

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY: APPLIED BUSINESS AND EDUCATION RESEARCH

2025, Vol. 6, No. 12, 6079 – 6097

<http://dx.doi.org/10.11594/ijmaber.06.12.18>

Research Article

Factors Influencing School Preference: Mapping the Student Market

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Article history:

Submission 03 November 2025

Revised 31 November 2025

Accepted 23 December 2025

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to explore the students' insights by examining the factors that influence their school preference and overall experience during the enrollment process. The study utilized a descriptive-quantitative research method employing survey research to analyze the perspectives of incoming college students. The participants of the study were all admitted students for the school year 2024-2025 at Baliuag University, Baliuag City, Bulacan. Specifically, the study employed a nonprobability sampling technique known as purposive sampling. A total of 707 respondents were involved in the conduct of the investigation, which comprised the total number of students who answered the survey questionnaire. The students' school preference, based on the results of the study, spans factors not limited to advertising strategies. With friends' and relatives' recommendations being the most influential, this underscored the importance of the respondents' social groups in choosing their university for higher education pursuits. Along with this factor are programs offered, academic excellence/quality education, mode of transportation being tricycle, sportsfest, and learning modality preferred as face-to-face classes. Further, the outstanding enrollment process satisfaction results also indicated that the institution should continuously maintain its current operational techniques as well as its openness to feedback, as service quality proved to be fundamental in how students perceive higher education institutions. The findings of the study served as a basis for targeted recommendations aimed at continuously improving university positioning in the student market, proactively responding to evolving student preferences, and ensuring relevance in the highly competitive Philippine higher education institution academic landscape.

Keywords: *College decision-making, Enrollment process, Marketing, School preference, Student market, University choice*

How to cite:

Cruz, A. C. U., Salamatin, A. M. M., & Espinosa, K. P. M. (2025). Factors Influencing School Preference: Mapping the Student Market. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research*. 6(12), 6079 – 6097. doi: 10.11594/ijmaber.06.12.18

Introduction

Enrollment is an important indicator that could impact the institution's financial stability, academic reputation, and overall institutional health. Being positioned at the forefront in making education accessible, procedures such as university admission have become an essential factor that needs to be innovated and regularly evaluated by higher education institutions. This was emphasized in a study conducted among Chinese universities, which revealed that admission, placement process, and examination are correlated in innovative growth and Total Quality Management (TQM) dimensions (Wu & Gu, 2022). Along with this is the apparent decline in the number of enrollees that the private higher education institutions (HEIs) face, stressing the need for various universities to expand their perspective and to fully step into marketing to keep up with the plummeting volume of students willing to enroll in private institutions.

In 2017, the Republic Act No. 10931, also known as the "Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act," was institutionalized to expand the accessibility of higher education for all Filipinos, granting them free tuition and other fees at State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) as well as subsidies and student loan programs. While it is a fundamental law, especially in achieving increased education access nationwide, it also poses challenges for the Philippines, which has been saturated with deregulated or autonomous HEIs. This resulted in an increased number of matriculating students in SUCs and a significant decrease in enrollees in HEIs. This was thoroughly analyzed by Saguin (2022), whose study focused on exploring the de-privatization of the Philippine higher education. Specifically, the decline continued during the implementation of the K-12 program, and even after the first batch of students graduated, it was shown that in school years 2003-2015, the volume of enrollments in private schools was 4% lower (3%) than the annual average enrollments of public HEIs (7%) (Saguin, 2022). By the academic year 2019-2020, the enrollment growth rate disparity between public and private HEIs widened, with the former growing at 3.77% and the latter at 0.84% based on a 10-year compound annual

growth rate (Bayudan-Dacuycuy et al., 2023). Even with the increase in the volume of HEIs in the Philippines, public HEIs grew exponentially in 2019, where their pre-K to 12 enrollments increased, albeit amidst the pandemic, in comparison to HEIs, which lagged (Bayudan-Dacuycuy et al., 2023; Saguin 2022). These postulate the need for HEIs like Baliuag University to continuously improve their services and evaluate the areas for improvement, not only to create a clear framework of the student market but also to become an institution that can accommodate students of all socioeconomic backgrounds.

Marketing strategies are necessary to apply, as there exists an educational competition even if universities are not necessarily defined as a business but rather an organization; this is heavily influenced by the same competition concerning economic factors (Nuriadi, 2021). For higher education institutions (HEIs), understanding the preference and decision-making processes of their student market is essential in shaping strategies that respond to both current demands and emerging trends. Along with the students are their parents, who play a significant role in choosing universities and in influencing their child's college program (Sarkodie et al., 2020), making them equally as important in mapping the student market. Factors such as tuition fees, university reputation, teacher and colleague recommendations, influence of parent or guardian, location, graduate quality, and learning environment are necessary in deciding and choosing a university (Harahap et al., 2021; Por et al., 2024). Aside from these, scholarships, academic staff, quality of education, student life, career prospects, and the infrastructure of the university are found to be considered by the students as well (Le et al., 2022; Najumidinova et al., 2022). This purports that the students' preferences are not linear and limited to the program a university offers. Rather, it is multi-dimensional and shall be approached with consideration for the entirety of services present in the HEIs.

Domestically, there exists a plethora of credible universities that vary in specializations and overall academic competency. However, the factors that the Filipino students consider may differ greatly compared to the general preferences of students worldwide. In a

study conducted in a private higher education institution (HEI) in Iloilo City, it was found that the students' family income significantly influences their preferences in choosing a university; participants from the lower family income bracket tend to consider the university's institutional profile while those on the higher family income bracket moderately consider the prior mentioned profile (Bajar & Gopun, 2021). Similarly, De Sesto et al. (2024)'s findings suggested that affordability, academic program offerings, and career opportunities are the factors that highly influence the Senior High School graduates' college selection; financial aid programs and university reputation are among the factors that the students also examine in their decision-making process. However, contrary to the learners outside the Philippines, the previously mentioned study of De Sesto et al. (2024) showed that family and peers have low influence on the students' college selection.

Universities can fulfill and set appropriate conditions to cater to the factors stated above. It is through delivering good customer service that HEIs can function as a singular unit that performs with consistency and openness to evaluation. In order to gain an understanding of how well an institution performs, feedback and surveys are conducted, as good service boosts the university's reputation and credibility. Some studies showed that student satisfaction is formed based on their social life inside the institution, interaction with faculty staff, quality of student support services and education, as well as the facilities (Dugenio-Nadela et al., 2023). This was further supported by Enoch et al. (2025) and Susan et al. (2023), where it was found that the higher the satisfaction is in terms of customer service delivery, the higher the students' loyalty was to their university; the willingness of students to recommend the university to their families and friends was shown to be increased when their satisfaction levels are high. Examining the service quality of all the branch services of the university has proven crucial, not only in gaining knowledge of the student market, but also in cementing the institution's ability to satisfy and understand its stakeholders, as well as in invoking loyalty through great service delivery.

Based on the relevant perspectives stated above, the study focused on examining the factors that impact school preference and determining the university's student market so that it can continue to grow despite the discussed challenges that HEIs face. By utilizing the enrollment survey, the researchers aimed to capture the students' insights by examining the factors that influence how students learn about Baliuag University (BU), their preferences, and their experiences during the enrollment process. Ultimately, the results of the survey also connect the institution and its stakeholders to ensure that BU remains responsive, innovative, and student-centered.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on the Push-Pull-Mooring Framework by Bruce Moon (1995), synthesized with the push-pull model in student destination choice by Tim Mazzarol and Geoffrey Soutar (2002).

The Push-Pull-Mooring (PPM) Framework, originally developed to understand factors behind migration and later extended to consumer service switching, posits that people's mobility and decision-making are primarily influenced by three interacting forces. Push factors refer to unfavorable conditions in an individual's present environment that drive them away from it and seek alternatives, while pull factors are the favorable conditions that draw people towards a specific environment (Marx, 2025; Xu et al., 2021). Alongside these two, mooring factors represent interpersonal, social, and situational factors that either inhibit or facilitate one's movement. When applied to the higher education sector, this framework aids in explaining how students' preferences are influenced not only by external opportunities and limitations, but also by interpersonal and contextual anchors.

To further expand the contextualization in the student market, the study drew on Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) application of the push-pull model in student destination choice. The mentioned model identified the push factors such as college programs availability, intention to migrate, and overseas education quality, as well as pull factors such as host country's reputation, parental influence, safety and cultural

factors, alumni and family/friend referrals, among others. Additionally, its relevance and application are still apparent in the field of education, as modern studies utilize the push-pull model to determine international students' intentions and preferences to migrate after graduation as well as switching behaviors from in-person to online learning (Jin et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2021; Nikou et al., 2023). These categories parallel and enrich the constructs examined in the present study.

By synthesizing Moon's PPM framework with Mazzarol and Soutar's student-focused push-pull model, this study provides a nuanced perspective for analyzing the factors that shape students' preferences in choosing a university. This theoretical integration also provides higher education institutions like Baliuag University with a concrete basis for understanding and responding to student market dynamics in order to strengthen their positioning in the competitive educational landscape of HEIs in the Philippines.

Methods

Research Design. The study utilized a descriptive-quantitative research method employing a survey research to analyze the enrollment perspectives of incoming college students of Baliuag University to gain insights into the factors that influence their school preference and overall enrollment experience. This approach aims to comprehensively define the participants' attitudes, as well as to ascertain through questionnaires the qualities, viewpoints, beliefs, and opinions of the sampled population, and by analyzing the gathered data using statistical methods (Taherdoost, 2022). By making use of the design mentioned, the aim of the study, which was to map the student market and understand their school preferences, would be interpreted and analyzed accurately and objectively.

Participants and Sampling Procedure. The study employed a nonprobability sampling technique, specifically purposive sampling, wherein participants were selected based on specific characteristics that are relevant to the study's objectives. In this method, the participants are considered to be representatives of the selected population, under the premise that

should another researcher approach the sampled population, similar results would likely be obtained with minimal error (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). The study purposefully included all incoming first-year college students who had gone through the admission process at Baliuag University for the School Year 2024-2025. These students were considered the institution's "student market," as they were in the process of selecting colleges and can provide valuable insights into the aspects influencing their choice of university. Moreover, since they were also experiencing the institution's admission process for the first time, their responses could provide organic and significant feedback. A total of 707 respondents were involved in the conduct of the investigation, which comprised the total number of students who answered the survey questionnaire.

Instrument of the Study. The researchers made use of an institutionalized survey tool to obtain relevant information from the targeted incoming college students, focusing on factors influencing school preference, such as source of awareness, personal preference, school determinants, mode of transportation, program of activities, learning modality, and overall enrollment experience. The use of this tool was considered appropriate as it directly addresses the objectives of the study, ensuring that the gathered data accurately reflects the students' insights and admission experiences. This instrument has been officially implemented by the higher education institution in 2018 as part of its admission and evaluation process. Additionally, it has undergone administrative and university-expert reviews, and is constantly refined based on the annual feedback, thereby establishing its content validity in assessing student feedback and preferences.

Data Gathering Procedure. To gather relevant data, the researchers distributed the survey questionnaire to the targeted admitted students in conventional form: through pen and paper, and under no time pressure during the admission period of Baliuag University for the school year 2024-2025. After completion of the survey questionnaire, the researchers ensured that the responses were accurate and complete. The data gathered was compiled and tallied for

analysis using appropriate statistical techniques.

Ethical Considerations. In conducting the study, the researchers made sure to follow specific ethical considerations in research writing, especially in the practice of responsible storage of the materials used in the study, as well as confidentiality, as all the raw data gathered was utilized solely for the study and exclusively accessed by authorized personnel. Furthermore, the personal information of the respondents is secure, as it was excluded from the study, and only their input on the survey questionnaire was accounted for. The accumulated responses would also be only used for the specified objective of the study, as well as for filing and record-keeping. Lastly, any revisions and/or changes to the study were not made unless approved by the immediate supervisor of the researchers.

Data Analysis. To interpret and analyze the quantitative data gathered, the researchers made use of frequency and percentage distribution as well as ranking to analyze the factors influencing students' school preference (source of awareness, personal preference, school determinants, mode of transportation, program of activities, and overall enrollment experience), which would aid in understanding the student market. The said statistical methods were used to determine and measure the number of occurrences and the percentage of the sample based on the specified value present in the gathered data (Cooksey, 2020). By applying this, the data was analyzed efficiently and interpreted to meet the objectives of the study.

Results and Discussion

Factors Influencing School Preference Source of Awareness

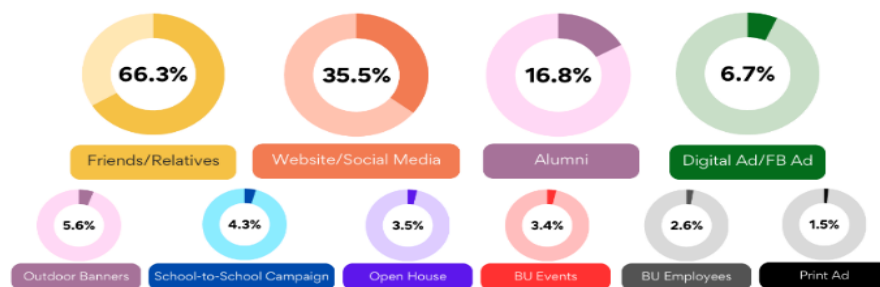


Figure 1. Factors Influencing School Preference in Terms of Source of Awareness

Figure 1 presents the factors influencing school preference in terms of sources of awareness. The study showed that friends/relatives play the most significant role in student's school preference (66.3%), followed by website/social media (35.5%), alumni (16.8%), digital advertising/Facebook advertising (6.7%), outdoor banners (5.6%), school-to-school campaign (4.3%), open house (3.5%), Baliuag University events (3.4%), Baliuag University employees (2.6%), and print advertising (1.5%).

The high efficacy of friends/relatives as source of awareness confirms the power of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) in the initial stages of the student journey. Students, especially millennials and Gen Zs, trust information derived from their social circle and peers more

than traditional advertising. Further evidenced in Emon et al. (2023)'s findings, which showed that the opinion of parents and/or guardians plays a significant role, along with other factors, in choosing a university in Bangladesh. Similarly, being one of the primary sources of word-of-mouth information, students have been found to perceive their parents and families as their source of information in choosing a university as well as in making career-related decisions (Le et al., 2019; Malik & Hussain, 2020; Owen et al., 2020). The role of this social network is primarily informational and legitimizing: they identify and recommend viable educational options, bringing the university into the student's consideration set.

In contrast, the data revealed that print advertising (1.5%) was the least influential

source of awareness among the respondents compared to website/social media (35.5%) and digital advertising/Facebook advertising (6.7%). This may reflect the shift in students' media consumption habits, with younger generations leaning more toward digital platforms and interpersonal networks rather than traditional advertising methods. Specifically, this was apparent in a study that found that social media advertising, especially in the higher education setting, was effective, affordable, and could reach greater visibility and engagement with potential students. Also, as evidenced by Alzubi (2022), digital media are more immersive, allowing users to have an interactive experience and, in turn, encouraging businesses and organizations to transition from traditional to digital advertising, as it has global reach. While print materials may still serve a purpose for

visibility and indispensability, as it was shown to have a longer-lasting impact on people's memory and engagement due to its stronger initial coding (Gökçe, 2022), their limited impact in comparison to personal referrals suggests that schools may need to reallocate resources toward more interactive, community-driven, and digital-based marketing strategies.

Overall, these results imply that schools should not only invest in formal campaigns but also nurture authentic connections and positive experiences that impact students and parents to share their experiences with others. By recognizing the weight of peer and family influence, institutions can strategically align their marketing approaches to resonate more deeply with their target audience.

Personal Preference

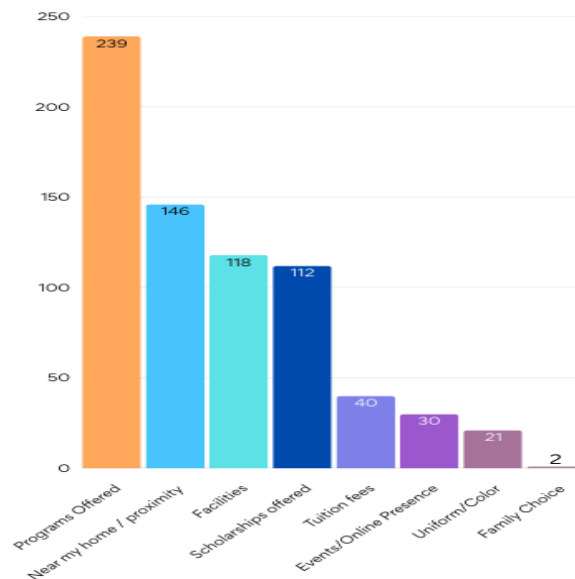


Figure 2. Factors Influencing School Preference in Terms of Personal Preference

Figure 2 presents the factors influencing school preference in terms of personal preference. The findings of the study revealed that programs offered emerged as the most important factor for students influencing school preference, where 239 out of 707 respondents preferred schools that offer diverse programs. Following it are proximity (146/707), facilities (118/707), scholarships offered (112/707), events/online presence (30/707),

uniform/color (21/707), and family choice (2/707).

This highlighted that learners today are highly intentional about their education, carefully considering whether a school can provide programs and specializations that align with their career aspirations and personal interests. This is because students highly consider their desire for choosing their specialty courses and in pursuing higher education studies, as well as

the university's academic program and its quality (Gaspar & Soares, 2021; Grigolienė & Tamoševičienė, 2020; Silwal & Baral, 2021). Consequently, academic programs are shown to play a fundamental part in college students' life satisfaction (Wong & Chapman, 2022), further emphasizing its relevance to learners. It reflects the growing awareness among students that their chosen program serves as a foundation for future opportunities, employability, and personal growth. Hence, the availability of diverse, relevant, and industry-responsive programs strongly influences how students perceive a school's value.

In contrast, the low influence of family choice as source of awareness underscores the high level of individual decision autonomy exercised by a student. Students asserted that the opinions of their relatives, parents, friends, and teachers do not necessarily influence their choice in choosing a university (Grigolienė & Tamoševičienė, 2020). Once the school is on the list, the ultimate decision is driven by personal evaluation metrics, such as career prospects, academic program quality, and campus accessibility. While families and peers undeniably play a supportive role in the decision-making process and are typically a significant factor

in school preference (Cletzer et al., 2020; Ranwala et al., 2023), this result suggested that students are becoming more independent in shaping their educational paths. The lower weight given to family choice may also mirror a generational shift where learners prioritize self-driven goals and aspirations over traditional parental expectations, which is succinctly present among first-generation students (Keppens et al., 2023; Lessky, 2024). The student views the final school choice as an investment in their personal future, where their individual preference criteria replace familial desires or directives. Thus, while the family initiates the search by suggesting schools, the student still has the final decision in choosing school.

Taken together, these results imply that institutions seeking to attract more students should focus on designing and promoting programs that are responsive to market demands, while also highlighting their relevance to students' personal ambitions. At the same time, acknowledging the lesser influence of families, schools may also frame their communication strategies in a way that reassures parents while ultimately empowering students to make informed and independent choices.

School Determinants

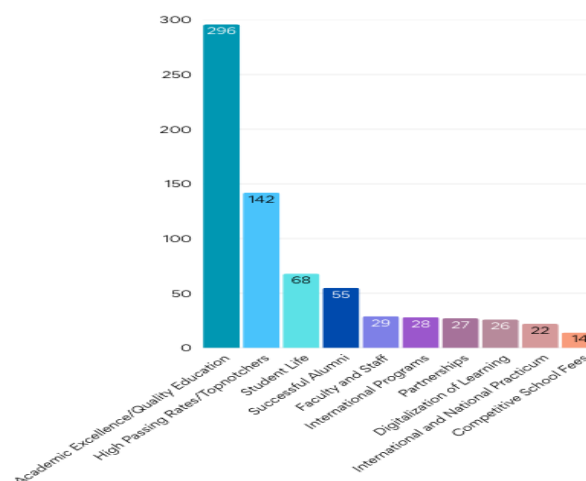


Figure 3. Factors Influencing School Preference in Terms of School Determinants

Figure 3 presents the factors influencing school preference in terms of school determinants. It showed that academic excellence/quality education (296/707) emerged as the highest priority that students consider in

determining their school preferences, followed by high-passing rates/topnotchers (142/707), student life (68/707), successful alumni (55/707), faculty and staff (29/707), international programs (28/707), partnerships

outside the university (27/707), digitalization of learning (26/707), international and national practicum (22/707), and competitive school fees (14/707).

To further expound, the results of the study revealed that academic excellence and quality of education stood out as the most significant determinants in students' school choice. This finding illustrated that students and their families place high value on an institution's ability to deliver meaningful learning, relevant content, effective teaching methods, assessment aligned with learning goals, and the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and lifelong learning skills. In an increasingly competitive academic landscape, quality education is viewed as an investment toward long-term success, employability, and personal growth. Among many studies, the findings were similar, where professional development and employability that universities can offer, alongside quality of service and reputation, have a significant correlation with student satisfaction and loyalty (Mendoza-Villafaina & López-Mosquera, 2024). Similarly, Jahaidi (2023)'s study supported this result, where it was found that general higher education students tend to be more career-oriented, and thus put more emphasis on a university's reputation and quality. Employability after graduation, as well as institutional reputation and programs offered, are also among the factors that Hieu et al. (2020) and Yusuf (2024) found to be considered by learners in choosing a university. The emphasis on academic excellence also reflects students' desire to be part of an institution that not only equips them with knowledge and skills but also enhances their credibility and opportunities in the future.

On the other hand, competitive school fees ranked as the least influential determinant. While affordability is still an important consideration for many families with emphasis on their income as a unit (Bajar & Gopun, 2021), as well as the tuition fee itself being considered by Filipinos during the COVID-19 pandemic (Belmonte et al., 2022), the data suggested that students are more willing to prioritize the per-

ceived value of quality education over lower tuition costs. This may indicate that students and parents see school as a long-term investment, where the benefits of receiving a strong education outweigh the immediate savings of cheaper fees. However, it also reflects a certain segment of respondents who may be less constrained financially, thereby giving more weight to excellence and reputation rather than cost. This was further supported in a study by Bohara et al. (2022), who found that the college choice of students in Nepal is mediated by "household income", particularly between tuition fees and the other three factors: university reputation, career placement, and location. In terms of access to private higher education institutions and prestigious schools, students who come from higher socio-economic classes tend to transfer schools towards "more prestigious schools" (Spencer & Stich, 2023), further evidencing the findings of the study. This high level of personal control also contextualizes the finding that "competitive school fees" ranked as the least influential determinant. In a market where State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) offer free tuition, simple price competition is neutralized, shifting the decision framework from cost-minimization to value maximization. Students are willing to accept residual non-tuition fees if they perceive the private institution delivers a superior product, framing their ultimate choice as a sophisticated value-for-money trade-off that prioritizes specialized quality and return on investment over baseline cost.

These findings imply that schools should continue strengthening their academic programs, ensuring that they remain relevant, innovative, and competitive in producing high-achieving graduates. At the same time, while tuition may not be the primary driver of preference, institutions should remain mindful of inclusivity by balancing excellence with accessibility. Offering scholarships, financial aid, and flexible payment schemes can help bridge the gap between quality and affordability, ensuring that opportunities remain open to a wider range of students.

Mode of Transportation

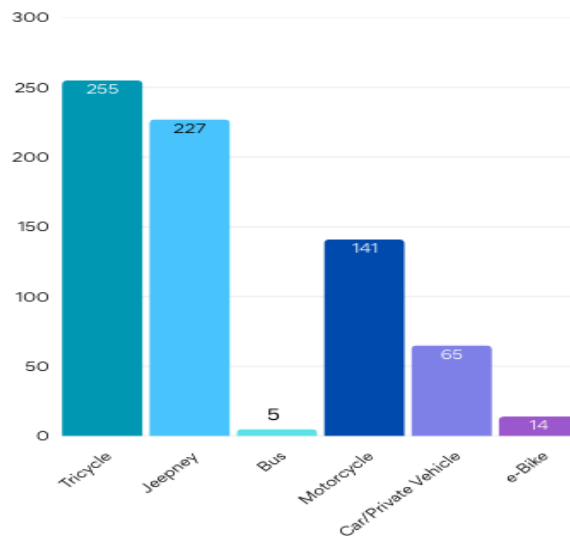


Figure 4. Factors Influencing School Preference in Terms of Mode of Transportation

Figure 4 presents the factors influencing school preference in terms of mode of transportation. The findings revealed that the majority of respondents reported taking the tricycle as their primary means of getting to school (255/707), followed by jeepney (227/707), motorcycle (141/707), car/private vehicle (65/707), e-bike (14/707), and bus (5/707).

This outcome, with tricycle being the mode of transportation that students use, reflects the strong role of accessibility and practicality in students' daily routines. The prominence of tricycles underscores their presence in local communities, as supported in the data that the Philippine Statistics Authority's 2019 Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS) released in 2021, which found that about 24.4% of students in the Cordillera Administrative Region use tricycles, pedicabs, and motorcycles to go to school. Tricycles are also recognized as one of the most used public transportation modes in the Philippines, with its availability spanning both the urban and rural areas of the country (Ong et al., 2023). This postulates that tricycles are readily available and are capable of navigating both main roads and smaller streets, and that they are considered a convenient choice for students who value reliability in their commute.

Considering that buses are not a common mode of transportation among students, as it is

utilized by commuters to go to Metro Manila and neighboring provinces in Baliuag City, Bulacan, the study will centralize the discussion on the second least used vehicle by students to go to school. Low usage of e-bikes may be attributed to several factors, including limited ownership, concerns about safety on busy roads, lack of infrastructure such as charging or parking stations, and cultural preferences that still favor more traditional or widely available transport options, which was particularly emphasized in Gumasing (2025)'s study where social influence and other factors focused on e-bike's accessibility and usefulness impacts Filipino commuters' behavior in using the said vehicle. It is also important to consider that non-motorized transportation policies and infrastructures in the Philippines are significant driving forces in making electric public vehicles as viable alternatives to traditional public transportation means (Guno et al., 2021), as students perceive commuting as not only a matter of cost but also of accessibility, sustainability, and predictability, all of which influence their overall school preference.

These findings carry important implications for schools. The mode of transportation is a practical yet critical determinant that shapes how students perceive the ease of attending classes daily. Institutions located in areas well-served by tricycles or other accessible

transport options may have an advantage in attracting students, as convenience and cost directly impact punctuality, efficiency, and overall satisfaction with the school experience (Felina et al., 2025). Conversely, for areas where alternative transportation such as e-bikes is emerging, schools may consider exploring partnerships or programs that encourage sustainable and safe commuting options, which could align with students' growing environmental awareness.

Overall, the results highlighted that while academic and program-related factors remain central to school preference, everyday considerations such as transportation being available on campus, location, and school proximity also weigh heavily in decision-making (Nuseir & El Refae, 2021; Pramono et al., 2022). Accessibility, therefore, becomes an influential factor that affects how students map their school choices.

Program of Activities

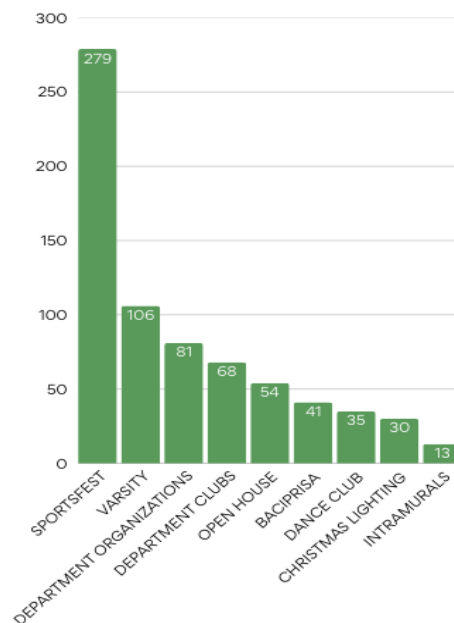


Figure 5. Factors Influencing School Preference in Terms of Program of Activities

Figure 5 presents the factors influencing school preference in terms of the program of activities. The findings showed that the sportsfest ranked as the most influential activity (279/707), followed by varsity (106/707), department organizations (81/707), department clubs (68/707), open house (54/707), Baliuag City Private Schools Association (BACIPRISA) (41/707), dance club (35/707), Christmas lighting (30/707), and intramurals emerging last (13/707).

This suggests that large-scale, community-centered events such as sportsfests have a positive impact on the well-being of students. As evidenced by Al Ahmed (2024), recreational activities, specifically sports-related, are shown to positively impact the college students'

quality of life in terms of social, family, physical, and psychological health, and education. Additionally, physical activity is often paired with sports-related events, and it has been found that having knowledge of its benefits influences one's level of activeness (Ersöz et al., 2023). Regarding academic performance, recreational activities also play an integral role as it was shown to impact students' scholastic achievement as well as higher participation levels in physical education classes (Erinjeri & Lobo, 2023; Aquino, 2023). Thus, incorporating physical and recreational aspects in university activities such as sportsfest becomes important in order to foster a productive yet leisurely environment in higher education institutions, as

it can aid in increasing the students' camaraderie, teamwork, and a sense of school identity.

By contrast, the relatively lower influence of intramurals may be due to their smaller scale and more limited visibility. It is also associated with the fact that learners are not well-informed on how to join the mentioned activity, as well as due to interpersonal hurdles (self-esteem), convenience, and accessibility (Selvanatram et al., 2023; Guan et al., 2021). Buedron (2022)'s study further expounded that the non-participation in in-campus intramurals was due to factors such as lack of time scholastically, personal obligations, as well as time management challenges. While intramurals provide opportunities for recreation and friendly competition, they are often perceived as less impactful compared to sportsfests. It can also be attributed to the diverse interests of learners, making their participation exclusive to activities that cater to it as well as the social aspects of their interests where they can interact closely with their social groups (Labuschagne et al., 2023). Hence, students may

associate intramurals with localized participation rather than a defining feature of school life, which explains their weaker pull in influencing school preference.

These findings highlight that beyond academics, students value experiences that build community and identity. Programs of activities serve as avenues for holistic development, offering opportunities for self-expression, leadership, and belonging. Schools, therefore, may benefit from investing in large, high-impact events such as sportsfests while also rethinking how to rebrand or innovate smaller-scale programs like intramurals to make them more engaging and memorable. In sum, the data affirm that students' choices are not solely grounded in academic offerings or logistical considerations, but also in the recreational qualities of campus life. Activities that strengthen interpersonal relationships, provide enjoyment, and build traditions play a significant role in mapping the student market and shaping perceptions of a school's overall appeal.

Learning Modality.

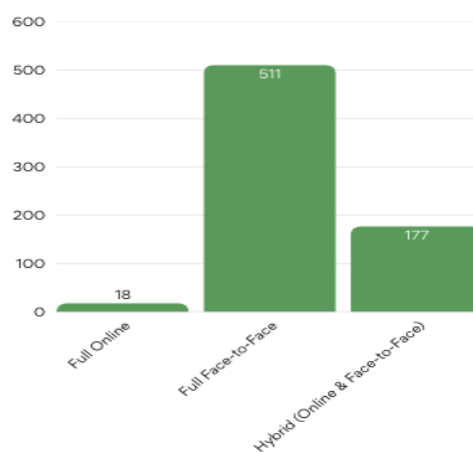


Figure 6. Factors Influencing School Preference in Terms of Learning Modality

Figure 6 presents the results on learning modality, one of the strongest factors influencing school preference among the respondents. The data show that a full face-to-face setup emerged as the most preferred option (511/707), followed by hybrid (online & face-to-face) (177/707), while a fully online setup received the least preference (18/707).

These findings emphasized what students value in their college experience. Many still associate face-to-face learning with a sense of normalcy, interaction, and community, as learners still prefer in-person classes despite disparities in their attendance in school, while blended learning influences students' better academic performance (Larson et al., 2023;

Mehta et al., 2024). This may be attributed to the fact that being physically present in classrooms means more opportunities to engage with professors, collaborate with classmates, and gather lived experiences on campus, as supported by Pingol (2022), as it was found that immediate feedback is communicated better in comparison to online classes.

On the other hand, the lower preference for fully online learning reflects certain challenges students may have faced, such as limited access to reliable internet and efficient gadgets, lack of personal interaction leading to higher levels of loneliness and isolation, increase of school activities, and difficulty staying focused in a virtual environment due to external factors especially in courses that require practical applications (Ahmed et al., 2025; Quesada et al., 2023;

Pingol, 2022). While online learning offers flexibility (Casingal, 2024), students may perceive it as less ideal for building relationships, immersing themselves in the university culture, and maximizing their learning potential.

These results highlight how important it is for institutions like Baliuag University to balance flexibility with meaningful engagement. While students prefer the full experience that face-to-face learning brings, the growing interest in blended or hybrid approaches should not be overlooked, as it promotes benefits such as less travel time consumed, independent learning pace, and comfort (Quesada et al., 2023; Ahmed et al., 2025). Mapping the student market in this logistical concern is important, as well as a factor that shapes the emotional, social, and academic dimensions of school preference.

Students' Overall Enrollment Experience

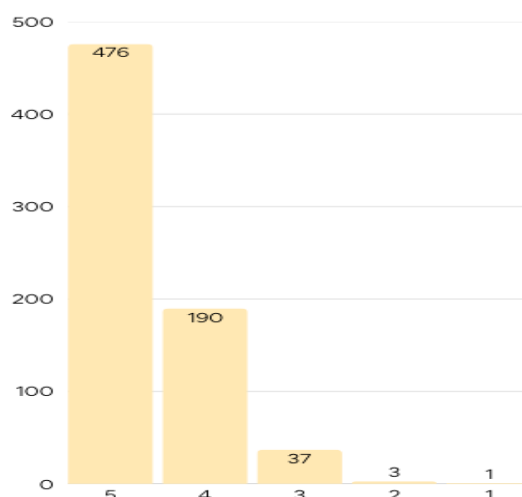


Figure 7. Students' Overall Enrollment Experience

Figure 7 states that students rated their overall enrollment experience highly, with a score of 5 as the most frequent response (476/707), followed by the score of 4 (190/707), score of 3 (37/707), score of 2 (3/707), and score of 1 (1/707). This strong result showed that the majority of incoming students felt satisfied and well-supported during their enrollment process at Baliuag University.

A positive enrollment experience often sets the tone for how students perceive the institution as a whole, as it is a representation of the

university's quality of service. Evidently, service quality is an integral factor for HEIs' competitiveness (Jošanov-Vrgović et al., 2020) as well as for holistic growth as an organization. For students, reliability, empathy, tangibility, and assurance are of importance in administrative services (Rizos et al., 2022), further highlighting how crucial it is for HEIs to continuously evaluate their services, not limited to enrollment transactions. The results also reflect that the employees' needs are well-taken care of, resulting in increased productivity and

better provision of good customer service, which is supported in a study by Mbazor (2020), explaining that employees are most productive when there is adequate access to water, electricity, and Wi-Fi. To sum up, the majority of respondents provided the highest rating, indicating that Baliuag University successfully fostered a welcoming and efficient environment, characterized by clear instructions, responsive staff, and an overall atmosphere of effectiveness. This outcome also revealed that students view enrollment not only as a transactional process but as their first real interaction with the university community and an important indicator of its quality and efficiency in catering to student needs.

In mapping the student market, these results highlight how customer service, guidance, and student-centered processes directly influence school preference. Beyond academics, students value institutions that constantly evaluate its services through surveys and feedback, as well as in providing excellent service to its stakeholders. The high ratings in Figure 7 affirm that Baliuag University's efforts to make enrollment more accessible and student-friendly have made a positive impression.

Conclusions

In order to continuously improve the overall services and competitiveness of Baliuag University, an examination of the students' school preferences was made. The students' school preference, based on the results of the study, spans factors not limited to advertising strategies. With friends and relatives' recommendations being the most influential, this underscored the importance of the respondents' social groups in choosing their university for higher education pursuits. Along with this factor are programs offered, academic excellence/quality education, mode of transportation being tricycle, sportsfest, and learning modality preferred as face-to-face classes. This showed that the student market of Baliuag University puts emphasis on the overall excellence of higher education institutions that can influence the growth of learners academically, professionally, physically, and emotionally. Furthermore, it also provided an insight into which direction HEIs should be refocused,

particularly in strategies to innovate pedagogies applied and used in the institution, in order to maintain and increase the quality of education as well as the diversity of programs offered. Looking into the travel preferences of students, as well as balancing academic activities with recreational programs, are also emphasized in the findings. This purports the essentiality of providing a well-rounded experience for students to equip them with growth opportunities not limited to theoretical applications, but also in understanding real-world problems.

The outstanding enrollment process satisfaction results also indicated that HEIs should maintain its current operational techniques as well as its openness to feedback, as service quality proved to be fundamental in how students perceive higher education institutions. This encompassed not just the streamlined procedures that the mentioned university uses, but also the employee satisfaction with the working conditions set by the administration, which can maximize productivity and efficient customer service. To sum up, the school preferences of students are diverse and could be attributed to other factors outside the scope of the study, which is why it is important for HEIs to sustain the initiative in studying the student market and in maintaining competitiveness as well as quality assurance.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study imply that students' school preferences are influenced by multiple dimensions that go beyond institutional advertising strategies. The strong influence of friends and relatives underscores the significance of word-of-mouth reputation and the need for higher education institutions to ensure that students and alumni have positive experiences worth sharing. Furthermore, the emphasis on academic quality, program diversity, and innovative pedagogies highlighted the need for universities to continuously update their curricula and teaching strategies in order to remain relevant and competitive. The preference for face-to-face learning modalities also emphasized the importance of maintaining high-quality in-person instruction, complemented by well-structured co-curricular and

recreational programs that contribute to the holistic growth of students academically, socially, physically, and emotionally.

Additionally, accessibility and convenience of transportation emerged as practical yet influential factors, implying that location and mobility options can directly affect enrollment decisions. The positive perception of HEIs enrollment process suggested that operational excellence, efficient systems, and employee satisfaction are integral to strengthening institutional trust and reputation. Overall, these findings indicated that institutional adaptability and ongoing research into student preferences are essential in ensuring competitiveness and quality assurance in higher education.

Based on these implications, several recommendations can be made. Firstly, the study recommends that HEIs strengthen their alumni and student engagement initiatives by capitalizing on the influence of peers and family recommendations. Providing and conducting events that foster a positive experience with the students' families and peers, which include targeted programs that can help with alumni engagement and alumni discounts, should be applied. The research also reveals a critical misalignment between promotional spending and market behavior: with Website/Social Media highest percentage on student awareness while Print Advertising having the least, the university must execute a strategic pivot to digital channels. This requires reallocation of funds currently earmarked for print media to high-performing digital initiatives, maximizing the return on marketing investment (ROMI). Specifically, this reallocated budget should be used to conduct a rigorous audit and subsequent enhancement of the university website, focusing on Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and User Experience (UX) to ensure it acts as a seamless, high-conversion enrollment gateway. Furthermore, the content strategy across social media platforms must mature from simple announcements to the creation and dissemination of authentic, high-value content (such as student-led video testimonials and program spotlights), which is essential for engaging the digital-native student market. Finally, the institution must increase investment in performance-based digital advertising (SEM) to

micro-target high-intent audiences, a precision-driven approach that is impossible to achieve through obsolete print placements. This decisive shift is not optional but necessary to align promotional efforts with proven student consumption habits and maintain a competitive edge.

Secondly, it is recommended that HEIs continue to enhance its academic programs by aligning curricula with industry needs, investing in faculty development, maintaining partnerships with reputable educational organizations internationally, and innovating pedagogical approaches that prioritize student-centered learning. This is to ensure that the overall academic reputation, quality, and diversity of programs offered, as highlighted in the study, remain competitive alongside other private HEIs.

Thirdly, given that the student market demonstrates a strong reliance on specific, low-cost public transport options, namely tricycle and jeepney, the university must strategically prioritize initiatives that directly address the practical importance of convenience, cost, and mobility in school preference. The current reliance on these public modes indicates that students value accessibility and budget-friendly commuting options. Therefore, HEIs are recommended to explicitly link and promote new initiatives to these factors. For instance, the implementation of subsidized shuttle services on high-traffic routes or the negotiation of institutional discounts with local transport cooperatives should be presented not just as a service, but as a direct solution to reducing student commuting costs and increasing convenience. The aim of these initiatives is to mitigate the friction associated with travel, effectively transforming geographic distance or transport cost from a potential barrier into a demonstrated factor of institutional support, thereby enhancing the university's overall attractiveness and competitive positioning within the student market.

Fourthly, the study urges the University to maintain a balanced approach to student development by complementing academic rigor with extracurricular activities such as conduction of sports fests, and wellness programs that promote leadership, community engagement, and

overall well-being. This is to ensure that Baliuag University remains aligned with the preferences of students, as highlighted in the study. Fifthly, operational efficiency and service quality should remain a priority by sustaining the current streamlined enrollment process while integrating more digital innovations and ensuring that employees remain supported, satisfied, and well-trained through career development planning.

Finally, it is recommended that the HEIs institutionalize regular market research to monitor shifts in student preferences, particularly on emerging concerns such as sustainability, mental health support, and digital learning, to enable universities to adapt proactively to the changing needs of its student market as well as to maintain its relevance across the competitive academic landscape of HEIs in the Philippines.

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