive. They read, saw or heard troubling images.

“The first time I went to West Virginia was for a church group. I was near Huntington and that’s a pretty poor area. So I thought it’s a poor state with small towns and no industrial cities. But then I got here and thought that’s what makes it really beautiful, no industrial stuff is ruining it. The trees are really beautiful, the hills are beautiful and the mountains are beautiful. That’s what made it different for me.”

“There is a huge heroine epidemic here and a lot of poverty.”

The issue of racism in West Virginia was brought up as well.

“I did not think much of West Virginia before coming here. I didn’t know much about it but I associated it with country and hillbillies and racism. That’s what a lot of people thought where I grew up. I don’t feel they are wrong in saying that it is racist, but I feel that Morgantown is not racist.” - Howard

“People from my school think it’s a very Republican state – very racist.”

One student questioned why the area where the University of Maryland is located is not regarded in the same way.

“UMD is a highly regarded school and it’s in Baltimore. If you go down any of the streets, there are colonies of homeless people. There’s so much crime, and it was just named the #1 murder capital based on crime per capita.” – Howard
PERCEPTION ABOUT WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY

Many parents who are WVU alums appear to perpetuate the party school image by harkening back to the time they were students at the University.

“My dad is a WVU grad so what I know about WVU all came from him...burning couches, etc. I was trying really hard not to apply here but my dad made me apply when I visited. But when I toured, I got more of ‘We’re an adventure school’ kind of vibe.”

“My friends didn’t wonder why I chose WVU, but my older family members (40’s, 50’s, 60’s) did. They said, ‘It’s a party school and you’re such a nice, young lady! It was almost like they thought I was taking myself to a lower level.’

In fact, several students’ parents discouraged them from attending WVU because they have heard of its “party school” reputation.

“I had really perfect grades in high school so my parents were mad that I decided to come here. They wanted me to go to Johns Hopkins because it’s prestigious.” – Carroll

They acknowledged that when they’ve heard news about WVU, the coverage was negative.

“WVU has a reputation as a party school. What people see on SnapChat or Instagram is the image they have of WVU. They think coming here for engineering isn’t as good as going to a Maryland.”

“We make the news a lot .. burning couches, Spruce Street, tear gas, etc.”

“Regarding the fraternity situation, we now have these organizations right next to campus that are not under campus control.”
WVU ON THE RADAR

These students knew little, if anything, about WVU. Counselors in Maryland do not mention WVU as a possible option for students to consider. Rather, they encourage students to attend college in Maryland. The absence of WVU at college fairs also precludes awareness. These students learned about the University by conducting their own research, and they considered it for the following reasons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Wanted to go to a big school with D1 sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Learned WVU had a high acceptance rate, so thought he might be able to get some scholarships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Perfect distance from home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• D1 school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Received in-state tuition for major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The only school that offered her major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Offered in-state tuition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Wanted to go to a D1 school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Father is an alum and made her apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tuition was significantly cheaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• WVU offered the most money</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Even with scholarships and in-state tuition, WVU was cheaper.”

“I had intended to be a Forensics major, so I had to come here.”

“The reason I am here is because I got a lot of scholarships.”

“People from Stevenson College would visit our school and show up in class. And say ‘Come join our college!’ They would have Maryland businesses. A lot of people applied to those schools, including some of my friends.”

“One of my counselors is a WVU alum. He didn’t tell me to apply here, but he was happy to hear that I did.”
OTHER SCHOOLS CONSIDERED
## THE COMPETITION

Students applied to a number of schools. These were the perceived advantages and disadvantages of each:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Penn State                                  | • Strong engineering school  
• Beautiful engineering school  
• Large, D1 school                   | • Campus is isolated                                                          |
| VCU                                         | • Strong engineering school  
• Located in the city                               | • Fewer extracurricular activities  
• Didn’t award as much money                             |
| Johns Hopkins                               | • Prestigious school                              | • Tuition is $60K/yr.                                                          |
| St. Mary’s College                          | • Gorgeous campus on the water                                | • In-state tuition was $2K more than the out-of-state cost here  
• Don’t have specialized majors                             |
| Embry Riddle and NC State                   | • Good engineering school  
• Pretty campus  
• In the south, so warmer                             | • Higher tuition                                                               |
| Marshall                                    | • Offers a Forensics program  
• Close to home                                  | • Relatively small tour  
• Boring campus tour                                  |
| Towson                                      | • Offers a Forensics program  
• Close to home                                  |                                                                              |
| Howard Community College                    | • A very good community college                             | • Difficult to transfer credits to a 4-year school                             |
| University of Maryland                      | • The “it” school                                        | • More than the out of state cost at WVU  
• Difficult to get into  
• Some consider it “13th grade” because they know everyone                   |
THE COMPETITION
Students did not notice any advertising for WVU, but they reported that UMD advertises a lot. It’s considered a very prestigious school and those who are accepted are considered “having made it.”

“It seemed like people who chose to go to school in Maryland wanted the name along with it.”

Just one student considered attending a community college because it was more economical. However, she rather quickly ruled out the idea.

“I took classes at the community college my senior year of high school. I knew the classes shouldn’t have been as easy as they were. I felt like it was simplified for the sake of more kids getting farther. I didn’t just want to pass a class; I wanted to understand the content. So I knew I wanted more than a community college.”

In the News: Maryland Community Colleges to Offer Free Tuition in 2019
https://www.educationnext.org/news-maryland-community-colleges-offer-free-tuition...
May 10, 2018 - In the News: Maryland Community Colleges to Offer Free Tuition in 2019. In Maryland, Gov. Larry Hogan has signed a bill that will make community college free for qualifying families. The state will provide scholarships of up to $5,000 to students from families earning less than $125,000 a year, the AP reports.
VISITS TO WVU
WVU EVENTS
Several of the students attended Decide WVU but failed to mention any other event. Those who did not attend Decide had a conflict on the day or felt it was unnecessary. Those who attended did so for the following reasons:

- The chance for a final visit
- The opportunity to see his dorm
- The chance to win cash

“I read about Decide Day on social media. I went to it because there was something about take your picture taken and you can win an extra thousand dollars to come here. I said, ‘Okay!’”

WVU TOURS
A slight majority of students chose to tour the campus. While some compared it to the other schools they applied to, they also noted that WVU’s tour stood out in some respect. In fact, two students acknowledged taking the tour is what made them want to attend WVU.

“WVU’s tour compared to a lot of the other state schools. At WVU, they pushed the adventure trips, the trips that the Rec Center does, and getting to know people. The tour guide took time to talk with me about how to transfer my AP credits”

“They provided so much detail in what they were showing you. If you had a question, they could give you an answer in a split second.”

“At WVU, there are so many historic buildings and they all look different. And the views are great here.”

“It reminded me of the atmosphere at UMD. Everyone was wearing WVU stuff. They were very proud to be here and they have their own traditions.”
Those who chose not to tour or attend an event failed to find a compelling reason to do so.

“It was basically a money thing. I was going to school wherever I could get the most money (so I didn’t need to visit or tour.)”

“My family just didn’t want to drive here.”
CONSIDERATIONS IN SELECTION PROCESS
**DRIVERS**

Students were given cards with the following 15 items on them and asked to choose the two or three that were most important to them in choosing a school:

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

Their top two/three reasons and rationale for their choices are below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accounting</th>
<th>Biomedical Engineering</th>
<th>Industrial Engineering</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affordability/overall cost</td>
<td>Affordability/overall cost</td>
<td>Offers desired program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ease of Admission</td>
<td>Offers desired program</td>
<td>Affordability/overall cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WVU size</td>
<td>Research opportunities/R1 status</td>
<td>Core academic experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Easy admission was a nice thing to have.”

“I don’t actually think there is a public university in Maryland that offers Biomedical Engineering.”

“Study abroad is important because my major is pretty global, and there’s a good chance I won’t be in the U.S. forever.”

“My parents put in a certain amount for my college. I know I can graduate debt-free at WVU.”
### DRIVERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Immunology</th>
<th>Chemical Engineering</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offers desired programs</td>
<td>Easy admission/Availability of aid/Affordability/overall cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R1/research opportunities</td>
<td>Feeling that I would fit in/Physical environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core academic experience</td>
<td>WVU “spirit”/size</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Immunology**

“I work in a vaccine development lab. I will be working there over summer and getting paid for it. That’s important to me and that really cemented it. I went to an event here and met Kim Kadato, the undergraduate research person, and she said ‘We will absolutely get you into a lab,’ so I had a job before the school year even started.”

**Chemical Engineering**

“I wanted to go to a school where everyone was happy. I feel that positive energy is contagious. I wouldn’t want to go to a school where everyone is dragging their feet in the mud. I know a lot of people back home say UMBC is like that; students are upset. It’s important to focus on academics because that will be with you the rest of your life. But I also feel that your college experience will be with you the rest of your life.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biology &amp; Psychology</th>
<th>Sports Psychology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R1 status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordability/overall cost</td>
<td>Athletic programs/sport team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core academic experience</td>
<td>Physical environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Study abroad opportunities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Biology & Psychology**

“I like research, and I’m doing research now, and I plan on doing research in the future.”

**Sports Psychology**

“I like being here in the mountains. At home, everyone is so fast-paced and always getting into car accidents. Here, people say ‘I’ll get there when I get there.’ When I asked what are we going to do today, friends say, ‘Let’s go hiking.’ It’s just nice up here.”

Several also mentioned that WVU spirit was important to some extent.

“When I tell people I go to WVU, they get really excited. Whereas people from Maryland don’t really care.”
THE HERE AND NOW
SATISFACTION
These students are very happy they chose to attend WVU and would not hesitate to recommend it.

“UMD is looked at like the school where you made it. I feel like it’s stupid but I feel like it’s contagious. Everyone always believes that….After visiting UMD – and I have friends who go there - and after going here, I would choose WVU in a heartbeat. In the beginning, I didn’t know enough and the UMD reputation is around Howard County.

No one talked about West Virginia University. I’ve had a great time here and posted a lot on social media and a lot of people back home follow me. My friends say, ’That’s cool, let me look into it.’ They asked when they could come visit and asked me to tell them about different majors. I feel like that’s because I’m showing it to them and no one really knew about it.”

“A lot of my friends went to prestigious schools and they thought I would too. So they were surprised that I chose WVU. I always had to counter with, ‘They gave me X amount in scholarships,’ and my friends would say, ‘Oh, that makes sense.’”

On the other hand, several students would give only a guarded endorsement of WVU.

“It would depend on what you’re going here for. You have to be disciplined. I would recommend it for some of my friends. “I know there’s partying, but you’ll be fine.’ But one of my cousins wants to apply here and I told them I didn’t know that they’ll be okay here. I said, ‘I don’t know if I trust you to be able to apply yourself.’”

“Even in the dorms – on my floor – on the weekends, I know there were three or four rooms where they were continuously drunk.”
THEIR WVU EXPERIENCE

The students were asked to choose the one person, place or thing that best reflects their experience at WVU.

Lincoln Hall
“My floor was community-oriented. We were all together and all of our parents were gone. We had a large group chat and everyone was in it. We still Snapchat.”

President Gee
“When I was at Orientation, President Gee was clowning around and taking girls to parties. He looked like he was having a lot of fun here, so why wouldn’t I have fun here! I said ‘This is exactly what I want my culture to be.’ I thought Orientation was going to be rigid, but everything was fun.”

WVU Football
“You get the sense that we’re all together – all on the same side. When you’re walking to the game, everyone talks to you. It’s great seeing the football team run out and everyone wearing blue and gold because it makes you feel at home.”

Jack Byrd
“He’s really great and set me up for success even though he’s not my advisor. He got me looking at internships and helped me figure out my schedule…where I’m going in the next four years.”

My Friends
“I lived in two different dorms. When I moved to the second place, I was in a much better place. My whole entire college life changed for the better. I had better friends and was focusing on school more. The people you surround yourself with really effect how you live.”

The Research Lab
“I love them all so much. They drill me really hard and make me do things that I never imaged doing as a freshman. I’m getting the exact type of experience that I want to have when I have that career some day. I knew I wouldn’t have had those opportunities at the other schools I looked at.”
WVU STRENGTHS
When asked what was important to say about WVU, students identified the following:

- There are countless opportunities that enables everyone to find their place at WVU
- WVU hosts impressive career fairs that provide a gateway to a career
- WVU has a very strong engineering school
- There are hundreds of clubs and organizations at WVU that allow students to branch out
- WVU is situated in a relatively pristine area

“I feel like no one in my high school knew anything at all about it. They knew it was in West Virginia which was a hillbilly state. I feel it’s important to say no matter who you are, where you’re from or what you like, you can fit in here. I know a lot of students worry about where they can fit in.”

“I went to career fair and got an internship – which is something great. I talk to a ton of people from Howard County, and a lot of those don’t offer career fairs. If they do, they don’t feature as many companies as are featured here. They are surprised because they think I party and sit on haystacks. In reality, I’m studying engineering and got an internship, which also shocked a lot of people.”

“I visited a ton of schools and they all started to blend together. But at WVU they talked about having camps for freshmen, and I thought that was different.”

“In my county (Howard County), there is something called PLTW which is an engineering career academy. There is a large engineering student population but they don’t know that WVU has a good engineering school. They don’t know that it’s an R1 research school. My teachers told me that MIT has all this, and Johns Hopkins has all this. Since those places were very expensive, I looked at WVU. It had all the things I wanted and I didn’t understand why I didn’t hear about it, even though we’re just the next state over.”

“I’m in a lot of clubs that have nothing to do with my major. I think they should push the clubs at the beginning of Welcome Week. I guarantee there are clubs I’d like to try that I still don’t know about.”