

PROMOTING AND ENHANCING THE GRADUATE STUDENT TRANSITION
EXPERIENCE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

by

KATHRYN T. LOPEZ

B.A., New Mexico State University, 2008

A THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Journalism and Mass Communications
College of Arts and Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2013

Approved by:

Major Professor
Dr. William Adams

Abstract

This is an exploratory study on the existing transition efforts of the Kansas State University Graduate School for master's degree students. There are a variety of graduate students at Kansas State University with many different graduate program experiences. This study identifies the current status of incoming master's degree students outreach and details experiences of transitioning graduate students to make suggestions on future strategies. It is vital to identify if, and which, programs are catering to the different needs of these students during their socialization into their graduate program.

The study has three main objectives: (1) determine the level of personal contact and emphasis on relationship-building during a master's degree student's transition, (2) identify the general efforts and practices of specific master's degree programs and the Kansas State University Graduate School, and (3) to document the needs of students as they transition into graduate school at Kansas State University.

The research was conducted through use of confidential one-on-one in-depth interviews with nine Kansas State University graduate program directors and two Graduate School administrators. Ten newly admitted to the Kansas State University graduate program in the spring of 2013 were interviewed. The qualitative approach to this study enabled the researcher to get detailed testimonials and experience-based knowledge from all of these key stakeholders.

Overall, the study revealed that graduate students value face-to-face and personal interaction and showed that student-to-student contact is a preferred component to a successful socialization of graduate students. The needs of transitioning graduate students included assistance with course scheduling, assistantship responsibilities, advisor selection, and an overall

understanding that graduate school is different from undergraduate school. Future graduate program strategies that would assist in the successful socialization of graduate students include: orientations, meeting with graduate program directors, social and networking opportunities, and workshops. Involvement in student organizations and utilization of on-campus resources are also a part of most of the graduate programs, and graduate school transition outreach. Based on the findings of this study, the researcher offers suggestions to the Graduate School, graduate programs, and incoming students in order to help enhance the transition experience of master's degree students into graduate school at Kansas State University.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	vii
Acknowledgements.....	viii
Chapter 1 - Introduction.....	1
Background.....	1
Problem Statement.....	2
Transition	3
Strategic Communication.....	4
Public Relations: Non-profit organizations and universities	5
Purpose.....	6
Justification.....	7
Organization.....	8
Chapter 2 - Literature Review.....	10
The Nature of Graduate Students.....	10
Transition	12
The Interests of Graduate Students	13
Forms of Communication	14
The need/benefit of the “personal touch”	14
Acclimation of Graduate Students	16
Strategic Communication	19
Theoretical Framework.....	23
Relationship Management Theory	23
Graduate Student Success	27
Chapter 3 - Methodology	29
Qualitative Approach.....	29
Qualitative Research	29
In-depth Interviews	31
Site Description.....	32
Sample Description.....	32

Data Collection Procedure	34
Data Analysis	35
Chapter 4 - Results	37
Graduate Program Directors	37
Importance of Personal Contact.....	37
Current Kansas State University Outreach	40
International Students and Out-of-State Student Outreach.....	43
Graduate Student Needs.....	44
Housing.....	45
Course scheduling.....	46
Skills	47
Student Organizations	47
Student-to-Student Interaction	48
Graduate School Administrators.....	50
Importance of Personal Contact.....	50
Analysis of the current situation at Kansas State University	52
International Student and Out-of-State Student Outreach	54
Graduate Student Needs.....	55
Student-to-Student Interaction Discussion	56
Graduate School Needs.....	57
Transitioning Master’s Degree Students.....	59
Importance of Personal Contact and Strategic Communication	59
Analysis of the current situation at Kansas State University	60
International Student and Out-of-State Student Outreach	61
Graduate Student Needs.....	62
Familiarity with the University.....	64
Campus Resources	64
Student –to-Student Interaction Discussion.....	64
Tables.....	65
Chapter 5 - Conclusion	68
Trends	69

Theoretical Implications	72
Enhancing Graduate Student Transition	73
Suggestions for Graduate Programs’ “Best Practices”	74
Suggestions for the Graduate School	75
Suggestion for Graduate School and Graduate Programs.....	76
Suggestions for Transitioning Master’s Degree Students.....	77
Best practices	78
Limitations to study	79
Future Research	79
References.....	81
Appendix A - Kansas State University 2025 Visionary Plan	87
Appendix B - Kansas State University Graduate Program Director Interview Questions	89
Appendix C - Kansas State University Graduate School Administrator Interview Questions.....	90
Appendix D - Kansas State University Transitioning Master’s Degree Student Interview Questions	91
Appendix E - Participant Consent Form.....	92
Appendix F - Sample Graduate Program Orientation Agenda	93
Appendix G - Suggested Graduate Program Communication Timeline for Transitioning Master’s Degree Students	94

List of Tables

Table 4.1 Graduate Student Profiles	65
Table 4.2 Trend Data- Graduate Program Directors & Graduate School Administrator Interviews	66
Table 4.3 Trend Data- Graduate Student Interviews	67

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to acknowledge all of my committee members from Journalism and Mass Communications: Dr. William Adams, Dr. Nancy Muturi, and Dr. Louise Benjamin for guiding me through the research process and for making this accomplishment possible. The time and dedication you provided during this thesis developing period is outrageously recognized and appreciated. In addition, I would like to thank Kansas State University Graduate School Dean Carol Shanklin for not only serving on my committee as well, but for providing me the countless opportunities to be involved in the Graduate School and assisting me with a topic I am passionate about.

I would like to thank all of the graduate program directors, graduate school administrators, and master's degree students who volunteered to be a part of this study. Without their cooperation and insight this would have never been possible. In addition, I would like to acknowledge my fellow Journalism and Mass Communications colleagues. The friendship, support, and adventures we had during this endeavor I will never forget. Thank you to my friends, near and far, for the encouragement and relentless motivation you have provided me in completion of my master's degree.

Finally, I would like to express the most gratitude to my parents, Ted and Terry Lopez, as well as my older brothers, Kevin, Kenny, and Keith Lopez for always serving as my biggest supporters and being there for me always, especially throughout my entire graduate school experience at Kansas State University. Attending Kansas State University has been one of the best decisions that I have ever made in my life. I am extremely grateful for the opportunities, experiences, and friendships I have gained here. I am forever indebted to those who were a part

of leading me to Kansas State University and allowing me to have such fulfillment upon completion of my master's degree.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Background

Universities are in constant competition with each other to attract and maintain quality students from the increasing pool of individuals seeking post baccalaureate education (Johnston, 2010). According to Denecke (2009) “the growing capacity around the world to deliver graduate education will permanently change the competitive position of American graduate schools,” (p. 7). Although the annual goal of enrolling and transitioning an incoming class remains the same, the planning, methods and strategies to do so are increasing in number and in complexity (Johnston, 2010). Agozzino (2008) suggested that institutions can no longer simply wait for students to find them among the wealth of information. Rather, more deliberate outreach will be what will distinguish universities in efforts catering to students.

There is an ongoing battle in today’s higher education community where every university is seeking this similar goal of success for their master’s degree students. Universities desire to adequately transition potential master’s degree students into their graduate programs, and a student’s success starts from their admission experience. Graduate schools are not only in competition for students, but from the moment they are admitted, they want those students to be invested and engaged in the university (Johnston, 2010). Narayanan (1999) noted that the key to successful master’s degree students and a sustainable graduate program relies not only on its capability of graduating excellent students, but also on the school’s ability to retain high-quality students. The challenges of meeting the needs of today’s heterogeneous graduate population require sensitive, flexible, and creative responses (Polson, 2003).

This is an exploratory study on the existing transition efforts of master's degree students at Kansas State University graduate school. The study identifies the current status of incoming master's degree student outreach at Kansas State University. It also details experiences from transitioning graduate students. The researcher will form suggestions on future strategies for Kansas State University based on findings.

In February 2010, Kansas State University launched an ambitious planning initiative with the visionary goal to be recognized as a Top 50 Public Research University by the year 2025. President Kirk Shulz' visionary plan, K-State 2025, states that there is a strong desire for Kansas State University to advance a culture of excellence that attracts highly talented, diverse graduate students and produces graduates recognized as outstanding in their respective professions. Theme #3 of the plan is: Enhancing the Graduate Scholarly Experience (*See Appendix A*). Increasing transition outreach from standpoints of the Graduate School and at program-levels would align with the 2025 vision, while enhancing the experience of a master's degree student from the start of their time at Kansas State University. This study examines the experience of graduate students and current outreach by graduate programs so that in the future, the initiatives to enhance the graduate student experience may continue.

Problem Statement

Master's degree students are a component of a university's research reputation. The Council of Graduate Schools (2003) says that success for these students relies on developing a sense of community and having students, with similar adjustment experiences, get together to help satisfy this need. Exploring how Kansas State University pays attention to the transition needs of incoming master's degree students is the guiding principle of the study.

Within 67 different master's degree programs, there is a variety of graduate students at Kansas State University with many graduate program experiences. It is vital to identify if and which programs are catering to the different needs of these students during their socialization into their graduate program and what "best practices" can be established. The study seeks to learn from graduate school administrators and program directors on their outreach to transition their master's degree students as well as to investigate student attitudes toward their transition experience, in order to make suggestions of best practices for Kansas State University.

Transition

Although on the surface the transition from undergraduate college to graduate school seems similar to the many steps in rank that have come before it, this transition is vastly different and requires a significant shift in attitude (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998). The transition and socialization process is one in which a newcomer is made a member of a community—in the case of graduate students, the community of an academic department in a particular field of study (Golde, 1998). For many people, admission to graduate school marks the beginning of a period of major, unavoidable life changes (Goplerud, 1980). This study examines transition as the time in which students are accepted and are enrolled in a master's degree program through their first semester of graduate school. Such an empirical and internal change in one's life provides a level of adjustment necessary to cope.

An effective transition into graduate school is considered a "good" beginning that helps students make informed, early decisions in response to the socialization challenges they face. "Bad" beginnings delay students' ability to answer key questions or they provide experiences that inaccurately reflect student and professional life (Golde, 1998). Mentoring relationships and personal interaction are forms of contact to help provide this social support. A mentoring

relationship can have a powerful and professional impact on students. Beginning graduate students often need emotional support and guidance to successfully achieve their goals (Bowman, Bowman, et al., 1990). Relationship management theory is used to inform the study.

Relationship management is a public relations theory that was developed by John Ledingham and Stephen Bruning (2000). In an effort to assist organizations develop personal relationships with their constituents and increase business Ledingham and Bruning (2000) believed that a successful and effective relationship is developed through clear and intentional communication between the organization and their public. The theory is applied in this study to identify the communication (between Kansas State University [business] and transitioning master's degree students [constituents]). Master's degree students are investing in a university to gain a fulfilling graduate experience and the relationships between those associated with the university are critical in examining this experience. The theory relies on business models that discuss business/customer relationships and underscores the need to be conversant with strategic planning and other managerial processes.

Strategic Communication

Strategic communication is crucial in effective transition of master's degree students and in relationship building with the key stakeholders. The term "strategic communication" is a broad, inclusive, and appropriate term for referring to planned, research-based persuasive and campaigns, often times in regards to public relations (Botan, 1997). Strategic communication is the "right way to communicate" intentionally with an audience (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Vercic, & Sriramesh, 2007). It enables the university to be more intentional with messaging to incoming master's degree students. The more intentional the message, the higher the likelihood the message will be received by the audience.

Intentional public relations tactics and strategic planning are the core practices for effective communicators and is the necessary response to the existing institutional competition (Council of Graduate Schools, 2003). The public relations and strategic communications tactics of universities are critical in determining effective tactics versus failed attempts at appealing to these potential students. A support system starts with a better orientation to graduate study, the department, the campus, and the community (Council of Graduate Schools, 2003, p.14). Strategic communication is important in building the social support networks among graduate students, specifically in building strong relationships with their peers (Hallahan, et al., 2007).

The study seeks to examine some of the strategies used at Kansas State University for transitioning master's degree students in addition to what the needs are of these graduate students. It also seeks to examine what outreach, critical relationships, and forms of strategic communication exist in this transition experience. The public relations efforts between graduate program directors, the graduate school and transitioning master's degree students are identified by the researcher.

Public Relations: Non-profit organizations and universities

This study is built upon public relations and strategic communication. Strategic communication is an amplified form of public relations whose purpose is to implement a plan to achieve an organizational/institution's long-term goals effectively. Goals are directly involved in engagement of the organization's stakeholders (Bonk, Griggs, & Tynes, 1999). Hinchey and Kimmel (2000) suggested that, "...researchers who acknowledge students as stakeholders define the problem with a broader perspective than institutional representatives..." (p. 13). The experience and needs of a university may be correlated with those of a non-profit business or organization.

Drucker (2010) believed that “a non-profit” institution is neither a pair of shoes nor an effective regulation. Its product is a changed human being. The non-profit institutions are human-change agents. Their “product” is a cured patient, a child that learns, a young man or woman grown into a self-respected adult; a changed human life altogether.” Universities, functioning as a “non-profit” institution, themselves know that they need management all the more because they do not have a conventional “bottom line” (Drucker, 2010).

Communications for such non-profit entities rely on public relations, data collection, and planning used on a day-to-day basis to achieve an overall mission (Bonk, et al., 1999). Strategic planning outlines [four steps in the strategic process]: the mission, plan, implementation, and evaluation of any given initiative to achieve an organization’s goal (Botan, 1997). These are the tenet by which this study’s efforts are guided. These basic principles of strategic communication may be applied to university competitive efforts in transitioning master’s degree students and the personal contact. Strategic and managed communication can be critical in the experience of students within a university. The public relations efforts of graduate program directors, the graduate school for transitioning master’s degree students are examined in this study.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to identify the current transition outreach used by Kansas State University graduate programs and the graduate school, as well as to outline the experiences of graduate students in this phase.

Specific objectives:

1. Determine the level of personal contact and emphasis on relationship-building during a master’s degree student’s transition
2. Identify the general efforts and practices of specific master’s degree programs and the Kansas State University graduate school

3. Document the needs of students at Kansas State University as they transition into graduate school

Justification

The findings of this pilot study were intended to inform the Kansas State University graduate program directors and graduate school administrators and to provide suggestions for the construction of future efforts targeting the transitioning master's degree student population. The research questions, methodology and sample were selected based on the high probability that they could help produce results related to this aim. The student testimonies, enlightenment of current program and graduate-level tactics, will allow the researcher to suggest best practices and strategies that may exist for future improvement on graduate student transition at Kansas State University.

The study adds to the existing knowledge on how graduate students may be effectively transitioned into their master's degree programs. The research will highlight the unique struggle of socialization and adapting into graduate school. Within the total enrollment at a university, the population of master's degree students is less than the undergraduate student population. With this, the research on graduate students and their needs is minimal in comparison to those of undergraduate students. An exploratory study such as this will help give attention to graduate students.

The study is informed by personal experience. As a current master's degree student at Kansas State University, the researcher has encountered transition into graduate school and all of the implications that come from such a life adjustment. She has observed how a proper transition experience can benefit a master's degree student, as well as witnessed the struggle of those not receiving intentional outreach. It is the researcher's sincere hope that this study documents some of the best practices for effectively transitioning graduate students, while

stressing the involvement of relationship-building, and importance of strategic communication during that time period.

A second key component of the study is that data were collected in-person directly from current Kansas State University program directors, graduate school administrators, and transitioning graduate students, and is presented in the form of narratives, paraphrases, and experiences. The participants volunteered their involvement in in-depth interviews with the researcher. Such testimonies were paraphrased for confidentiality purposes. The study assumed a qualitative approach to explore and gain the most accurate information on existing transition efforts throughout Kansas State University while understanding the experiences and needs of current master's degree students. The qualitative approach enabled the researcher to get detailed testimonials and experience-based knowledge from key university stakeholders involved in this study.

A third key element has been identified through the examining of related literature. The researcher was unable to find an extensive amount of literature on the transition process of master's degree students. Finally, the researcher aims to add to academia and the limited existing literature regarding transition efforts for master's degree students.

Organization

The study is organized as follows: Chapter 2 as a review of the literature, including existing research on the dynamic of graduate school, elements for success, related theoretical framework, and strategic communication. Research questions are included in this chapter. Chapter 3 details the methodology. It includes a justification of the qualitative approach, a detailed description of the sample population, the sample recruitment method, the data collection method and the data analysis process. Chapter 4 includes the results of the study, which are

based directly on the research questions presented in Chapter 2. They are divided by themes that emerged in the data analysis process. Chapter 5 includes a detailed discussion of the research findings presented in Chapter 4—also based on the research questions from Chapter 2. This chapter also includes conclusions, and suggestions for the Kansas State University graduate program directors and Graduate School administrators seeking to suggest future research and efforts targeting the master’s degree student population in transition.

Suggestions for future research related to the topic and study limitations are also discussed. The primary intended audience of the study is those directly involved in the transition efforts and initial contact with incoming graduate students within Kansas State University. The primary population it is intended to benefit is Kansas State University master’s degree students in the programs identified in this study, and translated to efforts for those across disciplines. On a broader scale, the study and its suggestions are intended to benefit all university graduate program directors, administration of the graduate school, master’s degree students, and the graduate school culture as a whole.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to identify the current transition outreach used by Kansas State University graduate programs and the Graduate School, as well as to outline the experiences of master's degree students in this phase. This chapter explores the nature and interests of graduate students, based on the theoretical framework, and public relations. According to Conrad, Duren, and Haworth (1998), the literature on master's degree programs suffers in that there is almost no literature on how students experience their master's degree programs, much less the effects of their experiences on students themselves. Furthermore, there is limited research on strategic communication and efforts within universities and the transition of master's degree students. However, most existing research so far has focused on recruitment of students [undergraduate] for universities. Due to minimal mention of transition of graduate students within universities in academia, strategic communication in non-profit organizations was assessed in this study.

The Nature of Graduate Students

A thriving system of graduate education is essential to national prosperity (Denecke, 2009) and is a growing part of the graduate education enterprise in the United States is master's degree education. As an emerging trend, today it is necessary for graduate schools to accommodate more working adults, part-time students, underrepresented groups, and more individuals who will not fit a "traditional" model of a full-time, residential student (Siegel, Sowell, Sullivan, Tate, & Denecke, 2004) Research suggested that graduate education is a prominent component in an individual's social status as graduate school is a pre-requisite to many desirable and prestigious professions such as physicians, business professionals, lawyers,

etc. Advanced degrees may result in greater economic rewards and high social status (Zhang, 2005). This may reflect the fact that economic and career advancement in the fields covered by arts and sciences often require an advanced degree while other, perhaps more professional degrees do not. Society has a large stake in graduate and professional education (Zhang, 2005). They must come to appreciate the increased competition for jobs and resources. They must begin to set achievable long-term goals. Then, with their goals in mind, students should plan backwards—that is, plot out what they will need to learn and do in order to obtain and succeed in the position they desire, setting milestones to track their progress on the way (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998).

Fischer and Zigmond (1998) felt that part of the responsibility toward graduate students is to provide them with a strong background in their field and to teach them how to design and carry out experiments. If, however, we are to ensure their success in graduate school and beyond, this is not enough. Students must also acquire many other “survival skills”—skills such as how to communicate their ideas (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998). The survival skills needed to succeed in graduate school and beyond can be divided into four categories: (1) basic skills, including how to be a successful graduate student; (2) communication skills, specifically, being able to convey the results of one’s work through publications and oral presentations; (3) job skills, for finding and maintaining employment; and (4) advanced skills, including teaching, grant writing, and personnel management. Integral to each of these skills is a core survival skill, the ability to behave as a responsible professional (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998).

It is the responsibility of university personnel to ensure that student concerns are taken care of and addressed early in the graduate school process. The diversity of course offerings, size of the department, library facilities and collections, and research and other opportunities to

work with particular faculty may all be factors that universities will need to address when marketing to graduate students (Kallio, 1995).

Transition

The most common institutional practice is to let students fend for themselves in solving the dilemmas that can arise (Kallio, 1995). Many institutions expend major resources to recruit new graduate students with limited emphasis devoted to assisting the students as they transition into their graduate study (Polson, 2003). Graduate faculty and program staff make false assumptions about graduate students and think that they are more equipped and knowledgeable than that are (Tokuno,2008). They call for a more programmatic approach to helping the transition of these master's degree students. There are various university approaches in attempts to satisfy these needs. Creating a support system for graduate students is important and starts with better orientation to graduate study, the campus, the department, and the community (Council of Graduate Schools, 2003).

Educational institutions face continued challenges in maintenance and retention, but many schools sensed little obligation to provide information or orientation programs to new graduate students once they have committed to come. Webb (1979) asserts that flaws in the system are caused by a lack of understanding by applicants about admissions procedures. A lack of information available to applicants about graduate programs is another contributing factor to confusion among incoming students.

The burning questions in the minds of incoming new students typically are based on the nature and availability of financial aid, and other general questions about the university, which have not yet been answered through the recruiting process. Without adequate information and knowledge it is difficult for students to feel comfortable with the nature of the institution, and

have a sense of accomplishment in the program (Webb, 1979). Correspondence with prospective applicants reveals that some applicants are frustrated by the difficulty of securing specific information about graduate programs. But, at large universities, the number of inquiries and applications are overwhelming. As a result, many inquiries go unanswered and some general information is not supplied to transitioning students.

The Interests of Graduate Students

Many individuals pursue graduate education because they have a deep interest in a particular subject matter. Ferrales and Fine (2012) noted that these students may consider graduate education as a “consumption good,” thus obtaining an advanced degree itself may be considered a sort of personal “triumph.” “Students who have been away from school for a few years, who have traveled or worked various jobs without building a career, face different challenges. One student described the return to graduate school after working for a marketing firm for two years as “an attempt to recapture the romanticism of university life” (Ferrales & Fine, 2012, p. 62). The effects of life stage development can significantly influence student behavior through the process of graduate school selections (Kallio, 1995).

The typical graduate student has different needs than an undergraduate college student. A graduate student’s needs and the opportunities offered by institution are highly subjective and individual in nature. Although some students enroll in a graduate program immediately after their undergraduate program, many others enroll only after several years. Pontius and Harper (2006) found that “...prior socialization to graduate school, student-faculty advising relationships, student engagement, and peer interaction correlate positively with persistence to degree” (p. 49). But, such students find themselves without peers with whom they can relate easily; most have responsibilities to others that consume their time as well as their finances

(Polson, 2003). There are some components that can help alleviate this inevitable graduate student anxiety. Constant interaction with a faculty member solidifies the bond between the two, and can help facilitate the metamorphosis of the undergraduate student to a graduate student (Kallio, 1995).

Forms of Communication

According to Johnston (2010) peer-to-peer communication is emerging, by means of social media. There is less of a sender-to-receiver, one-sided contact than a receiver-to-sender balanced communication. This dynamic serves to be more influential and universities are certainly buying into that view (Johnston, 2010). Lindbeck and Fodrey (2010) also recognize that individual text messaging and networking sites are used as common social communication tools by the millennial generation as means of communication.

Relying on what's popular with potential customers may not be the best idea. The real question is not what's popular, but what works in relating to graduate students. Johnston's (2010) study found that personal sources of information were more important than non-personal sources. The study found a direct correlation to "strong ties" between the senders of the message and the receivers, in this case, someone at the university who was known to the prospective college student. A delicate balance of technology and personal connections must be made in order to reach the maximum audience and provided fulfillment in an institutions' messages. Providing this balance, is the goal of competing post-baccalaureate institutional programs (Johnston, 2010). It all begins with leaving an intentional impression and a personal approach.

The need/benefit of the "personal touch"

If social media messages are to be effective, a customized and intentional approach must be taken. There is a need for a more personalized approach. "As colleges move toward a more

holistic, relationship-based model, they must build marketing strategies around students as lifelong customers. Trust is one of the most important factors in implementing a relationship-based model” (James, 2008, p.7). Universities are a community of people who create that culture of camaraderie in a given institution. Therefore, the “personal touch” must be utilized in order to appeal to students (Narayanan, 1999). Proactive techniques are a means to attract and assist high-quality graduate students.

On the other hand, perhaps the most effective way of allowing a student to acclimate to an institution is to facilitate interaction between them and those who are currently enrolled in the department's programs i.e. other students (Kallio, 1995). Emotions such as pride, belongingness, fear, wonder, and hope, impact a student’s decision about where they want to spend the next years of their life [college.] These emotions can be based on reactions to images, as well as words. According to Kretchmar and Memory (2010), a campus visit prior to the first day of school can highly influence a student, because of how that experience makes them feel and also the images it created in their mind. People serve a large role in the on-site experiences of incoming students. Impressions and people-to-people interactions are highly influential. In fact, up to 80% of the messages and meanings that people convey to one another are expressed in nonverbal ways. Gestures, body posture, distance, eye contact, and pupil dilation are all forms of such nonverbal influencers (Zaltman, 2003). Such influence can only be gained from a personal interaction. Non-verbal factors are impossible to be gained from a person to a brochure, website, or email interaction. Thus, the emphasis on the importance of human interaction remains within the relationship marketing modules when applied to educational institutions and relationships with graduate students. There is not a more natural way to build relationships and establish a friendly impression than interpersonal interactions (Agozzino, 2008).

Despite the increase of popularity of social media, website-use and paper mail, the personal touch still provides the strongest influence on students. Kretchmar and Memory (2010) suggest that if higher education personnel only think in terms of the information provided to students and not the way in which it is delivered, a deficiency is formed in ways that may be unrecognizable. According to Johnston (2010) marketers should consider social media more as a supplement to traditional marketing efforts, rather than a replacement.

Acclimation of Graduate Students

After the initial recruiting efforts, focus needs to be placed on the transition and retention of graduate students. Early and continuous follow-up, both inside and outside the classroom, form a theme in student retention. Quigley (1998) calls for both professors and counselors to respond promptly to adult learners' needs to sustain motivation, particularly in the first three weeks. Since many students will not request assistance, professors and counselors should initiate contact. Program features such as seminars, work groups, support groups, and cohorts can serve as a natural forum for follow-up contact (Wonacott, 2001). Informational materials and other communications with students such as face-to-face contact should also address other aspects of the academic environment that students consider (Kallio, 1995). Details about an academic program and statistics are not the only forms of knowledge that graduate students would benefit learning. There needs to be a large emphasis on the “practical” items associated with this stage of life for all graduate students.

Most graduate students are considered “adult students” by definition, due to their age. They must juggle demands on their time between study, family, work, and other commitments; their learning goals are often different from those traditional educational institutions and providers for undergraduates; and their needs and aspirations may change during the education

process, sometimes as a result of it. Today's graduate students have diverse needs requiring many different service providers. Essentially, education providers need to market their programs correctly and effectively. Marketing includes defining a mission statement, developing measurable program objectives, identifying discrete market segments, developing a marketing mix of specific programs for specific market segments, and conducting promotional activities tailored to target segments (Wonacott, 2001).

Gansemmer-Topf, Ross, and Johnson (2006) found that "...adjusting to new environments; juggling multiple roles of student, teacher, and researcher; and attending to personal relationships can play significant roles in students' progress toward their degrees" (p. 28). Individual advisors, departments, university-wide graduate schools, and specialized campus student service outreach are recommended in order to fulfill this need to connect with these students (Polson, 2003).

Research has found that graduate school is not a particularly healthy place. At the University of California at Berkeley, sixty seven percent of graduate students said they had felt hopeless at least once in their first year of graduate school (Fogg, 2009). Many graduate students arrive on campus feeling intimidated and emotionally fragile. Due to the sensitive nature of this stage in life, emphasis should be placed on investment and retention. Orienting adult students to educational programs is viewed by many as the first step toward retention. An orientation can provide a wide range of program and other information that allows adult students to make informed decisions and establish realistic goals and assess their own circumstances (Rettinger, 1996).

Adult students also need information on services available to help them meet their individual needs. Students may also need to know about support services such as child care,

transportation, health care, and employment (Rettinger, 1996). They also need information about the range of academic and student services available, including financial aid, tutorials, academic advising, and counseling, and especially career counseling, career exploration, and job placement (Baker, 1998). For a variety of practical reasons, services would probably have to be offered through or coordinated by a central administrative office located in the graduate school or in student services (Kallio, 1995). Polson (2003) believes that for graduate students, changing demographic “realities require the rethinking and restructuring of student services” (p. 60). All-in-all, programs must ensure that they provide whatever information their adult students need to form clear, realistic expectations, set targets, and track their own progress.

If all considerations are factored into the strategies of the university, retention will be the byproduct. Student retention serves to identify and focus appropriate targets, strategies, and recommendations for intervention and retention of current students before they decide to leave the college or university (James, 2008). Strong retention is a result of attention towards and a positive graduate school transition experience.

A frustration in a lack of a personal connection exists, too, after a student has been accepted into a university which often causes even more questions to emerge once the student arrives on campus. The socialization of graduate students is vital in their success. According to Polson (2003) providing opportunities to meet advanced graduate students is a major way to facilitate this process. In short, student outreach cannot stop with recruiting. Indeed, many universities have developed programs to transition undergraduate student programs, especially during their first year. However, similar efforts are lacking at the graduate level.

Student service providers should ask to be included in their institution’s graduate student orientation programs. Given the variety of needs of older graduate students, a cafeteria-style

approach is recommended; one size does not fit all. Advanced graduate students should be encouraged to help in these programs. Their firsthand experience and stories to share could be beneficial to the newcomers. Institutions that invest in helping graduate students with the transition into their new roles are more likely to retain their students through degree completion. Institutions that strive to meet the varied needs of adult graduate students will provide student services that go beyond their initial recruitment and orientation efforts (Polson, 2003). An underlying trust must exist between any student and their university. Once trust is established and the relationships are formed, student ambassador programs become a key part of the positive reputation and potential future for both undergraduate and graduate schools (James, 2008). “No program can be without empathy towards others, which include access, communication, understanding the customer and caring about others by providing individualized attention when needed,” states Heather James (2008, p.11). Efforts are intentional in such transition programs. Such university tactics are strategic.

Strategic Communication

Graduate program assessment and strategic planning are essential activities that have been increasing amongst graduate schools (College of Graduate Schools, 2008). Strategic communication is applied to planned communication. Strategic communication campaigns can be identified to be conducted under many mass communication entities including public relations, community relations, constituent relations, crisis management, outreach, public affairs, public health, public information, risk communication, strategic advertising, strategic marketing, and the like (Botan, 1997).

Strategic communication summarizes the tactics and efforts on a consistent basis with the long-term goal in mind. It puts together a vision, collects data, constructs a plan, initiates tactics,

documents experience and reviews progress for future use. This is all in order to reach the organizational long-term goals and increase effectiveness within non-profit organizations and academic institutions as well. Through the practice of strategic communication, a communicator does their research, knows their audience, carefully crafts the message in accordance to that audience, reviews effectiveness, documents practice, assesses and makes recommendations for the future (Botan, 1997). Strategic communication takes into consideration the mission, the audience, the available resources, the tactics needed, then review and edits a concrete plan according to it all. Outreach and planning exercised in this form helps increase the efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability of any communication.

Communicators within non-profit organizations each have an organizational mission and objection that guides their activities. Through strategic communication the members of the organization are better equipped to reach their sought-out mission because the efforts are not done with ignorance and haste. Efforts that lie within the strategic communication “umbrella” are, instead, executed with wisdom, care, purpose, and detail (Hallahan, et al, 2007). Academic institutions are in the business of needing to cater to different audiences and practice intentional communication. The graduate school experience is a consumable good based on the fact that students invest in a college education for personal and familial reasons (Kimball, 2011). The overall goal of an institution is to recruit students, orient them well, and retain them throughout their undergraduate or graduate careers. Through organized efforts an institution can seek to communicate with students effectively. Compiling information about the students, carefully crafting a message, communicating that message, and evaluating its level of success outlines how strategic communication can guide an institution’s recruiting and retention efforts. Such communication is critical in public relations.

Botan (1997) argued that public relations is a significant aspect of business communication and described it as planned, research-based communication campaigns covered by the umbrella term "strategic communication." Strategic communication, in contrast to everyday public relations, concentrates on the key instigators of organizational success. It also expands the traditional set of communication measures in order to manage meaning in all kinds of necessary interactions with internal and external stakeholders (Zerfass & Huck, 2007).

As the information in society develops so will the use of this public relations approach. Public relations are an outreach of communication that seeks to positively influence a given audience, resulting in a positive image. The efforts practitioners take to have a positive influence on a given audience is strategic and intentional. Public relations use a set of data, ideas, and knowledge to practice a plan (Botan, 1997). Public relations are a day-in-and day-out agenda and a sustainable practice that strives to implant a positive and lasting brand in the mind of a targeted audience. Factors that contribute to a well-done public relations effort include; credible practitioners, personal recruitment/transition outreach, substantial resources, positive testimonies, brand awareness, a consistent message, and clear/effective communication of the institutional values. Strategic planning is the core practice of successful public relations practitioners and effective strategic communicators and is comprised of a four-step model (Bonk, Griggs, Tynes, 1999). According to Hallahan and colleagues (2007) the model's components are as follows;

1. *PREPARE/RESEARCH- Extensive research must be conducted in order to gain insight.* Research includes learning about organizational history; studying the targeted audience, seek out models and literature that relates to your organization and its mission. The preparation and research component of this strategic planning process is the most

extensive. This research and gained wisdom is what helps guide all future efforts.

Formal (qualitative and quantitative) and informal forms of research are encouraged. The goal in this step is to create a strong framework as to what the history, environment, components, and knowledge exists that can help guide the rest of the process (Hallahan, et al., 2007).

2. *PLAN- Form an objective.* In order to move forward in any initiative it is necessary for a strong public relations practitioner or strategic communicator to know the organization's mission, values, objective, and form realistic and long-term goals to ensure the success of the organization. The planning phase includes documentation of resources, practices, and all messages related to the communication. Planning in this way helps prepare for the implementation step in the strategic planning model (Hallahan, et al., 2007).
3. *IMPLEMENT- Practice strategies and tactics based on research and formulated plan.* The third step to the strategic planning process is the action part of the plan. Based on the research and carefully constructed plan, here is where the communicators and personnel put all they have learned to use and initiate action towards moving forward in achieving the organization's overall goals. This part must be heavily documented and observed in order to prepare and satisfy the last step of strategic planning (Hallahan, et al., 2007).
4. *REVIEW- Evaluate what was implemented, document it, and edit for future use.* The fourth and final step to a strategic plan is to review what has been done and carefully assess it. This is the part for the practitioner and communicator to be critical of the efforts and look at them realistically. In this final stage is where one asks, "Did or didn't that work?" "Why or why not?" In the final step of strategic planning, recommendations

are made, necessary edits to the plan are constructed, areas of success/deficiency are evaluated, and a plan for the future is explored. This then enables the process to start at step 1 again, with the intent of continuous improvement until the organization or institution's overall goals are met (Hallahan, et al., 2007).

More attention in the intentional and one-on-one function of public relations geared toward incoming students could make it easier for the student to “connect” with certain institutions. Using more customized messages with organic approaches could serve as a gateway to a more personal experience and building relationships between student and university representatives.

Theoretical Framework

Relationship Management Theory

A focus on attracting, maintaining, and building relationships is a possible preferential method of university transition. This idea adheres to the relationship marketing approach which emphasizes targeting, socialization and communication to maximize return on investments (Ledingham, 2003). The relationship management perspective holds that public relations balance the interests of organizations and publics through the management of organization public relationships. The relationship marketing concept has resulted in profits among businesses, as it is traditionally a business model (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007). Hinchey and Kimmel (2000) suggest that research should be “based on a need to explore criticisms honestly not only because they can hurt the university and country, but also because universities have a responsibility to offer students the best possible return on their investment in graduate study” (p. 13).

As the Council for Graduate Schools (2003) indicated, “If we are relying on the student alone, we are not doing our job” (p.7). No two graduate programs are identical and no two graduate students will experience their transition in the same way. Graduate students experience socialization processes that reflect their chosen academic discipline, the structure and sequence of their program, and university’s overall setting (Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). New students are simultaneously directly socialized into the role of a graduate student and are given preparatory socialization into academics and a profession. An academic institution must pay close attention to whom they are targeting and take the time to properly compose their tactics, overall outreach efforts, and effective communication (Weidman et al., 2001).

The foundation of the relationship marketing approach in business is that resources are directed toward strengthening ties with existing customers. This would seem to make relationship marketing particularly adaptable to moving students from undergraduates programs into graduate programs. Such a model drives this study in the importance of “business” relationships, in terms of the institution/prospective of student dynamics (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007). There is a direct correlation between universities’ transition and retention with the relationships formed between the students and the university. The relationship marketing model presents a different way of viewing student transition and success. Having a successful transition and improving student retention is a worthwhile goal for a variety of individual, social, and economic reasons (Ackerman, & Schibrowsky, 2007). In the scope of higher education, the relationship marketing concepts hold promise for furthering the understanding of student retention and the improvement of incorporating more intentional communication efforts with students. Through the assumptions of Relationship Management Theory, the academic institutions that effectively communicate with their students and form a

strong relationship will be better enabled to achieve their institutional objective. Ackerman and Schibrowsky (2007, p. 311) relate that “just as managers of businesses have in place strategies to retain customers, campus faculty and staff can readily adapt the principles of relationship marketing to develop strategies to retain already enrolled students.” Let all references to “customers” be applied to incoming students. For purpose of theory application, interpret a “service” as an enjoyable or successful university experience. “Provider” in the higher education context can be viewed as the actual institution. There is a strong need for in-depth and integrated customer knowledge in order to build close cooperative and partnering relationships with them (Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2001).

According to Ackerman and Schibrowsky (2007) the conditions in which relationship marketing are most applicable occur:

1. Whenever the customer has an ongoing need or desire for the service.
2. The environments in which the customer selects the service provider.
3. When alternative service providers exist and customers have the power to switch from one supplier to another

In the realm of university education, all three conditions exist, thus making relationship marketing a relevant theory to drive such research. First, all students attend college with a purpose. Although those intentions may vary from student to student; each one still has expectancy from the experience, a hope to receive a service, and a need for there to be a reward post-graduation. Secondly, everyone in the United States has the ability to choose whether or not to attend the university, trade schools, apprentice programs and so on. Regardless of felt pressures or influences, ultimately it is an individual choice to pursue a university degree. With this empowerment comes the freedom of choice of what institution they want their degree from.

Lastly, not only do prospective students get to choose if they will, in fact, become a student, they also have the freedom to select at which university they will do this. At the same time, once that decision and enrollment is made, there is nothing to say that the decision cannot be switched or changed in some way. Every institution has first-hand experience of this through receiving transfers from other universities, as well as losing students who transfer to another school. The fulfillment of the three basic relationship marketing conditions proves the relevance of the theory to this study's topic.

Communication is crucial in relationship marketing. Communication helps to foster relationship bonds and those conscious efforts, to create common bonds, will have a more sustaining impact on the relationship by establishing proper communication channels for sharing information with customers a company can enhance their relationship with them (Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2001). In the same regard, universities must be in contact with prospective and incoming students in order to gain that relationship early.

Relationship marketing values commitment between both the customer and the service provider. Commitment serves as a measure of how important to both parties the relationship is and their mutual willingness to continue it. In terms of student relationship marketing, it is proposed that students who perceive a mutual and strong commitment between themselves and the college are more likely to enroll, remain enrolled and are more likely to recommend the school to others (Ackerman & Schibrowsky, 2007).

Ackerman and Schibrowsky (2007) view trust as a primary factor in building this commitment and forming a healthy relationship conducive to all parties involved. They point out that:

Given the long-term nature of the relationship building process, the recruitment of students is properly viewed as an initial stage of the relationship life-cycle, with the process of relationship building an ongoing activity that does not end until both parties decide to terminate it. For students, the relationship does not end at graduation. In fact, graduation is properly viewed as an opportunity to strengthen and refocus relationships with students so that they remain engaged with alma mater as alums (p. 321).

Relationship marketing theory justifies investments in transition programs so that vital and “profitable” relationships may be formed. If a campus knows its students, it is better positioned to build stronger personal relationships (Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2001).

Graduate Student Success

Despite the reluctance of educators to compare transition and business, there is some undeniable sense in which students are the customers served by higher education (Kretchmar & Memory, 2010). Just as it is important to understand what any given customer hopes to gain from a certain product, it is similarly important to assess the desired outcomes of prospective college students. In order to serve education’s customers [students,] it may be vital to truly know them. Genuinely understanding a student relates to what they view as a successful university experience (Kretchmar & Memory, 2010). College will give students tools to change the world, and this chance is what students seek in their higher education experience. It is the responsibility of the university and its representatives to see to it that they are fulfilled in what they seek and have a comfortable transition into graduate school.

This study will strive to answer the following questions in regards to the needs of Kansas State University graduate students during transition and suggest best practices for efforts:

RQ1: How is relationship-building incorporated in Kansas State University for master's degree students during their transition into graduate school?

RQ2: What types of institutional programming and efforts are there during transition for master's degree students at Kansas State University?

RQ3: What are the needs of new master's degree students during their transition into Kansas State University's Graduate School?

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This case study of Kansas State University examined the needs of master's degree students as they transitioned into the graduate school, as well as outreach programs that exist within nine different specific graduate programs. This chapter explains the overall methodology employed, the research sample, the sample rationale, the recruitment method, the data collection and the analysis process. It draws from existing literature on methodology to help provide the rationale for the researcher's decisions.

Qualitative Approach

The researcher performed confidential, one-on-one, in-depth interviews with nine Kansas State University graduate program directors and two graduate school administrators. Ten students newly admitted to the Kansas State University graduate program spring 2013 were also interviewed. This approach enabled the researcher to get detailed testimonials and experience-based knowledge from all of these key stakeholders in this qualitative study.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative methods have been gaining recognition in domains and literature promoting this method of research is rapidly increasing. The method serves as a positive step towards a deeper understanding of social phenomena and dynamics. Qualitative research is the method of inquiry. It strives to understand a "social phenomena" within the context of the participants' experiences and opinions. The research methods involved in qualitative studies are more flexible, responsive, and open to interpretation than in quantitative research (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Qualitative research helps to gather opinions and gain insight from individuals who are deemed knowledgeable and credible. Qualitative research is often utilized in

the social sciences (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). “Qualitative methods excel at giving an understanding of why things are the way they are and how they got to be that way” (Morgan, 1998, p. 11).

Qualitative designs are currently used in studies of health behavior, education, public relations and communications, sociology, international studies, psychology, management, social work, and more relevant fields (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Qualitative is meant to help seek answers to human behavior. Qualitative methods help to put the *why* and *how* in situations by calling upon those that “know” more information than the researcher. Examples of qualitative research methods include content analyses, in-depth interviews, and focus groups. Qualitative methods were selected for this study to gain a richer understanding of what a master’s degree student needs are when transitioning to graduate school and to seek knowledge about what it would take to create successful outreach programs to satisfy these needs.

Overall, the value of qualitative research lies in its exploratory and explanatory nature (Attride-Stirling, 2001). The style of qualitative methodology will allow trends in practices to surface, as well as help create a strategic plan for those practices and tactics. This study’s primary goals were to research experiences, personal opinions, and learn information about the transition of master’s degree students, in order to make inferences and suggestions. The lessons and specific details determining what graduate students value and how future effective outreach transition programs may be constructed were the most crucial results of this study. These findings will be used in construction of strategies for future outreach for graduate schools, including Kansas State University.

Overall, the research tested what programming focused on transitioning graduate students exists within Kansas State University. The researcher sought to test the relevance and

application of the relationship management theory in university transition efforts and learn what transitioning graduate students need during their first semester at Kansas State University. In-depth interviews were the method selected for this pilot study.

In-depth Interviews

An in-depth interview is a first person account gathered through intimate conversation. This type of detail and one-on-one communication is needed for such a study as this. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) suggest the validity of such a method “interview talk should bear a relevant, truthful, and reliable relationship to empirical facts (p. 173).” Through learning about the views of master’s degree students’ transition and tactics to help with it, firsthand accounts of the new students were important for the researcher to gather. In-depth interviews will help satisfy that need. Interviews are dyadic in nature and are suited to understand a social actor’s experience, knowledge, and overall view of the world. People are selected to be interviewed by researchers if their experience is central to the research problem in some way. Many interviewees are recruited for their expertise in a skill or discipline or simply because their role in a given environment (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Lindlof and Taylor (2011) interpret qualitative interviews as “vehicles for exploring people’s explanations.” Interviews may be able to achieve efficiency in data collection which may not be found through quantitative methods. There are various ways in which interviewees may be identified. The status of the interviewee is the determinant in how an interview is classified. Among the different forms of interviews, for this study the researcher used informant style interviews because “informants inform the researcher about the scenes history, customs, and rituals; the local “lingo;” the identities and actions of the key players; and so forth (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011.) The people who make good informants often are; “veterans” of the scene, are

viewed as reliable sources, and can speak on the social parts of a given scene (Lindlof & Taylor 2011). All interviews with Kansas State University graduate program directors, graduate school administration, and students were done in person. In-depth interviews with experts and those affected by research problem, [transitioning students] within Kansas State University helped to support the problem statement of limited outreach to master's degree students.

Site Description

The Kansas State University was founded in 1863 with the university as the first land-grant institution under the Morrill Act. The student body consists of approximately 18,500 undergraduate and more than 4,500 graduate students. Kansas State University is located on a campus of 668 acres in Manhattan, a progressive community of approximately 50,000 people. Kansas State University offers 67 masters and 44 doctoral degree programs. The Graduate School office is housed in historic Fairchild Hall (<http://www.k-state.edu/grad/students/prospective.html>).

Sample Description

Two primary participant categories composed this study: 1) Kansas State University “experts” and 2) “New” graduate students currently attending Kansas State University. The “experts” for this study include Graduate Program Directors (GPDs) from nine different graduate programs at Kansas State University: Agriculture Economics, Master of Public Health, Mechanical Engineering, Computer Science, Masters of Business Administration and Masters of Accountancy, Agronomy, Music, Family Studies & Human Services, and Grain Science. These programs are administratively house in six of the nine academic colleges at Kansas State University.

The “experts” also included two Kansas State University graduate school administrators. Previous studies deem in-depth interviews as a means of studying individuals’ experiences and gaining their perspectives on issues (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). This was the rationale for the researcher’s decision to conduct in-depth interviews and utilize these key individuals. It was important for the researcher to align the Kansas State University experts interviewed with the master’s degree programs of the participant students interviewed so that outreach and recipients of those efforts were consistent.

Current Kansas State University students were recruited to participate in the in-depth interviews through e-mails. These particular students were targeted to serve as the research sample because they were still in the graduate school transition process. All student participants began their master’s degree programs in January 2013 and thus are still considered in the transition period.

The researcher used three related, yet slightly different sets of interview questions based on the status of interviewees. First, questions were consistent among all student interviews. Then, the questions were all the same among the graduate program directors. Lastly, the Kansas State University graduate school administrators were both asked the same questions as well. Questions for each population were based on his or her perceived experience with the topic. The inquiries followed the study’s research questions and addressed as many of the study’s key constructs as possible. The wording of questions was conversational, comfortable, simple, and forthright (Krueger, 1998). The “think back” question approach was utilized by primarily asking the participants to reflect on their personal experiences or current recollections when responding to specific questions (Krueger, 1998). Appendices B, C, and D detail the questions used for all in-depth interviews conducted in the study.

Data Collection Procedure

After approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) committee for research involving human subjects at Kansas State University was obtained, data collection was begun. All participants of the research were informed of the purpose of study through email and all participants verified that information they provided may be used by the Kansas State University Graduate School and documented by the researcher. They were informed that their names would remain confidential from the printed research. They verified that they understood the purpose of the research and their participation in the study by stating their consent in a return email to the researcher. Email consent was gathered for all participants and formal consent forms (*See Appendix E*) were sent to all graduate program directors, signed, and received through campus mail.

All participants were originally contacted via email and asked to participate in the in-depth interview. The researcher extracted their e-mail addresses, which were publicly available on university websites and within the Zimbra webmail system of Kansas State University. Upon attainment of the addresses, the researcher sent an e-mail defining the study's purpose and procedure and requesting their participation in this study.

The most common starting point for recruitment is a list of potential participants (Morgan, 1998). This existing list, utilized by the researcher, was obtained by means of the Kansas State University Graduate School personnel. The list was a current and accurate representation of new master's degree students from specific graduate programs. The researcher aligned the master's degree programs of the students with the Kansas State University graduate program directors who were interviewed. Those individuals that fit the sample criterion were extracted. There were 104 names on this list. All participants were originally contacted via email, on behalf of the Kansas State University Graduate School Dean, in this initial contact, the

researcher defined the study's purpose and procedure and requesting participation in this study. The researcher then sent a follow-up email, stating the same concept. This message was also emailed to the designate graduate program directors who were encouraged to forward it on to specific [first semester] master's degree students. Lastly, the researcher used Kansas State University's website "People Search" to retrieve the 24 telephone numbers of graduate students who had not responded. All 24 individuals were called. Overall, each potential participant on sample list had the opportunity to participate in the researchers study on four different occasions. One Kansas State University administrator, ten students, and nine graduate program directors responded and were included in the research. One other Kansas State University graduate school administrator was met by the researcher, and in person an interview was set up.

The method of data collection used in this study was one-on-one, confidential, in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted in person between the timeframe of March 22nd, 2013- April 26th, 2013. All 21 interview conversations were audio recorded and digital files were transcribed verbatim upon completion of the study. Responses from all interviews completed in this study were paraphrased to protect the anonymity of all involved in the research. As the interviews were confidential, all interviews [graduate program directors, graduate school administrators, and students] are not identified. Full interview transcriptions are available upon request to the researcher. In such cases, the researcher will redact all names and identifying information to maintain confidentiality of participants.

Data Analysis

When the data collection was completed, the interviews were evaluated by qualitative technique. The researcher utilized coding to analyze and interpret the study's results, related them back to the research questions and drew conclusions to the study's key constructs [personal

and strategic communication, current Kansas State University transition outreach, other existing graduate level initiatives, and graduate student needs]. One interview was then selected by the researcher and another coder looking for major themes within the interview. The results produced an inter-coder reliability of 80%. The researcher then listened to all audio recordings of the 21 in-depth interviews and read the transcriptions of each interview. Key constructs were identified and used to sort statements from the interviews. Within each construct, the researcher analyzed the presence of emerging themes based on the research questions. Responses that were repeatedly mentioned were extracted and analyzed further. Conclusions and suggestions were drawn from the researcher's interpretation of organized data.

Chapter 4 - Results

The aim of this study was to identify the outreach efforts of Kansas State University in regards to transitioning graduate students. The study also examined the experiences of master's degree students in order to learn best practices for such transitioning efforts. Specifically, the study examined the recollections of nine Kansas State University graduate program directors, two graduate school administrators, and the personal experiences of ten first-semester master's degree students.

The method of data collection used in this study was one-on-one, confidential, in-depth interviews. Responses from all interviews completed in this study were paraphrased to protect the anonymity of all involved in the research. This chapter presents the key findings gathered from the 21 in-depth interviews conducted in this study. The results are organized by emerging themes from the research questions and questions asked in the interviews. With the purpose of determining what program and university-wide efforts exist to help with graduate student transition, this chapter emphasizes the information gained from the graduate program directors and the graduate school administrators. Suggestions were drawn from the interpretation of organized data.

Graduate Program Directors

Importance of Personal Contact

RQ1 asked: *How is relationship-building incorporated in Kansas State University for master's degree students during their transition into graduate school?* Accordingly, the interviews explored the extent to which the Kansas State University graduate programs use personal contact to reach out to transitioning graduate students. The Kansas State University

programs vary in the amount of personal contact they give master's degree students as they transition into graduate school. The researcher asked each graduate program director about their specific outreach and communication efforts in transitioning their incoming graduate students. Many recognized the necessity of personal and deliberate contact. One GPD explained that once a student gets accepted into their program, they [that GPD] send a personalized congratulatory email. The student then receives a follow-up email explaining how to get their log-in information and how to enroll in classes, and other important items. This GPD gathers content from the Graduate School website for this email. Rather than sending the student to this information, the GPD wants to provide information directly to them in case they have questions.

This graduate program's administrative assistant [full-time staff member] sends a letter to the accepted student with the GPD's signature to make it seem more personal. A few GPDs discussed using "welcome" letters and/or emails, however, the researcher found that no efforts were quite as deliberate as those of the abovementioned GPD. That particular GPD makes certain that anyone who has contacted their graduate program gets sent a personalized email within 24 hours. The intent of this personal interaction early in the recruiting stage is to establish a personal connection and ensure each student is comfortable asking questions. The GPD stated that if such a personal connection is established, it will be helpful in ensuring the student that it is okay to ask questions in the future. The GPD believes that reciprocal communication early in the inquiry and then also throughout students' admission and transition experiences facilitates master's degree students' success. Another GPD recalled their program's practice of sending a "welcome" email after a student's admission, and then a follow-up email two weeks later. This second email consists of helpful links to the university and corresponding department and is sent by the GPD.

Two other GPDs emphasized that pairing an incoming student with a faculty member with similar interests is crucial in helping the student. One GPD selects a faculty member that they think is a good match to meet with or otherwise contact the potential student prior to coming to campus in attempts to address their needs. Another GPD confirmed that having faculty meet with prospective students helps direct the student to the best major professor. This GPD also stressed the importance of incoming students interacting with the program's staff so that students immediately know who to go to for questions and guidance.

A different GPD believes that the responsibility of a graduate student's transition lies with the incoming student's major professor alone and not the program director or staff. The belief is that the major professor is entirely responsible for ensuring the student's transition into graduate school is smooth. This graduate program did not have any programmatic contact with the student after their acceptance. With this, each major professor is encouraged to orient their mentee [incoming graduate student] in this particular graduate program.

Another GPD discussed the necessity of treating each incoming student appropriately based on his or her residential "category:" 1) domestic-- those from the area and familiar with Kansas State or 2) international--those from out of the country. This GPD also treated 3) non-traditional- students who have been out of school for a few years or more as a category with particular needs. The GPD believed that targeted and catered efforts are needed for each of these audiences and stressed the importance of strategic communication. The GPD acknowledged that those three populations have different needs. The GPD wants more strategic efforts to address these various needs. It was suggested that activities be catered to each of these populations, based on the fundamental public relations principle of knowing one's audience.

Another GPD echoed the importance of communication with incoming students. They stated that students do not always discuss their concerns, necessitating proactive and anticipatory communication. The GPD questioned if their program was communicating effectively and acknowledged that this is a constant concern. This GPD was the only one who highly stressed how crucial it was to cater to each individual student's needs and personalize communication accordingly.

The most personal contact with an incoming student is to meet with them face-to-face and interact with them in person. The researcher learned from the study that the graduate programs with the financial resources to do so, strive to bring the student in as soon as possible for a face-to-face visit to recruit, advise, and transition that individual early. This was mentioned in two of the interviews. The seven other interviewees reported that their communication with a student prior to campus arrival was through email. All of the GPDs in the study expressed understanding that strong personal connection between faculty and incoming master's degree students is important. The overall tactics and efforts to reach out to transitioning master's degree students varied across programs.

Current Kansas State University Outreach

RQ2 asked: *What types of institutional programming and efforts are there during transition for master's degree students at Kansas State University?* To help answer this question, the researcher asked each GPD about their program's specific efforts to help transition their graduate students. The researcher found that each graduate program at Kansas State University has the freedom to create and implement its own transition initiatives for incoming master's degree students. The study found that none of the graduate programs had exactly the same formula for how they transition their graduate students. Many have programmatic

orientations while others depend on major professors to take on the responsibility of mentoring. The study found that, if offered, orientations are either the week before fall instruction begins or the first week of school. Some GPDs encourage their students to attend both [Graduate School and specific graduate program] orientations. One of the GPDs who helped facilitate an orientation within their program described the itinerary as such:

- synopsis of the program
- how to get started with graduate school
- meet and greet with graduate faculty

Beyond sending emails soon after a student's acceptance, one GPD mentioned the desire for and current efforts to create videos to describe programmatic details. These videos will, ideally, be sent and made available to transitioning graduate students. They praised their own efforts to academically transition their incoming students, but also noted deficiencies in helping students with the more practical items. The GPD mentioned their confidence in the content knowledge of the incoming master's degree students but realizes that the program offers no assistance in items of socialization or housing.

In another graduate program, the orientation is strategic and prescribed. The agenda consists of a full-day orientation. The morning is dedicated to getting to know the incoming students and to educating them about the program. This GPD brings in graduate school administration, as well as other program-specific personnel to introduce themselves and meet the students. Then, interaction occurs between first and second-year graduate students, program faculty, and even alumni of that graduate program. In the afternoon, the alumni serve on a question and answer panel for the incoming students. Only the first and second-year students

remain for the rest of the orientation during which the second -year students present another panel and the students continue to get to know one another.

Whereas some orientations and efforts are organized and documented, other GPDs admitted that their transition efforts are much less formal. One GPD noted that while nothing is done programmatically, efforts are still organically conducted to help transition the students in their program. A GPD mentioned that within their department it is understood by all of the graduate faculty members that they all must take on the responsibility of advising, training, and transitioning the students. It is the philosophy of the graduate program, the GPD said. This GPD mentioned this outreach is expected of every faculty member but that no formal programs are specifically structured for the transition of graduate students, especially in regards to social orientation. The GPD was confident that students receive guidance in advising but not necessarily in graduate school socialization.

In regards to socially assimilating their graduate students, the researcher learned from another GPD about a yearly “mixer.” This event takes place each fall, and faculty and students interact outside of orientation. This is habitual outreach. The GPD said that this effort is institutionalized from previous GPDs. The outreach’s specific intent is not to transition graduate students, but it is an event that does help in such efforts. The GPD mentioned that more structured initiatives would help to better transition graduate students into their program. Regarding the creation of these initiatives, a GPD also mentioned that it takes time, and that having an incentive to be the GPD would help. They mentioned a desire for acknowledgement, in some way, of extra work that they do in their positions to help graduate students.

Overall, some graduate programs strategically interact with their incomings students, and others do not. A few GPDs mentioned their intentional outreach shortly after the admission of

the student and the use of personalized welcome letters. More than half of the GPD participants in the study mentioned the existence of program-specific orientations. This is not consistent, however, across campus.

International Students and Out-of-State Student Outreach

When asked if they catered any particular efforts to international or out-of-state graduate students, one GPD admitted that their graduate program did not excel at that practice. The GPD acknowledged that their program used to be more intentional about reaching out to these populations but was unsure as to why those efforts have since decreased.

Another GPD described the difficulties that international students, especially, face. The GPD admitted that they do not know how to deal with all the issues and concerns of [international students]. The GPD mentioned that it is hard to know what this population of students needs because of either a language barrier or the students' reluctance to ask for assistance. Another GPD echoed this sentiment and said that the unintended-to transition issues faced by international students may be culturally related. This GPD mentioned that international students do not often challenge the professors or question them as much as domestic students do. The idea of questioning authority in any way may not be deemed appropriate by some international students, a GPD said, and this might factor into the communication problems with these students. The GPD attested that having a diverse faculty in any graduate program will help in this regard, and that their program actually has improved the diversity of their staff. The researcher also found from the interviews that campus offices dedicated to international students are helpful in their transition and are utilized by graduate programs.

Many of the study's students and faculty mentioned as helpful the International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) Office at Kansas State. The initiatives and outreach of this program

seem to be effective and heavily relied upon by almost all of the GPDs in their effort to assist in the transitioning of their incoming graduate students. A GPD acknowledged that when it comes to efforts meant for international students particularly, their program did not offer anything specifically, but asserted that, they (incoming international students) have to go through the university's (ISSS) orientation, and that this seems to help. None of the graduate programs have anything in their own programming that is aimed specifically towards international students or out-of-state students. The researcher was not able to identify any concrete programming or initiatives dedicated strictly to incoming international students or out-of-state students involved in this study. All GPDs at Kansas State University acknowledged this population of students had needs, but that this was true for all master's degree students transitioning into graduate school.

Graduate Student Needs

Through this study the researcher sought to determine what needs of transitioning graduate students to help answer RQ3, which asked: *What are the needs of new master's degree students during their transition into Kansas State University's Graduate School?* The researcher asked each GPD what they believed graduate students need while transitioning into their master's degree program and graduate school in general. Though some GPDs had similarities, the study found no two GPDs expressed the same views

One GPD believed that graduate students have a lot of practical issues when beginning graduate school. The GPD proceeded to say that Kansas State University must have programs to help graduate students settle in with housing, insurance, and other lifestyle issues because that is not something their program assists with. The GPD stated that they are unaware how to alleviate these problems of graduate students as they transition.

Another GPD also acknowledged these practical struggles that graduate students face. The GPD mentioned the necessity of master's degree students to confirm their housing. This GPD explained that their program will apprise the student of options but will not do the work for the student. The GPD believes that the students helping themselves in such practical items are all a part of their training as adults. The participant did, however, acknowledge that it's important to recognize that things are not quite as obvious as graduate faculty may think. The GPD mentioned that although graduate faculty should let the incoming student know where to find their answers, it is up to the student to ultimately satisfy their own practical needs.

Housing

One GPD stressed the issues of housing with his graduate students and described the efforts of their program to help address this need. This GPD specifically asks all incoming students what housing issues they have. Next, the GPD sends the students an email with websites related to housing options as well as current master's degree students' contact information to encourage a housing dialogue. Through the subsequent conversations and correspondence, new students are able to learn their options. The GPD says that this effort seems to satisfy the very prominent housing needs of all graduate students transitioning into their master's degree program. Another GPD sees the value in educating graduate students on not only particular housing items, but also on more lifestyle and practical concerns that the incoming student might have. Housing, understanding renters' rights, medical resources, dentist options, daycares, and public transportation are among the other practical needs that were mentioned by a few of the GPDs interviewed.

Another GPD stated that finances are an additional significant concern. They mentioned that graduate school may be the start to some students setting their own pace financially.

Another GPD stated that graduate students without funding are more likely to struggle if graduate programs do not give them attention and keep track of them. The GPD mentioned that finances always seem to be concern for transitioning graduate students are concerned about, yet they [the GPD] does not feel confident enough to help with this. Their assumption was that the Office of Financial Assistance takes care of that outreach.

Course scheduling

Help with course scheduling is another need the GPDs identified. One GPD was in favor of providing students with a standard two-year coursework plan that the students can later adjust as they become more comfortable with the process. Providing all course options to new graduate students, without guidance on which ones to take is overwhelming for the students, according to a GPD. The GPD stated that it is the responsibility of the graduate program director to ensure that the student makes knowledgeable course selection decisions. This sentiment was echoed by another GPD who asserted that the number one priority should be to ensure that students begin on track with the right courses and know how to time their coursework. A GPD mentioned that being properly advised and properly connected to faculty is a significant challenge.

Another GPD also acknowledged this need for mentorship for all incoming master's degree students. They said that adjusting to master's degree students' expectations could be taught to a mentee. One GPD acknowledged a potential flaw in a department's graduate school program is that faculty might not understand or know what a student really desires or who in a program needs support. However, the GPD admitted that there is limited time for faculty to really inquire and assess this, so attention to this area will probably not increase.

Skills

Another struggle that a GPD stated graduate students face during their transition involves their communication and writing skills. The GPD remarked that it would be beneficial to have more resources or universal outreach that would help incoming students become more effective communicators. The needs of international students in these areas were stressed by a couple of the GPDs. However, not all GPDs identified the same needs. Overall, the researcher inferred from the interviews that the Kansas State University GPDs in this study saw housing, course selection, and financial aid as the primary needs of graduate students. A few GPDs stated that although they might not fully understand what students need while transitioning into graduate school, they [GPDs] believe that existing groups of current graduate students are supportive and beneficial to incoming students.

Student Organizations

A third of the GPDs who participated in the study discussed the existence and importance of student organizations when attempting to transition incoming graduate students. The researcher inquired about programs' personal outreach, the programmatic efforts, and the needs of the transitioning graduate students. The presence of student organizations was brought up in each one of these inquiries by three of the nine graduate program directors.

The Grain Science Graduate Students Organization (GSGSO) is an organization dedicated to showing grain science graduate students around campus. They have monthly meetings, speakers, and service projects, the graduate program director stated. According to the GPD, because of the increase in activity and effectiveness this club has brought to the department, the GPD is satisfied with its existence and role in the program. When questioned on what key components were needed to duplicate this in other groups, the GPD advised that it is

important for the faculty/advisor to proactively identify the leaders and members early on in their experience so they you can keep a succession of active leaders in the club. The founders of the GSGSO were out-of- state students that came from other universities with active clubs and active students, and they wanted to see it happen at Kansas State University.

Another graduate student organization that exists is the Agronomy Graduate Student Association (AGSA). AGSA is helpful in transitioning the incoming students into the master's degree program according to the GPD associated with this organization. The GPD proudly stated that the current graduate students in AGSA do just as much, if not more, for the incoming students' assimilation as the faculty.

Not all graduate programs have graduate student organizations. However, GPDs of the departments that do have them believed the organizations had a positive impact on not only the department, but also the current graduate members of the organization, and especially the incoming master's degree students. Beyond the graduate student groups, the researcher learned of specific Kansas State University departments and offices that were said to alleviate some stress for an incoming master's degree student. This type of student-to-student component was identified by all GPDs interviewed as critical in the transition of incoming students.

Student-to-Student Interaction

Some graduate programs facilitate interaction between incoming students and current students. This practice is an effort to help transition and assist new master's degree students in their socialization process. A GPD stated that every time a new student makes a campus visit, they ensure that this student meets at least one other graduate student. Part of the rationale for making this connection is that the GPD might not be the right person to ask about housing and other practical items.

The study revealed perceived differences between incoming student to current student communication and, incoming student faculty communication. A GPD mentioned that interaction with the other graduate students is most beneficial because it is easier for students to establish trust and find commonalities with other graduate students. All GPDs that mentioned the value of student-to-student interaction during transition pointed to students feeling more comfortable asking questions of their peers or other graduate students rather than of graduate faculty. The study found the opinion that students are better equipped to help fellow students with so-called “practical” needs. A fellow student knows more about what an incoming student is thinking and is concerned with, acknowledged one GPD.

Even new student-to-new student interaction was viewed as beneficial. One GPD stated that if first-year graduate students have not interacted with current students before arriving, then getting them to interact with each other, as new students is helpful. Overall, the GPDs agreed that facilitating interaction with students in social or other ways as quickly as possible is important because of the bonding that will occur.

The “communication hierarchy” that exists in society is one of the reasons that another GPD believed student-to-student interaction was the most comfortable. They compared incoming students talking to graduate faculty, to GPDs, and the form of communication they [GPDs] have with higher administration of Kansas State University. The GPD felt these varied roles contribute to students’ reluctance to communicate openly and frequently with faculty.

A GPD asserted that students will learn more from each other than from the faculty and the graduate program. They said that graduate faculty might mistakenly assume that knowledge and training has to come from the university and the professors. This GPD goes as far as to initially advise incoming students to spend time with other current graduate students because

they (the transitioning student) will learn more about the graduate program and their classes from each other than they will from their faculty. The GPD thought that there is a social component to the learning and the development of graduate students that can result only from student-to-student interaction. They believed facilitating this is more important than anything else when it comes to welcoming and properly transitioning incoming graduate students into their program.

There was discussion with every GPD regarding the critical value of student-to-student interaction. All GPDs emphasized the differences between student-faculty communication and peer-to-peer communication, and favored the student interaction during the transition phase of their incoming master's degree students. The GPDs' responses were the most similar when it came to this final theme. All answers came from the graduate program level, yet the researcher sought to explore the efforts, experiences, and knowledge of Kansas State University graduate administrators as well.

Graduate School Administrators

Importance of Personal Contact

To explore RQ1, the interviews inquired about personal contact as a method of reaching out to transitioning graduate students. The interviews with the participants who were Kansas State University graduate school administrators highlighted the efforts of the University's Graduate School as a whole.

One graduate school administrator discussed a summer calling campaign outreach program that began last year. They explained that the Graduate School's research assistant called every graduate student (masters and doctoral) enrolled for the fall semester to welcome them to Kansas State University. The graduate school purchased calling cards for this effort which took place at the end of July. This outreach's intent was to help answer any questions the

transitioning students had, remind them of the graduate school orientation, and to overall make a personal contact from Kansas State University. The graduate school also has some undergraduate research opportunities that serve as early transition relationship building.

According to the graduate school administrator, and the Kansas State University graduate school website, the Summer Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (SUROP) at Kansas State University provides undergraduates from under-represented groups a first-hand experience with Kansas State University, the research process, and faculty members. This experience is designed to help students prepare for graduate school and other advanced study. Through SUROP students spend nine weeks during the summer at K-State working closely with faculty members as part of their research teams. Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) programs at Kansas State University are also in the summer months with a similar aim of research, personnel, and graduate school introduction. The administrator said that the personal connection gained through these programs is helpful in the transition of those graduate students when they enroll and arrive at Kansas State University because they have already made those connections with graduate faculty and students during the summer. Once those students enroll at Kansas State University, they typically have many of their questions already answered. The administrator added that since most participants in these research programs are from underrepresented groups, that extra touch and attention that Kansas State has dedicated to them is important. The mentoring exists early with these students and ultimately assists with the transition of those incoming students.

The administrator acknowledged that personal outreach is helpful to any master's degree student, especially international students. They mentioned that the personal contact of those in

ISSS should be reinforced by individual programs around campus. They stated that all targeted communication with all incoming students is vital to smooth transition.

The administrator said that ideally, every graduate student would receive a personalized phone call from the graduate school and their individual program within 4-6 weeks of their admission, though they acknowledged that privacy laws regarding students' personal information stand in the way of that. This kind of strategic and intentional communication is something that the administrator stressed during the interview. Beyond these efforts, the administrator said that because of Kansas State University's decentralized nature, the graduate school typically leaves the transition of the graduate students specifically to their individual programs and departments.

Analysis of the current situation at Kansas State University

Both of the graduate school administrators in this study were asked about the specific transition efforts that the Kansas State University graduate school provides for incoming graduate students. Their responses helped the researcher to answer RQ2 of this study. The largest transition program offered to all incoming master's degree students is the Graduate School's new student orientation.

The Graduate School's new student orientation was described as a one-day non-mandatory, general graduate student orientation held each semester the week before instruction begins. It aims to inform students about what to expect in graduate school. It was stated that this is a great way for incoming students to learn about the university-wide resources available to them as graduate students. There is a campus services fair during orientation that enables students to visit with representatives of helpful offices and resources on campus. Early each semester the graduate school also offers workshops to help prepare master's degree students for success in their academic careers. A "meet the dean" program is currently being developed

along with graduate school staff sessions, said one administrator. This way all students, but especially first- year master's degree students, feel comfortable interacting with and asking questions of important personnel. All students are strongly encouraged to attend this graduate student orientation and graduate teaching assistants are encouraged to attend the Center for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning's graduate teaching assistantship workshop as well to help prepare for the position and expectations of the role.

The administrators both discussed the importance of networking opportunities for transitioning graduate students. These efforts help graduate students meet with not only other students, but also graduate faculty, and other members of the graduate administration team. One administrator acknowledged that the president of Kansas State University has been extremely helpful with providing opportunities such as a fall graduate school football tailgate event. The other graduate school administrator noted a high receptivity and approachability of the president of the university, the provost, and Graduate School Dean. A participant also mentioned the graduate school ice cream social that happens once each semester. This gathering fosters getting to know each other, regardless of discipline or program of study. Both graduate school administrators described the dynamic between the graduate school and the university's graduate programs as well as their knowledge of the programs' transition efforts.

Kansas State University was described by both as a decentralized university, with each graduate program being primarily responsible for their own specific efforts. When it comes to transitioning incoming graduate students, though, some programs do a lot of contact through email and phone, whereas some do not do anything. There are often programmatic orientations and social events, recalled one graduate school administrator. One graduate school administrator highly encourages all graduate programs to have their own formal orientations as well as produce

a program-specific online handbook. These efforts could help address incoming students' questions during their transition process. The "landscape" of what is done from program to program is seemingly uneven, according to one Kansas State University graduate school administrator. The other administrator mentioned that each graduate program's efforts depend on the commitment of that GPD to put forth initiatives such as a formal orientation.

Overall, some graduate programs strategically interact with their incomings students, and others do not. Some campus transition resources are utilized. There are no consistent directives among departments or Kansas State University Graduate School that strive to specifically address graduate student transition. One administrator asserted that they would like to do more as a graduate school.

International Student and Out-of-State Student Outreach

Both of the graduate school administrators who participated in this study stressed the importance of specific outreach, especially for transitioning international graduate students. They discussed that at the graduate school-level there are not specific efforts or transition initiatives for either of these groups however, they identified the many efforts of ISSS. The two-day required international orientation coordinated by ISSS was discussed in this study.

This orientation is additional to the Graduate School's new student orientation. This one, however, is strictly dedicated to international students and focuses on cultural differences, staying connected to advisors, classroom expectations, and overall tips for how to be successful in an American institution. ISSS organizations were described as "fabulous" in their personal outreach and attention to the incoming international master's degree students.

The specific efforts of Kansas State University's ISSS were commended by both administrators. The participants both praised the intentional outreach by this university office

and discussed adapting their efforts to help out-of-state and other transitioning graduate students. Overall, the international student population is one that the administrators felt was critical and apart from the aforementioned Graduate School's calling campaign aforementioned, they entrust ISSS to take the efforts necessary to properly transition the students.

Graduate Student Needs

In accordance to RQ3 it was important for the researcher to ask the Kansas State University graduate school administrators their thoughts on what the needs of graduate students were. Like the GPDs, they identified social support as well as practical items in regards to a student's environment. Overall, it was said that students need housing, office space, and attention from faculty members and current students.

Overall, the graduate faculty saw assistantship information, area of focus, and financial aid as additional needs of graduate students as they transition into their master's degree programs. There was a strong need mentioned to link students to practical items (especially international students). It was mentioned that international students need to know what is important to bring when they arrive in the U.S. and then Kansas (i.e. potentially a sleeping bag, extra money for an apartment's deposit, used furniture, and transportation logistics). One participant acknowledged the struggles there are in reaching out to international students due to their international phone numbers or deactivated email addresses. These were mentioned as hindrances in certain personal efforts for some.

A graduate school administrator summarized the needs of graduate students as the following:

- 1) To understand that classes and expectations of instructors are different from those of undergraduate school;
- 2) To understand that everyone must learn time management skills to avoid procrastination;

3) To understand the role of the graduate school versus their department and how to work with both entities;

4) To understand the culture and dynamic of their specific culture.

Graduate students are advised by a graduate administrator in this study to stay informed of campus/departmental speakers, get engaged in student organizations, and to utilize all of the offices, services, and resources that Kansas State University offers.

The ISSS office, the Center for Advancement of Teaching and Learning, and the Non-Traditional Student Services offices were identified as helpful campus resources. Overall, the graduate school administrators suggested that all incoming graduate students could use more personal, general university programs, and non-academic lifestyle information to assist in a well-rounded and fulfilling transition experience into their master's degree program.

Student-to-Student Interaction Discussion

A common theme within all of the interviews was the importance placed on the interaction between students. The primary dynamic that the researcher discussed was of current master's degree students and incoming master's degree students, within a peer group. One graduate school administrator stated that peers are the primary socializers of incoming graduate students and that the best way to alleviate stress, through social support.

There are more than 400 organizations for and comprised by students in the Kansas State University Office of Student Activities and Services. Graduate Student Council (GSC) is one of those groups and is the governing body for graduate students. Getting involved in this organization is one opportunity that an administrator discussed in this study. Engaging in leadership opportunities like GSC in graduate school can help enrich their overall experience. Also, there are departmental organizations that are geared toward the graduate student population and exist in particular graduate programs that help facilitate such interaction.

A graduate school administrator stated that a key for success of a master's degree student is for them not to get isolated. They need to feel a part of something and people within a community. A suggestion by one of the administrators was to have a picnic for all graduate students at the beginning of the year to help them socialize with other students and graduate school staff, but also to let all students know that the graduate school works to enhance their master's degree experience. One participant discussed how effective some programs' student organizations are. They expressed that many organizations are really good at making a personal connection and reaching out to these incoming students.

Graduate School Needs

In the study, the researcher was able to not only identify the transition programs and outreach that existed at Kansas State University, but also the needs of master's degree students during this time. Through the in-depth interviews with the graduate school administrators, this study also helped to identify needs that the Kansas State University graduate school has in order to better provide transition outreach to incoming master's degree students.

According to one of the graduate school administrators in the study, graduate schools in general have been a highlighted within the last three years all across the United States. Most of the programs and initiatives of Kansas State University, regarding transition, are in their infancy. With that, they stated that in order for the Kansas State Graduate School to be able to provide continuous and more transition outreach from this point forward, sufficient staffing is a necessity. If the Kansas State Graduate School were to obtain the financial support to create a student services coordinator position, it would benefit the Graduate School and the students within, according to the administrator. This coordinator would be able to assist in advising GSC, providing networking opportunities for students, creating programs to communicate with

transitioning students, and implement other graduate student organizations like a student ambassador program.

The job duties of these ambassadors would be deliberate and based on a more in-depth assessment of what graduate students need, based on potential future research. Identifying the many needs through a large cross-section of students within the graduate school would help the graduate school determine future efforts. Another way that the graduate school would be better enabled to assist in a graduate student experience, is to be in a position to provide more compensation to GPD's who have taken on this responsibility. The added position incentive could help serve as motivation to busy GPDs to commit time in implementing programs and creative initiatives for incoming graduate students and show that the work they do is valuable.

The administrators made it clear, through the research, that the first thing that needs to be done before transitioning graduate students, is for programs to know exactly who is coming to Kansas State University and being proactive about finding these answers early in the summer. Doing this enables the programs to be aware on whom to invest in and start planning to transition into Kansas State University. Both of the graduate school administrators said that a master's degree student transition is key to not only the success of their first semester, but also helps assist in overall retention and completion of their graduate degree. Through these interviews, the study found that administrators at Kansas State University see the value of a master's degree student transition, and are dedicated to help enhance the already existing efforts as much as financially and physically possible at this time.

Transitioning Master's Degree Students

Importance of Personal Contact and Strategic Communication

Through the interviews with the transitioning master's degree students, the level of use of personal contact as a means to reach out to transitioning graduate students was explored. In assessing the study's RQ1 the researcher asked each graduate student participant about the specific outreach and communication that they recall experiencing throughout their transition period [time of admission through their current first semester of graduate school].

As found in the GPD interviews, emails, phone calls, and in person contact are all options as forms of communication between the students, program faculty and graduate school administrators. In the study, nine out of the ten students interviewed preferred method of communication during their transition period to be face-to-face contact. They said that it feels like a more real conversation when you can look at someone in the eyes, and it is more conversational and comfortable. The second form of communication that the participants from this study preferred was email. Through email the respondents are able to go back and refer to information given and it is a convenient form of communication when face-to-face contact is not feasible.

One student was extremely dissatisfied with the lack of personal contact they had experienced in their program thus far. This student transferred from another university and said that they were used to having communication relationships with their professors and fellow students. Kansas State University, however, was too large for any of that one-on-one contact to happen, according to the participant. While another student acknowledged the reciprocal nature of an incoming student's dynamic with their program's faculty. This participant is an

international student who had attended Kansas State University for their undergraduate degree and they asserted that a student shows their faculty effort then the faculty will try in return.

The study found that there is a lack of presence of any other initial contact besides use of email according to six of the ten graduate students in the study. The four students that received face-to-face contact were all those that had attended Kansas State University for their undergraduate degree and had formed relationships with their professors previously. Generally, the emails prior to arrival to campus, and meeting with graduate program directors, graduate faculty, and other students were the primary forms of contact that the participants received during their transition period into Kansas State University.

Analysis of the current situation at Kansas State University

The graduate students were asked about the specific transition efforts that they had received this semester. Responses to such inquiries helped the researcher to answer RQ2 of this study. Most students recalled having their graduate program orientation, while a few had attended the general graduate school orientation. None of the domestic students were able to pinpoint one specific outreach that really helped them with the transition initially. However, when questioned further, the items from their orientations that the participants found the most helpful were the GTA training, the interaction with other graduate students, and the meetings regarding expectations from their graduate program directors.

Those that had attended Kansas State University before could not provide the researcher with any details of specific transition efforts, because they stated they did not look for any nor need them. When asked if there was an orientation for their specific program, [as mentioned by some of the GPDs] one respondent to a one-on-interview casually stated that there might have been efforts but that they never read the emails. This student had recently done their

undergraduate degree at Kansas State University and so all “transition” efforts were lost or unutilized by the participant this spring.

One out-of-state participant expressed their desire for there to be more efforts from the program. They told the researcher that their transition experience was difficult because the faculty in their program assumed that the student knew everything about Kansas State University and how to be a GTA, whereas the student felt lost in it all. Efforts for the international students from ISSS were found in this study to be extremely helpful and did not go unnoticed according to the international graduate students interviewed.

International Student and Out-of-State Student Outreach

A couple of the GPDs expressed the concern of knowing what international students need, due to their reluctance to ask questions. One international participant, however, mentioned their complete level of comfort with seeking assistance. They felt comfortable asking questions and in return getting help from those around them. Two other international students acknowledged the ease of their transitions due to an international student organization through ISSS. They were extremely satisfied with their interaction with fellow graduate students from their country and felt their transition went smoothly because of that specific outreach. Those participants admitted to going to speak with their peers, rather than their GPDs, more if they had any questions regarding graduate school or Kansas State University.

The out-of-state participant was the most dissatisfied with their transition out of all of the students interviewed in the study. They attended their program and the graduate school orientation yet felt that there were a lot of practical items about the city and campus that were not explained to them. The participant expressed confusion with the course selection and major

professor selection process as well. Overall, there were no transition efforts specifically outlined for satisfying their out-of-state needs that the participant recalled experiencing.

Graduate Student Needs

In accordance to RQ3 it was important for the researcher to ask the Kansas State University graduate students what their current needs were and are during their master's degree program transition. The participants shared the same views of social support as well as practical items in regards to students' needs, which were discussed by the GPDs. Participant profiles of the students interviewed are provided in table 4.1. In order to determine if there were similarities or differences amongst the views of graduate program directors and students, the graduate students were advised by the researcher to outline their needs as a master's degree student. Student responses were as follows:

Direction/Major Professor selection - One student [out-of-state] was unclear on what area of focus they should have, what classes to take and who to go to for help during their transition process. The student expressed a lot of stress and pressure to select their advisor and did not feel adequately prepared to do so, and is not content with what they felt was decided out of haste. Another participant expressed their frustration with the lack of clarity they were given about selecting their main advisor. This student is a non-traditional student that returned to Kansas State to get their master's degree.

Graduate Research Assistant (GRA)/GTA Roles – The same two students that had concerns regarding the selection of their major professors and finding direction in their programs, feel inadequate with the knowledge they have as GRA/GTAs within their program. Clarity in this area, the students each mentioned would have been and would be helpful.

Surrounding area- Two of the international students and the out-of-state student stated that information on Manhattan and Kansas would have been helpful to know prior to arrival on campus. It was mentioned that their graduate program faculty seemed to “assume” that they knew where to go and what to do in this city, when they did not. Housing, where to shop, where to eat, what banks to use were all deficiencies of information provided to these participants during their transitions.

Financial options- One student was very discouraged by the lack of financial information that their program provided them during the participant’s first semester. This student was a transfer student and stated that the financial burden of graduate school was a need that they would have liked to have been guided more through.

The study revealed some positive transition experiences as well as some negative transition experiences. One student expressed that throughout their transition they were reaching out for assistance, not quite sure what to ask, looking up things online, yet they did not feel adequately informed about graduate school and their master’s degree program and comfortable with their transition. Clarity was identified as a large need for this out-of-state student.

Another student summarized their largest need in graduate school in one word: sleep. This participant graduated from Kansas State University and had a smooth transition process overall, they testified. Finances were a minor concern for this student but their program helped and the student has been pleased with their experience.

An international student mentioned that beyond housing needs they would appreciate getting provided some kind of mailing with cultural United States norms and clothing. Knowing how to approach people in America as well as how to obtain a phone would have been helpful

for this international student to have known. Knowing these things, the international participant felt, would have made their transition much smoother

Familiarity with the University

Transition into graduate school is not always difficult, depending on where the student attended previously. The four students that attended Kansas State University had far less to speak about in their interviews, due to their self-proclaimed comfort in their transition process. Either they did not seek out the efforts made towards them to help with transition or they did not know of any in particular. Regardless, the study found that if a student attended Kansas State University for undergraduate school and directly enrolled into graduate school, regardless of their individual program, they will have a much easier time transitioning than others who do not share the same background.

Campus Resources

Kansas State University has an abundant amount of campus services, offices, and departments that have the intent of supporting students. Through the methods of this study, the researcher identified those that were mentioned the most not only by students, but also by GPDs that direct their graduate students to these resources. ISSS, Office of Financial Assistance, the graduate school are the top three resources the study identified at Kansas State University that students utilized during their transition process.

Student –to-Student Interaction Discussion

Most of the participants in the study felt that during the transition process, it was helpful to talk to students rather than graduate faculty. The comfort level of asking questions and the empathy factors of the older graduate students are two of the reasons that the students stated they enjoy that interaction during their transition better. The participants also stated that when it

comes to questions about practical items, they feel more confident that their peers could guide them in the right direction, because of their [the peers'] recent experiences as well.

There were two students, one international student and one student [Kansas State University bachelor's degree recipient] however, that said they did not see a difference between their interactions with students versus their faculty. These two students thought the relationships were both equally as important as the other. None of the students informed the researcher that they preferred student-to-faculty over student-to-student interaction.

Tables

Table 4.1
Graduate Student Profiles

International students	3
Out-of-state students	1
Straight from Kansas State University undergraduate school	4
Came from the workforce to graduate school	1
Transfer student	1
Male	6
Female	4

Note: The table above represents the genders and background of the ten graduate students interviewed in this study. The numbers represent the amount of students that fit the description above.

Table 4.2

Trend Data- Graduate Program Directors & Graduate School Administrator Interviews

Primary method of communication is email	11
Has some type of structured programmatic transition efforts intended for graduate all students	11
Have structured transition efforts for international students besides utilization of International Student and Scholar Services	2
Have structured transition efforts specifically for out-of-state students	0
Find value in student-to-student interaction during the transition process	11
Would like to add to the already existing transition efforts for graduate students	11
Satisfied with their overall transition outreach and would not change anything	0
Graduate student needs involved housing, course selection, Financial Assistance, GTA/GRA assignments	11

Note: The table above represents the trends noticed from the 11 graduate school “experts” [graduate program directors and administrators] interviewed in this study. The numbers represent the number of participants that related to/mentioned the description above.

Table 4.3

Trend Data- Graduate Student Interviews

Face-to-Face contact is preferred method of communication	10
Intentional transition outreach experienced	8
Favored student-to-student over student-to-faculty interaction	8
Had a difficult transition experience in some way	5
Satisfied with their overall transition experience	5
Graduate student needs involved housing, course selection, Financial Assistance, GTA/GRA assignments (any or all)	10

Note: The table above represents the trends identified from the 10 graduate interviewed in this study. The numbers represent the number of participants that related to/mentioned the description above.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

The primary goal of this exploratory study was to assist in making suggestions for and to add to the existing transition efforts of the Kansas State University Graduate School for master's degree students. There are a variety of graduate students at Kansas State University with many different graduate program experiences. Due to the heterogeneous populations of graduate students, the study found strategic communication concepts were important. GPDs and administrators of the Graduate School acknowledged the necessity to target communication and efforts to the different populations of incoming graduate students, regardless of whether specific programs existed to align with this belief. It was recognized by the participants that a domestic student and an international student had different needs. There were differences discussed among in-state versus out-of-state student needs that were found in the student interviews, however, the graduate program directors did not make this distinction. They did not discuss any efforts in particular for the out-of-state students.

There are many stresses in the lives of master's degree students simply due to the unique dynamic and expectations in graduate school, yet there are minimal options to completely orient a student for the experience prior to their first day pursuing their master's degree. A Kansas State University administrator mentioned in the study that graduate school is a difficult concept to grasp and there are minimal ways for students to fully understand what to expect or how to prepare for it until they have actually experienced graduate school. Given this already existing difficult nature of graduate school, finding better practices and effective outreach to enhance the master's degree student transition experience at Kansas State University was the intent of this study.

Trends

The results of this study indicate there are definite and feasible ways to facilitate master's degree students in their transition process. Trends identified in the study are outlined in Tables 4.2 and 4.3. Through the strategic plan model, research is the first step in determining future actions.

With that in mind, the researcher identified trends through conducting the study.

- ***Email is the primary form of communication.*** GPDs and administrative staff members primarily email incoming students. The Graduate School was the only entity that discussed making a phone call [calling campaign] to the admitted students of the university.
- ***The major professor and GPD have the most interaction with the transitioning master's degree students.*** This relationship is crucial in the assisting of the graduate student for their master's degree student experience. GPDs stressed the importance of every student communicating with their major professors from the beginning of their graduate school process.
- ***Student-to-student interaction is valued by both students and faculty.*** Every participant interviewed either acknowledged or stressed the importance of student-to-student interaction during the transition process. The level of comfort and familiarity the dynamic provides helps alleviate the potential stress in asking questions, according to the participants.
- ***Generally at Kansas State this student-to-student interaction is not an intentional part of transition.*** This step occurred only rarely before the student arrived on campus. There

were few real attempts to establish such interaction until students were already well into the transition period [admission through first semester of graduate school].

- ***The best time to contact a student is soon after the student receives their letter of acceptance.*** The time in which the students are contacted was found to be crucial. One GPD stressed that they need to know that the program personnel is ready to connect with them from the time they are admitted and the touch point needs to be before school starts. One of the Graduate School administrators suggested that the student is contacted by phone with 4-6 weeks upon acceptance into the university. Ideally, each student should receive a phone call from the Graduate School for a general welcome, and also one from their graduate program director/student to answer specific questions.
- ***Programmatic efforts should stay consistent throughout the semester.*** The study found that not only does an initial effort need to exist, but the outreach must be sustained in order to be effective. Graduate School has social events and helpful workshops throughout the year. It is suggested that specific graduate programs follow that example, and continuously provide outreach and attention to their newer students throughout the first semester of the student's experience in graduate school. Ideally, the efforts that are put forth by programs for new students in the fall will need to be repeated in the spring for new students arriving at that time. In many graduate programs, the number of incoming students is less in the spring than the fall, which may make the orientation and socialization component harder for those students. Outreach at the beginning may not be enough, and necessitates effort throughout the semester to maintain engagement.

RQ1: How is relationship-building incorporated in universities for master's degree students during their transition into graduate school?

All participants mentioned the value of personal contact however the study did not find evidence that all graduate programs provided personal contact with their students. The study indicated there was a strong desire from the students to receive personal communication often. One student suggested that graduate programs make a more deliberate effort on checking in with the students throughout the semester, if possible.

The students preferred to communicate face-to-face with graduate faculty when they could. Findings showed that no personal contact of phone calls was made by graduate program directors, faculty, or students in programs and all communication was through email. In-person communication occurred when the student arrived on campus, aside from that which occurred if there were campus visits. The Graduate School did, however, have a calling campaign from a student to all incoming students during Summer 2012. This was the largest structured effort of personal outreach identified in the interviews.

RQ2: What types of institutional outreach and efforts are there during transition for master's degree students at Kansas State University?

Orientations, major advisor appointments, and graduate student organizations were the most institutionalized efforts identified from interview data. Whereas some efforts may be effective, they are not consistent across all graduate programs or within the Graduate School. Some outreach is also applied to specific incoming graduate students and not all. A few of the graduate programs had program-specific student organizations that help in orienting the new students.

The Graduate School has enhanced their outreach to transitioning graduate students within the past three years. The efforts of the graduate school were outlined in this study. There is a general new student orientation, workshops, mixer/social events, undergraduate research

opportunities, a summer calling campaign, and a Graduate Student Council that provides leadership and socialization opportunities for students to take advantage of. Other Kansas State Offices such as International Student and Scholar Services, Office of Financial Assistance, Career and Employment Services, and the Graduate School are all services available for graduate students to utilize during their transition.

RQ3: What are the needs of new master's degree students during transition into Kansas State University's Graduate School?

The definition of “need” was not consistent amongst interviewees. Many GPDs and administrators treated it as more of mental prerequisites and knowledge for the students to have, such as understandings of the dynamic graduate school. In contrast the students listed specific information that they needed. However, within further analysis of responses some of the same needs were identified and included information about housing, course scheduling, GTA responsibilities, and importance of interacting with advisor initially and throughout the semester. In comparison to those who came from out-of-state, those that have attended Kansas State University before had a much easier transition into their master's degree program, regardless of the program of study, according to their interviews. This population of students was satisfied with their transition process but could name very few real components of it. Much of this satisfaction comes from already knowing the university and community. These students should not be forgotten in transition efforts however, they may not need to be prioritized in future transition efforts.

Theoretical Implications

Relationship marketing concepts hold promise for furthering the understanding of student retention and the improvement of incorporating more intentional communication efforts with transitioning students. Through the assumptions of Relationship Management Theory, the

academic institutions that effectively communicate with their students and form a strong relationship will be better enabled to achieve their institutional objective. The study supported the sentiment and participants placed value on the intentional and more personal interaction. Findings indicated a need for a personal connection to be made whether it a current student to incoming student or faculty/major professor with an incoming student, such an effort is necessary and should be intentional. A GPD believed that any kind of relationships that an incoming student can form with members of Kansas State University is beneficial. Deliberate acts meant to benefit the audience are directly correlated to the principles of public relations. A successful practitioner will adhere to the varying needs of their “client,” in this case, student. Students are all different and should be treated as having unique needs and directions. A GPD stressed a one-size-fits-all program for every student, regardless of background, is clearly a program that is insufficient. Another GPD noted that managing the diversity of students at Kansas State University is becoming really important. With this, the researcher then made suggestions for the future.

Enhancing Graduate Student Transition

The goal of this study was to provide the Graduate School administrators and graduate program directors information to improve Kansas State University master’s degree student transition experience as a whole. Increasing personal contact and student outreach from standpoints of the Kansas State University Graduate School and at the program levels would help in this vision. Overall, the study found that students value face-to-face and personal interaction, and student-to-student is a preferred component to a successful socialization of graduate students. In such a decentralized university, findings were that there were not any graduate programs that implement the same approaches to facilitating graduate student transition.

Orientations, meeting with graduate program directors, social networking events, workshops, student organization involvement, and utilization of on-campus resources are components of many of the graduate programs and Graduate School outreach for transition. Needs of transitioning graduate students included assistance with course scheduling, assistantship responsibilities, advisor selection, and an overall understanding that graduate school is different than undergraduate school. Based on these findings, the study the researcher offers suggestions to Graduate School administrators, graduate programs, and incoming master's degree students to help enhance the transition into graduate school at Kansas State University.

Suggestions for Graduate Programs' "Best Practices"

The favorable techniques found in this study may lend themselves to assist graduate programs across disciplines and across campuses as students transition into their master's degree programs. There has not been literature identified that outlines the best practices in these efforts.

Based on the study, the researcher suggests general tactics for the Graduate School, programs, and directors to adopt for a larger and more effective emphasis on graduate student transition for their incoming master's degree students at Kansas State University:

- Arrange for personal contact as soon as possible upon admission into the program. Have GPDs [faculty member] and current graduate students utilize phone calls, face-to-face interaction through campus visit if financially feasible, and/or individually personalized emails to welcome them and answer any initial questions.
- Have an orientation every fall and spring semester for new students (*See Appendix F*).
- Post orientation materials on departmental website.
- Arrange interaction of incoming students with other students as soon as possible (*See Appendix G*).
- Have advisors (faculty in area of focus) contact students [incoming student] as soon as the student gets letter of acceptance.

- Train faculty on how to be an advisor and provide incentive to serving as one.
- Emphasize the process of selecting an advisor/major professor.
- Create a resource book/web resource for out-of-state students/international.
- Focus on course scheduling.
- Discuss GTA versus GRA roles.

Suggestions for the Graduate School

Maintain Large Outreach Efforts

Continue Graduate School Orientation

It is suggested to continue the Graduate School orientation and encourage more students to attend. It would be helpful to continue to provide emphasis on: the differences between undergraduate degree and graduate school, expectations of being a GRA/GTA, and giving important resource information on campus. An addition of programming for students to get to know each other at the orientation might also be helpful in their socialization.

Continue Summer Calling Campaign- with added student volunteers

Current graduate students personally make contact with each incoming student to welcome them to Kansas State University, provide important dates, and answer any questions the student may have regarding the university or Manhattan. The student-to-student communication that is provided with this outreach could be beneficial. Initiating this campaign for the spring Graduate School admits would also help reach all transitioning students throughout an academic year. Overall, the effort is not only an effort to answer questions and provide clarity, but also to make incoming graduate students feel more comfortable during their transition.

New Transition Initiatives

A beginning of the year

A cook-out, of some kind, on the lawn outside of Anderson Hall could bring graduate students together and be an empirical effort by the Graduate School to exhibit approachability. With this, donations would either need to be accepted or Kansas State University provides financial support to the Graduate School to create this initiative.

Add to the existing “Services Fair”

At orientation this is an important component to providing new students with information. It is suggested to either add to the existing one at orientation, or have another one the first week of school with added displays from community businesses and organizations. Providing an opportunity to interact with community services could help assist those with practical needs.

Create a Strategic Plan on graduate student transition

Upon the collection of data from future research, it is recommended that the Kansas State University create a strategic plan to help with the transition of future graduate students.

Suggestion for Graduate School and Graduate Programs

Student Organizations/Graduate Student Ambassador Program

It is suggested for graduate programs that are large enough to form a student organization. The graduate programs with student organizations that helped in socialization had more outreach for transitioning graduate students and opportunities for student-to-student interaction to occur. Having graduate ambassadors at a broader scale is also another suggestion for Kansas State University. If the needs of graduate students could be identified with future research, the job duties of ambassadors could be defined and training provided. Furthermore, the

researcher suggests a graduate ambassador program for Kansas State University that would consist of a group of individuals with the purpose of:

- a) Assisting in all events and graduate student transition efforts on behalf of the graduate program/Kansas State University Graduate School.
- b) Helping to integrate new students, especially out-of-state and international students during each semester
- c) Serve as unofficial mentors throughout graduate school for those in need of extra guidance and peer support.

Overall, the researcher found that student organization(s) within graduate programs and for the Graduate School to focus on student-to-student interaction and such collaboration could be beneficial to transitioning graduate students. Ambassadors would have the main focus on utilizing their strategic communication skills to better orient the specific populations of incoming master's degree students in their departments or within the Graduate School. A student organization dedicated to enriching the lives of potential and new graduate students could help lead to satisfying these institutional desires. This study suggests that a graduate school ambassador program will better assist in the aspirations of enhancing the quality of life and address the needs of new graduate students at Kansas State University.

Suggestions for Transitioning Master's Degree Students

There are efforts and more proactive actions that graduate programs could take to help orient their incoming graduate students, however, the individuals bear a responsibility as well. The study found that there might be existing programs that are not being utilized by graduate students or that there is reluctance for students to communicate their concerns or problems to their advisor or graduate program director.

Best practices

- ***Ask questions-*** GPDs can make more informed decisions and help more if they understand the needs of students.
- ***Interact with experienced graduate students within specific program-*** Peers in this capacity have a shared experience and can help provide answers to questions such as housing, child care, and other personal needs.
- ***Attend the Graduate School New Student Orientation-*** Whether or not a student is completely confident with their knowledge about Kansas State University, there may be something that one could learn, especially GTA/GRAs.
- ***Attend the program orientations*** (if offered) - This will help orient a student into the program and contribute to their socialization with the graduate faculty and fellow graduate students.
- ***Get familiar with the campus resources/services/offices*** – Kansas State University has programs and offices for nearly every type of incoming student. As a graduate student, self-propelled research and initiative to seek out these campus opportunities/assistances could be very beneficial in the transition process and beyond.

Limitations to study

This study was not without its limitations. First, the data gathered were self-reported through interviews, so there is room for subjectivity of information. The second limitation of the study was the overall sample of graduate students [and graduate program directors] from the university. With 67 master's degree programs at Kansas State University, there is room for more research to be done with those graduate programs in the future.

Based on the small sample size these findings should not be considered conclusive and cannot be generalized to all programs at Kansas State University or other universities, but rather give researchers and those interested in assessing and identifying initiatives for Kansas State University graduate programs some suggestions of fruitful lines of exploration and inquiry.

Future Research

The following are recommendations that could prove helpful in further research regarding studies of master's degree students and their transition experiences:

1. Further studies conducted to determine greater and more frequent needs of master's degree students by surveying incoming students. A future quantitative approach might be able to identify significance between different factors. Surveying a larger Kansas State University graduate student sample with different and asking for the following demographics, for further analysis, is recommended:
 - International versus Domestic
 - In-state versus Out-of-state
 - On-Campus versus Distance Education
 - Non-Traditional
 - Veterans
 - Fall versus Spring admit
 - Gender
 - Full-time versus Part-time
 - Funded versus Non- Funded

2. Explore their graduate program transition efforts, programs, and outreach being implemented at other universities in the United States of America
3. Identify best practices within the graduate school programs and university and evaluate the effectiveness. Analyze at one or two year intervals to determine the effectiveness and satisfaction of any graduate school/program transition initiatives

Kansas State University, its graduate programs, and other institutions should continue to assess the attitudes and satisfaction of their master's degree students. If programs or departments decide to integrate new changes, follow-up studies will help determine if these changes are effective. It is the wish of the researcher that Kansas State University and the graduate programs there within use the information provided in this study to continue and enhance support for its master's degree students during their transition into graduate school.

References

- Ackerman, R., & Schibrowsky, J. (2007). A business marketing strategy applied to student retention: A higher education initiative. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 9(3), 307-336.
- Agozzino, A. (2008) Recruiting the Right Class: Analysis of Admissions Publications. *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the NCA 94th Annual Convention, TBA, San Diego, CA*
- Attride-Stirling, J. (2001). Thematic networks: An analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 1(3), 385-405.
- Baker, G. A. (1998). Keeping all generations happy: The xers, boomers, and beyond... *Community College Journal*, 68(5), 10-16.
- Bonk, K., Griggs, H., & Tynes, E. (1999). *The jossey-bass guide to strategic communications for nonprofits: A step-by-step guide to working with the media to generate publicity, enhance fundraising, build membership, change public policy, handle crises, and more* Jossey-Bass.
- Bonk, K., Tynes, E., Griggs, H., & Sparks, P. (2008). *Strategic communications for nonprofits: A step-by-step guide to working with the media* Jossey-Bass.
- Botan, C. (1997). Ethics in strategic communication campaigns: The case for a new approach to public relations. *Journal of Business Communication*, 34(2), 188-202.
- Bowman, R. L., Bowman, V. E., & DeLucia, J. L. (1990). Mentoring in a graduate counseling program: Students helping students. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 30(1), 58-65.

- Conrad, C. F., Duren, K. M., & Haworth, J. G. (1998). Students' perspectives on their master's degree experiences: Disturbing the conventional wisdom. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 1998(101), 65-76.
- Council of Graduate Schools (2003). *Achieving an Inclusive Graduate Community: Inclusiveness Series Vol. 1*. Washington, DC, Council of Graduate Schools, p. 14.
- Denecke D.D. (2009). *Graduate education in 2020: What does the future hold*. Washington, DC, Council of Graduate Schools, p. 7.
- Drucker, P. F. (2010). *Managing the non-profit organization: Principles and practices* HarperCollins e-books.
- Fischer, B. A., & Zigmond, M. J. (1998). Survival skills for graduate school and beyond. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 1998(101), 29-40.
- Fogg, P. (2009). Grad-school blues. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 55(24), B12-B16.
- Gansemer-Topf, A. M., Ross, L. E., & Johnson, R. M. (2006). Graduate and professional student development and student affairs. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2006(115), 19-30.
- Golde, C. M. (1998). Beginning graduate school: Explaining first-year doctoral attrition. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 1998(101), 55-64.
- Goplerud, E. N. (1980). Social support and stress during the first year of graduate school. *Professional Psychology*, 11(2), 283.

- Hallahan, K., Holtzhausen, D., Van Ruler, B., Verčič, D., & Sriramesh, K. (2007). Defining strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1(1), 3-35.
- Hinchey, P. H., & Kimmel, I. (2000). *The graduate grind: A critical look at graduate education* (Vol. 20). Routledge.
- James, H. (2008). Development of a student ambassador program.
- Johnson, K. (2012). Creating experiential learning in the graduate classroom through community engagement. *American Journal of Business Education (AJBE)*, 6(1), 149-154.
- Johnston, T. C. (2010). Who and what influences choice of university? student and university perceptions. *American Journal of Business Education (AJBE)*, 3(10)
- Kallio, R. E. (1995). Factors influencing the college choice decisions of graduate students. *Research in Higher Education*, 36(1), 109-124.
- Kimball, E. (2011). College admission in a contested marketplace: The 20th century and a new logic for access. *Journal of College Admission*, 210, 20-30.
- Kretchmar, J., & Memory, A. (2010). One college's journey into the unconscious mind of its prospective students: How a new research methodology is helping us recruit. *Journal of College Admission*, 207, 8-15.
- Krueger, R. A. (1997). *Moderating focus groups* SAGE Publications, Incorporated.
- Ledingham, J. A. (2003). Explicating relationship management as a general theory of public relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 15(2), 181-198.

- Ledingham, J. A., & Bruning, S. D. (Eds.). (2000). *Public relations as relationship management: A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations*. Routledge.
- Lindbeck, R., & Fodrey, B. (2010). Using technology in undergraduate admission: A student perspective. *Journal of College Admission*, 208, 10-17.
- Lindlof, T. R. & Taylor, Bryan, C. 2011. *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2010). *Designing qualitative research* Sage Publications, Incorporated.
- Merriam, S. B. & Associates.(2002). *Qualitative Research in Practice, Examples for Discussion and Analysis*.
- Morgan, D. L. (1998). *The focus group guidebook* SAGE Publications, Incorporated.
- Narayanan, R. M. (1999). Use of Objective-Based undergraduate research project experience as a graduate student recruitment tool. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 88(3), 361-365.
- Parvatiyar, A., & Sheth, J. N. (2001). Customer relationship management: Emerging practice, process, and discipline. *Journal of Economic and Social Research*, 3(2), 1-34.
- Polson, C. J. (2003). Adult graduate students challenge institutions to change. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2003(102), 59-68.
- Quigley, B. A. (1998). The first three weeks: A critical time for motivation. *Focus on Basics*, 2, 6-11.

- Rettinger, G. S. (1996). Parents and preschoolers: Literacy partners (keys for kids), fiscal year 1995-1996.
- Ritchie, J., Spencer, L., & O'Connor, W. (2003). Carrying out qualitative analysis. *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, 219-262.
- Siegel, L., Sowell, R., Sullivan., T., Tate., P., Denecke., D. (2004) *Organization and Administration of Graduate Education*. Washington D.C.Council of Graduate Schools.
- Tokuno, K. A. (2008). *Graduate students in transition: Assisting students through the first year* National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina.
- Warnock, D. M., & Appel, S. (2012). Learning the unwritten rules: Working class students in graduate school. *Innovative Higher Education*, 37(4), 307-321.
- Webb Jr, R. (1979). Admission and appointment problems en speech communication graduate programs. *Communication Education*, 28(4), 314-321.
- Weidman, J. C., Twale, D. J., & Stein, E. L. (2001). *Socialization of Graduate and Professional Students in Higher Education: A Perilous Passage? ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, Volume 28, Number 3. Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series*. Jossey-Bass, Publishers, Inc., 350 Sansome Street, San Francisco, CA 94104-1342.
- Wonacott, M. E. (2001). *Adult students: Recruitment and retention*. ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, Center on Education and Training for Employment, College of Education, the Ohio State University.

Zaltman, G. (2003). *How customers think: Essential insights into the mind of the market* Harvard Business Press.

Zerfass, A., & Huck, S. (2007). Innovation, communication, and leadership: New developments in strategic communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 1(2), 107-122.

Zhang, L. (2005). Advance to graduate education: The effect of college quality and undergraduate majors. *The Review of Higher Education*, 28(3), 313-338.

Appendix A - Kansas State University 2025 Visionary Plan

Theme 3: Graduate Scholarly Experience – Strategic Action Plan

Thematic Goal: Advance a culture of excellence that attracts highly talented, diverse graduate students and produces graduates recognized as outstanding in their respective professions.

Assumptions: ■ As a land grant institution in 2025, K-State's graduate programs will continue to prepare students for professional life in both academic and non-academic professions. ■ The Graduate Scholarly Experience encompasses the changing and diverse needs of our graduate population and requires both discipline-specific preparation and attention to their future professional lives. ■ Diverse graduate students refers to traditional and non-traditional students; including residential, international, distance, military-veteran, adult degree completion, transfer, ethnic/cultural minorities, in-state/out-of-state. ■ In deciding to choose K-State, prospective graduate students would likely consider 1) the presence and quality of their programs of interest, 2) the reputation of the prospective major professors for programs that operate on the major professor/graduate student model, and 3) the overall prospective graduate school experience, which is influenced by many factors, including cost and expected support. ■

	Activities	Outcomes – Impact		
		Short Term	Intermediate	Long Term
I N U T S & R E S O U R C E S	What we plan to do...	What we expect to happen in 1-5 years...	What we expect to happen in 6-10 years...	What we expect to happen in 11-15 years...
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Recruit and retain high quality, diverse graduate students by: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> offering competitive compensation and support, including tuition waivers for GRAs and other incentives such as in-state tuition for spouses or children; engaging and recruiting our undergraduate stars and allowing them to begin graduate work as they finish their bachelor's requirements; increasing financial assistance to graduate students; such as assistantships, fellowships, and scholarships; designing recruitment strategies responsive to the changing demographics of potential graduate students, including international students; and exploring raising the minimum standards for admission and qualifying exams to "Top 50" levels in our graduate programs. Promote the importance and value of our graduate students by communicating their stories; ensuring their voices are heard in departments, on campus, and on committees; and capitalizing on the professional strengths, knowledge, and skills of all students in graduate and advanced professional degree programs. Build a community of support and effective student services for our diverse graduate student population by considering strategies such as: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> expanding and equipping Career and Employment Services (CES) to meet their needs; broadening the Admission Office mission to serve graduate students; and streamlining, revising, and resourcing administrative work related to application/admissions, program of study approval, and graduation processing to ensure timely, efficient, and accurate processes. Provide venues for social networking and interaction reserved for graduate students. Provide outstanding mentorship to our graduate students for their career preparation by: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> implementing a strategic approach for their skills development that includes identifying the types of skills needed and the appropriate provider (e.g. university, college, department, unit, individual) and improving our capacity to advise them on developing these skills; ensuring graduate faculty have the capacity to be effective mentors by providing them training and holding them accountable; enriching mentorship offerings beyond our faculty by creating more endowed lectureships and involving students in selecting, inviting, and hosting visiting scholars; actively engaging the student's entire graduate committee in his/her program and thesis dissertation project, and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competitive compensation and support available for GRAs, GTAs, and GAs Tuition waivers for all GRAs Engaged graduate students integrated in university life with enhanced visibility and appreciation Outstanding mentoring for our graduate students Expectation of excellence for the graduate scholarly experience Increased capacity to secure funding for graduate research and teaching Broader spectrum and greater overall number of courses offered at the graduate, and especially at the PhD level Expanded partnerships with industry and government to provide high level learning and experiential training opportunities for graduate students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased participation by our graduate students in unique high level learning and experiential training Expanded reputation for outstanding graduates with the critical skill sets needed to excel in their careers in a global environment Increased funding for graduate research and teaching Increased number of nationally and internationally recognized award-winning graduate faculty Increased number of Doctorates Awarded 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> National and international reputation for outstanding graduates with demonstrable career success World-class reputation as a preferred destination for outstanding graduate students Stable funding for graduate research and teaching competitive with benchmark institutions Doctorates Awarded comparable with benchmark institutions

Activities	Outcomes – Impact		
	Short Term	Intermediate	Long Term
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> e) encouraging and finding cost effective ways to assist graduate students to be active in professional societies/ organizations and participate in relevant meetings. 6. Emphasize speaking, writing, and presentation skills; increase university-wide support for scientific writing; and promote skills development in resource acquisition from the corporate, academic, government and other sectors through training opportunities and a program for graduate students to compete internally for resources to implement their ideas or acquire supplies/equipment. 7. Emphasize development of multicultural and global competencies by: a) increasing multicultural interactions, b) promoting and encouraging attendance at international and cultural events on campus and in the community, and c) expanding opportunities for international experiences that fit well with graduate students' degree programs and chosen professions. 8. Provide graduate students with quality teaching opportunities appropriate to their discipline that include effective mentoring, guidance, timely feedback, and support by an experienced faculty member. 9. Increase resources to enhance graduate research and teaching and to provide our graduates with exceptional high level learning and experiential training by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) aggressively developing funding and partnership strategies, such as exploring the feasibility of establishing a corporate endowment fund and implementing effective advisory boards to support our efforts; b) utilizing our strengths and unique local, regional, national, and international partnership opportunities to develop joint degree programs and produce stakeholder products; and c) actively engaging the corporate and government sectors in creating internships, fellowships, and academic programs; capitalizing on unique opportunities involving K-State Olathe, K-State Salina, the regional animal health corridor, our military partnerships, and our proximity to federal research labs, e.g. National Bio- and Agro-Defense Facility (NBAF). 10. Capitalize on our strengths and local/regional resources to provide opportunities for our graduate students to develop public policy and executive leadership capabilities. 11. Provide meaningful opportunities for persons with advanced professional degrees (e.g., DVM, MD, JD, etc.) to pursue graduate research degrees or dual professional and research degrees simultaneously that will endow unique skill sets to equip strategic leaders and policy makers. 12. Develop, promote, and reward teaching excellence at the graduate level. 13. Deliver high quality, graduate level distance education courses and degree/certificate programs by establishing guidelines for their development and expanding offerings to support non-traditional students and meet rapidly growing industry and professional demands. 14. Increase the number of available Ph.D. courses through efficiencies by allowing shared course offerings through cross listing. 15. Recruit and retain high quality, award winning graduate faculty by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) offering competitive salaries comparable to our benchmark institutions; b) exploring the feasibility of adopting a model that places an internationally recognized professor in each department or college; and c) duplicating the "National Scholarship" support office to serve faculty in award package preparation. 16. Ensure graduate faculty have the time and impetus to focus on making the graduate scholarly experience meaningful outside the classroom or laboratory. 			

Appendix B - Kansas State University Graduate Program Director Interview Questions

- 1) In general, what is your role here at Kansas State University?

- 2) What personal outreach (i.e. phone calls, letters, face-to-face conversations) is made to those students transitioning into your master's degree program? Who handles this outreach?

- 3) How are out-of-state/international graduate students integrated into your program? What particular activities does your program have to help with these master's degree students' transitions?

- 4) What programs here at Kansas State University or at other universities that you know of, are dedicated to helping transition graduate students?

- 5) What efforts or ideas would you recommend here at Kansas State University to help transition graduate students? For your program? For the Graduate School?

- 6) In your opinion, what do master's degree students in your program need most during their transition into graduate school, here at Kansas State University?

- 7) What else would you like to share with me regarding your graduate program, efforts that are made to help transition graduate students, and any other relevant outreach here at Kansas State University?

Appendix C - Kansas State University Graduate School Administrator Interview Questions

- 1) In general, what is your role within Kansas State University?

- 2) What personal outreach (i.e. phone calls, letters, face-to-face conversations) is made to those students transitioning into the Kansas State University graduate school and specific programs? Who handles this outreach?

- 3) How are out-of-state/international graduate students integrated into the Kansas State University graduate school? What particular activities does the graduate school or specific programs have to help with these master's degree students' transitions?

- 4) What programs does Kansas State University offer that are dedicated to helping transition graduate students?

- 5) In your opinion, what do master's degree students at Kansas State University need most during their transition into graduate school?

- 6) What else would you like to share with me regarding the Kansas State University graduate school, efforts that are made to help transition graduate students?

Appendix D - Kansas State University Transitioning Master's Degree Student Interview Questions

- 1) Describe your transition experience from the time you were admitted to K-State graduate school until now.

- 2) What personal outreach (i.e. phone calls, letters, face-to-face conversations) was made to you prior to your arrival in the spring?

- 3) What would have made your transition into graduate school easier?

- 4) What was helpful knowing/learning before the first day of school here at Kansas State University? During your first semester of graduate school?

- 5) What specific things did you have questions about and wished you would have known before the first day of school here at Kansas State University? Throughout your first semester of graduate school?

- 6) What needs did you have upon enrollment and throughout your first semester in graduate school?

- 7) What transition efforts/programs did you find effective in helping transition you into Kansas State University

- 8) What ideas do you have on how to better welcome and transition future incoming graduate students?

- 9) What else would you like to share with me regarding your transition into graduate school, including efforts during this first semester?

Appendix E - Participant Consent Form

PROJECT TITLE: Graduate Student Transition

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Dr. William Adams- Major Professor
Kat Lopez- Graduate Student

CONTACT AND PHONE FOR ANY PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS: Kat Lopez klopez@ksu.edu
505-670-5252

SPONSOR OF PROJECT: Department of Journalism & Mass Communications

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: Kat Lopez, second-year master's degree student, is conducting a study on Graduate Student Transition. The study is focused on master's degree student transition experience at Kansas State University. Kat has sought and received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for this research. As a Kansas State University graduate program director, graduate school administrator, or transitioning master's degree student you were asked to participate in this study. The information you provide will be helpful to the Graduate School in identifying strategies to improve students' transitions to Kansas State University and to Kat as she completes her research.

METHODS TO BE USED: Interview

LENGTH OF STUDY: 20-60minute interviews

RISKS: None

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED: The results of this study will provide insight that will be considered by the Graduate School to plan programs to address this topic in future years.

TERMS OF PARTICIPATION: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that in deciding to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

My signature indicates that information from my participation in this study may be used by the Kansas State University Graduate School and documented by the researcher. All participant names will remain confidential from the printed research. I verify that I have read and understand the purpose of the research, this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study.

Participant Name: _____

Participant Signature: _____

Appendix F - Sample Graduate Program Orientation Agenda

Morning:

People in attendance include: *all incoming master's degree students, graduate program director, and other graduate faculty*

- Welcome and general overview of the Department
- Introductions (depending on size of program)
 - Students
 - Name/Hometown
 - Undergraduate institution
 - Emphasis/area of interest
 - Graduate Faculty
 - Name/Hometown
 - Role within department/university
 - Area of research
- Overview of Graduate Program/Graduate School
 - Differences between graduate school and undergraduate school
 - Time management
- Course Scheduling (Classes to expect to take & when)
- Degree Progress Timeline/Deadlines
- Assistantships

Lunch with: *All incoming master's degree students, graduate program director, current master's degree students in the program*

- Graduate student panel (Q & A/tips) - *Incoming & current graduate students*
- Provide contact information for resources specific to program and other helpful campus offices
- Answer final questions

Appendix G - Suggested Graduate Program Communication Timeline for Transitioning Master's Degree Students

Timeframe	Communication	Person(s) involved
Student gets accepted	Phone call and email to congratulate student and ask if they can help answer any questions	Graduate program director/graduate program staff/faculty member
	Phone call and email to congratulate student and ask if they can help answer any questions	Current master's degree student in program
4-6 weeks after acceptance	Follow-up email to check in	Graduate program director/graduate program staff/faculty member
1 month prior to arrival to campus	Follow-up email to check in on practical items	Current master's degree student in program
Student arrives on campus	Set up meeting to discuss student needs	Graduate program director/graduate program staff/faculty member
	Introduce to current fellow graduate students	Current graduate student or [Graduate program director/graduate program staff/faculty member]
Week before school starts	Hold an orientation for graduate program	Graduate program director/graduate program staff/faculty member and current graduate students and campus resources representatives
At the end of the first week of school	Meet with, call or follow up email to see how transition is going	Current graduate student or Graduate program director/graduate program staff
Mid- semester	Meet with, call or follow up email to see how semester is going and discuss scheduling of classes	Graduate program director/ faculty member and current graduate student
At the end of their first semester	Meet with, call or follow up email to discuss first semester experience	Graduate program director/graduate program staff/faculty member