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Millennial students who go directly to graduate school: Influences on this decision and the characterization of their experience

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MILLENNIAL STUDENTS WHO GO DIRECTLY TO GRADUATE SCHOOL:

INFLUENCES ON THIS DECISION AND THE CHARACTERIZATION OF THEIR

EXPERIENCE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

By

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B.S., Wright State University, 2005

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WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

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I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY Courtney Smith ENTITLED Millennial Students Who Go Directly to Graduate School: Influences on this Decision and the Characterization of their Experience BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOT THE DEGREE OF Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Smith, Courtney M.A., Department of Educational Leadership, College of Education and Human Services, Wright State University, 2010. Millennial Students Who Go Directly to Graduate School: Influences on this Decision and the Characterization of their Experience.

The purpose of this research study was to explore the issues surrounding Millennial students who go directly into graduate school after completing an undergraduate degree including what influenced this decision and how the students characterized the experience. Participants were interviewed and several themes emerged from this study: feeling not ready for the real world or qualified to work, differences and difficulties of graduate life compared to undergraduate life, more academic support is needed before and during graduate school, relationships with parents were evolving towards independence, the importance of grades, lack of campus involvement in graduate school, overcoming personal and academic difficulties in graduate school, and specific or still undecided future plans. The recommendations for higher education were to evaluate the approach towards this group of graduate students, to develop a graduate school preparatory program and a mentor program, and to make a concentrated effort to engage this population on campus.

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Acknowledgment

I would like to recognize and express my sincere gratitude to all of those who helped me on this journey. Thanks are warmly given to the members of my thesis committee including Dr. Franco, Dr. Risacher, and Dr. Ryan for all of their support. Professor Lawrence Mrozek deserves special recognition for his guidance and dedication to this work and for his influential enthusiasm for qualitative research. I would also like to acknowledge the Student Affairs in Higher Education program at Wright State University. This program did not just help me find a profession it helped me find myself.

Dedication

I am fortunate to have amazing people in my life who care about me. I had a phenomenal support system before I started this program and although I did not think it was possible, I found even more wonderful people to add to that mix. This thesis is dedicated to my husband and to all of my family and friends who helped make this possible. You know who you are.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Numerous factors influence a student's decision to pursue a graduate level education. Familial background, personality, ambition, intellect, grade point average, standardized test scores, levels of self-efficacy, college experience, and levels of indecision are elements of the decision-making process regarding graduate school (Alexitch, Kobussen, & Stookey, 2004; Brown, 2004; Ethington & Smart, 1986; Hearn, 1987; Perna, 2004; Scepansky & Bjornsen, 2003; Song, Orazem, & Wohlgemuth, 2007). Students who enroll in a graduate program immediately post-baccalaureate are a specific population within higher education with their own unique academic and non-academic needs and experiences. These students lack exposure to the professional world and are younger than their peer graduate students. Today's students who enter graduate school immediately following undergraduate graduation are from the generation commonly referred to as Millennials (Howe & Strauss, 2003).

Millennial students have been identified as having seven core traits including special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, conventional, pressured, and achieving (Howe & Strauss, 2003). The seven traits have been characterized and applied towards Millennials at the undergraduate college level. Millennials have a unique viewpoint and specific requirements in relation to higher education. Very little research has been

conducted on Millennials as graduate students and there is even less information regarding why they chose to pursue a post-baccalaureate degree. Moreover, there is no clear understanding of their academic and non-academic needs, or how they perceive their graduate school experience.

Significance of the study

Research concerning graduate students has been limited despite all of the research about undergraduate college students. Researchers would be remiss to exclude this population as graduate school enrollment is currently at 2.5 million students with future projections showing a continuous steady increase ("Digest of education statistics," 2007). Millennial students are poised to account for a significant proportion of these 2.5 million and increasing enrolled graduate students. These Millennial students have been the subjects of a great deal of research during their undergraduate college years and it stands to reason that research about their graduate school issues would be just as valuable.

The decision to enroll in graduate school is influenced by many factors and understanding the motivation behind this decision might provide some insight about Millennial graduate students. If student affairs professionals could comprehend these academic and non-academic needs, it could contribute to a successful and satisfying completion of a graduate degree. Graduate schools have had an arduous struggle with attrition and burnout and assessing the academic and non-academic needs of Millennial students could help with understanding these issues (Garder, 2008).

Transitioning from undergraduate to graduate school can require some effort for students. Millennial students are team-oriented and sheltered; these traits could result in a stressful situation in the much more autonomous world of graduate school. However,

their conventional, achieving, special, and confident natures could be a true resource for these students. Millennials have also traditionally had a strong support system including friends, various networked individuals, and family. Their parents in particular have been so involved in their lives through college that they have been deemed "helicopter parents" because of their hovering and potentially intrusive behavior. How will this transpire for graduate Millennial students? Will these students struggle with the independence of graduate school or will they flourish?

Some graduate schools across the nation are developing separate departments or offices dedicated to the needs of graduate students. These Offices of Graduate Life are resources for students regarding both academic and non-academic needs as well as specific student support at the graduate level. This recent development is indicative that graduate students are becoming a larger part of the campus community and that educators and administrators are taking notice. Could a First Year Graduate Student Experience be on the horizon?

Deeper insight is needed into the Millennial graduate student regarding decision-making, motivation, academic and non-academic needs, and the characterization of the graduate school experience. Student affairs practitioners and graduate school faculty could gain an appreciation of the uniqueness of these students and better meet their distinct needs. Everyone involved in higher education could benefit from gaining a deeper understanding of Millennial graduate students. If these students' needs and experiences were known, they could be addressed when they were senior undergraduate students; graduate school faculty and staff could be better prepared to make the graduate education the best it can be.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to investigate Millennials in graduate school regarding their decisions to pursue this level of education, their academic and non-academic needs, and how they characterize their overall experience. A grounded theory methodology was applied to further conceptualize Millennial graduate students and to gain a better understanding of this distinct student population in order to better serve their academic and non-academic needs. Knowing how Millennials characterize their graduate school experience further enriched this understanding. The goal of the study was to provide insight into the world of the Millennial graduate student so that student affairs professionals, faculty members, and the students themselves can have the best educational experience possible.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were operationally defined for this study:

Millennials- Students who were born between the years 1982 and 2002, graduated from high school in the new millennium, and typically display some or all of the seven core traits (special, sheltered, confident, conventional, team-oriented, pressured, and achieving) described by Howe & Strauss (2003); a named generational cohort.

Graduate School- Any post-baccalaureate degree granting institution that awards master's degrees, doctorate of philosophy degrees, and professional degrees.

Professional degree- A degree that requires completion of a program that results in the student being qualified to practice the profession; professional degrees may be

awarded in 10 fields including medicine, law, dentistry, optometry, osteopathic

medicine, pharmacy, veterinarian medicine, podiatry, chiropractics, and theology.

Academic needs- The requirements of college students for in-class learning that can be

considered and/or provided by the university, including but not limited to: study

areas, study time, and communication and involvement with their professors.

Non-academic needs- The requirements of college students for extracurricular learning

that can be provided by the university, including but not limited to: student

support services, networking opportunities, social and cultural events, and on and

off campus involvement.

Research Question

The following question was developed for this study:

How do Millennials characterize their graduate school experience and their decision to

pursue a graduate degree?

Scope and Limitations

The scope of this study was identified and described as post-baccalaureate

Millennial students who immediately enroll in graduate school at a large public

university. The following limitations were acknowledged as influencing this study. The

study was conducted with graduate students that were identified as Millennials by their

age, date of birth, or high school graduation year and who had enrolled in graduate school

immediately after undergraduate graduation. All other students including Millennial

students that were in graduate school but had not enrolled immediately following

undergraduate graduation were excluded. The graduate students who participated

attended a large, mid-western, public university. Millennials who attend universities with other characteristics may have different experiences.

Summary

This study explored the factors influencing Millennial students' decision to enroll in graduate school immediately after completing their bachelor's degree coursework, their graduate school needs, and the characterization of their graduate school experience. Numerous elements influence a student's decision to pursue a graduate level education. The first wave of Millennial students has already entered graduate school, and a larger group is emerging on the horizon. There is a multitude of pre-existing research on Millennials during their undergraduate college years. However, there is a lack of information on Millennial graduate students regarding why they chose to pursue a post-baccalaureate degree, their academic and non-academic needs, and how they perceive their graduate school experience. This grouping of students brings with them a unique viewpoint and specific requirements in relation to higher education.

Five chapters are presented in this thesis to provide a comprehensive examination of this topic. Chapter 1 of this thesis has discussed the general background, research question and various considerations concerning the study. Chapter 2 investigates relevant literature relating to Millennial students, decision making, student needs, and graduate school. Chapter 3 details the methodology, methods, and analysis used to evaluate and process the data. Chapter 4 summarizes the results from the data acquired in Chapter 3, including themes and findings. Chapter 5 details implications of the study for student affairs in higher education professionals and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In order to understand why students chose to enroll in graduate school instead of entering the professional world, decision-making was reviewed. Decision-making is a complex and ambiguous subject matter because of the vast amount of things that enact influence upon it. Higher education enrollment was examined with a focus on traditionally aged students, who are considered to be Millennials. These students' traits and characteristics were investigated to explore their needs and considerations as Millennial graduate students.

Decision-making

The decision to enroll in higher education is understandably influenced by numerous factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status (Ethington & Smart, 1986; Perna, 2004; Scepansky & Bjornsen, 2003; Song et al., 2007). Familial background, personality, ambition, intellect, levels of self-efficacy, and levels of indecision can also influence any decision-making (Scepansky & Bjornsen, 2003; Song et al., 2007). Post-high school enrollment in an undergraduate program versus post-baccalaureate enrollment in graduate school is typically studied as being two separate types of decisions (Ethington & Smart, 1986; Hearn, 1987; Scepansky & Bjornsen, 2003).

In a study conducted by Alexitch, Kobussen, and Stookey (2004) high school students reported career development and parental influence as major factors influencing

their decision to pursue a college degree. Undergraduate academic performance, coursework, internships, and activities that provided students with new experiences and perspectives were found to impact post-college decision-making (Brown, 2004). Hearn (1987) studied what factors prompted new graduates to immediately enroll in graduate school and found that undergraduate experience impacted the decision. Ethington & Smart (1986) found that initially a student's background strongly influenced decisions when progressing from high school to college. However, as the student proceeded through college the significance of their background was reduced overall but was still an indirect factor in the decision to pursue a graduate degree. More direct influence was found to be the result of undergraduate college experiences (Brown, 2004; Ethington & Smart, 1986; Hearn, 1987).

The major factors found to influence the decision to pursue a graduate level education include undergraduate college experience, career advancement, and parental influence (Heller, 2001; Rajecki, Lauer, & Metzner, 1998; Scepansky & Bjornsen, 2003). Other influences that have been studied include grade point average (GPA), attitude towards learning, financial situation, and standardized test performance. According to Rajecki, Lauer, and Metzner (1998) students' GPAs are not a major influence in the decision to pursue graduate school because the GPAs of students planning on enrolling and those not planning on enrolling in graduate school were not significantly different. However, Heller (2001) reported that for every one point increase in GPA there was an increase of 15% in the likelihood of enrolling in graduate school. This study also determined that the amount of undergraduate student financial debt was not a determining factor in students' decision to enroll in graduate school (Heller, 2001).

Another determining factor that can influence the decision is the student's attitude towards the process of learning (Scepansky & Bjornsen, 2003). Differences exist between students who are motivated by grade outcome and those who are motivated by the process of learning. The Graduate Records Exam (quantitative and verbal), or GRE, was also a potential influence in the decision to pursue a graduate degree. Song, Orazem, and Wohlgemuth (2007) found that those with a higher average quantitative GRE score were less likely to attend graduate school and those with higher average verbal GRE scores were more likely to attend graduate school. It is important to note that this study was focused on a population of students returning to graduate school versus those who decide to matriculate immediately after undergraduate graduation.

Enrollment

There are over 18 million students enrolled in higher education institutions: 1.5 million are graduating seniors, and 2.5 million are graduate students ("Digest of education statistics," 2007). The majority (59.3%) of full-time graduate students in 2007 were ages 22-29 ("Digest of education statistics," 2007). Enrollment at all levels of higher education is expected to increase and set new records through the forecasted year of 2016 ("Digest of education statistics," 2008). Enrollment has been predicted to increase by 16% for undergraduate students and 21% for graduate students between the forecasted years of 2005 to 2016 ("Projections of statistics," 2007).

The traditional college-age population is considered to be those students between 18 and 24 years old. This population presented a 33% increase in full-time enrollment between 1995 and 2005 ("Fast Facts," 2008). Nearly 70% of undergraduate students are

traditionally aged ("Digest of education statistics," 2007) and these college students are referred to as Millennials.

Millennial Students

Millennial students started to graduate from high school at the turn of the 21st century and were born between the years 1982 and 2002 (Howe & Strauss, 2003). This generation is an extremely large cohort of students. When factoring in rising enrollment due to immigration, the number of Millennials is estimated to be more than 80 million (Coomes & DeBard, 2004). The largest group of Millennial high school seniors has yet to enter college. Millennials are typically described as the wanted, protected, worthy, and perfected generation (Howe & Strauss, 2003). They grew up when trophies were awarded not just to the first place winner but also to each child simply for participating. The term helicopter parent was created because this generation's parents are described as hovering, protective, and unwilling to let go (Howe & Strauss, 2003). According to Howe & Strauss these parents can be deeply involved in their child's life and the constant contact or monitoring is continuing into the child's undergraduate years. These wanted and protected children come to college with a strong system of support that could have questionable influences on their individuality and autonomy (Howe & Strauss, 2003).

Howe and Strauss (2003) identified seven core traits that are commonly seen in Millennials, while acknowledging that not all students will exhibit all traits. Those traits are special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, conventional, pressured, and achieving. The last trait, achieving, is of particular interest in relation to the pursuit of a graduate degree. Millennials were predicted to do well in college because they were raised to devote an exorbitant amount of time and effort to achieving goals (Wilson, 2004). Wilson

(2004) discussed a potential difficulty, which could be the development of autonomy during the progression from high school to college because of their previously organized and micromanaged life. This is in alignment with the core trait of being sheltered. Millennial undergraduate students prefer clear instructions and specific expectations of their work in the form of highly detailed and explicit syllabi, assignments, and projects (Wilson, 2004). Professors and student affairs service providers are being held to the standard that if it is not in the syllabus or policy book then it is not enforceable (Coomes & DeBard, 2004).

Another potential struggle for Millennials involves the pursuit of excellence and the desire to earn a perfect grade (Howe & Strauss, 2003). Two of the seven core traits proposed by Howe and Strauss are pressured and achieving. When explaining the connection between Millennial students and pressure, the authors described grade inflation, which has been studied at both the high school and college level. Student expectations are high with most undergraduates reporting that they expect to earn a B or better (Howe & Strauss, 2003). Grading in graduate school can be more ambiguous than at the undergraduate level and more subjective grading systems could be a source of difficulty for all involved in the situation.

Millennials are confident and educationally ambitious. Three out of four freshmen predict that they will obtain a graduate degree and nearly 20% indicate that they will earn a Ph.D. or Ed.D. (Coomes & DeBard, 2004). As this generational cohort ages, graduate school faculty and staff are now being exposed to the Millennial generation. Higher education professionals are now experiencing this unique population.

Millennial Student Needs

Much of the research that has been conducted on Millennial undergraduates is of particular value to graduate schools. A recent study on Millennials' self-perceived needs included such topics as social, academic, psychological, and physical concerns (Fletcher, Bryden, Schneider, Dawson, & Vandermeer, 2007). The most commonly reported concern was studying or exam writing (82%) followed by relationship issues (77%), time management (68%), financial concerns (57%), and family health issues (42%). Approximately 20% of students reported concerns related to various issues such as religion, cultural/ethnic, sexual orientation, residency, and learning. Nearly 50% of the over 400 students surveyed reported concerns with self-esteem; other concerns included grief, headaches, visual impairments, and obesity. Students disclosed that the most frequently utilized campus services were the registrar's office, student services, and health services. Millennials reported higher levels of stress, depression, and anxiety; they rely more heavily on their parents for support than previously surveyed generational cohorts (Laanan, 2006). Today's students are also entering their undergraduate years with significant and sometimes severe psychological and emotional issues; these concerns are likely to follow them into graduate school (Laanan, 2006).

Millennial Graduate Students

The focus of student development theories and much student affairs professionals' work has been on the development and needs of traditionally aged undergraduates (Astin, 1984; Baxter Magolda, 1992; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Gansmer-Topf, Ewing Ross, & Johnson, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Sanford, 1996). Student affairs professionals have used developmental theories to aid in college student success and to

nurture emotional, social, and cognitive development (Gansmer-Topf et al., 2006). Graduate student development has frequently been linked to adult development, which includes life span, developmental, transitional, and contextual perspectives (Gansmer-Topf et al., 2006). A graduate student developmental theory was not found in the literature.

Life span perspective views development as being influenced by significant life events and as a unique, individual, and varied process (Gansmer-Topf et al., 2006). The developmental perspective contains within it cognitive development, which is especially relevant to graduate students. In Baxter Magolda's (1992) Model of Epistemological Reflection she described four stages of student's ways of knowing. The fourth and final stage is contextual knowing, which was seen in 12% of postgraduate students and rarely if at all in undergraduate students. It is possible that this fourth stage of contextual knowing could apply to students in graduate school (Baxter Magolda, 1992).

Transitioning to graduate school suggests the relevancy of Schlossberg's Transition Theory in which it is stated that transitions occur throughout one's lifetime, and the magnitude of the transition is dependent on the individual's attachment of significance to the event or non-event (Schlossberg, 1984). According to Schlossberg the situation, strategies, available support, and the individual can influence coping with transitions. Schlossberg's Transition Theory can be implemented with graduate students during new student orientation and available student support services can then be introduced during this time of change (Gansmer-Topf et al., 2006).

Millennials began entering graduate school as early as 2003. Because this generation encompasses those born from 1982 to 2002 Millennials will continue to

saturate graduate school enrollment for many years to come. Millennial students have required more support at the undergraduate level than previous generations (Laanan, 2006). This is due, in part, to their sheltered, special, achieving, and team-oriented nature. Specific support for graduate students has already begun to emerge in different forms such as Office of Graduate Student Life, Graduate Student Affairs, and Office of Graduate Life. Numerous universities are now offering resource centers that focus entirely on graduate students, and these offices or centers serve multiple purposes.

The Office of Graduate Student Affairs at Brandeis University (2008) "supports and encourages life on campus for graduate students outside of the classroom and serves as a liaison between graduate students and University Administration" (para. 3). This office is not focused on graduate student needs inside the classroom; instead the focus is on coordinating and programming events, student orientation, and other non-academic needs. The Brandeis University Graduate Student Center ("Brandeis University," 2008) has a student lounge with computers, fax machines, plasma televisions, microwaves, refrigerators, lockers, free coffee/tea/hot chocolate, discounted tickets to movies, cultural events and transportation services, free workshops, quiet study areas, and a staff member that is available to counsel students. At Princeton University the Office of Graduate Student Life attempts to foster a stronger sense of community by planning intellectual, cultural, and social events, recreational outings, public service, and other activities ("Princeton University," 2008).

Other institutions, such as New York University, have also developed similar offices. The Graduate Student Center at NYU offers a wide range of programming including a grad school 101 course for students to learn what life is like and speed

friending events in which graduate students can make quick acquaintances ("New York University," 2009). Purposeful engagement both inside and outside of the classroom has been found to yield numerous positive outcomes (Astin, 1984; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Sanford, 1966; Schlossberg, 1989). Student involvement, marginality and mattering, challenge and support, and educational environments can have implications outside of the classroom.

Summary

Graduate students number 2.5 million and enrollment is projected to increase. An increasing proportion of graduate students are Millennials and this population has a distinct set of qualities as a generational cohort. Higher education should consider these traits when working with these students. One such consideration is the helicopter parent. Will helicopter parents follow their children to graduate school? Millennials are special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, conventional, pressured, and achieving. What are the needs that this unique cohort will bring with them to graduate school? College decision-making in general is influenced by a multitude of elements; the Millennials' decision to enroll in graduate school has yet to be characterized. Academic and non-academic needs for Millennial graduate students should be examined. In the extremely independent realm of graduate school, what will be the academic and non-academic needs of Millennial graduate students and how will these needs be addressed? These needs could be determined from the student's characterization of their own individual experiences.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Epistemology and Paradigm

The study was influenced by a *constructivist* epistemology and the approach was

through an *interpretivist* paradigm. Constructivists believe that knowledge is generated

from experience, and an interpretivist study implies that both the researcher and the

participants enact influence upon each other (Creswell, 2006). According to Jones, Torres

and Arminio (2006) constructivists believe that humans actually construct meaning as

they interact with the world that they themselves are interpreting.

An interpretivist viewpoint suggests there are many truths to be discovered from

the individual students in this study. It also attempts to understand how humans make

sense of their surroundings and addresses the need to see and understand the world

(Creswell, 2006).

Participants, Population, and Sampling

Data was collected from graduate students currently enrolled in a large, public,

midwestern university who had completed at least one year of study at the graduate level.

The target population of this study consisted of students in graduate school that had

enrolled immediately following undergraduate graduation and were considered to be

Millennial students based on their date of birth. These specific characteristics had to be

present in the sample because they were most likely to elicit insight about this topic of

interest (Jones et al., 2006). Graduate students who are both Millennials and direct from undergraduate study are a unique population as there are many additional populations in graduate school. These populations include Millennials who did not immediately enroll after college, older students with a variety of professional experience, full or part-time professionals in distinct situations, and those that are returning to school later in life, among others.

Ten students were interviewed once for approximately one hour. The study was split evenly with half of the participants being male and half being female and three were students of color. The students were from various academic disciplines including business, education, engineering, liberal arts, and science and mathematics.

The Millennial graduate students in this study were selected using both *purposeful* and *maximum variation* sampling methods**.** Maximum variation is a sampling strategy in which participants, who are different from one another, are chosen with the intent that this diverse pool of subjects will best represent different perspectives (Creswell, 2006). Creating a list of all graduate students, who met the previously described requirements, regardless of their academic discipline, gender, race, or ethnicity, encouraged maximum variation. From this list that contained maximum variation Millennial graduate students with different backgrounds were purposefully selected in order to reflect their differences and different perspectives. Potential subjects were contacted for participation in the study via e-mail and participants were interviewed once in person for approximately one hour.

Methodology and Methods

Grounded theory was the research methodology used to guide the design and analysis in this qualitative study. This methodology discovers, develops, and/or generates

a concept from several individuals (Creswell, 2006). The main focus of this methodology is to develop a theory from the common experiences of the participants in the study to better inform practice or to guide future research. The theory itself is generated from the data given by the participants in the study.

Student development theories exist so that those in higher education can serve students to the best extent possible and to better understand their needs. These theories, which generally focus on traditionally aged undergraduate students, cover a broad range of issues and graduate student development theories were not found in the literature review. As Millennials were born between 1982 and 2002 (Howe & Strauss, 2003) the typical traditionally aged Millennial student who immediately enrolls in graduate school will be approximately aged 22 to 24 years. A 22 year-old graduate student might develop differently than a 22 year-old undergraduate student because of the differences between the undergraduate and graduate school experience. Interviews were selected as the method in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of this student population's issues and needs while in graduate school. One-on-one interviews are considered an excellent method for developing a grounded theory because they yield *rich* data collection (Creswell, 2006). Rich descriptions are a way to provide in-depth and descriptive detail of the setting, participants, and themes from the research and findings (Creswell, 2006).

Data Collection Procedures

A list of students' e-mail addresses was obtained from a database provided by the university. Participants were contacted via an e-mail inquiry and then interviews were scheduled. The Millennial graduate students participated in singular in-depth interviews (see Appendix A). The initial questions were broad and then became more specific as the

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interview progressed. All interviews were digitally voice recorded, transcribed, and *coded,* which are consistent methods in the application of grounded theory methodology (Jones et al., 2006). Coding is a way to analyze and process data that has been fragmented, conceptualized, and developed into themes to form theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). Concepts were derived from the data and formed into emerging categories through the method of *axial coding*. Using axial coding, related themes were merged and combined. These categories initially came from specific words and concepts that were mentioned multiple times by multiple participants. During analysis of the coded data this study used the *constant comparative* method in order to generate and plausibly suggest multiple hypotheses about Millennial graduate students. The constant comparative method is the combination of coding and analysis in tandem to generate a theory (Glasser, 1965). As the initial interviews were transcribed, themes began to emerge, which in turn influenced the interviews with remaining participants. A grounded theory was generated as the result of the data collected.

In qualitative research the number of participants required to complete the study is not established in advance (Creswell, 2006). In order to approach a sound grounded theory, the data is collected until no new concepts can be identified, the data becomes redundant, and reliable themes have emerged (Creswell, 2006). Interviews were conducted, transcribed, and coded until a definitive theory was recognizable, which happened to emerge after 10 interviews. The data was managed through the creation of subcategories relating to the different patterns and themes that developed during the interviews.

Memoing is the process of making notes after the interviews and recording impressions of the participant's answers in a journal (Creswell, 2006). During transcription the tone and inflection in the voices of the participants were noted, which yielded further insight into their responses. The transcriptions were then meticulously reviewed and initial ideas were recorded. The larger themes then began to emerge. The audiotapes were reviewed at least two more times to listen for common ideas that were seen in the transcriptions. Each audiotape was evaluated at least three times and the transcriptions were scrutinized and reviewed multiple times. As common elements emerged from the coding, themes developed from this study and generated the grounded theory that pertained to Millennial students who had enrolled directly into graduate school.

Positioning, Biases, and Ethical Issues

As a graduate student and member of a campus community there was a connection with the population and participants. As a Millennial graduate student conducting research on Millennial graduate students, my personal experiences possibly influenced the analysis of the data (Charmaz, 2008). Despite being a Millennial graduate student, I was not within the population studied as I did not enroll immediately following completion of my undergraduate degree. Although I was closely matched in age to the participants I was slightly older than most and this could have created a power differential during the interviews (Jankowski, Clark, & Ivey, 2000).

This research study sought to garner a deeper understanding of Millennial graduate students regarding their decision to pursue a graduate degree, their academic and non-academic needs, and the characterization of their graduate school experience. A

better understanding of this population and of the issues pertaining to them could potentially have consequences for all involved in higher education including undergraduate and graduate students, staff, faculty, and student affairs professionals. This study did not have major consequences associated with its impact on the target population or the environment in which it was conducted.

Trustworthiness

Certain methods were utilized to enhance *credibility*, *dependability*, and *confirmability* (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). Credibility is whether or not the viewpoint and judgment of the researcher is considered reasonable within the scope of the study (Jones et al., 2006). To help ascertain credibility one must determine if the results are an accurate interpretation of what was presented by the participants in the study (Creswell, 2006). Credibility is generally considered to be the qualitative version of internal validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is enhanced with the implementation of *member checking* and *peer review* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking involves asking the participants to corroborate the findings and peer review consists of presenting the raw data to colleagues for their assistance in their analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability is the degree to which the research is consistent in quality and oftentimes considered to be the qualitative version of reliability (Hoepfl, 1997). Confirmability is the degree to which the researcher can demonstrate the neutrality of the results and it is sometimes seen as the qualitative parallel to objectivity (Hoepfl, 1997). Peer review, *journaling* and *reflection* are implemented to enhance dependability and confirmability. Keeping notes during data collection to organize thoughts and feelings and to collect comments is the act of journaling (Hoepfl, 1997). Reflection is the process

of personal notes made during the process of data analysis (Hoepfl, 1997). Journaling and reflection are used to preserve the thoughts and impressions gathered from the interviews, transcriptions, and coding analyses (Creswell, 2006).

Member checking is an important component of qualitative research (Jones et al., 2006). After the data was analyzed the participants were contacted to confirm what was said in the interviews. The participants were each sent an e-mail with an attached word document that contained the transcription of the interview. Students were asked to confirm what was said and given the opportunity to add further clarification. This correspondence took place exclusively over e-mail although students were given the opportunity to meet in person to discuss the transcriptions. The method of member checking was crucial as their feedback aided with dependability and enhanced validity to the study (Creswell, 2006). This technique allows the participants to further be involved and influence the research (Jones et al., 2006).

Peer review was implemented after individual coding analysis to further discuss themes relating to the research and the development of the grounded theory. Throughout the study the data was discussed with colleagues. Techniques, questions, concerns, and themes from the coding analysis were also examined.

Transferability was addressed through the use of rich and *thick* participant descriptions. Thick descriptions enrich the narrative aspect of the data and allow others a glimpse at the data itself so that they may understand the interpretation (Creswell, 2006). This technique also presents the reader with the opportunity to internalize what they have read and gives them the sense that they could experience the events described in the thick description. A detailed account of the participants' views, characteristics, and answers to

questions was provided along with a comprehensive description of the setting, in order to enable readers of this study to apply the findings to different settings so that similarities and themes may be recognizable and applicable (Creswell, 2006).

Summary

Millennial graduate students were studied using a constructivist epistemology and postpositivist interpretivist paradigm. A grounded theory methodology was utilized in this qualitative research study. The target population consisted of students enrolled directly in graduate school after completion of a bachelor's degree in a large, public, midwestern university. These students were interviewed to ascertain influences on their decision to pursue a graduate degree, their academic and non-academic needs, and the characterization of their graduate school experience. Their responses were transcribed, coded, and interpreted to develop a grounded theory on graduate student development. Trustworthiness was pursued with the implementation of peer review, journaling, reflection, member checking, and rich participant and thick descriptions.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to research issues surrounding Millennial graduate students who had enrolled immediately following completion of their bachelor's degree including influences in their decision making, their needs, and the characterization of their experience. Millennial students have been characterized as having unique and specific traits identifiable during their undergraduate years, but this generational cohort has yet to be examined at the graduate level. The analysis of the data will provide insight into this unexamined population. Results are presented following each research question.

Research Question

How do Millennial students characterize their graduate school experience and their decision to pursue a graduate degree?

Feeling Not Ready for the Real World or Qualified to Work

All students spoke about why they chose to enroll in graduate school instead of entering the workforce. Their decision-making process was largely motivated by career reasons but all students also indicated that they believed they were not qualified to work or they were not ready for the real world. This was especially true for the student described below.

Lenny

Lenny had pursued a bachelor's degree in the liberal arts discipline and was continuing his education in this same field at the graduate level. He had some

stereotypical Millennial traits in that he was very confident, team-oriented, pressured, and achieving. He spoke often about his strong self-motivation and even gave himself the title of "Anti-Procrastinator-Extraordinaire". He was decidedly loquacious and spoke at length about his worldly travels, his 600 family members, his ability to speak multiple languages, and his participation in numerous extracurricular activities including gymnastics, fencing, and musical instruments. When I asked Lenny what influenced his decision to go to graduate school, he paused for a long moment and then spoke:

> Do you want the honest answer? I didn't have anything to do… also you can't do anything with an international studies degree unless you speak a critical language. So there really wasn't a whole lot for me to do with an international studies degree and the economy was not that great at the time so I figured I'd go back to school and if it's bad when I graduate I'll go and get my Ph.D. I was actually really scared of getting into the real world because there is so much I wanted to do, to see, and so many places in the world. And I want to see it and I knew I couldn't do that once I was locked down with a real job. So that's how I ended up in grad school- nothing else to do.

Graduate school seemed to be an acceptable alternative when students had failed to obtain employment. Lenny had attempted to get a job, but when that was unsuccessful he knew he would be admitted to graduate school.

Employment appeared to be what was expected for these students, but when that became unlikely, intimidating, or unwanted then graduate school was transformed into a refuge. It was a safe place that was familiar and allowed the students to put off taking that next step. There was a general feeling that these students were doubtful of their

professional or career abilities but very confident that they would be successful in graduate school. They had convinced themselves that this was what now came next in their lives. Another student, Patricia, gave the impression that she was not interested in working and turned to graduate school as an exciting challenge that would prepare her for a job.

Patricia

Patricia had obtained a bachelor's degree in the humanities and decided to pursue a graduate degree in engineering. She had a strong interest in being a lifelong learner and spoke about possibly pursuing a third degree in yet another discipline. Patricia said she often spent time at the university library where she would select random books from the shelves and read through them for an hour or so in between classes. Her Millennial traits were apparent in her comments about her family life. She felt special and she also expressed some very conventional ideals:

> I realized during my senior year that I wanted to go to graduate school and I did not want to do it in my current major. I was ready for something new. I wasn't ready- I didn't want to be a teacher. I didn't want to go and get my master's or Ph.D. in [the humanities] and keep working in that. I wasn't ready to just go and get into a 9 to 5 office job. So I figured I would go to graduate school. Going to graduate school right away, I knew if I waited it would be harder for me to come back and do it. I would have more distractions and it was just the right time for me. It was easier to do it now than later because I can always go back again for something else if I want to.

Patricia expressed reservations that if she did not immediately pursue a graduate degree then the pursuit would have been harder later in life. School was important to her, as she had identified her passion for education. She was also articulate in her self-assessment that she was simply not ready to start her career. Patricia was not interested in the field that her undergraduate degree had prepared her for and as a result she sought out new options. Several students, including Alice, were pursuing a graduate degree in a discipline very different from their undergraduate area of study and stated that they were not interested in seeking employment in that career field any longer.

Alice

Alice had pursued a bachelor's degree in education but after gaining classroom-teaching experience she decided to pursue a graduate degree in business. Alice worked for the university part-time and worked at a local business nearly full-time and she was very busy with work, intramural sports, and traveling. She demonstrated some characteristic Millennial traits with her pressured and achieving approach to her education. Alice frequently took extra classes and she also selected to enter her graduate program two days after graduating with her bachelor's degree. Alice spoke about her undergraduate experience and when she knew she wanted to go to graduate school:

> I always thought they should put you in a classroom in your freshman or
> sophomore year to see if you like teaching so you don't waste your time. I think
> that's what happened to me- if I had taught my freshman year I would have
> changed my major. I taught inner city and charter school kids. Inner city scared
> me away from teaching definitely because I couldn't handle the way they treated
> me. I'm not strong enough for that. That's why I switched majors. Halfway

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through my senior year of undergrad I realized I didn't want to be a teacher

anymore and I felt like I wasn't ready to go out into the real world yet and work.

So I figured if I kept going to school it would prepare me for the real world.

Especially grad school because it really helps open your eyes to see what's going

to happen when you actually do get a job.

This was a major theme throughout each interview. The students believed they were

going to graduate school to better themselves and to make them more competitive and

marketable in the workforce. However, after they discussed the topic in depth every

student commented on the thought that they were not qualified, not interested in their

undergraduate degree, not ready for a job, not having anything else to do, or that if they

stopped now they would not come back. These Millennial students seemed lost and

sought sanctuary in the comforts of a world they were familiar with: higher education.

Differences and Difficulties of Graduate Life Compared to Undergraduate Life

Most students explained that their graduate school and undergraduate experiences

were very different in comparison. Students spoke about the increased in-class workload

regarding readings, writing, and studying. Lizette described the difficulties of graduate

school combined with the obligations in her personal life.

Lizette

Lizette had a bachelor's degree in fine arts but decided to pursue a graduate

degree in education. She had changed her major several times during her time as an

undergraduate student and also once while in graduate school. She spoke about how she

learned to balance the fun and the work of going to college after she had her first child

during her junior year. Lizette was extremely persistent in the pursuit of her education.

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She was a first generation student and her child spent consecutive months in the hospital after birth. Lizette commented on the difficulties of graduate school:

It is a lot of work- more work that I ever imagined. I don't know why I didn't realize it would be so much work, but it's a lot more studying, a lot more being serious about getting my work done, being focused and studying more, and playing less. One day at a time, one paper at a time, one assignment at a time, one class at a time, one quarter at a time. I'm really narrow-minded. I just need to go to class, go to the library because I have real bills now. I have a three year old. I have real life stuff to do.

Unlike her undergraduate years, Lizette had adopted a serious approach to graduate school. For Lizette, graduate school was very different from her years pursuing her bachelor's degree.

Not all students thought graduate school was more difficult, but those who did communicated the elevated amount of work, studying, and writing associated with graduate school. As a result of the amount of work Lenny was completing in graduate school, he developed his own method of determining how much he was reading for his graduate classes. He stated that instead of counting pages numbers he actually weighed the books he would read in a given quarter. In fact Lenny was able to articulate that he had read "30 pounds" in his first quarter. Alice had her own perspective on the graduate school experience:

Grad school has been either really hard or really easy. The classes have no in between. Everybody getting their MBA has to take accounting and finance and I just can't do it. It makes me feel stupid because I went from one major to a totally

different major. The hard thing for me is that I'll be the one raising my hand in class all the time asking questions and people will look at me like, 'why don't you know that?' I get that a lot.

Most students also described that the materials were more difficult when compared to their undergraduate studies. This was especially true for those students who changed academic disciplines. Alice in particular had struggled with this transition from education to business. Patricia was in a similar situation. She spent her undergraduate years in the humanities and was now pursuing a master's degree in engineering. During her undergraduate degree, Patricia was the majority in gender, race, and ethnicity. However, she had transitioned to become the minority in gender, race, and ethnicity in her master's degree program. Patricia discussed just how different the experience was for her and compared it to being in a foreign country by describing graduate school as her "year in Europe."

Students who pursued a graduate degree in a field analogous to their bachelor's degree commented on the similarities. These students were generally in the engineering or science fields and often were working on graduate research almost identical to their senior year special project. One student in particular, Howard, said that graduate school was virtually the same as his undergraduate experience.

Howard

Howard had an engineering bachelor's degree and was pursuing a graduate degree in that same field. He was also working in the field of engineering during the pursuit of both his bachelor's and master's degrees. Howard often commented that he thought he was different from most college students because he preferred to be socially isolated. His

entire world revolved around engineering- his father was an engineer, his friends were engineers, his bachelor's and master's degrees would both be in engineering, his job was in engineering, and he knew he would also like to pursue a Ph.D. in engineering. His only campus involvement came from being an assistant in the engineering labs. He was very confident of his chosen path. Howard did not see a difference between his undergraduate graduate school experience:

> It's like undergrad. I truly notice no difference whatsoever. Some classes are now at the 700 level instead of the 400 level, but it's just a number. To me the class is identical. As far as class difficulty and time requirements for homework, I have not seen any difference. By and large it's the same as undergrad for me.

Overall each student commented on the unique aspects of graduate school and how they interpreted these differences as relevant to their own individual situations. The students within the humanities commented on the abundance of time and effort spent reading and writing and those within the sciences and engineering spoke about time management and research issues. Generally most comments were in agreement that graduate school was a different time in their lives where they had less class time but more work and the accompanying need to be driven and self-motivated.

More Academic Support is Needed Before and During Graduate School

Students commented on their need for academic support before and during graduate school. Several students, including Lizette and Lenny, expressed regret that there had not been a graduate school preparatory course or program to help inform them about the realities and nuances of graduate school. Lenny would have also liked the

option to take courses that helped him with his writing, explained how to conduct a literature review, and how to complete a thesis proposal. He spoke about this need:

> That's one thing the school definitely should focus on is if people are going to grad school '1. How to do a research design.' There is a class for it but I think by the time you get to grad school that should be a skill you already have and '2. How to do a lit review.' I'd never heard of that before and those are things that you get thrown into in the class and not only do you have to do all these things but you've never heard of them, so how do you do it? I think this could be useful in your senior year of undergrad, like make it a 2 credit hour requirement grad school preparation to be pass or fail. That will let you know what you're getting into. You go in unprepared but I don't think it is anyone's fault, not the university. I just wish that the system was set up better. There's no preparation.

In his undergraduate years, Lenny had never written a literature review and as a result he was overwhelmed. Writing was a large focus of his graduate school experience and he wished he had been better prepared. His first year in graduate school was spent catching up and Lizette also specifically mentioned her desire for a graduate school preparatory program:

> I started grad school last year but even in that first year I had graduate-level seminars that I had to complete for my degree and they were strictly research and scholarly and I was not used to that. I struggled with that, I struggled a lot with that aspect of it. So maybe more preparation, more preparatory programs for that aspect of graduate school. Some kind of heads up from somebody like this is what graduate school is like, these are the expectations. Like the same way the high

school seniors are prepared and they get lectured on what college is like and I feel like that should happen on some level for undergrads when they make the decision to go to graduate school.

The idea that first year graduate students need as much transitional support as entering college freshman was intriguing. The students seemed to want academic support before even entering graduate school. Lizette had studied theater and stated that she had never done any research papers. She was unaware of the expectations and the realities of the demands were a substantial struggle for her.

Alice also described her need for academic support during graduate school. She described her desire for a mentor within her program to help her with the transition to graduate school:

I wish we had that (advisory board) when I came into business because when I was transferring from education to business I started grad school two days after I graduated from undergrad and I knew nothing about the college of business. They didn't have any group of students to help other students like us, like if they have comments or concerns, for non-academic needs for students who don't know what they're doing. At least have a mentor or big brother/big sister for the first year. They should definitely do that to help keep kids on track. I think all grad students should have a mentor their first year who is in their second year of grad school. I think a support system is the most important thing for grad school for sure.

Some students felt like they were unprepared not only in terms of their writing skills but also in their approach to graduate school life. They would have benefited from a support system before and during graduate school. It appeared as though a more holistic approach

would have been of great value for those struggling both academically and emotionally. It seemed like they wanted more individualized care and attention to satisfy their "special" Millennial needs.

Relationships with Parents Were Evolving Towards Independence

Millennial students and their complex relationship with their parents have been a topic of study and one that yielded the term helicopter parent. It has been noted that as these students transitioned from high school to college that they brought their parents with them to their university in some way. I wanted to explore how these students, who went directly from pursuing a bachelor's degree to pursuing a master's degree, were interacting with their parents while in graduate school. There were varying levels of interactions with parents. Some students still lived at home and some were married or on their own, but almost all of the students commented on their relationship with their parents without being asked directly about them:

> Mom and Dad are always there for me. Especially when I went to buy a house they loaned me money. Now I owe them money, but I will pay them back. They've always said if you need to borrow something just let us know. I have a nice system where they are holding the net below me.

> -Howard

A few students were still very connected to their parents for all kinds of support. Howard considered himself to be completely independent because he lived alone and had his own house. He later divulged that his parents had given him the money to make this possible. His autonomy was still linked to financial dependence on his parents. These graduate

students also commented on how much they depended on their parents for emotional support.

Lizette stated that her mother was her best friend and helped her immensely. Other students were more conscious of the fact that their relationship with their parents had changed since entering graduate school. Her parents had paid for her undergraduate tuition, but Alice decided she was ready to pay for graduate school on her own:

At first my parents wanted to take out loans for me so I wouldn't have to work, but I didn't want them to have to do that for me. So I just thought I was old enough. I can handle this. I can handle paying for my own college now.

Alice seemed to identify a difference in accepting financial support for her undergraduate and graduate degrees. Although she had accepted this support while pursuing her bachelor's degree, Alice did not want help funding her graduate degree. To her, being a graduate student was associated with financial independence. Another student, Doug, also commented on financial and emotional support.

Doug

Doug had obtained a bachelor's degree in science and was pursuing a master's degree in the same field. He was extremely confident, conventional, and achieving. Doug described himself as very intelligent, mature for his age, shy, and laid-back. He had a close relationship with his parents, and he cited them as one his largest influences on why he chose to pursue a graduate degree. Doug described how he'd changed since entering graduate school:

I feel like I've matured in a different way by going to graduate school because my connections to my parents are almost gone as far as finances are concerned. In

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undergrad they helped me pay for housing and gave me general funding. I really

appreciated that but it's my goal to be as independent as possible. I think a part of

that is having enough money to support myself, which has helped me to be more

independent from them and develop my own separate life and that is important for

growing up. I was always very close to them, but moving away to college I kind

of lost that to a certain degree, and more so now that I'm in graduate school. I

have an apartment and a whole separate life from them now.

Beyond the financial side of things students talked about their changing

relationship with their parents. Alice spoke about the complicated issue of support from

her parents. She commented that her parents were not entirely supportive of the degree

she was pursuing in graduate school and that they did not really understand what she was

going through. These students were attempting to become independent and experiencing

the complexities of this evolving relationship.

Although I never specifically asked about parents, all students commented on

their relationship with their parents. It appeared that some were still very much supported

and sheltered by their parents and some were the complete opposite. Lizette, who stated

that she relied a lot on her mother, had also changed majors five times during her

undergraduate years and twice while in graduate school. Lenny was more mature and

confident in his approach and he was living a separate life from his parents. The

relationship with their parents seemed to correspond with how far along the students were

in their quest for autonomy. The more focused students were less dependent on their

parents and the less focused students were more dependent on their parents.

The Importance of Grades

Grades were very important to these Millennial graduate students. Without ever being directly asked about this subject, more than half of the students commented on their grades. These conversations seemed to go in two directions: students either had an instance where they struggled with grades and GPA requirements in graduate school or they felt an increased level of competition with their peers concerning grades. One student, Linda, was particularly focused on grades.

Linda

Linda had obtained a bachelor's degree in science and was pursuing a master's degree in the same field. She was somewhat shy and had been an athlete for all four years of her undergraduate career. In addition to an athletic scholarship she also had an academic scholarship during her undergraduate years. She was from a small town and very close to her parents. She was a special, sheltered, achieving, pressured, team-oriented, and conventional Millennial. Linda spoke about her feelings on grades:

> This is grad school and you have to get good grades. I've only got one B so far and I'm still mad about that B. Everybody is worried about getting good grades. There is one student left in the cohort with all A's. The rest of us have all A's and one B and that one student is taking a class right now and we are all watching to see what grade she gets.

Several students had received C's and struggled with maintaining the minimum 3.0 GPA required for their graduate program. Although they were currently in good academic standing, a few students had come close to probation and dismissal. The high achieving Millennial trait was apparent for one student, Sabrina, who was forced to take an

incomplete with the grade of an "I" due to the nature of a class project. Grades were extremely important to Sabrina and her biggest complaint about graduate school was directly related to having an I in one class.

Sabrina

Sabrina had obtained a bachelor's degree in the life sciences and was pursuing a master's degree in education. She was very close to her family and very confident in her academic abilities. This was the second master's degree she was pursuing after completing an accelerated graduate program at a different university. Sabrina stated that her experience in the master's program was great and that she was very prepared for the demands of graduate school. Sabrina discussed her final comments on graduate school and mentioned one problem:

> I did have one problem in grad school. Some classes have ongoing projects, which means I have an "I" on my transcripts. It's frustrating and I wish they could figure out a way around that. Grades are extremely important to me. I think grades are a reflection of your performance.

Even those that had received a C were quick to point out that they immediately earned A's and in their minds that seemed to absolve that sin. Throughout the interviews the students were very conscious of their grades and GPA and it was an important issue for them.

<p align="center">**Lack of Campus Involvement in Graduate School**</p>

Millennial students are known for being highly involved in extracurricular activities and I was hoping to learn more about this for this generational cohort while in graduate school. Nearly every student commented on the fact that they were less involved

with extracurricular events as graduate students. Some students felt like there were fewer opportunities for campus involvement for graduate students. Other students stated that they had less time to get involved as graduate students or that being involved was more for undergraduate students and not for graduate students:

> I haven't done any extracurricular activities. I think we need more involvement because it's important for us grad students to get together and network because those relationships we build on campus will be extended beyond our higher education. It's harder to build relationships with graduate students versus undergrad because there is so much more going on that its hard to connect. The opportunities are not there. In my bachelor's there was a lot more opportunities for those things for students. In my master's I would argue against that. I think that would be my most important concern as a graduate student.
>
> > -Sabrina

Sabrina felt the void left by the lack of campus involvement and connection with her graduate peers. She even identified the lack of opportunities as the most crucial unresolved issue pertaining to her graduate school experience.

Lizette also spoke about the specific needs of graduate students as they related to campus involvement:

> I don't socialize on campus anymore. I think it would be a good idea to have something more accessible to graduate students because they have more responsibilities than undergraduates. Some undergraduates have class from 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. and then they are free to do extracurricular things. A lot of campus resources are open for them whereas graduate students have their classes

in the evening and they're coming off work and after class everything is closed. It would be helpful to have something that is more accessible to graduate students. And we need more organizations or other things specifically for graduate students.

Most of these students were very involved in extracurricular activities during either their high school or undergraduate years. However, only one or two students had specific activities or organizations that they were currently involved with as graduate students. Although they did mention lack of time as one reason some students acknowledged that they wanted more involvement in extracurricular activities in graduate school.

Overcoming Personal and Academic Difficulties in Graduate School

When asked to describe their graduate school experience, each student discussed a personal or academic difficulty that they had overcome. This was most prevalent for those students in the science and engineering fields or those doing laboratory research. These students had issues with their thesis advisor or laboratory principal investigator (PI). Issues ranged from being removed permanently from their lab, being accused of cheating, being inappropriately solicited, being a victim of their PIs pursuit of tenure, and having to delay graduation because their PI was denied re-entry to the United States. Michael had a very difficult time and numerous obstacles that he was forced to overcome.

Michael

Michael had obtained his bachelor's degree in the physical sciences and was pursuing a master's degree in a similar field. He had what he described as "the jock experience" during his undergraduate years as he was involved in athletics for all four

years. Michael had a great relationship with his parents, and they made him feel truly special and supported. He was a student who felt the pressure of being academically achieving and he also started his graduate program two days after finishing his bachelor's degree:

> It's had its ups and downs. Last winter I was asked to leave the lab I worked in. I made a few little mistakes and my advisor called me in about a week before Christmas to tell me he was thinking about not having me in the lab anymore. I was on pins and needles. A day later I got called back and he sat down and told me it was a hard decision for him to make, but he said he wanted me to leave his lab. He told me he didn't think I had the skills to learn the work in two years nor did he have the time to teach me those skills. He tells me I have three options. Leave grad school altogether. He starts with that one first and I'm sitting there almost in tears of frustration, shaking. He says my second option is to go to another department and seek a new advisor. The third option is that you stay in our department, work with someone else, and I stay on your committee… At the time I was really frustrated. I feel like I'm on eggshells around him. The other issue is that in a class I took with him, he accused another student and myself of cheating on homework. I feel like now, in my grad program, I have no motivation. I just want to write a thesis, get it done, and get the hell out of here.

Michael struggled during his time in graduate school. Being removed from his first laboratory left him feeling isolated and shunned and the accusations of academic dishonesty intensified this. He was very close to leaving graduate school altogether and he seemed like he had distanced himself as a coping mechanism. This was a significant

event that he was forced to overcome in his tumultuous tenure as a grad student. Unfortunately, difficulties with one's advisor, PI, or professor were not uncommon:

> I've had frustrations with professors and research. I've had several professors, because of who I am in my department and my background, they know I can write well and several of them have approached me to write for them and work on articles, which is great. But there is a mismatch in priorities for me because I am here to get my degree in two years so don't make me stay here an extra two years just to do your research. That's been a frustration for me and that was something difficult for me to deal with.

> -Patricia

This was a difficult situation politically and Patricia had to learn to resolve it on her own. She felt like she was in an awkward position with no allies to help her.

Linda also had some difficulties and discussed feeling the pressure of her advisor's pursuit of tenure:

> I'm struggling with her right now, trying to get her to calm down. She is a new professor and the tenure clock is ticking. I understand but I have stuff to do and I haven't been able to work on my thesis very much because I'm doing all these other side projects for her. She gives you tons and tons of things to get done and she wants it done that day and sometimes that is impossible.

One student was forced to delay starting his research because of complications with his PI and as a result will graduate at least a quarter later than anticipated. Several students also divulged personal difficulties that they experienced during graduate school. Lenny stated, "I almost had a nervous breakdown during winter quarter because it was too much

work to handle." Doug described sinking into a deep depression after a difficult

relationship breakup and shared that he was in group therapy to deal with the depression.

Despite every student disclosing personal and academic difficulties, each one

strongly believed that graduate school was a positive experience overall. They recognized

that they had experienced what they perceived to be a significant hardship but that they

overcame the issue and were in their second year and close to graduation. These

academic and personal issues were more prevalent for the science and engineering

students that were required to work in a laboratory to complete their graduate work.

Despite these difficulties in the lab, these students often indicated that they were

considering pursuing a Ph.D.

Specific or Still Undecided Future Plans

When asked about their future plans, some students had a very clear path mapped

out and some were still largely undecided. Their responses were either very broad or very

specific. It seemed to be the result of where they were developmentally and how

committed they felt to their career path. Those students with a narrow focus were those

that had pursued a similar field in graduate school as their undergraduate degree. Howard

brought his unique perspective to my question of his plans for the future:

> Well, I'm going to die one day but I will try and delay that as long as possible, but
>
> it will happen. I'll finish my master's and then get my Ph.D. I plan to work at my
>
> current job until I retire. I will do my research and live in my current house for
>
> five to 10 years and then I will move. I will die in that house. I don't want to
>
> switch jobs I want this area to be my home. They could offer me a job at the

Pentagon and that's cool but I'm not going. The job is a means to an end and the end is right here where I'm living.

Howard had mapped out what he wanted in relation to education, career, and home life. He wanted to go straight into a Ph.D. program, continue to work at his current job until he reached retirement, and ultimately die in his next purchased home. This really spoke to his Millennial conventional trait.

Lenny, who had stayed on the same undergraduate to graduate track, had an extremely distinct plan as well:

Take any acronym that stands for any government and that's what I want to do. I want to work for the FBI, CIA, or NSA. USAID is what I really have my eye on, the agency for international development. They have a great job, crisis stabilization officer, who basically goes and helps reconstruct Third World countries from the ground up. I want to be able to travel and see the world. I want an apartment that I don't live in but is paid for by the government and have my student loans paid for. That's my American dream. I don't need a nice car or nice stuff. I just want the world.

Lenny was very clear about where he wanted to go on his future path as he had a very specific job that he was pursuing. Although crisis stabilization officer may be an unconventional occupation, he was conventional in his pursuit of his own American dream.

Some of the students, like Alice, who had changed their career field, were broader in their perceptions of their future. Alice talked about possibly moving around and experiencing new places and new things. She was still somewhat undecided about what

her ideal future would be and was considering pharmaceutical sales, marketing, or even returning to teaching. An interesting phenomena was seen with one of the students, Patricia, who changed career fields from her undergraduate degree to her graduate work. She was no longer interested in the field that her master's was in but had now discovered yet a third field of interest:

> I'm enjoying my classes and the technical work but I've pretty much decided I'm not going to use it in that specific field. I'm going to go ahead and finish it, keep the master's degree because I can apply that in different places. But I'd rather be in a more administrative field or support staff. I think this year and a half of graduate school has given me time to figure that out.

Students stated that their time in graduate school helped them determine what they wanted to do in their careers. Those on a similar path from their undergraduate degree were able to become more specialized or distinctive in their careers such as going from general biology to herpetology. The students who had already made one career change were open to more possibilities and saw numerous options in front of them. Overall these students saw graduate school as a time in their life to help them make decisions for their future.

Summary

This qualitative research sought to employ a grounded theory approach to explain systems and clarify the relationships between these concepts. These Millennial students spoke openly about themselves, their undergraduate and graduate school experiences, the influences on their decision to go to graduate school, and their plans for the future. The findings of this grounded theory study gave light to eight themes:

- feeling not ready for the real world or qualified to work

- differences and difficulties of graduate life compared to undergraduate life

- more academic support is needed before and during graduate school

- relationships with parents were evolving towards independence

- the importance of grades

- lack of campus involvement in graduate school

- overcoming personal and academic difficulties in graduate school

- specific or still undecided future plans

Although these students had varying backgrounds and different academic disciplines they had a unifying link in their shared experience of going directly to graduate school. They seemed certain that they had gone to graduate school for career reasons. However, the deeper meaning was more complex. Higher education was familiar and the real world was something they were not ready for. It was easily discernable that how they interpreted their experience, their relationships, and their potential future was rooted in where they were developmentally. These young Millennial graduate students were a distinctive population and this qualitative study has provided some insight into this.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND SUMMARY

The purpose of this research was to learn more about the issues surrounding Millennial students who entered graduate school immediately after finishing their bachelor's degree. This generational cohort has been studied within the context of their formative undergraduate years, but not during their time in graduate school. As graduate school enrollment continues to steadily increase, student affairs professionals must be able to anticipate the needs of these students. Millennial students who choose to go directly into the pursuit of their master's degree immediately after completing their bachelor's degree bring with them their own unique needs and issues. These students were united in their experiences despite their differences.

Summary of Findings

As previously stated, eight themes were developed from the interviews in this qualitative research. These Millennial graduate students discussed:

1. Feeling not ready for the real world or qualified to work

2. Differences and difficulties of graduate life compared to undergraduate life

3. More academic support is needed before and during graduate school

4. Relationships with parents were evolving towards independence

5. The importance of grades

6. Lack of campus involvement in graduate school

7. Overcoming personal and academic difficulties in graduate school

8. Specific or still undecided future plans

Discussion of Results

Participants in this study had recently completed a bachelor's degree and elected to pursue a graduate degree as their next step. When asked to discuss what had influenced this decision, most students initially responded that their pursuit of a master's degree was career motivated. Some careers currently require a master's degree in order to gain employment and this was clearly identifiable as a major motivating factor. One of the most interesting themes came from these students divulging that they were not ready, qualified, or prepared to enter the workforce regardless of the career field. Students seemed to fall into two categories: those who were on the same career path as what their undergraduate degree prepared them for and those who were pursuing a new career field in their graduate work. Regardless of this status, the students felt unprepared for their preferred profession. The world of higher education was familiar and comfortable and delaying employment was acceptable, nay valiant, as long as it was in the "noble" pursuit of a graduate degree. These students had also been successful during their time as undergraduate students and this could also have been a factor. Some of these students seemed lost and the notion of facing "adulthood" in the form of their first real job was too overwhelming. This indecision or anxiety spoke to where the students were developmentally.

Most of the students believed that the graduate school experience was very different from the undergraduate experience regardless of their academic discipline.

When asked to describe the graduate school experience, the students immediately compared it to their undergraduate experience. This would then result in comments pertaining to academic support before or during graduate school. Part of the intent of this research was to investigate how Millennials were dealing with the autonomy required of them in graduate school. These students had also never been in the workforce professionally and had yet to experience that form of independence. As a result some students yearned for more care, attention, and help while in graduate school.

They wanted mentors and graduate school preparatory programs. One student compared the transition from undergraduate to graduate to be the same as going from high school to college and just like high school seniors work to get ready for college, so too should college seniors work to prepare to be graduate students. Some students also struggled with independence and dependence in their relationships with their parents.

Although some still relied quite heavily on their parents, most of these Millennial graduate students endeavored to become more independent. The students articulated awareness of this dependency and their desire for independence. Those dependent students seemed to be at an earlier stage in their development and when describing difficulties or indecision they stated that they consulted their parents for advice. They were also more prone to be undecided about their future. The students who were more independent demonstrated more confidence and conviction in their future plans.

These stereotypical high achieving Millennials placed great importance on grades. In some instances the focus on grades seemed to be less about learning the subject and more about obtaining the perfect grade. Students commented that if a professor outlined an assignment on a syllabus then the student expected the professor to follow it exactly.

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Grades were a way for these students to assess their worth and also a way for them to compare themselves to their peers and establish superiority.

The participants were not very involved with campus or extracurricular activities despite most being highly involved during their undergraduate years. This was attributed to a general lack of available activities for graduate students and also mainly because the students stated that they lacked the time or desire to be involved. It is known that undergraduate students who are more involved are more successful and it would be intriguing to learn more about how this could apply to graduate students.

All students were genuinely positive in their overall comments on graduate school, and this was remarkable given some of the personal and academic problems they had endured during this time. One student in particular, Michael, had undergone some extremely stressful situations. Michael had been asked to leave his research lab, forced to stop his thesis research work, and expected to find a new advisor on his own. He was also accused of academic dishonesty and believed his situation was collateral damage as the result of a larger political issue in his department. His experiences had left him with bitter feelings and the desire to graduate and get out of the program as quickly as possible. Despite all of this, when describing his overall experience his comments were positive. These students, even with the obstacles they had overcome, realized that they were bettering themselves and accomplishing something significant. Their tenacity combined with their Millennial traits had helped them to persevere.

Reflections as a Researcher

As I reflect upon this experience, I can empathize with what was said by these students. Like them, I am also a Millennial graduate student although I chose not to enroll

immediately following the completion of my bachelor's degree. I found myself identifying with the themes in one way or another and also with the students. I could recognize parts of myself in what they had to say about their experience.

This was especially true as I listened to the students from the sciences, as this was my background from my undergraduate years. Too often had I seen students fall victim to the whim of their advisor or departmental politics and be forced to leave their labs, essentially leaving them academically homeless. These students were marked with a "scarlet letter" that negatively impacted how their department, their peers, and their professors regarded them. Suffice it to say, I found myself to be particularly sensitive to their difficult situations with their advisors.

I empathized with those students who had changed career paths, as this was congruent to my own graduate school experience. I understood what it felt like to transition as I went from the sciences in my undergraduate years to student affairs in my graduate work. One student saw herself as a transfer student because she thought of herself as transferring into a new field with outsider status. I could definitely relate to this. I found myself relating to the other themes including grades, campus involvement, and parents as well.

Conducting individual interviews in this qualitative research was deeply impactful to me. I was able to gain insight into the world of the student population that was studied and discover some of the underlying themes. As the students impacted me, I as the researcher also exacted influence upon the research and themes. I see myself in varying degrees in each theme. It was very revealing to learn that despite their differences, these

Millennial students were joined together by the shared experience of going directly to graduate school.

Recommendations for Further Research

There exists a wealth of preexisting research in which Millennials have been the focus, except in the realm of graduate school. It would be advisable for further research to be conducted on these Millennial students in this situation of going directly to graduate school. As found by this study, Millennial students sometimes struggle with the autonomous nature of graduate life and more could be learned about this topic. This research leaves room for future study and comparison of this specific population to other groups of graduate students.

Within the sciences a related phenomenon exists in which Millennial students go directly into Ph.D. programs after completing a bachelor's degree. The sciences have somewhat rendered the master's degree as obsolete and thus some students are pursuing Ph.D.s at age 22. It would be extremely interesting for a study similar to this one to be carried out with the population of students who go directly from an undergraduate degree to the pursuit of a Ph.D. More research on graduate students in general would be recommended as enrollment is increasing. As the result of this research the recommendations for higher education are as follows:

- Evaluate the approach towards this group of graduate students and consider the issues surrounding them
- Develop a larger graduate school preparatory program and a mentor program
- Make a concentrated effort to engage this population on campus

There exists a dividing line between graduate students and undergraduate students in regards to how they are perceived in higher education. Graduate students are generally thought of as a separate and distinct population, but what if some are not very different from their undergraduate peers? These students would benefit from graduate school preparatory programs and mentoring while in graduate school. Support from members of their cohort could foster a richer and more connected first professional network. In addition to this support, these students want more engagement with their institution and campus to further enrich the experience and enhance their success.

Implications for the Higher Education Profession

This study has numerous implications for the student affairs profession because understanding the issues surrounding this population is advisable for student success. It is important for student affairs professionals to be aware of the needs of this generational cohort while in graduate school. Those graduate students who begin the pursuit of their advanced degree are unique in many ways. It is sometimes assumed that graduate students are very different than undergraduate students in their characteristics, situation, and needs. However, it would be unwise to make this assumption. Two of the 10 students in this study began graduate school two days after undergraduate graduation. These students who immediately enroll are typically very young and lack professional work experience. It is crucial that student affairs professionals consider where these students are developmentally as that will enhance student success.

The students in this study indicated that they would like to be more involved in campus activities and perhaps more focus should be given to this group. Creative ways of engaging Millennial graduate students would be beneficial for students, faculty, and staff.

Perhaps there is a way for these graduate students to interact with senior undergraduate students to provide insight on graduate life. This might alleviate some of the struggles that lead to students wanting a graduate preparation course. Student affairs professionals should also be aware of the notion that first year graduate students want mentor/mentee relationships to enhance their understanding and successful integration to graduate school.

Student affairs professionals who work with graduate students should be conscious that these students are still developing their independence and navigating new territory in their relationships with their parents. It is often assumed that the parent/student relationship is only relevant to undergraduate students but this research has shown that this is not true. Virtually every functional area within student affairs is in contact with graduate students in some way and the students in this research mentioned several. For example, residence services, student activities, counseling and wellness, and academic advising were all directly named and discussed. These Millennial graduate students should not be overlooked and in order to ensure their success student affairs professionals should give this population further thought and consideration.

Limitations

This study was limited in that the students were only interviewed once and further understanding of this population could be obtained through multiple sessions with each individual. Slight differences were seen in the characteristics and needs of students depending on their academic discipline and their academic background. This study included three students in engineering, three in the sciences, two in liberal arts, one in education, and one in business. Although this variability was intentional it inherently has

limitations because only one perspective was gained from graduate students in both business and education.

Summary

Graduate school enrollment is increasing and so too is the number of Millennial students who choose to enroll in graduate school immediately following the completion of their bachelor's degree. This generational cohort has been characterized as having seven distinct traits that allow student affairs professionals to gain a deeper understanding of their needs and issues. It is only fitting that student affairs professionals integrate knowledge of these traits with Millennial graduate students.

The results of this study have indicated that these students chose to go to graduate school because they did not believe they were qualified to enter the workforce and that they were not ready for the real world. Some of the students struggled with the differences between life as a graduate student compared to what they experienced as an undergraduate. The research demonstrated that the students were not ready to be completely autonomous and wanted more individualized care. They wanted graduate school preparatory programming and mentors during their first year. The evolving relationship with their parents was also significant in what it meant for the student developmentally. This population of graduate students was also very concerned with grades and campus involvement. They had all experienced some kind of personal or academic difficulty that influenced their time in graduate school. When considering their future plans, some students were exceptionally articulate about their goals, and others were still largely undecided and a few were interested in pursuing new fields altogether.

Future studies of this Millennial graduate student population should seek to better understand what their issues and needs are so that higher education can provide a support system to enhance student success. Student affairs professionals should endeavor to create a campus environment that is inclusive to all populations including graduate students. Ensuring that these students have the best experience possible is paramount to their success and development, which is the ultimate goal for student affairs professionals.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Tell me about yourself.

Tell me about your undergraduate experience.

What influenced your decision to go to graduate school?

Tell me about your graduate school experience so far.

Have you changed since entering graduate school?

What are your academic and/or in-class needs in graduate school?

What are your non-academic or extra-curricular needs in graduate school?

What are your plans for the future?

Follow-up Interview Questions (if not addressed during interview)

Tell me about your support system.

Has anyone in your immediate family gone to graduate school?

When did you know you wanted to go to graduate school?

Did you live at home during your undergraduate years?

What could the university do differently to meet your needs as a graduate student?

Would you benefit from/use an office on campus that was devoted only to graduate

students and provided resources that addressed graduate student needs?

Did you feel prepared for the demands of graduate school?

Disclaimer:

Additional follow-up questions may be necessary to expand on the issues presented in the

interviews, and to elaborate on items presented in the initial questions.