Factors Students Consider in the Decision Making Process for Graduate Education

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Factors Students Consider in the Decision Making Process for Graduate Education

(TITLE)

BY

Kiley Sturm

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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Factors Students Consider in the Decision Making Process for Graduate Education

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Abstract
Using a qualitative methodology, the researcher studied the factors students consider in the decision making process for graduate education. Through conducting two focus groups that contained a total of thirteen participants, the researcher identified the factors that were the most significant to their decision making during the decision making process for pursuing graduate education, applying to institutions, and the selection and enrollment at their institution. The researcher also identified reasons affecting the students' decision of when to pursue graduate education and how their undergraduate experience impacted the decision making process.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my fiancé, parents, sister, and brother-in-law. To my future husband, David Rotchford, it is impossible for me to put into words how much you mean to me and how much credit you deserve for this thesis. While you may not have done the study or the writing, the minutes you spent listening and the knowledge you have of the research I conducted is extremely impressive. Thank you for always being there even when you were unsure of what the thesis process included. Thank you for encouraging me to chase my dreams even though it resulted in us transitioning our relationship to long distance. Thank you for always being up for a trip to EIU so we could spend the weekend together. I cannot wait for June 22nd, 2019 and all the days we will share in our life together. I love you more, always!

To David, Greg, Angie, Lindsey, and Tom, thank you for being the best family I could ever imagine being part of. I am so lucky to have all of you by my side and will always cherish the memories from the weekends when all of us were together at EIU. I am appreciative of the traits you have instilled in me or shown to me through our experiences individually and/or together. This thesis is better because I had all of you as such positive role models. Thank you for all the love and support you have provided through the thesis process. Your love and support gave me the confidence to return to graduate school and you all have been along for every step of my graduate experience.
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Enrolling in a graduate education program allows students to expand their knowledge of a field of study while also developing in ways to prepare them for their future career (Poock & Love, 2001). Before enrolling, students must decide which graduate school they should attend. The process of selecting a graduate education program has been identified as a stressful and time-consuming process (Poock & Love, 2001). When making this decision, students consider which school will provide the best fit to them as an individual when it comes to their academics and personal life (Lei & Chuang, 2010). To determine best fit, the decision making process for students relies on knowledge, interpretation of costs and benefits, interactions with faculty and peers, resources available, academic options, and financial aid (Griffith, 2010; Malcom & Dowd, 2012; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

These factors can vary in influence depending on the demographic variables that exist between individuals (Lei & Chuang, 2010). Demographic variables include characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Lei & Chuang, 2010). Due to the complex nature of selecting a graduate program, students must make their final decision through reflection and identification of personal, academic, and career goals (Lei & Chuang, 2010). Through reflection and identification, the graduate school decision making process is extremely unique and dynamic for each individual (Dowd, 2008).
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to look at the graduate education decision making process of students at a midsized university in the Midwest. The study aimed to identify what factors students considered important in their decision to pursue graduate education. The study also aimed to identify what factors students considered important in their decision to pursue graduate education at their undergraduate institution or graduate education at a different institution. The study was guided through the knowledge that graduate education has grown significantly in recent decades (Xu, 2014).

Through this growth, students wishing to pursue graduate education have been provided with more choices when it comes to their enrollment options (Von Hoof, Luorong, & Lu, 2014). As a result of this growth, programs face an increase in competition when it comes to attracting the best and brightest students to their programs (Von Hoof et al., 2014). For this reason, administrators and faculty have become concerned with what factors are important to individuals when it comes to the graduate school decision making process (Von Hoof et al., 2014). Despite the increase in competition, a lack of research and understanding exists when it comes to the graduate school decision making process for students as a whole (Von Hoof et al., 2014; Xu, 2014). As a result, the study aimed to contribute to the understanding and literature for the topic of the decision to pursue graduate education and the decision to enroll in a specific graduate program.

Research Question(s)

Due to the increasing competition between graduate programs to get students to enroll in their program, this study sought to gain knowledge on the factors that influenced
the decision to pursue graduate education. Additionally, the study sought to gain knowledge about what factors influenced a students' decision to enroll in graduate education at their undergraduate institution or a different institution. The following research questions were created and guided the study:

1. How do individuals come to the decision to pursue graduate education and what factors influence this decision?

2. How do individuals come to the decision to apply for graduate education at particular institutions and what factors influence this decision?

3. How do individuals come to the decision to enroll for graduate education at a particular institution, how do they determine the best time to enroll for graduate education, and what factors influence this decision?

4. What factors influence a student's decision to enroll for graduate education at the same institution where they completed their undergraduate degree or an institution that differs from where they completed their undergraduate degree?

Significance of the Study

Due to undergraduate degrees becoming more attainable to all students, individuals have pursued graduate education as a way to separate themselves as being unique from others (Zhang, 2005). The decision to pursue graduate education is a decision made by thousands of individuals following the completion of their undergraduate degree (English & Umbach, 2016). When a student successfully completes their graduate degree, they experience an increase in earnings and quality of life (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). This occurs through the contribution to government through higher tax payments, characteristics that reflect better health, and children who are better
prepared for education attainment throughout their lives (Baum et al., 2010). Even though graduate education has grown in size and importance, a lack of research and understanding exists when it comes to the decision making process for students who pursue graduate education (Mullen, Goyette, & Soares, 2003). For this reason, the study is valuable in filling a lack in current research and assisting institution administrators and faculty in their knowledge of the graduate education decision making process for students.

**Limitations of the Study**

When considering limitations of the study, the first limitation involved the institution that was used for the study. The study took place at a mid-sized institution located in the Midwest. By selecting one specific institution, the findings of the study are limited in their generalizability to other institutions. However, the findings can be transferred to other institutions of similar setting, size, mission, and programs.

The second limitation of the study occurred due to the study being qualitative. In a qualitative study, the researcher is considered a key component of the instrumentation of the study (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2015). The researcher’s bias, personality, experiences, behaviors, and body languages can influence different aspects of the study (Fraenkel et al., 2015). Some of the ways the characteristics of the researcher can influence the study include: how the participant responds, how data is collected, and how data is interpreted (Fraenkel et al., 2015).

For the study, researcher bias and experience may have influenced the study. This limitation may have occurred due to my personal connection to the study. As someone who enrolled in graduate education at the same institution as my undergraduate
institution, my experiences may have created a bias towards similar decisions and experiences. Remaining aware of this bias during the interpretation of the data acted to decrease any negative impacts on the final results of the study.

The final limitation of the study occurred due to focus groups being utilized as the means to collect data. While the study had thirteen total participants, only one of these participants was an online student. By utilizing focus groups, it was very difficult to get online students to participate even though more than enough were initially willing to do so. Many online students expressed interest in being a participant but were only willing to do so if there was a survey for them to complete. With the growth in online education, this was a limitation and may have influenced the results of the study due to not being able to get an entire understanding of the decision making process for graduate students who have selected online education.

**Definition of Terms**

**Adult learner.** A student who was enrolled in undergraduate education at the age of 25 years or older (Ross-Gordon, 2011).

**First-generation.** A student whose parents’ highest education level is a high school diploma or less (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998).

**Graduate school choice.** Decision to pursue any post-baccalaureate degree program at the master’s, doctoral-research, or doctoral-professional practice level (English & Umbach, 2016)

**Summary**

The study was designed to gain a better understanding of the decision making process to pursue graduate education. The study aimed to identify the specific factors that
influenced the graduate school choice decision making process. The factors that influence the decision making process of graduate education are important to higher education administrators due to the competition that exists between institutions when it comes to getting students on campus. By studying the decision making process of graduate education, higher education administrators and faculty will be able to improve the programs and services offered to students. Chapter One provided an introduction into the study. Chapter Two will provide a review of current research and literature that relates to the topics of the study.
CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

Graduate education has grown significantly in recent decades in terms of value and importance (Zhang, 2005). This growth has occurred due to undergraduate education becoming inadequate when it comes to rapid knowledge development and technological innovation (Zhang, 2005). This has been reflected through many professions only being open to those who are able to earn a graduate degree (Morelon-Quainoo et al., 2009). If a student is unable to earn a graduate degree due to internal or external factors, they are automatically at a disadvantage when it comes to the pursuit of certain professional fields (Morelon-Quainoo et al., 2009). For example, a student may have the dream of being a doctor, lawyer, college professor, dentist, pharmacist, or veterinarian but may not have the means to earn a graduate degree (Morelon-Quainoo et al., 2009). Despite this growth and need for graduate education, a lack of understanding still exists for different aspects of the graduate education process (Xu, 2014). For this reason, a review of the current literature related to the decision making process for graduate education will be provided. The literature review will identify and evaluate the internal and external factors that influence the college choice process for individual students who pursue graduate education.

Graduate Education

When it comes to earning a degree, universities aim to produce programs that allow and prepare students to directly respond to societal and business needs once they graduate (Jepsen & Varhegyi, 2011). This is done through universities constantly creating, refining, and adapting courses within their undergraduate and graduate
programs (Jepsen & Varhegyi, 2011). On a larger scale, graduate education has been identified as essential to America’s economic and social prosperity (Stewart, 2010). The argument has been made that graduate education produces people who have obtained the advanced knowledge and skills necessary for America’s prosperity to continue (Stewart, 2010). The advanced knowledge and skills gained through graduate education include: understand, use, and develop methods of inquiry and research, synthesize complex information, exercise critical and analytical judgment, and address the complex and compelling issues of the current time (Stewart, 2010).

Overall, economic growth comes from the production of ideas that lead to technological progress (Bailey, 2001). To create a more efficient system of the production of new and better ideas, skilled individuals need to be spread throughout the workforce (Stewart, 2010). This is achieved through individuals being trained and developed through the process of graduate education (Stewart, 2010). For this reason, students are attracted to graduate education in two main ways. For some, the decision to pursue graduate education comes from their desire to specialize in their specific field (Jepsen & Varhegyi, 2011). For others, the decision to pursue graduate education comes from their desire to supplement their undergraduate degree by generalizing their knowledge with an advanced degree (Jepsen & Varhegyi, 2011).

Due to the desire for economic growth, hiring officials take into account if an individual has earned a graduate degree (Carnevale, 2009). At the time of hiring, employers look to identify if an individual has the potential for development (Carnevale, 2009). The most important skill considered when it comes to development is the ability to acquire new skills (Carnevale, 2009). For this reason, hiring officials prefer to hire
“proven learners” who have a record of learning through formal education (Carnevale, 2009). This behavior creates an environment where education requirements are constantly rising (Carnevale, 2009).

Ultimately, the large scale importance placed on graduate education is reflected on a smaller scale through the behavior of students (Stewart, 2010). Between 1998 and 2008, graduate degree enrollment increased annually by a rate of roughly 3.5% (Stewart, 2010). Students have identified the value of a graduate education through employers increasing their recognition of graduate degrees and the earnings increase students receive with a graduate degree (Stewart, 2010). When it comes to increased earnings, students earn $14,000 more annually with a master’s degree and $30,000 more annually with a doctoral or professional degree (Stewart, 2010). From these factors, the impact of graduation education can be felt on something as large as America and on something as small as one individual.

Online Courses

In 2010, Allen and Seaman conducted a study where they surveyed over 2,500 universities and colleges located in the United States. From this study, the authors identified multiple statistics regarding the growth of online classes during matriculation (Allen & Seaman, 2010b). These statistics were: 63% of institutions stated online learning was a “critical” part of their long-term strategy, 5.6 million students had taken at least one online course during the fall 2009 term (an increase of nearly one million students over the number reported in fall 2008), nearly 30% of higher education students now take at least one course online, and between 2002 and 2008, a 260% increase in the
proportion of students enrolling in online courses relative to face to face courses occurred (Allen & Seaman, 2010a, 2010b).

As online courses offerings continue to expand, students are able to become more selective of the program and institution they ultimately choose to enroll (Harris & Martin, 2012). For this reason, Harris and Martin (2012) conducted a study with the goal of identifying which factors motivate students to choose online courses. A survey with sixteen multiple choice questions was sent to 4,000 students at one institution located in rural, eastern Oregon (Harris & Martin, 2012). Of the 4,000, 644 students responded broken down as follows: female (71%), Caucasian (89%), senior status (28%), age 18-22 (36%), and fully/mostly online (50.5%) (Harris & Martin, 2012). Before analyzing motivations, Harris and Martin (2012) found a significant correlation when it came to student age and course delivery method in that as the age of the students increased, their enrollment status was more likely to be fully/mostly online (Harris & Martin, 2012).

Regarding the motivations for selecting course delivery, the first group of students analyzed was the group that identified their enrollment status as fully on-campus delivery (Harris & Martin, 2012). For this group, they were motivated to not take online courses due to a lack of needing online courses, desiring face-to-face interaction, and misunderstanding/lack of information about online courses (Harris & Martin, 2012). In this group, 35% selected on campus courses because they believed that online courses would be isolating while 65% reported that they were willing to consider online courses (Harris & Martin, 2012). The second group of students analyzed was the group that self-identified as taking at least one online course (Harris & Martin, 2012). For this group, students were motivated to take online courses due to place-bound or time-bound issues
DECISION MAKING PROCESS

(Harris & Martin, 2012). When comparing the two groups, students who had fully on-campus delivery were more likely to be motivated by learning preferences (65%) compared to students in at least one online course (17%) (Harris & Martin, 2012). The results found by Harris and Martin (2012) match the results of other studies (Marshall, Greenberg, & Machun, 2012; Noel-Levitz, 2010). In these studies, students were motivated to pursue online courses due to access, convenience, flexibility, and ability to fit into schedule (Marshall et al., 2012; Noel-Levitz, 2010). Specifically, online courses appeal to students due to the fact that they can be taken at anytime and anywhere which provides more choices and eliminates restrictions caused by pre-set specific dates, times, and/or locations when it comes to the courses they must take (Marshall et al., 2012).

In another study, researchers aimed to identify the specific characteristics of students that may influence their decision to select online courses (Mann & Henneberry, 2012). The researchers were motivated by the fact that online courses are now being taken by both non-traditional and traditional students (Mann & Henneberry, 2012). In the beginning, online courses were predominately taken by non-traditional students due to the fit they provided for this group of students (Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003). The fit was caused by the maturity and experiences of non-traditional students which allowed them to achieve success in online classes with little technology and direction (Allen & Seaman, 2010a; Bejerano, 2008; Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011; Howell et al., 2003; Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robinson, 2011; Mann & Henneberry, 2012; Oblinger, Barone, & Hawkins, 2001). Additionally, non-traditional students were considered a good fit for online courses due to the flexibility that allowed students to earn their degree while maintaining work, family, and social aspects of life (Allen & Seaman,
Over time, traditional students have increased their enrollment in online courses (Bejerano, 2008; Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2011; Mann & Henneberry, 2012; Oblinger et al., 2001). This increased enrollment has been found to be caused by online classes being an alternative option to avoid scheduling conflicts (Bejerano, 2008) and student acceptance of online courses due to the growth in familiarity and comfort with the technology that operates them (Allen & Seaman, 2010a; Bejerano, 2008; Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2011; Oblinger et al., 2011; Russell, 1999).

Due to the shift in students who enroll in online courses, the researchers believed that the choice to enroll may be driven by factors beyond career, family, and/or social obligations (Mann & Henneberry, 2012). From this belief, the researchers created a study that would aim to identify the characteristics of students that influence the decision of whether to enroll in an online course (Mann & Henneberry, 2012). Student characteristics that were studied included the following: college major, course load, employment, demographic information, preferences for learning and communicating, use of different computer technology, and experience/knowledge about online courses (Mann & Henneberry, 2012). An email survey of 27 questions was sent to all graduate and undergraduate students at Oklahoma State University-Stillwater during the fall 2010 semester and 2,691 students completed the survey (Mann & Henneberry, 2012).

From the data collected, Mann and Henneberry (2012) were able to draw numerous conclusions. When it comes to college major, undergraduate and graduate business students were more likely than others to enroll in online courses (Mann &
Henneberry, 2012). Additionally, undergraduate engineering students and graduate anatomy, biochemistry, biology, and botany students were least likely to enroll in online courses (Mann & Henneberry, 2012). When considering year in school, freshman/sophomores were more likely than juniors/seniors and much more likely than graduate students to enroll in online courses (Mann & Henneberry, 2012). Looking at the residency status of students, out of state students were most likely to enroll in online courses while international students were the least likely to enroll in online courses (Mann & Henneberry, 2012). Lastly, a significant positive relationship was found between students who are familiar with technology such as online social networking and live video chatting and their decision to enroll in online courses (Mann & Henneberry, 2012). Overall, the conclusions found by Mann and Henneberry (2012) support the previous research that has found non-traditional and traditional students to be enrolling in online courses.

Most recently, Online College Students 2018: Comprehensive Data on Demands and Preferences was released (Magda & Aslanian, 2018) that addressed issues relating to online education. In this report, nine key findings were presented about online students/online education and were the following: mobile-friendly content is critical, online students need career services, online learning is providing a positive return on students’ investment, online programs are becoming more diversified, online students support innovations that decrease the cost and time to complete a degree, interactions and relationships with peers are key to online students’ success, multichannel approaches to advertising and marketing are necessary to attract online students, an online degree’s
value is more than its price, and online students are bypassing the on-ground classroom for added convenience (Magda & Aslanian, 2018).

Within these key findings, numerous statistics were presented and included the following: 67% of online students complete online coursework on their mobile device, 85% of online students believe online learning is equal to or better than attending courses on campus, 57% of online students were found to consider interactions with their peers as important to their academic success, and 60% of online students selected online education even though they had the choice between online and face to face education (Magda & Aslanian, 2018). Additional statistics that were found to show how online education is changing included: 74% of online students pursue graduate education as a means to achieve a career change. This means that career services and programs are becoming more applicable to post-graduation success while shifts in the types of online programs students are seeking have moved from business/education towards IT/health and medicine/STEM (Magda & Aslanian, 2018). Overall, this report shows how quickly online education is growing/changing.

**Demographic Characteristic – Ethnicity**

When it comes to the selection of a graduate education program to attend, there are many factors that can influence the decision process for students. The first factor of influence that will be reviewed is ethnicity. Ethnicity is defined as, “the fact or state of belonging to a social group that has a common national or cultural tradition” (Ethnicity, 2018). Even though a graduate degree has the ability to further develop individuals and society as a whole, inequality exists when it comes to the graduate degree attainment for underrepresented populations (Perna, 2004). When a student has an ethnicity that aligns
with the minority population, they have less likelihood of achieving a graduate degree compared to their peers in the majority population (Morelon-Quainoo et al., 2009). If these odds do not improve, the United States will have a hard time remaining a leader in the overall global economy (Wendler et al., 2010).

In 2004, Perna conducted a study where she aimed to contribute to the understanding of why women, African-Americans, and Hispanics were underrepresented among students receiving advanced degrees. Specifically, she examined the differences among students who had earned a bachelor's degree and the type of post-baccalaureate educational program they enrolled in (Perna, 2004). Data was pulled from the 1997 follow-up to the Baccalaureate and Beyond (B & B) survey that was first given to individuals in 1993. The Baccalaureate and Beyond survey was a national longitudinal study that was created with the goal of collecting information from students about their education and/or work experiences after they had completed their bachelor's degree (Zhang, 2005).

By using the Baccalaureate and Beyond Survey, Perna (2004) utilized a nationally representative sample that included 9,241 individuals. A conceptual model was created and the assumption was made that race/ethnicity was one function of the decision making process to enroll in a post-baccalaureate program (Perna, 2004). For the study, the race/ethnic groups analyzed were Asian, Black, Hispanic, White, and other (Perna, 2004). The "other" group was comprised of American Indians/Alaskan Natives, nonresident aliens, and those who had unknown or other races/ethnicities with the highest degree program a student had enrolled in by 1997 as the dependent variable (Perna, 2004). Due to the timing of the follow-up survey being administered in 1997, it was only able to
evaluate enrollment in a graduate program that took place no more than five years after having earned a bachelor’s degree (Perna, 2004). Students fell into one of five categories; did not enroll, enrolled in a submaster’s level program, enrolled in a master’s degree program, enrolled in a first-professional degree program, and enrolled in a doctoral degree program (Perna, 2004). Submaster’s level programs were those that grant certificates, associate’s degrees, or bachelor’s degrees and first-professional programs were those that represent MBA, law, and medicine (Perna, 2004).

After analyzing the data, Perna (2004) found small differences between race/ethnicity when it came to the five different enrollment categories. For all races/ethnicities, not enrolling in a program was the most common option among students. Specifically, 53.0% of Black, 52.8% of White, 48.8% of Hispanic, 46.8% of Asian, and 40.8% of Other/Unknown had not enrolled in a program by 1997 (Perna, 2004). The second most common option amongst students was enrolling in a master’s degree program, 31.2% of Other/Unknown, 21.6% of Black, 20.5% of Hispanic, and 19.3% of White (Perna, 2004). The only exception to the second most common option was Asian students who were more likely to enroll in a submaster’s level program (21.8%) (Perna, 2004).

Taking it a step further, Perna (2004) made additional assumptions in the conceptual model that was used for the study. These assumptions were that sex, expected costs and benefits, financial and academic resources, and cultural and social capital were factors that influence the decision to enroll in a post-baccalaureate program (Perna, 2004). A similar percentage of Black and White students were found to enroll in a submaster’s level program (16.9/18.2%), master’s program (21.6/19.3%), and first-
professional degree program (6.5/6.6%) (Perna, 2004). When taking into account the additional expectations, Black students were found to be significantly more likely to enroll in a master’s or professional degree program rather than not enrolling at all compared to the reference group of White students (Perna, 2004).

A second study was conducted by Xu using the 1993/1997/2003 Baccalaureate and Beyond Survey. In the study, Xu aimed to identify factors that influence the advancement to and persistence in graduate education. Xu had the goal to promote access to graduate education and to achieve this goal, two groups were the focus of the study. Due to the imbalance of women and minority groups in certain academic areas (Malcom & Dowd, 2012; Perna, 2004), students were separated based on undergraduate major being either in a STEM field or non-STEM field (Xu, 2014).

For the study, Xu (2014) used the dependent variable of student’s experience with graduate education between bachelor’s degree completion in 1993 and survey follow-up in 2003. The dependent variable was broken into the categories of no graduate enrollment, previously enrolled but no degree attainment, and currently enrolled or attainment of one graduate degree (Xu, 2014). Ethnicity was broken into the categories of White and racial minorities (Xu, 2014). When comparing these groups, Xu found two significant results. First, racial minorities were found to be twice as likely as White students to never attend graduate school within the ten years since completing their bachelor’s degree (Xu, 2014). Second, racial minorities who were enrolled in graduate programs were found to be more likely to drop out compared to White students (Xu, 2014).
In 2016, English and Umbach presented a study where they examined the individual and institutional effects on the graduate school choice process for students. In the study, the conceptual model used identified that the graduate school choice process involves three phases. The three phases an individual goes through are: the development of aspiration for graduate education, submitting applications to graduate schools, and transitioning into a specific graduate program (English & Umbach, 2016). The authors analyzed the process of the three phases and the influence they had on graduate education in general (English & Umbach, 2016). For this reason, graduate education was not broken into the various graduate degree disciplines or types (English & Umbach, 2016).

For the study, English and Umbach (2016) used nationally representative data from the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study that began in 2001. Of the 9,480 participants, 83% aspired to graduate education, ~67% applied to a graduate school, and ~25% were enrolled in a graduate program (English & Umbach, 2016). English and Umbach (2016) split ethnicity into the categories of White, Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Indian, and Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander (English & Umbach, 2016). From the data analysis, significant relationships were identified. The first significance was found between African-American and Caucasian students. African-American students were more likely to aspire to, apply for, and enroll in graduate education (English & Umbach, 2016). The second item of significance that was found was between Hispanic/Latino and Caucasian students. Hispanic/Latino students were more likely to aspire to and apply for graduate education but were less likely to enroll in a graduate education program (English & Umbach, 2016).
The results found by English and Umbach (2016), found both similarities and differences from a previous study (Millet, 2003). For the earlier study, the graduate school choice process was broken into the three phases of aspiration, application, and enrollment (Millet, 2003). Like English and Umbach, Millet found that African-American students were 1.8 times as likely to apply to graduate education (Millet, 2003). Millet also found that Hispanic/Latino students were less likely to enroll in a graduate education program (Millet, 2003). Unlike English and Umbach however, Millet found that African-American students were 3.4 times less likely to enroll in graduate education compared to Caucasian students (Millet, 2003). Millet identified no significant difference in the odds of applying to graduate education when it came to being Hispanic/Latino or Caucasian (Millet, 2003).

These studies analyzed the effect of race/ethnicity on the graduate school choice process of students. This was done by holding all variables constant with the exception of race/ethnicity. By doing this, these studies found few differences in the graduate school choice process for students regardless of their race/ethnicity (English & Umbach, 2016; Perna, 2004; Xu, 2014). For this reason, race/ethnicity appears to have a limited impact on the graduate school choice process for students. However, these studies all share one limitation that influenced their results; the decision to hold all variables constant with the exception of race/ethnicity. By doing this, the authors assumed that the students in their studies were comparable for all variables besides race/ethnicity. This assumption was a limitation due to the understanding that few minority students share exact characteristics comparable to their White student counterparts (English & Umbach, 2016). For this
reason, race/ethnicity may have a larger impact on the graduate school choice process of students than what was found in these studies.

**Demographic Characteristic – Gender**

In 2004, Perna identified that women were receiving fewer doctoral and first-professional degrees compared to their male counterparts. In the year 1994-95, women earned 55% of the bachelor's degrees that were awarded that year (NCES, 2002). However, women only represented 45% of the people who earned doctoral or first professional degrees in the year 1999-00 (NCES, 2002). Bowen and Rudenstine (1992) found that women majored in undergraduate academic programs where fewer students continued on to pursue a doctorate. Taking this into account, the conclusion was drawn that women were less likely to receive doctoral or first-professional degrees compared to their male counterparts (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). This result has been challenged by more recent studies where authors have argued that in recent decades, women have gained ground in higher education (Fox, 2001; Sax, 2001; Szelenyi & Inkelas, 2011).

In Perna’s 2004 study, gender was analyzed in addition to race/ethnicity. Specifically, the assumption was made that gender was one factor towards the decision to enroll in a post-baccalaureate program (Perna, 2004). In the study, multiple levels of education where looked at when it came to type of post-baccalaureate education enrollment. These levels were submaster’s, master’s, doctoral, and first-professional (Perna, 2004). The effect of gender on the decision to enroll in a post-baccalaureate program was found to be small in magnitude but different for women and men (Perna, 2004). Ultimately, women were more likely than men to enroll in a submaster’s (20% versus 16%) or master’s program (23% versus 16%) (Perna, 2004). In contrast, women
were less likely than men to enroll in a doctoral program (2% versus 4%) or a first-professional program (5% versus 10%) (Perna, 2004). These percentages represent the rate of enrollment at each post-baccalaureate education level for the students who completed the 1993 national Baccalaureate and Beyond Survey (Perna, 2004).

The overrepresentation of women compared to men enrolling in submaster’s and master’s programs was found by Perna (2004) to be caused by two traits. First, women were more likely than men to have an undergraduate degree that fell into the lowest quartile of starting salaries (38% versus 24%) (Perna, 2004). The lowest quartile contained jobs that required a student to have an undergraduate degree in the fields of education, history, and psychology (Perna, 2004). By being in the lowest quartile for starting salary more often than men, women were found to enroll in submaster’s or master’s programs more frequently (Perna, 2004). Second, enrollment patterns were different based on gender due to undergraduate grade-point average (GPA) (Perna, 2004). When it came to GPA, students were less likely to enroll in a master’s degree program when they had an undergraduate GPA that contained only Bs and Cs (Perna, 2004). From the study, more men than women reported a GPA that contained Bs, Cs, or below (20% versus 13%) (Perna, 2004). This data followed the trend that women tend to have a higher undergraduate GPA compared to men and thus supported the master’s degree enrollment for more women than men (Perna, 2004).

A second study supported the findings of Perna (2004) when it came to finding more women than men enrolling in master’s programs. Similar to Perna, Mullen, Goyette, & Soares (2003) performed a study utilizing data from the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study. Of the 10,080 students surveyed in 1992-93, 3,364 were
enrolled in some form of graduate education (Mullen et al., 2003). Students were first given the survey in 1992-93 and a follow-up took place in 1997 (Mullen et al., 2003). The odds of entering a master's program were higher for women compared to men (Mullen et al., 2003). On the other hand, odds were much stronger for men compared to women when it came to entering a doctoral, professional, or MBA program (Mullen et al., 2003).

In 2016, Xu presented a study that analyzed gender differences in the decision to pursue an advanced degree. Specifically, the role of aspiration towards advanced degree enrollment was studied (Xu, 2016). This was done to discover if aspiration is related to the underrepresentation of women in low participation STEM (Ip-STEM) majors (Xu, 2016). Data was pulled from the 2008 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study which was first given to students during the 2007-08 year (Xu, 2016). Low participation STEM majors were defined as the academic majors that had 40% or less of a female population (Xu, 2016). The majors that fell into the low-participation category included engineering, engineering technology, computer and information sciences, mathematics, architecture, agriculture and natural resources, and manufacturing/construction/transportation (Xu, 2016).

Xu (2016) found that the percentages between men and women were close when it came to aspirations for pursuit of an advanced degree. For women in Ip-STEM majors, a higher percentage wanted to pursue a doctoral or first professional program compared to men (18.6% versus 16.1%) (Xu, 2016). When it came to self-reported graduate status, women (5%) in Ip-STEM majors were found to have aspirations for graduate education but decided not to apply more often than men (1.5%) (Xu, 2016). Additionally, women
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(34%) in Ip-STEM majors were more likely than men (25%) to begin the application process when they expressed interest in pursuing a master's degree (Xu, 2016). However, the opposite was observed when students' expressed interest in pursuing a doctoral degree. In this scenario, women were less likely (53%) compared to men (60%) to begin the application process (Xu, 2016).

Within these results, Xu (2016) identified specific factors that influenced the aspirations for graduate education for students in Ip-STEM majors. For men and women, aspiration for graduate education was increased when they had parent(s) who had earned an advanced degree (Xu, 2016). This relationship was found to be significant for both genders but was stronger in magnitude for women (Xu, 2016). Additionally, females who had parent(s) who had only earned a bachelor's degree were found to not go beyond a bachelor's degree themselves more often than their male counterparts (Xu, 2016). Due to these results, it was concluded by the author that women experienced a stronger influence from their parents when it came to advanced education aspirations (Xu, 2016). The findings of Xu's study were consistent with previous studies (Hazari, Tai, & Sadler, 2007; Tassoobshirazi & Carr, 2008).

A second factor that was identified by Xu (2016) was the influence of peers on educational aspiration. For the study, peer influence was measured based on institutional selectivity (Xu, 2016). For men, their educational aspiration was not significantly influenced based on their institution's selectivity (Xu, 2016). For women, peer influence/institutional selectivity was found to be a strong influence on their advanced degree aspiration (Xu, 2016). Specifically, women who attended a less selective institution were found to have significantly lower expectations for advanced degree
aspiration (Xu, 2016). Based on the findings of multiple studies, authors concluded that women were more likely than men to be influenced to graduate education by the social expectations and pressures from their significant others (Taasoobshirazi & Carr, 2008; Xu, 2016; Wells, Lynch, & Seifert, 2011).

These studies analyzed the effect of gender on the graduate school choice process of students. For each study, the authors observed differences between men and women that were small in magnitude when it came to enrolling in a graduate education program (Mullen et al., 2003; Perna, 2004; Xu, 2016). Even though differences in enrollment percentages were not statistically significant between men and women, the graduate school choice process was influenced by different factors based on gender. The decision to pursue and enroll in graduate education was influenced more for women than men by employment starting salary (Mullen et al., 2003; Perna, 2004), undergraduate GPA (Mullen et al., 2003; Perna, 2004), parent(s) education level (Hazari et al., 2007; Taassoohshirazi & Carr, 2008; Xu, 2016), and social expectations and pressures from significant others (Taassoohshirazi & Carr, 2008; Wells et al., 2011, Xu, 2016). The conclusion has been made that gender alone does not significantly influence the graduate school choice process of students; rather, gender influences the importance placed on the factors that are considered in the graduate school choice process.

**Demographic Characteristic – First Generation**

When graduate students are studied, two assumptions are made; dealing with potential or actual graduate students does not mean those students understand the discipline or how graduate education works at all institutions and when these students are left to figure things out on their own, they may be found to display questionable behavior.
as they engage in trial and error through the process (Lunceford, 2011). These assumptions can be detrimental to all students but more detrimental if made when working with those who are considered to be first-generation (Lunceford, 2011). Previous researchers have identified that first-generation students face significant challenges throughout their undergraduate education (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Merritt, 2008, 2010; Orbe, 2008; Strayhorn, 2006). These challenges include integration, employment status, and family situation and may carry over to the graduate education process for first-generation students (Lunceford, 2011). For this reason, their decision to pursue graduate education will be reviewed from their unique perspective towards graduate education.

Olive (2014) conducted a study looking at the lived experiences of first-generation Hispanic students who were enrolled in a graduate counseling program. A phenomenological study was used in order to describe the meaning of the lived experiences as they applied to the phenomenon being examined (Olive, 2014). For this study, the phenomenon was the pursuit of higher education and a post-baccalaureate path for Hispanic first-generation students (Olive, 2014). Ultimately, three students were selected for the qualitative study (Olive, 2014). The participants were selected based on their ability to meet the following criteria; graduate student enrolled in graduate counseling program at selected institution, identified Hispanic as their primary ethnicity, and first-generation student (Olive, 2014). For the study, first-generation student was considered to be a student who had parent(s) who had not attended a higher-education institution (Olive, 2014). The three participants selected were able to bring unique perspectives to the study based on their individual characteristics (Olive, 2014).

Participant one was a 28 year old male who was an immigrant to the United State from
Mexico, participant two was a 40 year old female who was an immigrant to the United States from Mexico, and participant three was a 27 year old female who was born in the United States (Olive, 2014).

Each participant was interviewed individually in a one-time, one hour interview (Olive, 2014). From these interviews, seven constituents were identified as being important towards the desire for higher education (Olive, 2014). These constituents were found to be the following: influence of respected others; resilience, persistence, and self-efficacy; self-denial in order to model education values; a need for distinction and career satisfaction; spirituality and divine influence; altruistic motivation to professionally help others; and a view of commitment to a counseling degree as a nonlinear but preferred process (Olive, 2014). The author found the seven constituents of importance towards the graduate education decision making process to be related to each other in a holistic interdependency (Olive, 2014). The relationship was observed through the personal, interpersonal, occupational, and spiritual influence that Hispanic first-generation students experienced while going through the graduate education decision making process (Olive, 2014). For every participant, personal, interpersonal, occupational, and spiritual influences were observed from a combination of at least two constituents (Olive, 2014). For this reason, the author identified that the constituents were unable to influence the graduate education decision making process individually which caused Hispanic first-generation students to focus more on the big picture when it came to their academic plan compared to other populations (Olive, 2014).

Another study looked at a group of students who were not only first-generation but also low income (Tate et al., 2015). The authors identified four specific factors to
study in order to observe the influence they had on the career development and pursuit of graduate school for Underrepresented-First-Generation-Low-Income (UFGLI) students (Tate et al., 2015). The four factors were: self-efficacy, perception of career barriers, coping efficacy, and family influence (Tate et al., 2015). The authors hypothesized that these factors would predict which UFGLI students' would successfully pursue graduate education and thus reflect aspects of their decision making process (Tate et al., 2015).

Surveys for the study were sent to participants of The Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program (Tate et al., 2015). The program was put in place in order to help UFGLI students prepare for graduate education by providing opportunities through research internships, faculty mentors, academic advising, personal counseling, test preparation for the GRE, tutoring, funding for travel to conferences, and graduate school campus visits (Tate et al., 2015). Students qualified for the program by being a full-time undergraduate student, low income (determined by the U.S. Department of Education), having parent(s) who had not completed a four-year college degree, and being a member of an underrepresented group in graduate education (Tate et al., 2015).

For the study, 170 participants were utilized (Tate et al., 2015). All had the goal of attaining some form of an advanced degree (Tate et al., 2015). Of the participants, 70% wanted to attain a doctorate degree, 12% a master's degree, 11% a professional degree, 6% multiple degrees, and 1% other (Tate et al., 2015). For the study, the Graduate Education Self-Efficacy Scale, Family Influence Scale, Perception of Barriers Scale, Coping with Barriers, and Indicators of Intent to Attend Graduate School instruments were created (Tate et al., 2015). When it came to graduate education self-efficacy, three sub-categories were analyzed. These categories were research, academic,
and social self-efficacy (Tate et al., 2015). Of the three, only research self-efficacy was found to influence UFGLI students in their desire to pursue graduate education (Tate et al., 2015). Due to the level of research that takes place in graduate education, the authors were not surprised to find that self-efficacy towards graduate education research played an important role in the decision process to pursue graduate education (Tate et al., 2015).

The study also looked to explain the influence of family towards the decision making process to pursue graduate education (Tate et al, 2015). From the study, the authors found that as the level of influence from family career values increased, the students’ desire to pursue graduate education decreased (Tate et al., 2015). Identifying the specific reasons behind this inverse relationship was beyond the scope of the study; however, the authors identified two potential reasons for their findings based on previous research. Khank (2002) found that UFGLI students desired to honor their families through their aspirations whether they be career or educational and Gardner and Holley (2011) and Leyva (2011) found that UFGLI students struggled to pursue paths that required a shift in their values (Tate et al., 2015).

Finally, Tate et al. (2015) looked at self-efficacy for coping with career and educational barriers was found to not influence UFGLI students’ and their desire to pursue graduate education. While identifying the specific reasons for this observation was beyond the scope of the study, the authors identified one possible explanation for their findings. For this study, the authors utilized surveys that were completed by students who were part of The McNair program (Tate et al., 2015). Due to this program being in place to aid students in their desire to pursue graduate education, the students had already made initial commitments towards graduate education (Tate et al., 2015). For this reason, the
students may have already identified barriers and had the ability to perceive these barriers on their future paths (Tate et al., 2015). The specific participants selected for the study could explain why their ability to cope with barriers was found to not be significantly related to their desire to pursue graduate education (Tate et al., 2015).

These studies analyzed the effect of first-generation status on the graduate school choice process of students. Olive (2014) and Tate et al. (2015) found first-generation students to make their decision for graduate education based on the influence of important people in their lives and their personal level of self-efficacy. Olive (2014) also found that first-generation students made their graduate education decision based on additional factors that related to personal, interpersonal, occupational, and spiritual factors. Tate et al. (2015) also found that first-generation students were not influenced by perceptions of career barriers or their coping efficacy when it came to their graduate education decision. Based on these results, students who are first-generation may not experience differences in their decision to pursue graduate education compared to their counterparts. These observations contradict the struggles first-generation students experience at the undergraduate level (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Lunceford, 2011; Merritt, 2008, 2010; Orbe, 2008; Strayhorn, 2006) and show that those challenges are not as influential at the graduate education level (Olive, 2014; Tate et al., 2015).

**Demographic Characteristic – Adult Learner**

In previous years, graduate students have been considered as no different compared to their undergraduate counterparts (Polson, 2003). This assumption has taken place due to their decision to continue their education but does not take into account the lived experiences that may take place between a bachelor’s degree and enrollment in a
graduate program (Polson, 2003). While this classification may be true for the students who enroll immediately following their undergraduate career it does not apply as readily to the students who enroll after a gap of more than one year takes place (Polson, 2003). Adult education differs from traditional education in multiple ways due to the following principles; adult students need to know the reason for learning something, adults use prior experiences as their foundation for future learning, adults need decision-making power in their education, adults are motivated to learn subjects that are most directly relevant to their work, adult learning is driven by solving problems rather than covering content, and adult learning is driven more by internal motivation than external motivation (Knowles, 1980).

From these principles, adult learners have characteristics that may cause them to struggle to relate to their peers, struggle with time and finances due to having responsibilities to others, and have interests and/or realities of the job market that may control the path they choose to follow (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998). Additionally, adult learners have been found to be more motivated and mature (Hofinger & Feldmann, 2001), more goal-directed (MacFagden, 2008), and more aware of ethical issues (Hofinger & Feldman, 2001) compared to students who enter graduate education straight from undergraduate education. For this reason, their unique perspectives and challenges to the graduate education process will be reviewed.

In a study released in 2013, Peters and Daly aimed to fill the research gap that existed for the experiences of students returning to graduate education after entering the workforce. Specifically, they aimed to understand the experiences of returners to engineering graduate education (Peters and Daly, 2013). The authors identified returners
as an important group to study due to their ability to represent alternative pathways to and through graduate education, display diverse lived experiences, present different perspectives from those of students who went straight into graduate education, and directly apply their research results (Peters & Daly, 2013). Data was collected from 10 participants who were varied in background, life experience, years in the workforce, and academic interests (Peters & Daly, 2013). To collect data from the participants, Peters and Daly (2013) utilized one hour semi-structured interviews.

From the study, the authors found their participants were confident in their abilities and expected that they would successfully complete the graduate degree (Peters & Daly, 2013). Motivation for returning to graduate education was observed through a student’s desire for graduate degree attainment, general interest, and utility (Peters & Daly, 2013). No participants identified with the idea of connecting their sense of self to their pursuit of a graduate degree, some participants were motivated to pursue a graduate degree due to their personal interest in a field or research area, and all participants indicated that their decision to pursue graduate education was based on utility values (Peters & Daly, 2013). The utility values of the participants included: expanding their skills, new opportunities in current work, new research area of focus, ability to control funding/research, and change in career (Peters & Daly, 2013).

The authors also identified balance costs and cultural/environmental costs as important in the decision making process to return to graduate education (Peters & Daly, 2013). When it came to balance costs, six participants shared that they had a spouse or dependent children who affected their decision to return (Peters & Daly, 2013). When it came to cultural/environmental costs, transitioning from the work to the university
environment, new expectations and norms, and feelings of demotion were found to be important in the decision process (Peters & Daly, 2013). All costs were found to be significant to the participants who had more experience and success in the professional world (Peters & Daly, 2013). The adult learners anticipated these costs, considered them in the decision to return, and found them to be the price to pay for returning to graduate education (Peters & Daly, 2013). Ultimately, Peters and Daly (2013) found that the decision to return to graduate education by adult learners was a combination of the expected value of the education and the costs associated with the education.

The decision to pursue graduate education has the ability to benefit both individuals and organizations (Seibert, Kramer, Holtom, & Pierotti, 2013). For an individual, the benefits include an increase in financial yield (Baruch, Bell, & Gray, 2005) and changing their career which can lead to better fit, higher career satisfaction, and better work performance (Seibert et al., 2013). One example of increased financial yield can be observed in regards to students who earn a master’s of business administration (MBA). For those who earn an MBA, they have been observed to earn $20,000 more annually compared to those who have only earned a bachelor’s degree (Carnevale, Strohol, & Melton, 2011). For this reason, Seibert et al. (2013) suggested that graduate education should be considered in terms of a career self-management process.

In a second study, the pursuit of graduate education was looked at through the lens of a career self-management process (Seibert et al., 2013). The framework for a career self-management process includes an individual establishing career goals, developing and implementing career plans and strategies, and receiving feedback in regards to the progress towards their career goals (Greenhaus, Callanan, & Godshalk,
Goals are considered to be essential to the self-regulatory process (Diefendorff & Lord, 2008) but students have reported they are unable to have full control over their careers and often find their career decisions to be influenced by unplanned events (Bright, Pryor, & Harpham, 2005).

Due to previous research, Seibert et al. (2013) hypothesized that career self-management processes and career related shocks are related to the decision to pursue graduate education. For the study, a career shock was considered to be any event that results in an individual considering a change in their career behavior such as pursuing education, changing occupations, or changing employment status (Slay, Taylor, & Williamson, 2006). A negative career shock occurs when there is a negative impact on one’s career and could occur through a mentor leaving, reduction in workforce, bankruptcy, or scandal (Seibert et al., 2013). A positive career shock occurs when there is a positive impact on one’s career and could occur through being successful through a challenge, receiving a pay raise, or receiving a promotion (Seibert et al., 2013).

At the beginning of the study, seven hypotheses were created by the authors that predicted that the decision to pursue graduate education would be related to intrinsic career goals, career satisfaction, extrinsic career goals, career planning, and career shocks (Seibert et al., 2013). To test the hypotheses, the authors collected survey data from 337 alumni of two universities two to five years after graduating from their bachelor’s program (Seibert et al., 2013). Two surveys were created with the second survey being administered 16-months are the first (Seibert et al., 2013). This was done to see if the students who had indicated on the first survey that they planned to pursue graduate education had begun the application process (Seibert et al., 2013).
At the conclusion of the study, intrinsic and extrinsic career goals, career planning, and career satisfaction were all found to be related to the intention to pursue graduate education (Seibert et al., 2013). The authors hypothesized that positive career shocks would negatively impact intentions for graduate education while negative career shocks would positively impact intentions for graduate education (Seibert et al., 2013). Neither of these hypotheses were supported and were in fact found to show the opposite. Based on this result, the authors concluded that positive career shocks caused individuals to reassess their current path (Seibert et al., 2013). An individual who experienced a positive career shock was given the confidence and encouragement to pursue a more challenging opportunity such as graduate education (Seibert et al., 2013). The final hypothesis predicted that intention to pursue graduate education would positively relate to actual application to graduate education. This hypothesis was not only supported but also significantly related (Seibert et al., 2013).

These studies analyzed the effect of being an adult learner on the graduate school choice process of students. Peters and Daly (2013) found that adult learners were influenced by personal interest and utility values when they made the decision to pursue and enroll in graduate education. Within these aspects, adult learners made their decision for graduate education through a combination of the expected value of the degree and the costs associated with the degree (Peters & Daly, 2013). Seibert et al. (2013) found similar results when it came to the career utility values adult learners placed on earning a graduate degree. From these studies, adult learners were influenced in their graduate education decision making process by personal and career related desires (Peters & Daly, 2013; Seibert et al., 2013).
Individual Changeable Characteristics – Major, GPA, Parent Education Level, Undergraduate Institution

Every year, thousands of students make the decision to pursue graduate education in the United States (English & Umbach, 2016). For some, graduate education may be a prerequisite to the profession, economic rewards, and high social status that a student hopes to gain (Zhang, 2005). For others, graduate education is pursued due to their personal interest in a subject matter and the desire to obtain more knowledge about the subject (Zhang, 2005). For individuals, the decision to pursue graduate education may be influenced by two aspects that deal with the “why of graduate education (Zhang, 2005). This influence has the ability come directly from one aspect or a combination of the two.

Within the graduate school choice process, the decision to pursue can become complicated due to being influenced by numerous individual characteristics (English & Umbach, 2016). These characteristics are academic and non-academic in their nature and represent a student’s background, experiences, and previous academic decisions (Zhang, 2005). Previous academic decisions include the undergraduate institution attended and undergraduate academic major (Zhang, 2005). These characteristics differ from demographic characteristics due to students having the ability to control and change these characteristics through their actions and decisions. Due to their influence on the graduate school choice process, individual changeable characteristics will be reviewed.

Mullen et al. (2003) aimed to identify the relationship between students’ parents’ education level, student academic achievement, and the decision about graduate school enrollment. Data was pulled from the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study of 1993 and provided 3,364 participants (Mullen et al., 2003). A unique aspect of the study
was how the authors evaluated the level of parents' education (Mullen et al., 2003).
Parents' education was evaluated based on the highest education level of either parent rather than the highest education level of the combined parent pair (Mullen et al., 2003). This was done due to the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study utilizing a survey that included questions which allowed for the determination of highest education level completed by either parent (Mullen et al., 2003). The authors were able to create a more detailed measure for the influence of parent education level than what had previously been provided (Mullen et al., 2003).

When it came to parents' education level, Mullen et al. (2003) found that their education level does influence the decision of their student to attend graduate school. When a student had a parent(s) who had a high school education or less, they were found to pursue graduate education 24% of the time (Mullen et al., 2003). When a student had a parent(s) who had some form of postgraduate education, they were found to pursue graduate education 38% of the time (Mullen et al., 2003). Parents' education level was also analyzed in terms of the influence it had towards students attending specific programs. Students were found to enroll in all advanced degree programs at higher percentages when their parent(s) were more highly educated compared to students whose parent(s) had a high school education or less (Mullen et al., 2003). This enrollment occurs through the following rates: master's program (22% versus 18%), first-professional school (7.1% versus 2.2%), and doctoral programs (5.1% versus 1.4%) (Mullen et al., 2003). Parents' education was also found to influence graduate education enrollment based on each year of higher education the parent(s) had obtained (Mullen et al., 2003). For each additional year of parents' education, the likelihood of their students'
enrollment in a master’s program increased by 6%, first-professional program increased by 16%, and doctoral program increased by 20% (Mullen et al., 2003).

Through the study, the authors looked to identify the relationship between multiple individual characteristics and the decision to enroll in graduate education (Mullen et al., 2003). With individual characteristics, Mullen et al. (2003) found that increased age had a negative effect on enrolling in a first-professional or doctoral program and no effect on enrolling in an MBA or master’s program. A second analysis was performed to look at the effect of scores on admissions tests towards the enrollment in graduate education (Mullen et al., 2003). When student performance on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) increased by 100 points, authors found the student was 1.11 times more likely to enroll in a master’s program and 1.70 times more likely to enroll in a doctoral program compared to students with lower test scores (Mullen et al., 2003).

A third analysis looked at the type of institution attended for undergraduate education on the pursuit of graduate education was analyzed (Mullen et al., 2003). Students from private research institutions were more likely to enroll in a master’s, first-professional, or doctoral program and students from liberal arts institutions were found to be more likely to enroll in a first-professional or doctoral program than their peers at a comprehensive institution (Mullen et al., 2003). The selectivity of a student’s undergraduate institution was a second aspect of the institutional characteristics that were found to be significant in the decision to enroll in graduate education (Mullen et al., 2003). Selectivity had a modest influence towards enrolling in a master’s program but greatly increased the odds of enrolling in an MBA or first-professional program (Mullen et al., 2003). In the final analysis, undergraduate GPA and major were studied to observe
what effect they had towards graduate student enrollment (Mullen et al., 2003). Undergraduate GPA was found to be a significant determinant for graduate education enrollment for all types of programs (Mullen et al., 2003). For each one decile increase in GPA, the odds of entering a master’s program increased by 13%, MBA program by 20%, first-professional program by 31%, and doctoral program by 37% (Mullen et al., 2003). When it came to undergraduate major, different majors were found to be of significance towards graduate enrollment for all types of programs (Mullen et al., 2003). Biology, mathematics, science, and psychology were significant for doctoral enrollment, biology was significant for first-professional enrollment, business, engineering, and social science were significant for MBA enrollment, and most fields with the exceptions of business, health, and social science were significant for master’s enrollment (Mullen et al., 2003).

In a second study, Zhang (2005) found many results that were similar to and supported the results found by Mullen et al. (2003). One aspect of Zhang’s study that differed from Mullen’s was the decision to analyze the effect of the quality of undergraduate institution attended on the decision to enroll in graduate education (Zhang, 2005). When it came to the quality of undergraduate institutions, schools were put into the categories of low, middle, or high quality (Zhang, 2005). These categories were determined based on Barron’s ratings. A low quality institution had a Barron rating representing less competitive or noncompetitive, a middle quality institution had a Barron rating representing very competitive or competitive, and a high quality institution had a Barron rating representing most competitive or highly competitive (Zhang, 2005).

Students who attended a high-quality undergraduate institution were found to enroll in a graduate program 16% (private undergraduate) and 18% (public
undergraduate) more often compared to students who attended a low-quality institution (Zhang, 2005). Students who attended a middle-quality undergraduate institution were found to enroll in a graduate program 10% more often compared to students who attended a low-quality institution (Zhang, 2005). The quality of undergraduate institution was also compared to the quality of graduate program that students enrolled in (Zhang, 2005). Students who attended a high-quality undergraduate institution were found to select a comprehensive university for graduate education 40% less often (Zhang, 2005). Students who attended a high-quality undergraduate institution were also found to select a research university for graduate education 50% more often compared to students who attended a low-quality institution (Zhang, 2005). For students who attended a middle-quality undergraduate institution, they were found to select a comprehensive university 10% less often and a research university 20% more often compared to students who attended a low-quality institution (Zhang, 2005). Ultimately, undergraduate college quality was found to increase enrollment in graduate education and helped determine the quality of the graduate program selected (Zhang, 2005).

In a more recent study, English and Umbach (2016) aimed to explore the impact of individual characteristics and undergraduate institutional characteristics on the decision to pursue graduate education. With being a more recent study, data for the 9,480 participants of the study was pulled from the 2000 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (English & Umbach, 2016). Individual characteristics studied were undergraduate major, undergraduate GPA, and parent education level (English & Umbach, 2016). Students who had an undergraduate major in humanities, social sciences, behavioral sciences, mathematics, life science, and physical science were significantly
influenced by their major when it came to the graduate school choice process (English & Umbach, 2016). A second aspect of the undergraduate experience was found to be significantly related to the graduate school aspiration, application, and enrollment processes. This aspect was undergraduate academic performance which was measured by cumulative GPA and showed a positive relationship between increased GPA and decisions to aspire to, apply to, and enroll in graduate education (English & Umbach, 2016). In another aspect of the study, English and Umbach (2016) looked at the highest education level for parents and how it influenced the graduate school choice process for their children. They found that when a parent earned a bachelor’s degree, students were more likely to apply for a graduate program but not necessarily enroll (English & Umbach, 2016). However, when a parent earned a master’s degree, students were more likely to both apply and enroll in a graduate program (English & Umbach, 2016).

When it came to undergraduate institutions, English and Umbach (2016) compared institutions on two distinct criteria. The first was if the school was public, private not-for-profit, or private for-profit (English & Umbach, 2016). The second considered the Carnegie Classification of the school in terms of doctor/research universities, master’s universities, baccalaureate colleges, and other (English & Umbach, 2016). The authors found no statistically significant relationship between attending a public, private not-for-profit, or private for-profit undergraduate institution and pursuing graduate education (English & Umbach, 2016). However, compared to those who had attended a doctoral/research university, those who attended an “other” university were half as likely and those who attended a baccalaureate university were three quarters as likely to pursue graduate education (English & Umbach, 2016). The results of this study
and a more recent study (Xu, 2014) support the results of the studies reviewed earlier (Mullen et al., 2003; Zhang, 2005) even though data was collected from different participants multiple years apart.

These studies analyzed the effect of individual characteristics on the graduate school choice process of students. The individual characteristics of interest were academic and non-academic in nature through their representation of a student’s background, experiences, and previous academic decisions. The following factors were found to influence the graduate school choice process; parent(s) education level (English & Umbach, 2016; Mullen et al., 2003), score on the SAT (Mullen et al., 2003), undergraduate institution (Mullen et al., 2003; Zhang, 2005), undergraduate GPA (English & Umbach, 2016; Mullen et al., 2003), and undergraduate major (English & Umbach, 2016; Mullen et al., 2003). Individual characteristics have been found to influence the graduate school choice process of students and show that the more success an individual has with undergraduate education will result in an increased likelihood of graduate education.

Financial Factors – Undergraduate Debt and Graduate Financial Assistance

In 2010-11, student debt changed in two major ways. These changes were the occurrence of student debt outgrowing credit card debt in the United States (Federal Reserve Bank, 2012) and the total student debt exceeding one trillion dollars (Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, 2012). These two changes reflect overall changes that have occurred in recent years in regards to the trends of graduate education. On one hand, graduate education is becoming a prerequisite for entry level professions (Aud et al., 2012) which has increased the number of students pursuing graduate education to further
their careers and separate themselves from those who have only earned a bachelor's degree (Belasco, Trivette, & Webber, 2014). On the other hand, due to economic conditions and government's lack of investment in higher education, institutions have been forced to find new ways to generate revenue which has increased the cost of higher education (Collins, 2002; Van de Wefhorst & Andersen, 2005).

Before reaching graduate education, approximately half of the graduate student population has borrowed money for their undergraduate education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). For Americans as a whole, 37 million have some form of higher education student debt with 67% of them being between the ages of 18 and 39 (Whitsett, 2012). In the past, student debt was mostly comprised of debt borrowed at the undergraduate level (Reed & Cochrane, 2012) but this trend is quickly changing. During 2011-12, graduate students borrowed more than 35 billion dollars in loans which is more than double what was borrowed just one decade ago (College Board Advocacy and Policy Center, 2012). For some academic fields, graduate students are able to complete their advanced degree with little or no debt and are able to avoid being dependent on loans compared to their counterparts in other academic fields (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011; National Science Foundation, 2012). Based on these statistics and previous research, undergraduate debt and financial aid package offers have the potential to significantly influence the decision to pursue graduate education and will be reviewed.

The literature that exists on the effect of undergraduate debt and the pursuit of graduate education has been found to offer mixed results (Malcom & Dowd, 2012). For some studies, a negative relationship was found to exist between undergraduate debt and
graduate school enrollment which resulted in students choosing to not enroll in graduate education in order to avoid taking on additional debt (Choy & Gies, 1997; Heller, 2001; Tsapogas & Cahalan, 1996). For other studies, a small positive relationship or no relationship were found to exist between undergraduate debt and graduate school enrollment (Bedard & Herman, 2008; Kim & Eyermann, 2006; Murphy, 1994; Perna, 2004; Weiler, 1991). The positive relationship results have been explained by the following; long-term financial benefits (Kim & Eyermann, 2006), individual ability, aspirations, and expectations (Bedard & Herman, 2008; Murphy, 1994; Weiler, 1991), policy (Kim & Eyermann, 2006), economic climate (Bedard & Herman, 2008), and social location (Perna, 2004). Through these studies, the difficulty of showing the effect of debt on graduate school enrollment can be observed (Malcom & Dowd, 2012).

Millett (2003) looked to determine if undergraduate debt prevented students from having access to graduate education. Students who had earned their bachelor’s degrees during 1992-93, had their post-baccalaureate decisions examined based on if they had indicated their intention to pursue a doctoral degree (Millett, 2003). The sample who met these requirements was taken from the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study that began in 1992-93 (Millett, 2003). Data was taken from the survey due to the ability it had to provide information in regards to an individual’s intention, application, and enrollment into a graduate or first professional degree program within one year of completing their bachelor’s degree (Millett, 2003). From the nationally representative sample, 1,982 individuals were selected as participants for the study due to their indication that they planned to earn a doctoral degree (Millett, 2003). Of the 1,982 who indicated they planned to earn a doctoral degree, 52% (1,036) applied to a graduate or
first professional school, 86% (890) were accepted to a graduate or first professional
school, and 68% (603) enrolled in a graduate or first professional school (Millett, 2003).

In the initial analysis, many independent variables were involved in the full-model
analysis. These variables included sex, race, income, parents' education, selectivity of
undergraduate institution, being in a pure or applied major as an undergraduate, GPA,
satisfaction with instructors, satisfaction with undergraduate institution, intellectual
growth, undergraduate debt, and forgone income (Millett, 2003). Undergraduate major
was classified as pure or applied using Biglan's pure/applied paradigm (Millett, 2003). In
this paradigm, an undergraduate major is classified as pure or applied depending on if the
focus of the department is on pure research or the practical application of content
(Millett, 2003). Under these variables, the following results were found when
determining the effect of undergraduate debt on the decision process for applying and
enrolling to an advanced degree program (Millett, 2003). When it came to applying,
students were equally likely to not apply or apply if their undergraduate debt was
between $100 and $14,999 (Millett, 2003). Once undergraduate debt reached $15,000,
students were less likely to apply to a program compared to their counterparts (Millett,
2003). For students with no undergraduate debt, they were found to apply 59% of the
time compared to those with undergraduate debt who applied 41% of the time (Millett,
2003). When controlling all other independent variables, undergraduate debt was found
to be significantly related to applying to graduate or first professional school (Millett,
2003). When students had undergraduate debt ranging from $5,000 to $15,000 or higher,
they were less likely to apply to a graduate or first professional school compared to
students with no undergraduate debt (Millett, 2003).
When it came to enrollment, 70% of students with no undergraduate debt were found to enroll in some graduate education (Millett, 2003). Similar percentages of students enrolled in graduate education regardless of whether their undergraduate debt was $100 or more than $15,000 (Millett, 2003). For this reason, undergraduate debt was found to not be statistically significant when it came to enrolling in a graduate or first professional program (Millett, 2003).

These results are both supported and contradicted by a more recent study (English & Umbach, 2016). In their study, English and Umbach (2016) found undergraduate debt to not have a significant effect on the decision process at any step of the graduate education process, whether it be aspiration, application, or enrollment. For this reason, Millet (2003) supported English and Umbach (2016) when it came to undergraduate debt not having a significant effect on enrollment in a graduate education and contradicted them when it came to undergraduate debt not having a significant effect on application to a graduate program.

Millet (2003) also looked at how undergraduate debt influenced the decision to apply and enroll in the first choice program for students. Of the initial sample, 50% (993) applied to their first choice graduate or first professional school, 79% (725) were accepted to their first choice graduate or first professional school, and 66% (453) enrolled in their first choice graduate or first professional school (Millett, 2003). When controlling for all other variables, undergraduate debt was not significantly related to applying or enrolling to a first choice graduate or first professional school (Millett, 2003). One aspect of this result may be explained by the significance found between the offer of financial aid and the decision to enroll in a first choice graduate or first professional school; when
students were offered a financial aid package from their first choice school, they were found to be two times more likely to enroll compared to their counterparts who did not receive financial aid packages (Millett, 2003). The significance of receiving financial aid may cause students to disregard their undergraduate debt when it comes to the decision process for graduate education. The precise effects of financial aid on the decision process was beyond the scope of this study and thus was not discussed further (Millett, 2003).

In a more recent study, Malcom and Dowd (2012) looked at identifying how much debt was too much, too little, or just right. For students, the right amount of debt depends heavily on expected future earnings (Malcom & Dowd, 2012). This concept came from the fact that federal policy finds financial hardship to exist when monthly student loan payments exceed 10% of discretionary income (Kittredge, 2010). In 2005, 20% of those who borrowed $15,000 or more defaulted on their loan payments compared to only 7% of those who borrowed $5,000 or less (Choy & Li, 2005). Additionally, 17.4% of students with an income in the bottom quartile defaulted on loans compared to 7.6% for those in the high-middle quartile and 4.2% for those in the highest quartile (Choy & Li, 2005). These trends show the significance and overreliance on borrowing to pay for an undergraduate degree and may influence the decision and/or ability to attend graduate school (Malcom & Dowd, 2012).

For the study, data from the 2003 National Survey of Recent College Graduates (NSRCG) was utilized (Malcom & Dowd, 2012). Ultimately, 7,700 students were chosen and students were placed in one of three categories; heavy borrowing, typical borrowing, or control group which was made up of students who had not borrowed as an
undergraduate student (Malcom & Dowd, 2012). Heavy and typical borrowing were determined based on the average undergraduate debt at an individual’s undergraduate institution (Malcom & Dowd, 2012). This was done due to the literature that supports debt being relative to each individual and influenced by social location, success in college, and the potential for future earnings (Malcom & Dowd, 2012).

Malcom & Dowd (2012) first looked at the borrowing trends based on race/ethnicity. Asian students were found to borrow the least when it came to funding their undergraduate degree (Malcom & Dowd, 2012). For Asian students, 40% borrowed no money, 47% borrowed the typical level, and 13% borrowed heavily (Malcom & Dowd, 2012). For White students, 36% borrowed no money, 43% borrowed the typical level, and 22% borrowed heavily (Malcom & Dowd, 2012). For Hispanic/Latino students, 28% borrowed no money, 51% borrowed the typical level, and 21% borrowed heavily (Malcom & Dowd, 2012). For African American students, 20% borrowed no money, 48% borrowed the typical level, and 32% borrowed heavily (Malcom & Dowd, 2012). Overall, a negative effect was found between borrowing at the typical level and graduate school enrollment across all race/ethnic groups (Malcom & Dowd, 2012). When it came to heavy borrowing, Hispanic/Latino and White students were found to experience a negative effect while African Americans and Asians experienced no effect. These results are consistent with (Price, 2004) and in contradiction (Xu, 2014) of previous studies.

Regardless of undergraduate debt, once a student makes the decision to pursue graduate education, their financial focus turns to the cost of the graduate degree (Mark, Lusk, & Daniel, 2004). For students, a major consideration in the college choice decision
for graduate school was the cost of study and availability of financial assistance (Mark et al., 2004). Financial assistance can come in the form of an assistantship, scholarship, fellowship, or grant stipends. For those who recruit graduate students, it is important to consider what financial assistance can be provided in order to recruit quality students in the quantity desired (Mark et al., 2004). This has been proven significant from the highest quality graduate students who are most concerned with finances when it comes to selecting a graduate education program (Malaney, 1987).

Mark et al. (2004) conducted a study that looked at the complex process that students experience when assessing the many factors that can influence their decision to attend a specific graduate school. For the study, 403 participants were surveyed where they were given a list that contained hypothetical graduate schools where each school represented a unique combination of varying levels of attributes that affect the school choice decision (Mark et al., 2004). The attributes that were varied were: stipend level, distance from home, departmental ranking, and office/computer facilities. From the list, students were asked to rank the schools from highest to lowest in terms of preference (Mark et al., 2004).

Overall, students were found to prefer a school that was closer to home, higher ranked, had more office/computer facilities, and had larger monetary stipends, however students valued graduate program ranking higher than the other three attributes (Mark et al., 2004). From these results, the authors determined that higher ranked programs have the ability to offer lower stipends and that lower ranked programs would need to offer larger stipends in order to remain competitive in the graduate program selection process for students (Mark et al., 2004). As with most decisions, students were found to be
willing to make trade-offs based on what they found to be more important. For example, a program that was ranked at the tier two level was found to need to provide a stipend that was $5,917 more per year compared to a program ranked at the tier one level (Mark et al., 2004). When comparing a tier one program to a tier three program, students showed preference towards a tier one program with no stipend rather than a tier three program that provided a stipend of $13,775 per year (Mark et al., 2004).

In one study, the authors analyzed the decision making process for the selection of an institution for doctoral students' (Bersola, Stolzenberg, Love, & Fosnacht, 2014). For the study, participants were administered the Admitted Student Survey that asked questions regarding personal, academic, and demographic characteristics, the level of importance placed on program and institutional characteristics, contact with the program and institution, and the financial support package received (Bersola et al., 2014). From the survey, the authors found that the majority of admitted students received a financial aid package (Bersola et al., 2014). The package included one or more of the following: stipend, fellowship, and research or teaching assistantship (Bersola et al., 2014).

For the admitted students who received financial aid, they were found to enroll at higher rates than their counterparts who did not receive aid (Bersola et al., 2014). Additionally, those who did enroll were found to have been more likely to receive all four types of financial aid offered (Bersola et al., 2014). Of the four types, only fellowships and teaching assistantships were found to be significantly related to the decision to enroll (Bersola et al., 2014). Students who received a fellowship were 29% more likely to enroll than students who were not offered a fellowship and students who received a teaching
assistantship were 17% more likely to enroll than students who were not offered a
teaching assistantship (Bersola et al., 2014).

Bersola et al. (2004) also looked at the differences between non-underrepresented
minorities and underrepresented minorities (URM). For a student who was an URM, the
effect of receiving a fellowship had a stronger positive relationship on the enrollment
decision compared to non-URMs (Bersola et al., 2014). For this reason, URMs were
found to place more importance on receiving a financial aid package when it came to
their enrollment decision compared to non-URMs (Bersola et al., 2014). Even though
positive relationships were found between the financial aid package received and the
decision to enroll, the authors found that finances were not the main consideration in the
decision making process (Bersola et al., 2014). This was best represented by the finding
that three out of four students who were admitted but did not enroll shared they would
have still rejected the admission offer even if the institution in the study had an
equivalent financial aid package to the institution where they did enroll at (Bersola et al.,
2014).

A third study looked at the factors that were involved in students’ choices in
assessing masters’ programs (Mbawuni & Nimako, 2015). The study was conducted
using the responses to a cross-sectional survey from 183 participants enrolled in varying
masters’ programs (Mbawuni & Nimako, 2015). From the responses, seven factors were
identified as being key to the decision process when it comes to selecting a master’s
program (Mbawuni & Nimako, 2015). These seven factors were: cost of the program,
student support quality, recommendation from lecturers and staff, failure to gain
alternative admissions, personal intention to pursue master's program, attachment to university, and school location benefits (Mbawuni & Nimako, 2015).

When it came to cost of the program, not only was it identified as a key factor, it was identified as the highest in terms of priority (Mbawuni & Nimako, 2015). Cost was considered to be tuition, fees, and other costs associated with the program which included charges for practical work, books, food, and accommodations (Mbawuni & Nimako, 2015). Due to being identified as the top priority, the authors believed this implied that most students enroll in a master's program based on the cost of the program being less expensive compared to other competing master's programs (Mbawuni & Nimako, 2015). This result was supported by many earlier studies that found overall cost to be an important factor in the decision process of which master's program to attend (Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Sidin, Hussin, & Soon, 2003; Wilkins, Shams, & Huisman, 2013).

These studies analyzed the effect of financial considerations on the graduate school choice process of students. The studies looked at the effect of undergraduate debt, receiving a graduate financial aid package, and cost of the program. When it comes to undergraduate debt, studies are split on the effect it has towards a students' decision making process for graduate education. Studies have found that undergraduate debt can have a negative effect (Choy & Gies, 1997; Heller, 2001; Malcom & Dowd, 2012; Millett, 2003; Tsapogas & Cahalan, 1996), a positive effect (Bedard & Herman, 2008; Kim & Eyermann, 2006; Murphy, 1994; Perna, 2004; Weiler, 1991), or no effect (English & Umbach, 2016; Millett, 2003). When it comes to graduate financial aid packages, students have been found to consider receiving a package as a factor of importance in their decision making process for graduate education (Bersola et al., 2014;
Mark et al., 2004). Students have also been found to consider the cost of the program as a factor of importance in their decision making process for graduate education (Mbawuni & Nimako, 2015; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Sidin et al., 2003; Wilkins et al., 2013). From these studies, it has been concluded that some financial factors are important in the graduate education decision making process while others may or may not be important.

**Program and Institutional Characteristics Desired**

Once a student makes the decision to pursue graduate education, the decision making process shifts to the student deciding which graduate program to ultimately attend (Luchini-Colbry, 2017). At this stage of the graduate school process, students consider the factors that are related to the academic and personal fit between themselves and the graduate programs they are considering (Luchini-Colbry, 2017). When it comes to academic fit, students consider academic programs offered, ability to pursue specific research interests, ability to meet academic goals, and supportive mentors being provided (Luchini-Colbry, 2017). When it comes to personal fit, students consider location, ability to be happy living in the environment, resources available, and the supportiveness of the community (Luchini-Colbry, 2017). Students are able to determine the level of fit through campus visits and talking to current faculty and students within the graduate program (Luchini-Colbry, 2017). Based on the level of fit, students attempt to identify the best graduate program for them as an individual through the determination of which graduate program “feels right” (Luchini-Colbry, 2017). The determination of what “feels right” for students is influenced by their ranking of importance for numerous factors which will be reviewed.
In 2014, Von Hoof, Luorong, and Lu completed a study in order to address the lack of research dedicated to identifying the factors that graduate students consider when making their graduate program selection. The authors believed that due to students being provided more choices, administrators and faculty should be concerned with why students select one graduate program over another in order to remain competitive (Von Hoof et al., 2014). Data was collected during the 2011-12 academic year from graduate students who were studying hospitality management in the United States (Von Hoof et al., 2014). Overall, 202 students participated in the study with 98 being international students and 104 being domestic students (Von Hoof et al., 2014). Through analysis, five factors were found to be considered when students selected an institution and graduate program; admission process, faculty interaction, living conditions, program and faculty reputation, and location (Von Hoof et al., 2014).

Within the factors, the authors aimed to identify differences between a variety of demographic groups (Von Hoof et al., 2014). These groups were: domestic versus international students, master’s versus doctoral students, female versus male students, and 20-29 year olds versus 30-39 year olds versus those 40 years and older (Von Hoof et al., 2014). Within this part of the study, three significant relationships were found. When it came to the factor of admission process, male international and female domestic students rated the factor as more important compared to their counterparts (Von Hoof et al., 2014). When it came to the factor of faculty interaction, doctoral students rated the factor as more important compared to their master’s level counterparts (Von Hoof et al., 2014). Finally, when it came to the factor of location, domestic students rated the factor as more important compared to international students (Von Hoof et al., 2014).
In a similar study, Winn, Leach, Erwin, and Benedict (2014) aimed to identify the factors that influence the selection of a graduate program for educational leadership students. For the study, 47 students were recruited to participate from three public regional universities in the southwest United States (Winn et al., 2014). Students were provided a survey that allowed them to identify which factors influenced their selection of a graduate program (Winn et al., 2014). Students were able to answer in two ways due to the survey containing a prepopulated list of factors and open-ended comment boxes (Winn et al., 2014).

Overall, the authors were able to identify the main factors that influence the graduate program selection for students. The following factors were considered by students in the decision making process in the following percentages: delivery of course work (73%), convenience (70%), tuition cost (45%), reputation (44%), and attended the institution previously (41%) (Winn et al., 2014). From the percentages, the authors found that students placed significant importance on the delivery of course work and convenience compared to all other factors (Winn et al., 2014). When it came to delivery of coursework, students wanted a program that offered a mixture of online and face-to-face instruction (34%), a program that offered more online instruction (28%), or a program that offered more face-to-face instruction (15%) (Winn et al., 2014). When it came to convenience, students wanted a program that was close to their home (49%), allowed for ease with scheduling classes (43%), and located close to their work (13%) (Winn et al., 2014).

Joseph, Roche, Bock, and Albrecht (2014) conducted a third study with the aim of identifying the factors that are important to students when they reach their final decision
for the selection of a graduate program. Their study differed from other studies due to their desire to explore the important factors that were considered throughout the graduate program decision making process and how those factors match up with the institution that was ultimately selected (Joseph et al., 2014). Students who were attending a public university in Germany during the fall semester were given surveys during class over the course of two weeks (Joseph et al., 2014). Initially, students were asked to rank 24 factors based on their importance in the decision making process for the school(s) that the student had applied to (Joseph et al., 2014). Following this, students were asked to rank the same 24 factors based on their importance in the decision making process for the school that the student enrolled in (Joseph et al., 2014).

When it came to application decisions, the factors found to be most important were: living accommodations/housing, attractive campus, small class sizes, student services, public university, and friendly environment (Joseph et al., 2014). When it came to the enrollment decision, the factors found to be most important were: small class sizes, student services, public university, community involvement, acceptance rate, and latest technology (Joseph et al., 2014). From these results, the authors determined that some factors were considered important at multiple stages of the graduate program decision making process and some factors were only considered important at one stage of the graduate program decision making process (Joseph et al., 2014). The authors concluded that the enrollment behavior of students may not directly reflect the behavior they displayed through the application process when it came to what they identified as important in the final decision making process (Joseph et al., 2014).
In a fourth study, Chen (2007) had the goal of explaining why international students from East Asia decided to attend a graduate program in Canada. For the study, 140 students participated in qualitative face-to-face interviews and completed a quantitative based survey (Chen, 2007). From the interviews and surveys, Chen (2007) identified institutional characteristics that had the strongest influence on the graduate school decision making process. These characteristics were broken into academic, administrative, and location factors (Chen, 2007). Academic factors of importance were: reputation of the university, quality of the university, availability of financial aid, quality of the academic program, reputation of the academic program, quality/reputation of faculty, and being research focused (Chen, 2007). Administrative factors of importance were: uniqueness of program, course offerings, and positive interaction with faculty and staff (Chen, 2007). A third importance was found when it came to the consideration of location factors (Chen, 2007). Students indicated that their decision making process was influenced by the institution being located in a safe city, feeling they would not be discriminated against, overall location of the institution, and diversity among people (Chen, 2007).

Two studies discussed previously in the chapter aimed to identify what factors students considered important in their decision making process for the selection of a graduate program (Bersola et al., 2014; Mark et al., 2004). In the first study, Mark et al. (2004) selected stipend level, distance from home, department ranking, and office/computer facilities as the four factors to study. Students were found to prefer graduate programs that were closer to home, higher ranked, have more office/computer facilities, and offer larger stipends (Mark et al., 2004). The authors did not determine the
exact ranking of these four factors in terms of most important to least important in the decision making process, rather, the authors found that students were willing to make tradeoffs among the four factors (Mark et al., 2004). For example, students were found to be willing to select a graduate program with a smaller stipend when it was located closer to their home (Mark et al., 2004). Additionally, students were found to select a lower ranked graduate program when it was closer to their home and had office/computer facilities versus selecting a higher ranked graduate program that was further away and had no office/computer facilities (Mark et al., 2004).

Bersola et al. (2014) studied the level of importance students placed on graduate program and institutional factors in the decision making process. For students, the most important factors were ranked in the following order; faculty quality, research quality, faculty access, and program reputation (Bersola et al., 2014). The least important factors were ranked in the following order; child care, student diversity, community diversity, and housing (Bersola et al., 2014). Within the study, the authors also looked to identify differences in the decision making process between underrepresented minorities (URMs) and non-underrepresented minorities (non-URMs) (Bersola et al., 2014). For URMs, significantly more importance was placed on faculty, student, and community diversity, cost of living, and receiving a fellowship (Bersola et al., 2014).

Two additional studies (Bowie, Cherry, & Wooding, 2005; Ramirez, 2013) added to the knowledge of factors that influence graduate program selection when it comes to minority students. Bowie et al. (2005) examined 207 African-American students and their decision making process for graduate program enrollment. Students were selected due to being alumni of three graduate social work programs and were given a closed-ended
survey to complete (Bowie et al., 2005). The enrollment decision factors found to be of influence were: geographic location, type of program, class scheduling, cost of tuition, and academic reputation (Bowie et al., 2005). The enrollment decision factors found to not influence students were: number of minority students, school recruitment efforts, and number of minority faculty (Bowie et al., 2005). The lack of desire for diversity among students and faculty challenges the results of the Bersola et al. (2014) study.

Ramirez (2013) studied the factors that influence graduate program selection when it comes to minority students by studying Latinx students. Data for the study was pulled from a larger case study that was performed by Ramirez in 2007 that examined access to and the experiences of Latinx students in doctoral degree programs at one institution (Ramirez, 2013). In the earlier study, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 24 students (Ramirez, 2013). Within the interviews, students were asked to identify their reason(s) for enrolling in the specific program (Ramirez, 2013). From students' responses, five major factors were identified (Ramirez, 2013). These factors were: desire to stay close to home, to study with specific faculty members, financial considerations, campus climate, and circumscribed choices (Ramirez, 2013).

These studies analyzed the effect of program/institutional factors on the graduate school choice process of students. For each study, the authors were able to identify which factors students considered most important to their graduate school choice process for their specific group of participants. A wide variety of factors were identified with faculty interaction, living conditions, and reputation/quality of institution, program, and faculty being the most frequently identified as important to the graduate education decision making process (Bersola et al., 2014; Bowie et al., 2005; Chen, 2007; Joseph et al., 2014;
Ramirez, 2013; Von Hoof et al., 2014). From these studies, program/institutional factors have been found to be significantly important to the graduate school choice process but vary from student to student.

**Theoretical Framework**

When a student makes the decision to pursue graduate education and/or to enroll in graduate education, many aspects of their lives may change (Gansemar-Toph, Ross, & Johnson, 2006). When transitioning to graduate education, a student may feel self-doubt or self-awareness and may experience changes amongst relationships with significant others (Gansemar-Toph et al., 2006). From student to student, the magnitude of change will vary but few students are able to pursue and/or enroll in graduate education without experiencing the stress that comes along with the transition to the different stages of education (Golde, 2000). For this reason, Transition Theory will guide the proposed study.

In Schlossberg’s, Waters’, and Goodman’s (1995) Transition Theory, a transition is considered to be any event that results in change for an individual when it comes to relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles. The event and resulting transition can be anticipated, unanticipated, or a nonevent (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Anticipated transitions are those that are scheduled or predicted (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Students may experience anticipated transitions through enrolling at an institution and preparing for the changes that will occur when it comes to their lifestyle, work environment, and finances (Gansemar-Toph et al., 2006). Unanticipated transitions are those that are not scheduled or predicted (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Students may experience unanticipated transitions through expecting to work in a specific area but are assigned to a different
area at the last minute (Gansemar-Toph et al., 2006). Nonevents are those that are expected but do not actually occur (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Students may experience nonevents through being informed of limited resources but then resources are secured and the expected event does not occur (Gansemar-Toph et al., 2006).

Within the three types of transitions, a student’s perception of the transition is influenced by the context and impact. (Schlossberg et al., 1995). A student’s context of the transition is influenced by the setting of where the transition occurs and the relationship they have with the specific event that has taken place (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The impact of the transition on the student is influenced by how much the transition alters their daily life and the effects that are felt amongst relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The context and impact of pursuing/enrolling in graduate education can vary drastically from student to student (Gansemar-Toph et al., 2006). The difference in context and impact occurs due to some students moving significant distances for graduate education, some students experiencing financial strain, and some students remaining at the same institution where they completed their undergraduate degree (Gansemar-Toph et al., 2006). Context and impact may be less significant for students who researched the institution, visited the department, and selected a program based on personal fit compared to students who relied more on factors such as reputation or location (Gansemar-Toph et al., 2006).

As a second aspect of the Transition Theory, Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) identified four S’s which influence an individual’s ability to handle the transition they are experiencing. The four S’s are situation, self, support, and strategies (Schlossberg et al., 1995). When it comes to situation, many factors are considered
important. These factors include: what triggered it, is the timing good/bad, does the individual have control, does the individual need to go through a role change, what is the duration, has there been previous experience, is concurrent stress taking place, and where does responsibility fall for the transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Self is broken into two different categories of focus. The first category looks at personal and demographic characteristics while the second category looks at psychological resources (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Personal and demographic characteristics have the ability to affect how someone views life (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Characteristics include socioeconomic status, gender, age, stage of life, state of health, and ethnicity/culture (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Psychological resources have the ability to aid in coping with the transition and focus on optimism, self-efficacy, commitment and values, and spirituality and resiliency (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

The third S is support and is broken down into types, functions, and measurement (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Types of support are intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions/communities (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Functions of support are affect, affirmation, aid, and honest feedback (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Measurements of support include identifying stable supports, having supports that are role dependent, and having supports that will change over time (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Strategies look at how an individual copes with the transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The type of coping falls into three categories. These categories are: those that modify the situation, those that control the meaning of the problem, and those that aid in managing the stress in the aftermath (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Taking it a step further, individuals may also choose to implement coping modes. Modes include information
seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, and intrapsychic behavior (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

The factors within the four S’s provide an idea for how individuals work through the transitions they experience throughout their lives. For individuals who work with students who are pursuing and/or enrolling in graduate education, the factors within the four S’s serve as guidelines for understanding students through the transitions of deciding to go to graduate school, applying to graduate school, and enrolling in graduate school (Gansemar-Toph, 2006). At these stages of graduate education, students experience academic and social maturity by “moving in”, “moving through”, and “moving on” at each stage (Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). By understanding how students process the four S’s within their transition to graduate education, administrators, faculty, and student affairs professionals are able to assist students by connecting them to the academic and social support they require in order to successfully cope with their new circumstances (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2011).

Summary

The current literature identifies the numerous personal and academic factors that guide a student through their decision making process for graduate education. Through the literature, it is apparent that the decision making process for graduate education is extremely complex and differs from student to student. However, there are a few factors that carry more influence on the decision making process compared to other factors. The one factor that influences the majority of students to seek out graduate education is the increase in the importance of earning a graduate degree (Carnevale, 2009; Stewart, 2010). Students have found that more employers are demanding graduate education of their
employees (Carnevale, 2009) and the increased earnings that come with earning a graduate degree (Stewart, 2010). As a result of these changes throughout the years, graduate education has grown in value and importance to students and leads to an increase in the odds of enrollment for students (Zhang, 2005).

At the individual level, students make the decision to pursue, apply for, and enroll in graduate education based on many unique characteristics to each individual. When it comes to the demographic characteristics of ethnicity (English & Umbach, 2016; Perna, 2004; Xu, 2014), gender (Hazari et al., 2007; Mullen et al., 2003; Perna, 2004; Tassoobshirazi & Carr, 2008; Xu, 2016; Wells et al., 2011), first-generation (Garder & Holley, 2011; Khank, 2002; Leyva, 2011; Lunceford, 2011; Olive, 2014; Tate et al., 2015), and adult learner (Peters & Daly, 2013; Seibert et al., 2013), these characteristics were found to have little significance in who was going to graduate education but significant differences in how they were influenced and came to the decision to go to graduate school.

When it comes to additional characteristics that influence the decision making process on the path to graduate education, individual changeable characteristics were researched in previous literature. Individual changeable characteristics included: undergraduate major, undergraduate Grade Point Average, parent education level, and undergraduate institution. These characteristics were considered changeable because they could be controlled by individuals unlike demographic characteristics which tend to stay the same. For undergraduate major influence, students were found to be more likely to enroll in a specific graduate program depending on the undergraduate major they held (English & Umbach, 2016; Mullen et al., 2003). For Grade Point Average influence, as a
student’s GPA increased, the odds of the student entering a graduate program increased as well (English & Umbach, 2016; Mullen et al., 2003). For parent education level influence, students were found to be more likely to pursue and attend graduate education as the level of education for their parent(s) increased (English & Umbach, 2016; Mullen et al., 2003)

For undergraduate institution influence, the type of undergraduate institution (Mullen et al., 2003) and the quality of the undergraduate institution (Zhang, 2005) attended previously was found to influence which type of graduate program the student enrolled in.

A third area that has received much attention in previous literature when it comes to the decision making process for graduate education revolves around the financial considerations of students. Previous research has looked at how undergraduate debt acquired, receiving financial assistance at the graduate level, and the overall cost of the graduate program influences the decision making process for graduate education. When it comes to undergraduate debt acquired, previous research is conflicted on its influence. Researchers have found that undergraduate debt can have a negative effect (Choy & Gies, 1997; Heller, 2001; Malcom & Dowd, 2012; Millett, 2003; Tsapogas & Cahalan, 1996), a positive effect (Bedard & Herman, 2008; Kim & Eyermann, 2006; Murphy, 1994; Perna, 2004; Weiler, 1991), or no effect (English & Umbach, 2016; Millett, 2003) on the decision making process for graduate education. To counter the negative effect of undergraduate debt acquired, additional research has found that students are influenced in their decision making process by receiving financial assistance in the form of financial aid (Bersola et al., 2014) or higher stipends (Mark et al., 2004) and the overall cost of the
graduate program (Mbawuni & Nimako, 2015; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Sidin et al., 2003; Wilkins et al., 2013).

Once students make the decision making process for graduate education through their demographic characteristics, individual characteristics, and financial considerations, they are able to make decisions based on the program and institutional characteristics they desire for graduate education. While many studies have been reviewed, for each specific group of participants, a slightly different list of factors that were considered most important was created. These lists varied slightly but were found to be significantly important to the decision making process for graduate education and most often included: faculty interaction, living conditions, and reputation/quality of institution, program, and faculty (Bersola et al., 2014; Bowie et al., 2005; Chen, 2007; Joseph et al., 2014; Ramirez, 2013; Von Hoof et al., 2014).

Due to the complex nature of the decision making process for graduate education that has been identified through many previous studies, administrators and faculty must aim to understand how their potential students make the decision to pursue and enroll in graduate education. Chapter Two provided a detailed literature review for topics relevant to the study. Chapter Three will present the methodological framework of the study.
CHAPTER III

Methodology

In this chapter the methodological framework used for the study will be outlined. The framework was meant to create an understanding of the decision making process of students for pursuing graduate education and enrolling in a graduate education program.

Design of the Study

The study was completed using a qualitative approach. This approach was performed through utilizing two focus groups. Focus groups are categorized by their ability to allow for group discussions that explore a specific set of issues, views, and/or experiences (Kitzinger, 1994). The group discussion is “focused” due to the fact that participants are discussing a topic that is shared amongst all participants in some way (Kitzinger, 1994). Focus groups differ from group interviews due to the use a group interaction amongst participants as part of the research data (Kitzinger, 1994). Focus groups allow for data to be collected that goes beyond solely what people think by allowing for the “how” and “why” of the specific topic of interest to be observed (Kitzinger, 1994). This is done through the ability of the focus group to encourage people to engage with each other and to verbally articulate their comments that may be unarticulated without the group (Kitzinger, 1994). As part of the focus group, participants are often required by others to explain the reasoning behind their thinking rather than just providing their basic answer to questions (Kitzinger, 1994).

By utilizing focus groups, the researcher hoped that participants would interact with each other and bring more meaning to their experiences when it came to the decision to pursue graduate education and to enroll in a specific graduate education program.
Through each focus group, participants listened to the experiences of others and were able to agree, disagree, and/or add input when applying their personal experience to the experiences of others in the focus group. The focus groups were guided through the use of open ended questions (refer to Appendix A) and allowed flexibility when it came to natural conversation that occurred throughout the group discussion.

Participants

Participants in the study were graduate students at a midsized university located in the Midwest. Sampling was performed using a purposive approach. A purposive sample is one where the researcher selects participants for the sample based on their ability to yield the best understanding of what is being studied. While there are nine types of purposive sampling, for this study, a homogeneous sample was selected (Fraenkel et al., 2015). In a homogenous sample, individuals selected for the study all possess a certain trait or characteristic (Fraenkel et al., 2015). Homogenous sampling was used in order to ensure that each focus group was composed of participants who all shared a common trait.

For the study, two homogenous focus groups composed of five to eight participants were utilized. Group one utilized participants who enrolled in graduate education at the same institution as their undergraduate institution. Group two utilized participants who enrolled in a graduate education at a different institution from their undergraduate institution.

Participants were obtained by the researcher through two actions. First, the researcher contacted the Office of the Registrar of the institution used for the study to ask that an email be sent out to all graduate students on behalf of the researcher. Second, the
researcher attended the institution’s Graduate Student Advisory Council to speak to graduate students directly about the study and their potential for participating in the study. Participants who agreed to be part of the focus groups and were selected were asked to complete a consent form (refer to Appendix C). Participants were made aware that participation in the study was completely voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any point.

**Focus Group One.** From the recruitment of participants and their availability, five individuals were selected for Focus Group One. These five were all female, not first generation, had an age range of 22-27, and an average undergraduate grade point average of 3.32. Due to no participants being first generation, education level for their parents was identified as Associate’s Degree (20%), Bachelor’s Degree (40%), and Master’s Degree (40%). For three of them, they pursued graduate education within one year of earning their undergraduate degree while two of them pursued graduate education after a gap of at least one year since earning their undergraduate degree. The majority had a race/ethnicity of Caucasian (80%), were enrolled in an face-to-face graduate program (80%), and were full-time students (80%). Within the group, three undergraduate degree programs were represented. These included: Special/Elementary Education, Family and Consumer Science, and Kinesiology and Sports Studies. Finally, from earning their undergraduate degree, the participants had a range of undergraduate debt. One had no debt, one had debt ranging between $5000 and $15,000, and three had debt that was over $15,000. For identification purposes in Chapter 4, participants in Focus Group One were labeled with a SG. This was a result of all participants in the group having enrolled in a
graduate program at the SAME institution as where they completed their undergraduate degree.

**Focus Group Two.** From the recruitment of participants and their availability, eight individuals were selected for Focus Group Two. These eight were male (62.5%), not first generation (75%), had an age range of 22-30, and an average undergraduate grade point average of 3.48. Due to the majority of participants not being first generation, education level for their parents was identified as High School (25%), Bachelor’s Degree (37.5%), and Master’s Degree (37.5%). For three of them, they pursued graduate education within one year of earning their undergraduate degree while five of them pursued graduate education after a gap of at least one year since earning their undergraduate degree. The majority had a race/ethnicity of Caucasian (87.5%), were enrolled in an face-to-face graduate program (100%), and were full-time students (100%). Within the group, seven undergraduate degree programs were represented. These included: Family and Consumer Sciences, Digital Marketing, Health and Fitness Recreation, Recreation and Event Management, Psychology, Marketing/Human Resource Management, and History. Finally, from earning their undergraduate degree, the participants had a range of undergraduate debt. Two had no debt while the other six had debt that was over $15,000. For identification purposes in Chapter 4, participants in Focus Group Two were labeled with a DG. This was a result of all participants in the group having enrolled in a graduate program at a DIFFERENT institution from where they completed their undergraduate degree.
Research Site

The research site was a midsized institution located in the Midwest. The public institution is located in a rural community and offers four year undergraduate and graduate master programs, but does not offer any doctoral programs. Roughly 7,500 students attend the institution and 20,000 individuals live within the rural community. The focus groups were conducted in a secure meeting location. The location selected was a private floor lounge located in one of the residential buildings on campus. The lounge was selected due to the space it provided for group discussion around tables and additional space for refreshments for participants. Each focus group session took approximately one hour and was recorded using two audio devices.

Instrument

Semi-structured interview. The study consisted of two focus group interviews. Each interview was conducted between the researcher and one focus group. The interview utilized predetermined open ended questions (refer to Appendix A) and lasted for approximately one hour. At the beginning of each focus group, participants were asked to complete a demographic information card (refer to Appendix B). This allowed for the collection of demographic information by the researcher and allowed for any trends within each focus group to be tracked. Semi-structured interviews within the focus groups were selected for the study due to their ability to elicit specific answers from participants while also remaining flexible due to the uniqueness of individual participants and the interactions with other members of their focus group (Fraenkel et al., 2015).

Based on the responses of the participants, each focus group followed a unique path that was controlled by the participants, their experiences, and their lives currently.
Prompts caused by the answers given by the participants were allowed to be explored further by the researcher and other participants in the focus group. For this reason, follow-up questions within each focus group were modified to reflect the experiences of the specific focus group being interviewed.

At the completion of the focus group, participants were allowed to offer any last insight into their graduate education decision making process.

**Researcher.** As a current graduate student who returned to my undergraduate institution for graduate school four years after earning my undergraduate degree, I conducted the study to gain an understanding of the factors that had influenced others to do the same or differently in their graduate studies. My undergraduate experiences were very influential on the person I have become today. My experiences were extremely positive and made my decision to return to my undergraduate institution for graduate school an easy one.

As part of the study, a third party was utilized by the researcher. The third party was selected from the first year cohort of the researcher’s graduate program. The third party was responsible for assisting the researcher through the focus group sessions and the transcribing process. During the focus groups, the third party was responsible for tasks such as: addressing participants who arrived late to the focus group sessions and ensuring that the audio devices were functioning throughout the entire session. Once transcribing was completed by the researcher, the third party reviewed the transcriptions in order to confirm their accuracy. By completing this process, the credibility of the study was strengthened (Fraenkel et al., 2015).
Data Collection

Focus group interviews were conducted during the fall semester of 2018. Each focus group was recorded using two audio devices. The researcher and third party individual took notes throughout the interview to collect additional data for trends observed throughout each focus group. Due to the study being qualitative, the researcher needed to be continuously observing the people, events, and occurrences that occurred throughout the study (Fraenkel et al., 2015). For the study, a phenomenological approach was used throughout the data collection process. In this approach, the researcher investigated various reactions to, or perceptions of, a phenomenon (Fraenkel et al., 2015). Through the perceptions and reactions of the participants, the researcher gained knowledge about the world of the participants (Fraenkel et al., 2015).

Treatment of Data

Following the focus group interviews, the researcher transcribed and coded each interview. Coding was completed to determine themes presented from the responses of the participants throughout each focus group. The codes were created using topics that related to graduate education college choice, graduate education decision making, individual factors, and institutional factors. Once coded, the themes were analyzed.

All information collected for the study was saved to two flash drives. Two flash drives were utilized in order to create a back up for the information collected throughout the study. To maintain the confidentiality of participants, the two flash drives were stored within a secure location in the personal apartment of the researcher. Contact information was saved in a separate document from the data collection document used for each participant. This was done to keep contact information separate and not associated with
the participant’s responses. Data will be kept for three years following the completion of the study. After three years, the flash drives used for the study will be destroyed.

**Data Analysis**

Due to the study utilizing a qualitative approach, data was analyzed based on the coding process. The coding process involved assigning different codes to participant responses in order to identify the frequency of responses of each individual and the group as a whole (Fraenkel et al., 2015). Once the focus group interviews had been transcribed, codes were assigned to participant responses. Based on the emergence of codes, themes were identified and analyzed by the researcher. Within the phenomenological approach, these themes were considered to be the essence of the experiences of the participants (Fraenkel et al., 2015). Even though two focus groups were interviewed, the goal of any phenomenological study is to find commonalities amongst the experiences of the participants (Fraenkel et al., 2015). From the analysis, the identification of the essence and commonalities of the experiences of the decision to pursue graduate education and to enroll in a specific graduate education program were determined.

**Summary**

In this chapter, the methodological framework for the study was presented. The outlined framework was used to gain knowledge about students’ graduate education decision making process. Due to the study utilizing a qualitative approach, parts of the framework were adjusted as the study took place based on the individual participants and focus groups. In Chapter Four, data collected will be presented and analyzed. Once analyzed, the results will be discussed in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER IV

Results

In this chapter the factors students consider in the decision making process for graduate education are presented. The chapter will highlight the similarities and differences between the two focus groups that were conducted. The results are presented through each stage of the graduate enrollment process which are the following: the decision to pursue graduate education, determining where to apply to graduate education, and the process of selecting an institution for enrollment in graduate education.

Findings

Research Question #1. How do individuals come to the decision to pursue graduate education and what factors influence this decision?

When describing their decision to pursue graduate education, participants across the two focus groups were influenced by several common factors. For five participants, the decision to pursue graduate education came from being uncertain about their future/wanting to make a career change. Participants SG2 and SG3 in focus group one had very similar experiences:

I wasn’t really sure what I wanted to do. My undergrad was family services and I thought I wanted to be a social worker. I got to my social work class and I would cry because I just could not take the stories. I had to pick a different route. (SG2)

I thought I wanted to be a social worker. My family actually choose to be foster parents so then I saw that side of the world and couldn’t imagine doing the case work. I also felt that FCS in general is slightly a bit of a dumping ground for
students who aren’t really sure where they want to go. I took some time and did some other things that were completely unrelated to my undergraduate degree and took the time to find something that I knew I’d love and was passionate about. (SG3)

For participant DG6, he discussed that pursuing graduate education was a result of applying for a lot of different jobs but not receiving any positions. Participants DG2 and DG5 in focus group two shared that they needed to work full-time to realize what they wanted to do with their future. For DG2, he described his experience as,

I studied to be a teacher and absolutely loved it but wanted to travel a little bit. I did my consulting job and while I was on the road, I realized I didn’t want to teach at the high school anymore but wanted to be more involved with higher education, working at a university or college.

For DG5, she initially considered graduate education because she was reevaluating her current living arrangement. Due to being out of undergrad for roughly a year, she knew her current lease was going to expire and she would have to decide whether or not she wanted to renew it or move elsewhere. Having worked in on-campus housing as an undergraduate, she knew she could go back to school and work in housing. By doing this, she would have a place where she could live on campus. DG5 also stated, “I was working a lot with little kids and really missed being in the older kid setting.” The combination of these two situations, resulted in DG5 questioning where she was going in life and initiated her pursuit of graduate education.

A second factor shared between the participants in both focus groups was the need to possess a graduate degree for professional advancement with eight participants
who all mentioned how this influenced their decision to pursue graduate education. For four of the participants, a graduate degree was required for future work because their undergraduate degree was not a sufficient qualification for their chosen field. From focus group one, SG5 stated, “There are things I could do with just an undergraduate degree in Kinesiology and Exercise Science but I needed my master’s degree in order to pursue what I want to do.” In focus group two, participants DG3 and DG4 both shared the same undergraduate degree and like SG5, determined that graduate education was a necessary qualification for future employment in their field. DG3 described his experience:

I pretty much knew right when I had decided on my major. Because, I had kind of a worthless degree. It’s in psychology, and I mean it’s not completely worthless but it’s not really a degree that you pursue something specific at the bachelor’s level. I had to go back.

Participant DG4 shared that by majoring in psychology, she understood that she would have to pursue graduate education for her intended career. For this reason, she was aware and planning on pursuing graduate education going into her undergraduate degree. However, SG1 shared that she was only pursuing graduate education because it was required for her future career stating, “If I didn’t need my master’s, I probably would not get my master’s because of the extra stress and work.”

The remaining four participants viewed graduate education as an opportunity to develop professionally. SG4 was driven to pursue graduate education in order to become a better teacher for her students. DG1 chose to pursue graduate education in order to be taken seriously as a coach. He felt that it would be in his best interest to have a graduate degree in order to create greater opportunities for employment in his chosen field. DG7
had a similar mindset and stated, “If I was interested in pursuing Higher Education (as a career), it’s easier to obtain a job as (an entry level) professional by going back to school.” DG8 was convinced that she would gain many more career opportunities if she had a graduate degree. She was very passionate about this belief sharing:

I had the chance to work with the Peace Corps. While I was working, I became more convinced that I really needed to get a master’s degree because it opens up many doors. I’ve always had the dream of working with international organizations like the United Nations. Many times when I have checked (job postings), you have to have a master’s degree. Essentially a master’s degree is going to open up many doors for me. After some time with the Peace Corps, I knew it was time to come back to school. To delve deeper into my area of study, to gain expertise, and to see the many doors that open for me.

In their discussion of making the decision to pursue graduate education, three participants were influenced by an experience available to them as an undergraduate student. SG1 was originally an education major. A requirement of this major is to conduct observations of teachers in the classroom environment. During these observations, she found herself focusing more on the students who needed extra attention. She realized that she wanted to spend more time making connections with students rather than teaching them. From her experiences with the observations, she decided to go into counseling instead of education.

Participant SG5 was unsure of what she wanted to do with her degree when she was a sophomore. Because of this, she shadowed a Cardiac Rehab professional at a hospital near campus and found a career field she loved. Due to her new found passion,
SG5 conducted an internship one year later in the Cardiac Rehab unit. From these experiences, she knew exactly what she wanted to do moving forward. DG7 described his specific undergraduate experience as:

One of the key experiences for me in determining to go to grad school was after I had just completed my first orientation program. It opened my eyes to the field and the potential I had with it. That was key.

The final factor that was found to influence the decision to pursue graduate education was common among all of the participants who shared that they were strongly influenced by a key person in their lives. The people who most influenced the participants included: advisors, faculty, television characters, mentors, and supervisors. Even though participants mentioned many influences, they most often shared that faculty were the most influential to the decision to pursue graduate education. Participant SG5 shared how she was influenced by a professor who listened to what she wanted to do and pushed her to shadow a Cardiac Rehab professional. This push resulted in her identifying what she wanted to do for a career and the necessity of a master's degree to achieve that. DG3 described the influence of faculty as,

I did definitely have some faculty that supported me along the way. I had one faculty that I really, really, really enjoyed his class, number one professor I ever had and wrote me a letter of recommendation. He helped me figure out what I needed to do exactly. He is probably my biggest influence, my biggest push for grad school.

DG8 also had a faculty member who helped facilitate the process of pursuing graduate education. This faculty member recommended the institution that she is now a graduate
student at, helped her study, and encouraged her to leave her home country in order to get more exposure and experience.

Besides faculty, participants were influenced by many other individuals. SG3 shared, “One day I was watching Friday Night Lights, there is a school counselor in that show and seeing the kind of impact that she was making on students was very inspiring to me.” Participants DG2, DG5, and DG7 were all influenced by individuals who were working full-time in the offices where they worked as undergraduates. This influence came from the professionals discussing their own experiences with the participants and informing them they could do the same with their futures. For DG1, his biggest influence was the head coach he was working with as an assistant track coach. The head coach encouraged him to go back for graduate education in order to be taken seriously as a coach and to be competitive in the job search process with other coaches who had done the same.

**Research Question #2.** How do individuals come to the decision to apply for graduate education at particular institutions and what factors influence this decision?

When discussing the decision to apply to graduate education at particular institutions, participants in both focus groups shared multiple common factors that influenced them. The first common factor involved participants applying to institutions that were able to meet the wants and needs they had identified as most important to them personally. These included: paid graduate assistantship, tuition waiver, not being required to take the GRE, location, housing, and low cost of living. For focus group one, the most common want and need was focused on being able to hold a paid graduate assistantship and having their tuition waived. Participant SG2 shared, “I was really enticed by the idea
of having the tuition waived.” while SG3 stated, “Knowing the graduate assistantships were there and knowing that would be something that was taken care of, was big for me.”

For focus group two, their wants and needs were also focused on being able to hold a paid graduate assistantship and having their tuition waived but also included numerous other factors. For DG1 and DG5, they looked for graduate assistantships first and institutions that offered them second. For DG4, DG7, and DG8, all three placed importance on applying to institutions that had funding for them. DG4 said, “Having a GA position was definitely a big factor.” DG7 had similar feelings/thoughts and shared, “Guaranteed tuition remission and what the stipend was, was really key. Because I knew for me, going to grad school really depended on the financial aid aspect of it.” DG8 had a slightly different experience due to having to put graduate education on hold initially. When she first applied for graduate education, she shared having to let go of that opportunity because of financial assistance not coming through from any of the institutions. For this reason, the graduate assistantship was of critical/primary importance when applying the second time around.

Beyond a paid graduate assistantship and having their tuition waived, participants in focus group two also shared that they applied at institutions that did not require the GRE, were in a location they desired, and met basic needs such as providing housing or a low cost of living. Not having to take the GRE was an attractive element in their application process for three participants for a variety of reasons. DG1 indicated that not needing it for his major was a positive element due to not having to pay or study for the test while DG8 was relieved to not have to take the GRE due to a sense of test malaise. When it came to the importance of the institutions being in a desired location,
participants had a few different views. For DG2, he applied to institutions that would be relatively close to family/friends. DG4 and DG8 no longer wanted to reside in a particular location and applied to institutions outside of their current region.

The second factor of importance when deciding what institutions to apply to for graduate education was found to be the perceived experiences participants would gain from the institution. SG2 wanted to gain experience because when graduating from undergrad she felt like that was a problem. She described herself as a student who just went to class, worked, and saw their advisor. For this reason she wanted an institution that would provide the opportunity to build her resume more. DG7 applied to programs that would provide him with different opportunities such as practicum and internship experiences. This was an important component to his desire to gain more experience in Higher Education and to learn how things differed in different places. For DG8, she only applied to institutions outside of her home country because she desired more exposure, more experience, and to be exposed to a broader range of opportunities.

The third factor, the one that was considered by the most participants when it came to the decision to apply for graduate education, was the academic program. This included both the reputation and make-up of the program. For focus group one, four participants applied for graduate education at an institution that they had determined to have a top ranked program in their academic field. This factor was considered important enough for three of the participants that they only applied to that one program. SG5 shared, “we’re one of the best programs for Kinesiology and Exercise Science in the United States so that definitely was a big factor for me.” SG4 was in agreement and added, “Like you were saying, the education department is nationally ranked and I knew
a lot of the professors so I only applied here.” From focus group two, DG7 shared that his
desire for an academic program that was made up of specific courses had influenced his
application process. He stated, “The slight blend of counseling mixed with the
administrative piece like our program was nice. Because I wasn’t set on counseling base
or administrative base, I wanted a little bit of both.”

While the two focus groups shared similarities in the factors they considered for
application to graduate education, participants in focus group one differed from their
peers in that all five participants applied to the same institution where they completed
their undergraduate degree. Of the five, four of them only applied for graduate education
at their undergraduate institution. The major reason behind this decision came from their
comfort and familiarity with the institution. Two participants agreed that these positive
feelings came from knowing faculty and the program. For three participants, their
undergraduate experiences made them want to stay. SG1 said, “I just feel like once you
come here, you’re trapped. You can’t leave because it’s such a wonderful institution.”
SG4 added, “By the time I graduated, I didn’t want to leave because I had gotten
involved with so many things. Just being here, loved it, still love it.” SG5 described her
decision as, “I lived on campus for four years so I had a great experience with that and
was involved in a lot of different clubs/activities. Not only did the program bring me back
but the school did too.”

In the discussion about applying to graduate education, participants were asked if
they had considered online programs. Between the two focus groups, there were thirteen
total participants with only one being an online student. For the twelve participants who
were enrolled in an face-to-face program, all of them indicated that they did not consider online programs due to their desire for personal connections. SGI said,

I wouldn't have pursued an online degree because I'm a very visual learner. I like seeing, I like hearing the professor in person talk. I've taken some online classes in my undergrad and I don't feel like I really got anything out of it because I didn't have that face to face connection.

DG1 expressed a similar sentiment,

I have to meet people, I have to network, and I wanted that aspect. I wanted to be in a classroom with people in my same area. I wanted to meet professors, I wanted to actually get to know people. That's why I chose a two year program versus a one year cause I wanted more time to do that.

For six participants, they expressed not considering online programs due to the nature of their academic programs and future career. These participants stated that: “I chose counseling because I love people and I want to be around people”, “I value the face to face connection and that’s really my industry”, and “Student Affairs is a people job so an online program just wouldn’t give you that”. For the participant who was an online student, an online program was the only option for her when it came to graduate education. The student shared that similar to the other participants, she feels connected because she is still a student. Specifically this participant shared,

I’m still super connected with people on the cross country team and different programs that I was involved in [as an undergrad]. Because I’m taking a master’s course, I got to meet with one of my professors today and she helped me with a
bunch of my assignments. It was really nice because I can still kind of come and be involved with things.

Participants in both focus groups shared having negative feelings towards online classes that acted as a deterrent to them when considering applying to programs that were online. Participant SG1 said, “I’ve taken some online classes in my undergrad and I just don’t feel like I really got anything out of it.” SG2 simply added, “I didn’t look into online programs and I don’t think I would have. I’m not a strong online student.” For DG2, he does not have much confidence in online courses, “Studying education, after student teaching and studying about it, I was not totally bought in to online education. I think there is a long way for it to go.”

Research Question #3. How do individuals come to the decision to enroll for graduate education at a particular institution, how do they determine the best time to enroll for graduate education, and what factors influence this decision?

Enrollment in graduate education at a particular institution was the one factor that separated the two focus groups. For focus group one, participants enrolled for graduate education where they had completed their undergraduate degree. For focus group two, participants enrolled for graduate education at an institution that differed from where they had completed their undergraduate degree. Within each focus group, participants were asked to discuss the time that occurred between earning their undergraduate degree and enrolling in graduate education. For participants in each focus group, they considered the time of enrollment based on if it was within one year of earning their undergraduate degree or a gap of one year or more.
When it came time to enroll in a graduate program, the first factor that was found to be considered by participants was needing the degree for their desired job. SG1 shared, For school counseling, you do need your master's. If I were to get a job with my bachelor's degree, it wouldn't be something I was necessarily really passionate about. I could have possibly fallen into staying in a career that I wasn't passionate about. I really just wanted to get right into it and just do something that I loved.

For SG2, a similar perspective was shared, “I wanted to get out there (employment) and figure out if this is what I wanted to do but then I did not want to stay and be stuck in an area or path I did not want to stay in.” DG5 found that working full time in a position that utilized her undergraduate degree made her realize what she really desired. She found herself missing being in the college environment and made the decision to return for graduate education.

The second factor that was shared during the decision process for graduate education enrollment came from the personal touch/comfort that came from the institution. For focus group one participants, the odds that they would enroll at their graduate institution were high due to four of the five participants only applying at the one institution. While they were set on the one institution, these four all shared a personal moment that solidified their enrollment decision. SG3 said,

One of our faculty started a program at a nearby school. There is a video on the institution's website of the faculty talking about the program, talking with the students there, and how things have been implemented. I thought this was so beautiful, that was the final decision where I knew I have to go see what this is like.
SG1 felt a personal touch during her interview day. On this day, she was able to interact with faculty and could see how genuine they were. She felt like the faculty weren't just there to recruit, they were there to make them feel welcome and wanted. She added, “I just feel like the environment that they create is just so warm and inviting. I knew that after that interview I would end up going here.” SG4 and SG5 had both received a personal call or email from faculty in the program. SG4 stated,

She (faculty) sent me an email, you could tell she had taken time out of her day to individualize it to me, congratulated me on getting into the program, and how excited she was that I was returning. That definitely helped.

For focus group two, participants felt similar personal connections/comfort during the application process that helped them make the decision to enroll at the institution. DG3 shared, “Some of the faculty I did definitely like a lot better than others. They’re pretty personable here in general.” DG4 visited the institution and it left a good impression on her. DG7 said,

Being here for interview days and that process really just gave me a great feeling about the university. Talking with people who had gone through the program or were currently in the program put me at ease and I felt like I’d be successful here.

For DG2, he could not put his feelings into words. He described his decision to enroll as a gut feeling and added, “I guess I just had the feeling that this was just the better choice. I don’t think there’s a way to put that as a pro other than just actually picking it.”

When discussing the decision to enroll, participants in focus group two shared one factor unique to those students. This factor was the ability of the institution to address their financial concern. Of most importance was the financial aid package which included
a graduate assistantship and tuition waiver. Seven of the eight participants in focus group two stated this was a major factor in their decision to enroll. DG1, DG4, DG5, and DG8 all knew they would enroll once they received their graduate assistantship.

While DG3 and DG4 described the graduate assistantship as a factor of importance, they both had additional wants and needs. For DG3, he enrolled at the institution that would provide him the best opportunities for future employment. He believed there would be more opportunity for him in his home state once he completed his graduate degree due to larger cities existing throughout the state compared to others and used that factor to rule out institutions. For DG4, she had numerous wants and needs that she was looking for during her search,

For me it came down to two schools. The other school was really beautiful but there was nowhere to live out there. Everything was way too expensive, there was no student housing, and the GA position was not guaranteed. The big city was overwhelming and it didn’t seem safe, it was twice as far from home which is just too much.

When discussing the decision to enroll, participants were asked to discuss the time they took between earning their undergraduate degree and enrolling in graduate education. For those who enrolled within one year of completing their undergraduate degree, they were influenced by their concern that it would be hard to come back to school after too much time had passed. SG1 shared,

I knew if I would have taken time off, I probably wouldn’t have been able to get back into the groove of school because I’ve had ‘senioritis’ since sophomore year. I knew if I took some time off, I just would not be motivated to go back.
SG5 added,

"I thought that maybe taking a year off, depending on what job experience I would have, it would be more helpful to do it all in a row instead of taking a break in order to stay current on information. I knew if I would've taken a break, it would have been harder for me to get back into the groove."

From focus group two, DG6 and DG7 shared similar feelings as the participants in focus group one who went to graduate education within one year of earning their undergraduate degree. DG6 was drawn straight to graduate education because he wasn't sure that if he jumped into full-time work that he would ever go back to college. DG7 shared,

"I think kind of being in the groove of just having been in school, it would be easier to continue then to leave and try to come back and convince myself it would be a good idea to come back and worth my time."

In each focus group, there was one participant who went straight from undergraduate to graduate education because they desired to continue taking classes. In focus group one, SG4 stated, "I'm so used to being in school all the time, I was like, when can I start again? Where are the classes? Sign me up right now. I was really excited to start." Similarly, in focus group two, DG4 was driven to graduate school right away because she wanted to get more professional experience as soon as possible since an undergraduate degree was not sufficient for entry level jobs in her chosen field.

For those who enrolled at least one year after completing their undergraduate degree, they shared that they were influenced by their desire to pursue other opportunities/gain real world experience. SG3 had observed friends who went straight into their graduate degree and felt like they were only doing so because they were afraid
of going out into the real world. She did not want to be that person and since graduate school was never part of her original plan she decided to take a break from school. SG2, wanted to get some experience outside of school so that she could make sure she was going back to school for something she really wanted to do.

In focus group two, DG2 delayed graduate school in order to take advantage of a once in a lifetime job opportunity. This opportunity involved being a consultant for his fraternity and being paid to travel to complete job requirements. Additionally, he had received advice about graduate school from his professors in undergrad who recommended that he delay graduate school until gaining some real world experience. They told him that by doing this, he would be able to better appreciate a lot of the concepts and material in his graduate classes. Reflecting on this, he now finds this advice to be amazing and he is so thankful that he followed their advice. DG8 also shared a similar experience. She worked for three years before returning to graduate education. While this was not her initial plan, she has reflected on it and shared,

Now I sit in classes, I appreciate the experience being away that long and delve deeper into my area. It’s really helped me appreciate the things I’m studying in class and made graduate education a lot more meaningful to me. I’m glad that I didn’t have to make that choice, it was by chance. Thinking back, if I had to reverse I think I would have made the choice that I would want to wait for some time and work before going to grad school.

Research Question #4. What factors influence a student’s decision to enroll for graduate education at the same institution where they completed their undergraduate
degree or at an institution that differs from where they completed their undergraduate degree?

The participants in focus group one all enrolled for graduate education at the same institution as where they completed their undergraduate degree. Participants in focus group two, all enrolled for graduate education at a different institution from where they completed their undergraduate degree. Due to this difference, each focus group had unique factors that influenced their decision to enroll for graduate education at their current institution.

Participants in focus group one were influenced to remain at their undergraduate institution for graduate education due to the reputation of their future academic program and their comfort with the institution, program, and faculty. Four of the five participants in focus group one referenced the reputation of the academic program as an important factor of influence. For SG3, the program was the only reason she remained at her undergraduate institution for graduate education and shared the following, "It [My decision] was completely reliant on the program and what it's known for." Participants SG2, SG4, and SG5 were also influenced by the reputation of the graduate academic program but it was not the only factor they considered.

For focus group one, participants were comfortable with the institution, program, and faculty and this comfort was a factor for four of the five participants in the group. SG5 shared, "My undergraduate institution was the only school I applied to for grad school because I was very familiar with the teachers and the program." For SG4, her comfort with faculty in the department allowed her to feel comfortable applying for graduate education only at her undergraduate institution. SG1 and SG2, initially did not
want to stay at their undergraduate institution for graduate education but did so because of their positive feelings from their undergraduate experience. SG1 shared,

I was really hesitant to apply to my undergraduate institution because I wanted to branch out and get a new experience and maybe go somewhere that’s a little bit more of a city aspect, just something different than my undergrad. I started filling out the application for the [redacted], I started filling it out and I just had this feeling like you’re not going to go here. I’m like, you know what, I’m just going to apply to my undergraduate institution and I feel like once you come here, you’re trapped. You just can’t leave because it’s such a wonderful institution. I tried to branch out but I couldn’t. I had to apply to my undergraduate institution and this was the only school I did apply to.

Of the eight participants in focus group two, only four of them considered their undergraduate institution initially for graduate education. For DG3 and DG4, they both applied to their undergraduate institution for graduate education but were not accepted. DG3 shared, “I actually had applied to my undergrad and they are kind of selective, I didn’t get accepted into it. It was elsewhere, out of state for me.” DG4 had a much more complicated experience with her undergraduate institution because of advice she had received early in her graduate school search process that had changed towards the end of her decision to enroll for graduate education at a particular institution. DG4 was under the impression that it looked bad to enroll for graduate education where you had completed your undergraduate degree. For this reason, she initially did not consider her undergraduate institution but was later told they were looking for more students to accept
in her desired graduate program. As a result, she made the decision to apply and described her experience as,

I kind of had a strange situation. I had applied to doctoral programs out of state because I had been told it looked bad to go to the same graduate school as your undergrad. Pretty late into the game, about April of my last year, our doctoral program decided they needed more students so I was told to apply to the doctoral program. I did but then they said they didn’t want students from the undergrad program because they had already selected students from the undergrad program and they didn’t want any more. Had I been able to be considered, I would have because it was a doctoral program, offered a stipend, and there were more opportunities. Not being able to do that, having secured funding at my current institution, that’s what I went through with.

DG8 applied and was accepted to her undergraduate institution for graduate education but dropped mid-way through first semester because it was not what she really wanted her experience to be. For this reason, during her second attempt at starting a graduate degree, she did not consider her undergraduate institution.

Six of the eight participants in focus group two were influenced to leave their undergraduate institution for graduate education due to desiring a particular experience. DG2 stated, “It was more important to be able to go to a different campus and get some more experience outside of where I did my undergrad at so that was the deciding factor.” DG7 added, “I did not consider my undergrad. Mainly because I wanted the experience at a different place and a different region to see how they differed.” For DG6, he was influenced to leave his undergrad institution due it being small and familiar. He shared,
The biggest thing was I wanted to meet more new people, make more connections. My undergrad institution is small and I had already known the game there and met people. So, let’s go somewhere else, just for a change.

DG5 considered her undergraduate institution but enrolled at a different institution because she wanted her priorities to focus on being a student. She stated,

The biggest reason why I picked here was because I would be a student here. At my undergrad, I would be a full-time Hall Director making a decent amount of money but I would be taking classes on my own. It was going to take me longer to get my degree because I’d be taking one class at a time instead of being a full-time student.

Summary

This chapter provided a breakdown of the responses that were provided by participants in regards to the research questions that guided the study. Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences and decision making that took place at the stages of pursuing graduate education, applying to graduate education, and enrolling in graduate education. Analysis of the results is presented in Chapter V and will include discussion, limitations, recommendations, and conclusions.
CHAPTER V
Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions

In this chapter the final conclusions from the study and recommendations for future research are presented. The current study was driven with the goal of gaining more knowledge of the graduate education decision making process for students. Specifically, the study aimed to identify the factors students considered most important in their decision to pursue graduate education, where to apply for graduate education, and the process of selecting an institution for enrollment in graduate education. The findings presented in Chapter IV will be connected back to the previous research discussed in Chapter II.

Discussion

When making the decision to pursue graduate education, students have been found to consider which schools will provide them the best fit as an individual when it comes to their academics and personal life (Lei & Chuan, 2010). In their consideration of pursuing, applying to, and enrolling in graduate education, students follow a path that is unique and dynamic to each individual (Dowd, 2008). The thirteen participants of the current study support this earlier research. While the participants shared similarities in the factors they considered important, they all traveled a path that was unique to them to get to enrollment at the institution where the current study was performed.

All five of the participants in focus group one enrolled for graduate education at the institution where they completed their undergraduate degree. Of these five, three had initial negative feelings when it came to selecting this particular institution for graduate education, but only two of them considered other schools at the pursuing graduate
education stage. Of these two, only one actually applied at another institution to which they weren’t accepted. While students may share similarities and be driven by the same factors, they are also unique individuals that must be treated as such. For this reason, higher education administrators must listen to the voices of graduate students in order to meet their needs and help them to get to their institutions.

**Pursuing Graduate Education**

In order to begin a graduate program, students must first make the decision to pursue graduate education. From the current study, students were found to pursue graduate education because of the following factors: being uncertain about their future/wanting to make a career change, the need to possess a graduate degree for professional advancement, and the influence of a key person in their lives. The factors of being uncertain about their future/wanting to make a career change and the need to possess a graduate degree for professional advancement align with the previous studies conducted by Peters & Daly (2013) and Seibert et al. (2013).

In those studies, the participants were all adult learners who had taken a gap of at least one year between earning their undergraduate degree and enrolling in graduate education. While some participants of the current study were adult learners, not all of them who considered these factors to be important were adult learners. Regardless, the reasoning behind these factors being important is comparable. Peters & Daly (2013) and Seibert et al. (2013) found their participants were motivated to pursue a graduate degree due to desiring graduate degree attainment, general interest, and utility. The utility values included: expanding their skills, new opportunities in current work, new research area of focus, ability to control funding/research, and change in career (Peters & Daly, 2013;
Seibert et al., 2013). Specifically, expanding their skills and change in career mirror the findings of the current study.

When it comes to needing a graduate degree for professional advancement, this was a factor in two different ways. For some, a graduate degree was a necessary requirement in order to be qualified for their desired career. For others, a graduate degree was something they desired in order to acquire additional qualifications that would help them gain future opportunities. For this reason, the graduate degree was seen as something that they needed to have in order to be qualified for their future career field or was something that would assist with their professional advancement. For the individuals who were influenced by this factor, they represented the following undergraduate majors: Special Education/Elementary Education, Family and Consumer Science, Kinesiology and Sports Studies, Health and Fitness Recreation, Psychology, and Marketing/Human Resource Management. The representation of these majors both aligns with and contradicts previous research.

For the participants who had an undergraduate major of Family and Consumer Science, Kinesiology and Sports Studies, Health and Fitness Recreation, and Marketing/Human Resource Management they contradict the study conducted by Mullen et al. (2003). This is a result of the researchers finding that when a student has an undergraduate major of business, health, or social science they are not significantly influenced by their undergraduate major in the decision making process for graduate education (Mullen et al., 2003). For participants who had an undergraduate major of Family and Consumer Science, Kinesiology and Sports Studies, Health and Fitness Recreation, Psychology, and Marketing/Human Resource Management they align with
the study conducted by English and Umbach (2016). These researchers found that when a student has an undergraduate major in humanities, social sciences, behavioral sciences, mathematics, life science, and physical science they are significantly influenced by their undergraduate major when it comes to the decision making process for graduate education (English & Umbach, 2016).

As a result of the mixed results of these three studies, a variety of undergraduate majors have been found to influence a student to pursue graduate education. Undergraduate major alone may not predict the pursuit of graduate education due to the desire of each individual student when it comes to their desired career and opportunities. For most, an undergraduate degree in any major will result in future employment in a related field. Some students may be content with this entry level employment while others may seek additional education in order to seek more advanced employment and opportunities. From these findings, graduate education administrators must focus on recruiting any and all undergraduate students. However, they would benefit by giving additional attention and resources to the undergraduate majors that require graduate education for advancement in employment opportunities. While they should not limit which undergraduate majors they recruit, graduate schools may get more return by giving extra attention to the undergraduate majors that naturally lead to graduate education.

For all of the participants, they were strongly influenced to pursue graduate education by a key person in their lives. The person of influence varied and included advisors, faculty, television characters, mentors, and supervisors. Of these different individuals, faculty were most often to be the key person who influenced participants. With the exception of television characters, the four other groups all contained people
who were directly related to higher education. For example, if the person of influence was a supervisor, it was the supervisor in the office at the institution the participants had worked in as undergraduate students. This is important as it shows the power that individuals who work at higher education institutions have over the pursuit of graduate education.

Higher education employees must understand the important role they play in students' decision to pursue graduate education. In the current study, not all of the participants remained at the same institution where they completed their undergraduate degree and where they were influenced by faculty as undergraduate students to pursue graduate education. While they may pursue graduate education at a different institution from their undergraduate institution, all employees must remember that graduate education is essential to America's economic and social prosperity (Stewart, 2010). For this reason, higher education employees should want as many students as possible to pursue graduate education regardless of where they actually pursue their degree. Institution administrators must stress this to their employees as they are the greatest recruitment tool for getting undergraduate students to pursue graduate education.

**Applying for Graduate Education**

Once a student has made the decision to pursue graduate education, the student must decide which institutions to which they will apply. In the current study, participants were influenced to apply for graduate education at particular institutions based on the following factors: ability to meet the student's wants/needs, future experiences participants would gain, academic program reputation, comfort/familiarity with institution, and being an face-to-face program. When it came to the top wants/needs,
students were looking for institutions that offered paid graduate assistantships, tuition waiver, not being required to take the GRE, geographic location, housing availability, and low cost of living.

Of these wants/needs, students most desired a paid graduate assistantship and a tuition waiver. For the majority of the participants, they needed the paid graduate assistantship and tuition waiver as the primary means to fund their graduate education. They knew that by applying to schools with both, they would have one less thing to worry about. Based on previous research, it comes as no surprise that receiving a strong financial package would be the most considered factor when it comes to the application process for graduate education. Any form of financial assistance has been found to be a significant influencer for students (Bowie et al., 2005; Chen, 2007; Ramirez, 2013; Winn et al., 2014).

Due to the importance that is placed on receiving a strong financial package, institutions need to evaluate what financial packages they offer to graduate students. In the current study, several participants shared that without the financial assistance available to them, they would not have even applied to the institutions that they did. Of all the factors considered by the students in the current study, receiving a strong financial package was the one that stood out most often as an all or nothing factor for their application process. For multiple participants, there was no middle ground. This, in addition to previous research, informs higher education administrators of the importance, necessity, and demand from potential graduate students of being able to offer a strong financial package. If an institution offers a weak or no financial package or offers one that does not compare to other institutions, it instantly takes them out of consideration for
students who are applying to graduate education. For this reason, institutions must work
to create the best financial package possible for graduate student and present that
information to potential students in the most comprehensive way possible.

It is important to note that administrators must be mindful of how they market the
financial package that they offer to graduate students. In the current study, students were
motivated to apply to the institutions that would fund their graduate education as a result
of the work they provided the institution. When discussing the importance of receiving a
financial package, students focused solely on the tuition waiver and paid assistantship.
None of the participants spoke about receiving financial aid and/or scholarships. For this
reason, graduate students do not just want to receive aid, they want to work to have their
graduate education paid for. As a result, administrators need to provide opportunities for
graduate students to work on campus in order to receive a tuition waiver and stipend. By
doing so, institutions will be able to meet the most important want/need of graduate
students.

Looking closer at the financial issues, the students who most emphasized the
importance of a paid graduate assistantship and tuition waiver were the same students
who had taken on debt while earning their undergraduate degree. In the current study,
dergraduate debt taken on by the participants ranged from zero to over fifteen thousand
dollars. For those with no undergraduate debt, they considered the financial assistance
package as something that was nice but not mandatory. While those with higher
undergraduate debt considered the financial assistance package as something that was
mandatory in their decision making process.
Previous research about undergraduate debt and the influence it has on the decision making process for graduate education is conflicted. For some studies, a negative relationship was found to exist between undergraduate debt and advancing to graduate education (Choy & Gies, 1997; Heller, 2001; Tsapogas & Cahalan, 1996). For other studies, a small positive relationship or no relationship was found to exist between undergraduate debt and advancing to graduate education (Bedard & Herman, 2008; Kim & Eyermann, 2006; Murphy, 1994; Perna, 2004; Weiler, 1991). From the current study, the emphasis placed on receiving a valuable financial package was found to be a result of not wanting to take on additional debt as well as needing the financial package in order to cover expenses. For this reason, the current study aligns with the previous studies that found a negative relationship between undergraduate debt and advancing to graduate education (Choy & Gies, 1997; Heller, 2001; Tsapogas & Cahalan, 1996).

For some students, if an institution does not offer a strong financial package they will not be able to take part in graduate education. This reinforces the fact that graduate students are significantly influenced to apply to institutions that do offer comprehensive assistance. For several participants in the study, they considered only schools with strong financial packages as a result of the debt they had incurred in undergrad and desiring to keep the debt they would incur at the graduate level as low as possible. For higher education administrators at the undergrad and graduate level, they need to work to keep debt accumulated as low as possible. Undergraduate administrators must understand that debt taken on during undergrad may hinder a student’s ability to take the next step towards graduate education. Graduate administrators must understand that students may be coming in with an amount of debt and would be more successful in recruitment by
offering ways to lower any additional debt being taken on for graduate education. For this reason, administrators at both levels need to aim to put together the best financial package they can for potential students.

When it comes to other wants and needs that institutions must meet, students applied to institutions that did not require the GRE, were in a specific geographic location, offered reasonable housing, and were located in a place with a low cost of living. While these factors were important, they did not carry the same degree of importance as the financial package. Additionally, not all of the participants agreed on the want or even need for these particular factors. Instead, each item was desired by a limited number of participants. All of these factors are supported in the existing literature. Von Hoof et al. (2014) found that students were influenced to select particular institutions based on their admission process, living conditions, and geographic location. In additional studies, researchers found students considered living accommodations (Joseph et al., 2014) and geographic location (Bowie et al., 2005; Chen, 2007; Mark et al., 2004; Ramirez, 2013) in their decision to apply for graduate education.

While smaller in importance, these additional factors are ones that administrators must consider when recruiting graduate students. With the exception of the GRE, institutions have significantly less control over these factors. As a result, administrators must partner with their local communities in order to ensure they are supporting graduate students beyond the campus. This partnership would allow administrators to be aware of the factors students may be faced with when it comes to their off-campus experience at their particular institution. While administrators cannot control or impose rules on their off campus partners, they can be aware of what their graduate students are experiencing.
For example, if the cost of living is high in the city where their institution is located, administrators may offer a larger stipend to their graduate students who hold graduate assistantships in an attempt to help cover the higher cost of living.

Beyond meeting their wants and needs, students applied at institutions based on the experiences they would gain and the academic program's reputation. Of the two, the reputation and the structure of the academic program were much more significant to the application process for students. This factor carried enough influence that for some students, it resulted in them only applying to one institution due to the awareness that they were applying to a program that was highly regarded in their field of study. The reputation of a program and its faculty was a factor of influence on the application process for graduate education in many previous studies (Bersola et al., 2014; Bowie et al., 2005; Chen, 2007; Mark et al., 2004; Von Hoof et al., 2014; Winn et al., 2014).

Due to the number of studies that have found academic reputation and structure of the academic program to be significant to the application process for graduate education, administrators and faculty must make the information related to these factors easily assessable to potential graduate students. This would be achieved most easily through how the graduate program markets themselves to students. This marketing would be most effective through face-to-face interactions but may not be achievable for all programs and students. For this reason, academic programs need to use electronic forms to better market themselves to potential students.

Through this marketing, academic programs would benefit from posting an outline of the courses taken each semester in their graduate program to show students what type of courses are required. Additionally, programs should share testimonials of
the experiences of those who have been part of the academic program previously. These testimonials can come from anyone who has previous experience in the program and are of extreme importance. This importance is driven by the fact that students in the current study were aware of the reputation of their future academic program more due to word of mouth than an official ranking system by an outside group. For this reason, administrators and faculty must realize that potential students are influenced by what they hear from those around them.

The reputation of academic programs through word of mouth brings in a third group of potential people to this collaboration, program alumni. Alumni travel far and wide from the institutions where they completed their graduate degree which creates a national recruitment tool for institutions. For this reason, administrators and faculty must be motivated to provide a great program that will result in their alumni sharing their experiences with potential students they come in contact with. Additionally administrators and faculty need to stay in contact with alumni to keep them informed about what is happening currently in their academic program so they can share this with potential graduate students.

An additional factor that influenced the application process for graduate education was the comfort and familiarity participants had with the institution. This factor was only shared by the students who had applied for graduate education at the same institution as where they completed their undergraduate degree. This factor was so significant that it resulted in almost all of the individuals of the group only applying to that one institution.

When a student is comfortable and familiar with their undergraduate institution, they may only consider that institution for their graduate education. For the majority of
the participants who fell into this group, the comfort and familiarity came from knowing faculty in the department. As a result, this comfort and familiarity shows that faculty are the best recruiters for their graduate programs. They must understand that the comfort/familiarity that is developed in undergraduate education is the cheapest and most efficient use of resources to get people to graduate education.

The final factor that influenced the application process was whether or not the institution had an online or face-to-face academic program. In the current study, twelve of the thirteen participants were enrolled in a face-to-face program. For all of those twelve, they did not consider any online programs in the application process. The driving force behind this decision was their desire for personal connections. For the one participant who was enrolled in an online program, she only considered online programs because she had accepted a full-time position that she was unwilling to leave. However, she wanted to continue her education and was able to do so as a result of online education.

Nearly all of the participants were influenced to apply at institutions where graduate education programs were provided face-to-face. This supports Harris & Martin (2012) who found students were motivated to not take online courses due to desiring face-to-face interactions. While the students in this study desired personal connections more, they were also influenced to not apply to programs that were online due to having had negative experiences with previous online courses and believing them to be not as effective for learning. This contradicts numerous previous studies where it was found that online education was growing as a result of students being familiar and comfortable with the technology that operates them (Allen & Seaman, 2010a; Bejerano, 2008;
While online education has grown, it has not reached all students equally. Many students are still demanding that their education be completed face-to-face and considered this as a significant factor in the schools they applied to for graduate education. Similar to financial assistance, this factor was an all or nothing factor that resulted in students only applying to institutions that offered in person programs. As institutions rely more and more on technology, administrators must be aware that many students still want education that will build personal connections. If institutions must move programs or courses to an online format, they need to find a way to provide these key personal connections in the online environment. In order for students to consider online graduate programs, they also must have positive experiences with online courses during undergraduate education and feel that they will be active participants in their educational journey with supportive faculty. Institutions must constantly evaluate the benefits that students gain from online education in order to ensure they will consider it as an option for graduate study.

**Enrolling in Graduate Education**

Following the application process for graduate education, students must decide which institution they will enroll at from the institutions they have been accepted to. In the current study, participants were influenced to enroll for graduate education as a result of the following factors: needing the graduate degree for a desired career, wanting to gain qualifications that would result in more opportunities, institution being able to meet financial concerns, and personal touch/comfort from the institution towards students.
When it comes to the first three factors that were identified as important to the enrollment stage, these factors were also considered important in the initial decision to advance to graduate education and the application stage of graduate education. Due to the majority of factors being considered at multiple stages and at the same level of significance, the current study contradicts some of the existing literature. Joseph et al. (2014) found that students may behave differently between the application and enrollment stages. They identified that students considered different factors at the application process then what they considered as most important to the final decision of enrollment (Joseph et al., 2014). For some factors, they were considered at each stage but carried different significance while others were only considered at one stage rather than multiple (Joseph et al., 2014).

With these three factors, it makes sense that they would transition with the students through each stage of the graduate education process. When it comes to students who need graduate education for a desired career or to gain qualifications that would result in more opportunities, they are driven to pursue, apply for, and enroll in graduate education in order to advance themselves. For students who have financial concerns, these are also going to be present at each stage of the graduate education process. If they can only take part in graduate education as a result of receiving a financial package, they will consider this as an important factor when they make the initial decision for graduate education, apply for, and enroll in graduate education. For the majority of students, the financial concern will not just disappear randomly throughout the different stages of the process.
For students in the current study, they recognized the importance of earning a graduate degree and the benefits they would receive from doing so. Their responses support the findings of previous literature that identified the strengths of graduate education. Carnevale (2009) found that hiring officials prefer to hire “proven learners” who have a record of learning through formal education. From this preference, education requirements are constantly rising when it comes to employment (Carneval, 2009). For some students in the current study, they recognized the demand from future employers for their education to be at the graduate degree level.

Additionally, the current study aligns with the findings of (Stewart, 2010) who found that through graduate education individuals gain the following skills: understand, use, and develop methods of inquiry and research, synthesize complex information, exercise critical and analytical judgment, and address the complex and compelling issues of the current time. For some students in the current study, they recognized that by gaining additional qualifications they would be better prepared to take on, and be selected for, future opportunities. As a result of these two factors, they were going to transition through each stage of the graduate school process to the best of their ability and within the means they desired and/or could accommodate. For example, a few students were not able to enroll in a particular institution they desired because they were not accepted to that institution. Rather than give up, they enrolled at a different institution that did accept them.

When it comes to graduate education enrollment, higher education administrators must give attention to the students who desire graduate education no matter where it will take place. While institutions desire the best candidates and want those students who have
the institution high on their list, a significant number of students may come from those who do not fall into these categories. It is important that those involved in recruiting graduate students consider all students who have applied because their institution may be the only one where the student has the ability to enroll. While everyone may desire a perfect match between the best student and top school, this is not realistic 100% of the time.

As a result, institutions may lose potential students from being too selective or sensitive of students who may consider other institutions in higher regard. For this reason, institutions must encourage the enrollment of all students who meet their qualifications and would be successful at their institution. This is supported by students in the current study. For many of the participants, they enrolled at an institution that was not their top choice but still spoke very highly of their experience and were appreciative of how things had worked out.

A major factor that influenced students to enroll at a particular institution over others was the personal touch and comfort they felt from the institution they ultimately selected between the application and enrollment stage. From the current study, these moments were found to exist when students came to campus for their interview, met with faculty, developed a ‘gut feeling’, or by receiving a personal phone call or email letting them know they had been accepted. Of these behaviors, meeting with faculty and receiving a personal contact was the most significant in the decision to select an institution for enrollment. These factors align with Luchini-Colbry (2017) who identified that students are able to determine the best fit for graduate education through campus visits and talking with current faculty/students in the academic program.
When it comes to campus visits and talking with current individuals in the program, this can be both a positive and negative for institutions. These serve as a positive when they cause a student to enroll at their institution but a negative when they cause a student to enroll elsewhere. Regardless, institutions must recognize the importance of making students feel connected to the institution and valued as a potential student. In the current study, many participants shared that meeting with faculty who were genuine and receiving contact from someone who had obviously taken the time to personalize the contact to them individually was of significant importance. Students do not want to just meet with individuals in the program or just receive a generated contact that goes to all potential students. Students want to feel special and unique.

As a result of how students want to feel, institutions need to be genuine in how they market themselves to potential students. Students can distinguish between real and fake. Students are not looking for institutions that promise them the most benefits or show-off their campus, they are looking for the institution that makes them feel the best. For this reason, time must be given for interviews, meetings between potential students and current students in the program, and contacting students who have been newly accepted into the program by staff in the department.

In the busy world of higher education, time may be a difficult thing to give to these areas but the pay off would be significant. Graduate programs must implement these personal touches in order to increase the odds of a student enrolling in their program. Each academic program could delegate the outreach to accepted students to the faculty of the program. This delegation should also not be random, rather, students should
be delegated to the individuals they have already been in contact with or who they have connected with during their transition between application and enrollment.

Within the consideration of enrollment, time was found to play a role in when students enrolled for graduate education. For the current study, students considered time in two different contexts. The first was those students who enrolled for graduate education within one year of earning their undergraduate degree. These students were influenced by their concern that it would be hard to come back to school after too much time had passed or by their desire to continue taking classes. The second was those students who enrolled for graduate education after a gap of at least one year since earning their undergraduate degree. These students were influenced by their desire to pursue other opportunities/gain real world experience.

As shown by the current study, time is a unique piece of the decision making process for enrollment in graduate education. Regardless of which group they fall into, students want to be in control of their experiences. These experiences may be going straight to graduate school in order to not be tempted by new experiences that will distract them or may be to delay graduate school in order to take advantage of opportunities they have earned just from completing their undergraduate degree. For this reason, time may be a difficult piece to control for graduate school administrators.

Once a student has made up their mind for when they will enroll for graduate education it may be difficult for administrators to convince students to do otherwise. However, they have the ability to still support potential students however they need to find the right time to do so. It would benefit administrators to recruit undergraduate students for graduate education prior to their senior year. By the time an undergraduate
student reaches senior year, they may have decided to not continue directly to graduate education. For this reason, recruiting sooner would result in getting more students to consider graduate education before they have selected a different path.

For students who have already decided that they will not be enrolling in graduate education right away, administrators can provide support for them when they decide to return. If administrators believe certain students are destined for graduate school, it would be worthwhile to stay in contact and touch base yearly to see if the student is ready for graduate education. For some students, they may reach out to their former faculty when they are ready for graduate education. This would come in the form of needing an academic reference or having their employment materials reviewed to be most successful in their desired graduate academic program. When this happens, it is important that administrators/faculty do not turn them away, rather, they should embrace them and encourage them through the enrollment process.

**Consideration of Undergraduate Institution for Graduate Education**

Throughout the decision making process for graduate education, students often have the option to consider remaining at their undergraduate institution for graduate education. In the current study, the two focus groups were separated based on whether or not the students in each group had enrolled for graduate education where they had completed their undergraduate degree. While this characteristic separated the two groups, the majority of participants did consider their undergraduate institution for graduate education at some point throughout the process towards graduate enrollment.

For the students who considered remaining at their undergraduate institution, they were influenced by the reputation of their future graduate academic program and their
comfort with the institution, program, and faculty. Of the participants who did apply to their undergraduate institution, a few were not accepted and had to stop considering their undergraduate institution between the application and enrollment stage. For a few other participants who considered their undergraduate institution, they stopped considering their undergraduate institution for enrollment when they found that other institutions would be able to better offer them the particular experiences they were looking for. This group of students was influenced by the same factor that influenced the students who never considered their undergraduate institution for graduate education. The particular experiences they desired included: going somewhere different whether it be institution or region, structure of classes, and that their undergraduate institution did not offer the graduate degree they were seeking.

Similar to time, the decision about whether or not students consider their undergraduate institution for graduate education is a complex factor that becomes increasingly complex because the reasons for whether or not an individual student considers their undergraduate institution for graduate education can change at each stage of the process. For some, students will consider their undergraduate institution from start to finish if they are able. For others, they will consider their undergraduate institution until their school rejects them or they find other institutions that are a better fit. For the remaining students, they never considered their undergraduate institution for graduate education due to desiring a particular experience that requires them to go elsewhere. For this reason, graduate education administrators will have a more difficult time controlling whether or not their undergraduate students will consider their current institution for
graduate education. For example, if a student desires relocating to a different region, it is unlikely that the student will remain at the undergraduate institution.

One thing administrators can control is recruiting graduate students from their undergraduate student population. Students have been found to be significantly influenced by the reputation of the graduate programs at their undergraduate institution and the familiarity they have with the institution, program, and faculty. For this reason, graduate recruitment should start at the institution's undergraduate level. Graduate administrators must make sure they are partnering with the undergraduate departments that feed into their graduate programs. For example, faculty and current students associated with graduate programs should attend undergraduate classes and events to discuss their graduate program. This would expose the graduate program to undergraduate students and would lay the foundation for students wanting to stay at the institution for graduate education.

Administrators can also control what experiences they are offering their graduate students as a way to get more students to remain at the institution. This can be done through evaluating their graduate programs in two different ways. First, administrators can evaluate if their graduate programs are offering the experiences that students desire. In the current study, the majority of participants desired a graduate program that was face-to-face. In the future, this trend may change and administrators must make sure they are keeping up with the changes in what students desire. In higher education, changes are often slow moving and slow to be implemented. For this reason, graduate programs would benefit by constantly evaluating the experiences of their students and making the appropriate changes as soon as they can.
The second evaluation should look at how graduate programs can offer "different" experiences for their graduate students. For a student who did not consider their undergraduate institution for graduate education, they were most influenced to not do so due to looking for a different experience than the one they received as an undergraduate. For this reason, administrators should identify ways they can challenge their graduate students in order to provide them different experiences from what they received as undergraduate students. This would be important for all graduate students but especially those who may be willing to stay at the undergraduate institution for graduate education.

Administrators must determine how they can separate the graduate experience from the undergraduate one since students are expressing that they do not want the same thing a second time around. If administrators fail to distinguish between the two levels, students are motivated to go elsewhere and are unwilling to even consider their undergraduate institution at any stage of the process. Undergraduate students are an easy group to recruit and would be the most efficient use of resources. In a time when funds are limited, administrators need to make necessary changes to keep as many students as possible. These changes could involve providing graduate students with an office, additional responsibilities from undergraduate student workers, money for research, and professional development opportunities.

**Connection to Theoretical Framework**

The current study was guided by Schlossberg's et al. (1995) Transition Theory. This theory was selected as a result of students transitioning from pursuit to application and finally enrollment during the decision making process for graduate education. The
theory first identifies what a transition is and is defined as any event that results in change for an individual (Schlossberg et al., 1995). This change can be anticipated, unanticipated, or a nonevent and occurs within relationships, routines, assumptions, and/or roles for the individual (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

In the current study, participants had varied experiences when it came to graduate education being anticipated, unanticipated, or a nonevent. For some participants, they anticipated graduate education enrollment based on their undergraduate experiences and for others, they did not anticipate graduate education enrollment until another opportunity was not what they expected or did not work out. Additionally, some participants anticipated graduate education but had unanticipated events that took place throughout their decision making process. For example, some participants were not accepted for graduate education where they completed their undergraduate degree and had to find alternatives.

The Transition Theory also identifies four S's which influence an individual's ability to handle the transition they are experiencing. The four S’s are situation, self, support, and strategies (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Situation can include such factors as: what triggered it, is the timing good/bad, does the individual have control, does the individual need to go through a role change, what is the duration, has there been previous experience, is concurrent stress taking place, and where does responsibility fall for the transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). In the current study, students expressed that their situation for graduate education was most influenced by what triggered their transition and the timing of the transition.
Students were most influenced towards graduate education as a result of needing a graduate degree for their desired career or wanting to develop additional skills that would lead to more opportunities. Their situations were also influenced by the timing of the transition. Students were either influenced to transition straight from undergraduate to graduate education or they were influenced to take a gap of at least one year between the two. Due to having control over when they pursued graduate education, the timing of the transition was considered good timing for all participants.

The second S is self and is broken into the categories of personal/demographic characteristics and psychological resources (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Personal/demographic characteristics can include factors such as socioeconomic status, gender, stage of life, and ethnicity (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Psychological resources can include factors such as optimism, self-efficacy, commitment, values, spirituality, and resiliency (Schlossberg et al., 1995). From these characteristics and resources, participants in the current study identified stage of life and commitment as significant factors in the decision making process for graduate education.

Stage of life was most prominent when participants discussed the time they took between earning their undergraduate degree and enrolling for graduate education. Each participant had a unique path to graduate education but they were all driven based on where they were at in life and where they wanted to go. For some, they were in a stage that motivated them to go straight to graduate education and for others they were in a stage that motivated them to delay graduate education. Similar to stage of life, commitment was a factor of significance for all participants. This was shown through the fact that all participants ultimately enrolled in graduate education. While the institution of
enrollment may not have been their top choice, they were all committed to graduate education and took the necessary steps to get there.

The third S is support and is composed of types, functions, and measurement. Of these three, types and functions of support were most significant to the participants and their decision making process for graduate education. Types of support can include intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions/communities (Schlossberg et al., 1995). In the current study, the most influential type of support was faculty members. Faculty was significant whether it was shoulder tapping an undergraduate student for graduate education or was graduate faculty of the desired graduate academic program making potential students feel comfortable. Functions of support can include affect, affirmation, aid, and honest feedback (Schlossberg et al., 1995). In the current study, participants were overwhelmingly influenced towards graduate education when they received the support of aid from institutions. The most common form of aid they desired or required came in the form of a paid graduate assistantship and tuition waiver.

The final S is strategies and looks at how an individual copes with the transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Through the process of coping, individuals will utilize strategies that modify the situation, control the meaning of the program, or aid in managing the stress in the aftermath (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Of these strategies, participants were found to rely on modifying their situation as a way to cope most often. Participants relied on this strategy though the decision making process for graduate education as a result of needing some form of change. All participants wanted to modify their situation and used the stages of graduate education as a way to do so. This was
observed through all participants utilizing graduate education as a way to change careers, gain qualification for future employment, or develop skills that would lead to future opportunities.

The current study was guided by the Transition Theory and the findings at the conclusion of the study found that the experiences of individuals when they go through the decision making process for graduate education align well with Transition Theory. Overall, graduate education is a significant transition to experience and includes mini transitions to go from pursuit of graduate education to enrollment in graduate education. Graduate education administrators and faculty should familiarize themselves with Transition Theory in order to best assist students through each transition of the decision making process regarding graduate education. From the current study, factors of greatest influence when it comes to transitioning were identified and would be the foundation for implementing the Transition Theory into practice. For example, students were found to be significantly influenced for graduate education when they received aid from institutions that came in the form of finances. As a result, administrators and faculty can use these factors to ensure that they are meeting the needs of potential students as they transition to graduate education.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The current study focused on the decision making process for graduate education. Two focus groups were conducted and participants were asked to speak about their transition to graduate education. The focus groups were separated based on if the participants in the group enrolled for graduate education at the same institution as where they completed their undergraduate degree. Between the two groups, thirteen participants
were involved with five enrolling for graduate education where they completed their undergraduate degree and eight enrolling for graduate education at a different institution from where they completed their undergraduate degree. During the focus groups, participants discussed pursuing graduate education, applying to graduate education, and enrolling for graduate education. The following are recommendations for future research that would complement the findings of the current study:

- Conduct four focus groups instead of two. In the current study, the two focus groups were separated by whether or not participants enrolled for graduate education where they completed their undergraduate degree. Within these groups, an additional separation would be the time between earning an undergraduate degree and enrolling for graduate education. This would allow the factor of when to pursue graduate education to be more of a discussion point between participants and would bring more knowledge of why some individuals transition straight from their undergraduate degree to their graduate degree while others transition to other opportunities before enrolling in graduate education. By expanding to four focus groups, this would also result in a larger participant perspective.

- The current study was limited when it came to the diversity of participants. In the focus group that was composed of students who enrolled for graduate education where they completed their undergraduate degree, all participants were female. Additionally, between the two focus groups, only one participant was an online graduate student and only one was an international student. In future research, a
more diverse group of participants may bring different perspectives of the
decision making process for graduate education.

- Conduct a mixed-methods study in order to increase participation of online
  students. In addition to focus groups, utilize online data collection method that
does not require participants to be face-to-face or at a scheduled time.

- Research was conducted at a public, mid-sized institution located in the Midwest.
  If the study were to be replicated at institutions of different type, size, and
  geographic location, the results found for the decision making process for
  graduate education could differ. By completing the study at institutions that are
  varied, the decision making process for graduate education may be found to be
  influenced by the perspectives that exist at the different types, sizes, and
  geographic locations of these institutions.

**Conclusion**

This study looked at how graduate students go through the decision making
process for graduate education by pursuing, applying for, and enrolling in graduate
education. Specifically, the study identified what factors students consider most
important to the ultimate decisions they make at each stage of the process. Through two
focus groups that were separated based on whether or not the participants enrolled for
graduate education where they completed their undergraduate degree, thirteen
perspectives were presented by participants of varying backgrounds and experiences.

While each participant had a unique perspective of, and path towards, graduate education,
several common factors were of significant influence to the majority of participants. The
factors of most influence to pursuing graduate education were found to be the following:
being uncertain about their future/wanting to make a career change, the need to possess a
graduate degree for professional development, and the influence of a key person in their
lives. The factors of most influence to applying for graduate education were found to be
the following: ability of the institution to meet the student’s wants/needs, future
experiences students would gain, academic program reputation, comfort/familiarity with
the institution, and being an face-to-face program. The factors of most influence to
enrolling in graduate education were found to be the following: needing the graduate
degree for a desired career, wanting to gain qualifications that would result in more
opportunities, the institution being able to meet financial concerns, and the personal
touch/comfort they felt from the institution.

While the decision making process for graduate education can seem complex to
potential students, higher education administrators, and graduate education faculty,
students have been found to consider only a few key factors at each stage of the process.
When looking at the process as a whole rather than the individual stages, the number of
significant factors of influence becomes even smaller. In this study, these factors of
influence towards graduate education were narrowed down to needing the graduate
degree for future employment, the influence of a key person in their lives, academic
program reputation, the institution being able to meet financial concerns, and the comfort
students felt with and/or from the institution. Even though this list may seem small,
students understand that they may not be able to have it all and thus have to prioritize
what is most important in their decision making process. The factor of most importance
to each focus group was varied with focus group one (same institution for graduate and
undergraduate education) being most influenced by the academic program reputation and
focus group two (different institution for graduate and undergraduate education) being most influenced by the ability of the institution to meet their financial concerns.

This study aligns with previous research that has found the same factors to be of influence to the decision making process for graduate education. Additionally, the study adds new knowledge to this topic due to being more current and through utilizing focus groups as the qualitative methodology. Due to the differences between the two focus groups and the perspectives of each participant, higher education administrators and graduate faculty can use this study as a guide for practices to implement at their institutions. The researcher has provided recommendations as a result of these findings for higher education administrators and graduate faculty in order to assist with meeting the factors of influence to potential graduate students. By ensuring that their institution is implementing practices to enforce the factors of influence, institutions will benefit from an increase in graduate enrollment and an efficient use of resources.
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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Introduction to study

Confidentiality and right to withdraw from study

1. Let’s start with the decision to pursue graduate education. What factors influenced your decision?

2. During undergraduate education, what experiences or individuals influenced you in making the decision to attend graduate school?

3. So now you have decided to pursue graduate education. Tell me about the decision making process you used to apply for graduate education at particular institutions and what were the factors that influenced your selections?

3A - If graduate institution is same as undergraduate - Did you consider other institutions? Why or why not?

3B - If graduate institution is different from undergraduate - Did you consider your undergraduate institution? Why or why not?

4. In your consideration of programs, did you look at online as well as in person programs? Why or why not?

5. After you had applied at the institutions you were interested in, how did you make the decision to enroll for graduate education here at [institution] and what factors influenced your decision?

6. You made the decision to come to graduate school within one year of earning an undergraduate degree. What were your reasons for doing so? (or)
You have been away from higher education for over a year before coming back to enroll in your graduate program. What were your reasons for doing so?
Appendix B
Demographic Card

1. Where did you complete your undergraduate degree?

2. When did you complete your undergraduate degree (semester/year)?

3. When did you begin your graduate degree (semester/year)?

4. Indicate your gender:

5. Indicate your race/ethnicity:

6. Are you a first-generation student (student whose parents' highest education level is a high school diploma or less)?
   a. Yes
   b. No

7. Which type of graduate program are you enrolled in?
   a. On-line
   b. Face-to-face
   c. Combination of on-line and face-to-face

8. Which type of graduate student are you?
   a. Full-time
   b. Part-time

9. Specify your parents' highest education level.

10. Specify your age.

11. Specify your undergraduate GPA.

12. Specify your undergraduate major.
13. Please indicate the amount of undergraduate student debt you have:

___ None ___ Less than $5,000 ___ $5,000-$15,000 ___ More than $15,000
Appendix C

Informed Consent

You have been invited to participate in a research study conducted by Kiley Sturm, a graduate student in the College Student Affairs program at Eastern Illinois University. You are being asked to participate because you have been identified as a graduate student who meets the requirements to take part in one of two focus groups. The purpose of the study is to examine the graduate education decision making process and the decision to enroll in a specific institution for your graduate education. Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without penalty. Any responses you share will not specifically be associated with you or your personal information. The focus group interview should take approximately an hour and a half and will be recorded with two audio devices. Following the focus group, transcribing will take place. The data from this study will be kept on two flash drives for three years following the completion of the study. At that point, the flash drives will be destroyed. I appreciate your participation in this study and thank you for your cooperation. If you have any questions about the study, you may contact my thesis advisor Dr. Jon Coleman by email at jkcoleman@eiu.edu

Are you willing to participate and be interviewed within a focus group?

YES    NO

Print Name

Student Signature
Appendix D

Email Communication

[Institution] Graduate Student,

You have been invited to participate in a focus group regarding the factors that influence the decision making process for graduate education. You have been selected due to your status as a graduate student at [Institution]. The focus group will be conducted by myself, Kiley Sturm. I am a current graduate student in the College Student Affairs program at EIU and am conducting this study in order to complete my master’s thesis.

The purpose of the study is to examine the factors students consider during the decision making process for graduate education. Participation in the study would require that you take part in a focus group that will take approximately an hour to an hour and a half. Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time without penalty. Your involvement in this research will be kept confidential by the researcher with the exception of others in the focus group knowing you participated as well. Any personal information you provide will not be connected to you specifically due to results being analyzed from the group as a whole instead of by each individual participant.

I would greatly appreciate your participation in my study. My hope is to gain an understanding of the factors students consider in the decision making process for graduate education to better serve students who pursue graduate education. If you have any questions about this research, you may contact my faculty sponsor, Dr. Jon Coleman at 217-581-7240, or at jcoleman@eiu.edu.

Please respond to my email (kjsturm@eiu.edu) if you are interested in participating in the study. Once I have enough participants for the focus group, I will be
in contact in order to schedule a time for the focus group to take place with all participants. My hope is to conduct the focus group around the end of September/early October. I look forward to hearing back from you! Thank you for your time and consideration!