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12-12-2007

# Student connection: how graduate assistants of Rowan University connect to the campus community

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STUDENT CONNECTION: HOW GRADUATE ASSISTANTS OF ROWAN

UNIVERSITY CONNECT TO THE CAMPUS COMMUNITY

by
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A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts in Higher Education Administration
of
The Graduate School
at
Rowan University
September 25, 2007

Approved by_____
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Date Approved___12/12/07___

# ABSTRACT

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2006/07
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The purpose of this study was to investigate how graduate assistants at Rowan

University, Glassboro campus connect to the campus community using socialization

theory. Data collection consisted of interviews of 10 randomly selected first and

second year graduate students during the 2006-07 academic school year. The

interviews were conducted at Rowan University during the spring 2007 semester. On

average the interviews took about 25 minutes to conduct. Participants were

interviewed to see how the graduate assistants felt about graduate school and their

programs of study. Interviews were transcribed into a word document and then

analyzed for common themes.

The study provides insight into how graduate assistants connect to a campus

community. Participants indicated positive relationships when it came towards peers

in the classroom environment, but a definite lack of socialization outside of the

classroom. Faculty were found to be a strong support system, but the availability

outside of the classroom was lacking.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the following individuals for their help in the research:

My Lord and Savior- for allowing me to take this journey through graduate school and to finally get this thesis done.   Also, for being my strength in my time of need.

Rowan University Graduate Assistants- the research could not have been possible without their time and experience as graduate students.

Dr. Burton Sisco- having the time, energy, talks of getting me over my anxieties and having an open door.

Mr. Mills-just listening to me when I needed the extra ear and for being my mentor.

My parents-for always encouraging me to do my best and being a great support system.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

Graduate students seek higher learning for many reasons such as to enhance

economic value, expand career opportunities, and to increase personal understanding

of a discipline or a specialty area. Attending institutions of higher education affords

graduate students the opportunity to expand personal horizons as they gain

knowledge, skills and dispositions in a discipline of study. Higher education

institutions attract students from different backgrounds and experiences. Colleges

and universities make an investment in students to connect with the institution, learn a

discipline or knowledge-base and ultimately graduate. The challenge becomes one of

connecting with students in all levels so that a positive outcome emerges.

### Statement of the Problem

Graduate students came from varied backgrounds, experiences, and values,

and are usually more mature than traditional undergraduate students. These factors

contribute to how well graduate students acclimate to a campus environment. In

order to examine this connection, certain aspects should be looked at such as where

the student comes from, personal life experiences, and motivation for learning.

Personal qualities help to shape how a student feels about a college or university and

the degree to which a connection is formed.

Important factors that contribute to student connection at the graduate level

have received little attention in the literature. A first year graduate student who is

new to a campus may feel differently than one who completed undergraduate study at the institution. In addition, the depth of connections formed between a graduate student and the faculty contributes to feelings of acceptance in the campus community. Areas such as these need to be investigated because the lack of connection could be detrimental to a graduate student succeeding at a college or university.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the connection that graduate assistants felt at the graduate level. The study sought to learn how selected graduate assistants felt about the degree to which the university met their needs as a student. In addition, the study examined ways of improving the connection among and between graduate students and the campus community.

## Significance of the Study

This study examined graduate students' attitudes about the campus community and associated impact on being a first and second year graduate student. The study further addressed how students perceived the administration/faculty effectiveness on issues of student connection. Research has been done at the undergraduate level, but relatively little focused at the graduate level. Findings of this study may provide insight for the campus community as a whole to participate in an open dialogue on issues of student engagement at the graduate level.

## Assumptions and Limitations

The scope of the study is limited to graduate assistants at Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey during the spring 2007 semester. Interviews were

administered to 10 randomly selected graduate assistants from various disciplines. A limitation may be researcher bias that could have inadvertently influenced the findings in the study. The researcher was a graduate assistant and a graduate student at the institution under investigation. In addition, another limitation of the study that may affect the results of the study is the lack of time to conduct the interviews over an extended period of time. The study was conducted during the spring semester only, and a longer length of time would allow for further understanding of the socialization process graduate assistants report over time. Lack of a representative sample of the different majors in the study was another limitation.

## Operational Definitions

1. Academic: Refers to classroom settings and on campus areas where graduate students engage in pursuit of knowledge and education.

2. Attitude: Exploration of the connection graduate students at Rowan University have toward the campus community, including feelings of acceptance and how socialized the students feel toward the campus.

3. Campus Community: The administration, faculty, and staff that facilitate relationships with graduate students on the Rowan University campus.

4. Connection: The connection that graduate students feel to the campus including: (a) how they feel that faculty are creating bonds that include mentorship; (b) relationships that they are developing with peers; and (c) awareness of all of the graduate student resources available on campus.

5. Engagement: The level of connection that graduate students feel to the Rowan University campus community and to other graduate students.

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6. Graduate Assistants: Refers to graduate students attending Rowan University either full-time or part-time during the 2007 spring semester. The assistants receive compensation and a stipend in exchange for working in their assigned campus department.

7. Graduate Students: Refers to first and second year graduate assistants at Rowan University attending full-time and part-time during the 2006-2007 academic year.

8. Non Academic/Social: Where graduate students engage in activities and experiences that enhance personal connections as a graduate student beyond the classroom.

9. Resources: Additional resources available to enhance the graduate students' educational experience at Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey.

## Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the attitudes of selected graduate assistants who attend Rowan University in relation to the connection they feel to the campus community?

2. To what extent do the students feel that the institution is meeting their needs as graduate students?

3. What factors contributed to the connection between the campus and graduate assistants at Rowan University?

4. What are some suggestions for enhancing the connection of graduate students at Rowan University?

## Overview of the Study

Chapter two provides a literature review pertaining to the issues and concerns that face graduate students today. The literature review includes key issues that affect graduate students in terms of support, mentoring and connections among other graduate students. In addition, the chapter describes socialization theory and applications to the graduate student experience.

Chapter three describes the methods employed in the study. The following details are included in the description: the context of the study, the population and sample selection, the data collection instruments, the data collection procedure, and how the data were analyzed.

Chapter four presents the findings of the study. The chapter addresses the research questions posed in the introduction of the study.

Chapter five summarizes and discusses the major findings of the study, with conclusions and recommendations for further practice and research.

# CHAPTER TWO

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### World of Graduate Education

Graduate education is a constellation of academic disciplines that has flourished in recent years. Attaining education at the graduate level constitutes receiving education beyond the baccalaureate level. Students pursuing education at this level are engaging in the study of an academic discipline or specialization. In the field of graduate education there are increasing changes in trends and demographics. Students at the graduate level attend graduate school for a variety of reasons. According to Ebersole (2004), "…the rising cost of education, those pursing graduate degrees will increasingly study part time while remaining employed. This is due to the fact that nearly 20 percent of all graduate and first-professional students get some tuition support from their employers… (p. 15)." It is evident that money is a factor that contributes to the enrollment pattern of those attending graduate school. Not all employers are willing to pay for employees to go to school and not all potential students have discretionary income to spend on further education. Moreover, some of these students still have debt from their undergraduate education which could be a barrier to the pursuit of a graduate degree.

Research indicates that the proportionate number of women attending graduate schools is increasing. The Council of Graduate Schools (2006) conducted research on graduate enrollments from 1986-2005 and found on average, women have

increased 2% every year. Comparably, men on average have increased by only 1% suggesting that women are the leading contenders for enrollment. This presents a challenge for colleges and universities depending on how the situation is viewed. On the one hand, administrators may seek alternative methods to increase enrollments among the male population. On the other hand, the institution may choose to create programs geared towards potential female students.

Another national trend in graduate education is the majority of the enrollments are 30 years of age and older (Ebersole, 2004). As a result, many institutions have broadened their mission from servicing traditional students to also servicing non-traditional adult students. Rowan University, for example, has been a traditional campus, but has recently added the College of Professional and Continuing Education. This school is designed with the working adult in mind by offering online and weekend class options.

Due to the lack of money to attend graduate school full-time, many students can only attend part-time. In order to serve part-time students, many institutions are offering online courses and accelerated degree programs. According to the Sloan Study (as cited in Ebersole, 2004), it is estimated that 90% of public and 55% of private institutions are offering online courses.

As a non-profit institution, the Lesley University National Initiative (2007) has responded to the call of offering graduate courses in a more accessible format. They are the nations leading graduate institution for classroom educators operating at 250 sites in 23 states. Core faculties are deployed from the main campus in Cambridge, Massachusetts to travel around the United States offering weekend

intensive courses at different sites. In addition, the school employs "national faculty" located in the various parts of the country to teach. Lesley University has found ways of increasing enrollment and meeting the needs of future graduate students. The school has created an environment where they are increasing the accessibility for education for the working adult population that could normally not attend classes geared toward traditional students.

Graduate Student Issues and Concerns

Graduate students face many issues and concerns during entry into graduate school. One of these concerns is different backgrounds which contribute to students not feeling connected with the campus. Merriam Webster Online (2006) defined acculturation as "cultural modification of an individual, group, or people by adapting to or borrowing traits from another culture; a merging of cultures as a result of prolonged contact." Students bring their own cultural experiences to school and conflict may arise in how the school handles the different situations because of lack of knowledge about a student's cultural background.

A second issue is the lack of money that is available to students to help them participate in graduate study full-time. Students who would like to participate in graduate school full-time have taken jobs to supply the financial support in order to receive a degree. This burden alone deters students from forming bonds to the campus because of the worry about supporting themselves. Lesley University President Margret McKenna stated, "Students are becoming more demanding consumers. They want good content and good delivery, and their expectations have risen in graduate education" (as cited in Goral, 2004, p. 55). A graduate student that

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pays for his/her education is going to demand the most for the money. As demographics have indicated, students enrolling in graduate school are increasingly older averaging 30 years of age. Age is a contributing factor that reflects a person's development and at this stage, students are considered adults with multiple responsibilities. One of those responsibilities is making sure that a professor is fulfilling his/her role as an educator and exposing the student to new ideas and information.

Research on first year graduate students reveals differences from second year students. Fuehrer and Lawson (2001) conducted a study to see if social support helped to buffer stress that graduate students experience. Stress is a major factor that graduate students must deal, including school, work and family obligations. Twenty first year graduate students from a midwestern university majoring in zoology, history, and English were interviewed. The students who participated in the study consisted of ten males, ten females, with one of the males married. The students were interviewed during the beginning of the second semester about the sources of stress in their lives. After the interviews, the students completed a questionnaire of 29 Likert scale type items on a five point scale focusing on stress. At the end of the survey, the subjects were asked to fill out the *Perceived Social Network Inventory* identifying individuals who had been instrumental in helping the participants deal with personal stress. The data of the study were examined to see if they were any relationships between specific stressors and social support. A total of 16 stressors were identified, but only 12 held any significance. Faculty support (21%) and support from the fellow students (59%) accounted for the strongest sources of support. The support received

from the faculty was advice and information. Support received from friends was emotional, affirmational, advice, and information.

Fuehrer and Lawson (2001) noted that the graduate students who were classified as being highly stressed were those reported to be highly satisfied with the support received. The researchers found that graduate students were able to handle the demands of graduate school because they had strong support. Support is an essential factor that allows graduate students to cope with graduate school and associated challenges. Data from the participants indicated that faculty members played a significant role in helping the students cope and prosper.

Pike and Kuh (2005) studied first and second generation undergraduate students to see how their experiences impacted learning and intellectual development. In order to analyze the data, the researchers selected a random sample of 3,000 students who completed the *College Student Experience Questionnaire*. Pike and Kuh (2005) focused on first year students and after the elimination process, ended with a sample of 1,127 students.

The researchers found that females, students of color, those who were planning to attend graduate school, and those living on campus were more engaged to the campus environment. Graduate students living on campus were in closer proximity to all of the campus resources. Newcomb (as cited in Pike & Kuh, 2005) noted, "...living on campus puts students in close physical proximity so they cannot avoid being confronted on almost daily basis by others who look, talk and hold values different from their own" (p. 289). Living on campus contributes to a student feeling

connected with the campus and other students as well. This not only applies to undergraduate students, but to graduate students as well.

Mentoring and advising relationships are another way of facilitating connections for graduate students to the campus environment. Students new to a campus often find having a mentor/advisor helpful in adjusting to the campus. Peyton, Morton, and Dougherty (2001), described an advisor as:

> ... an individual who tracks a student's progress throughout a program to advise him or her concerning the steps that should be taken to complete the necessary requirements for graduation. A mentor is a guide who role models the "how two's" of achieving academic excellence, goal clarification, and career planning in addition to providing an advisory role. (p. 348)

Clearly, a mentoring relationship is the ultimate benefit for a graduate student. A mentor provides support for the student to talk about what is going in his/her life and any personal challenges being faced. A student not receiving support and guidance from a mentor could be prevented from succeeding in school.

Clark (2005) conducted a study to explore and expand the concept of strategies as a way of gaining a deeper understanding in how students make the transition in college. She conducted the study at a public four-year commuter institution located in the eastern part of the United States. Her study consisted of interviewing eight second-semester freshman students who were in college for the first time. Results of the interviews indicated that students faced challenges inside and outside of the classroom. Clark performed a deeper analysis about the strategies that the student's devised in order to overcome the challenges and four themes

emerged. She found: overcoming an obstacle, seizing an opportunity, adapting to a change, and pursuing a goal.

Overcoming an obstacle is when students saw obstacles blocking their path to success; in response they devised strategies to help them in those areas. Opportunities were present for the students to gain experience and they had to devise ways to take part in the experiences. For example, one of the students engaged in so many activities during the first semester, that when the second semester came around the student was trying to juggle all personal commitments. This student saw many opportunities during the first semester to participate in activities that the choices ended up causing much stress during the second semester. In adapting to change, students perceived these as new and sometimes inevitable experiences. One student noted the difference between high school and making the adjustment to college. This is applicable in relation to graduate students because of the transition they experience upon entering graduate school. Once a student graduates from a baccalaureate institution, coming to graduate school is a significantly different experience that requires adjustment. The last theme is pursuing a goal, where students sometimes had predetermined levels of success for themselves. One student had strategized the goal of making certain grades and writing down this goal. The student was then able to see how the class operated and worked with the professor in earning the desired grade.

<center>Adult Learning Theory: Transitions</center>

Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) defined transition theory as "…any event or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines,

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assumptions and roles," (p.27). Here Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman applied the theory to counseling adults and as graduate students are increasingly are non-traditional students. They have to make adjustments of going back to school and this is a transition. Along with going back to school, the student experiences other transitions in their lives, if they have families, then this will be a transition for them or if they are employed, attending graduate school may effect employment. Transition is a process that adults go through as how they experience the transition. Adults react to situations differently and different factors will determine how they affect the individual.

Schlossberg et al. (1995) outlined three types of transitions that a person can go through. Anticipated transitions refer to events that happen in a life cycle that are expected. Examples that were given are marriage, birth, starting a first job and retirement. Unanticipated transitions are nonscheduled events that are unpredictable. Examples that were given were being fired from a job, death of a loved one, and divorce. Non-event transitions are ones that are expected but did not occur, thus altering her or his life. Examples would be a marriage that never took place, promotion for a position never offered, and diseases not materializing.

In determining the transition theory, Schlossberg et al. (1995) determined four coping transitions that affect an adult's ability to cope with a transition. The first coping transition is situation, in which what made triggered the transition, is the person going to experience a change in their role, are there stressors in the situation, and what contributed to the making of the transition. For example a perspective graduate student making the decision to attend graduate school is a transition. They

have to take into account the transition experience they will have to go through and what to expect. Self is the second coping transition in which personal and demographics affects how an individual looks at life. A graduate student has to look their financial situation or stressors that will arise with the decision they have made to attended school. Support is another coping transition and this is when friends, family support the individual going through the transition. A graduate student makes the decision to attend school, this has an impact on their home life and their families. Having a strong support system around them will help to make the transition easier. Strategies are where the individuals can put into action their transitions and follow through. However the individual decides to handle the situation, they have to have a strategy that will allow them to take all factors into consideration and an effective course of action in how to handle any situation that may arise.

<center>Socialization Theory</center>

Graduate students entering graduate school for the first time go through a process of adjustment. This process can be described as socialization. Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001), described socialization in the context of graduate school as the process through which individuals gain knowledge, skills, and values necessary for successful entry into a professional career requiring an advanced level of specialized knowledge and skills. Upon entering graduate school for the first time students are bringing personal experience and knowledge acquired through previous education, and this impacts how a student is socialized into graduate school. These elements determine the connections students make to the campus and the process they will go through in order to be socialized to the campus.

Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001), identified four stages in the socialization process. The first stage is anticipatory, where an individual becomes aware of behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive expectations held for a role incumbent. A graduate student enters graduate school for the first time with preconceived ideas about what to expect from faculty, peers, and graduate school as an organization. In this stage the student possesses ideas on how to act and cope with life in graduate school. The second stage is the formal stage in which the role expectations held by the novice remain idealized. During this stage, students are taught by faculty members and interact with student peers. The faculty members instruct the students in the foundations for future practice for the students' professional career and the peers influence the students through communication about course work. Communication between the first year and second year graduate students allow for feedback from peers and lays the foundation to build relationships that leads to a connection with the campus. Informal is the third stage in which the novice learns of the informal role expectations. In this stage, students learn what acceptable behavior is and incorporates this knowledge into what is expected of them as graduate students. Thornton and Nardi (as cited in Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001) defined the last stage personal as, "individuals and social roles, personalities and social structures become fused" (p. 14). Once students are in this stage they can completely shed preconceived notions of what they thought prior to entering graduate school and embrace new ideas. From interaction with faculty and peers, students will form a new view on what they think because of the connection.

Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) conducted a study on the topic of obtaining the students' perspective on whether to persist or leave their doctoral education programs. The recruiting methods used by the researchers were informational packets and email requests from 41 of the CACREP-accredited doctoral programs in counselor education. In addition, a request for participants was listed on the national counseling graduate student listserv. A total of 33 participants from 17 of the 41 CACREP-accredited programs participated in the study. Hopkins and Goldberg conducted interviews through face-to-face, telephone, email interviews, and sometimes a combination of all three. One of the significant findings of the students interviewed is they described their experiences in the program as expected or unexpected. The students noted that their expectations were not met due to lack of faculty support and the graduate program they attended had a high rate of faculty turnover. These factors led to the students leaving the counselor education program because they did not feel the support of the faculty and this was an expectation they had upon entering into the program.

As the students continued in the counseling education program, they began to learn what would be expected of them as future professionals, and what their life would be like upon entering the field after graduation. One student noted that knowing about her faculty outside of the classroom in a social atmosphere allowed her evaluate her decision to stay in the doctoral program rather than go back to teaching children. She did not realize how much she missed teaching children, until the observance of teaching children and the increased knowledge of her faculty

member's life both of which, helped her to make the decision to leave the doctoral program.

Robinson (2005) conducted a study at The University of Wisconsin, Madison campus about entry-level doctoral students' expectations, beliefs, and goals. Robinson built his study on socialization and cognitive-ecological theory looking at the beliefs of incoming doctoral students as well as their experiences over the first year of study. The participants in Robinson's study were selected using purposeful sampling and consisted of the departments of Botany, Physics, and Chemistry.

Participants in the study were contacted four weeks prior to the beginning of classes with emails going out to solicit participation in the study. The recruitment process yielded a total of 12 participants, for a gender distribution of six males and six females. Half of the students were U.S. citizens and the other half were international students primarily from China and Mexico. Robinson conducted the initial interviews several weeks prior or within the first week of the students' matriculation into their program of study. There were 34 open ended questions that were asked about students' expectations. The second phase consisted of interviewing the participants six more times, every six to eight weeks, throughout the academic year. These interviews were conducted through email and the questions were open ended. Areas of focus for this second phase were to see how participants' were making meanings of their environments and changes that may have occurred.

A significant finding in Robinson's study was lack of knowledge on the student's part about policies and procedures to navigate through the doctoral programs. Participants had an elementary understanding about what classes to take,

in what sequence and time management. In addition, the participants were aware of the entire dissertation process, on how to pick a topic and choosing a dissertation committee. Another difference was how the international students versus the American students described their expectations of their respective programs.

International participants had barriers, such as language and cultural barriers that prohibited them from expressing personal expectations clearly. The international participants expected the advisors to play primary roles in shaping their academic lives compared to American participants. Due to the perceived language barrier, international students expected to only communicate and socialize with students from specific students groups on campus such as the Chinese Student Association. International students had a fear that because they had not mastered the English language, they were not going to be able to communicate fully with peers and faculty. Participants in their first year of the doctoral program began to experience conflict in their roles. On the one hand, they felt like students in respect to attending classes, but during the second semester the students began to relate to their faculty as peers. This caused participants to experience a duality in their roles as students and peers.

Challenges that participants faced were time management and the lack of faculty involvement. Successes that were experienced by the participants were good grades and opportunities for professional development. Participants did refine their expectations of socialization in terms of what the faculty and departments expected. Robinson further analyzed the finding through three different perspectives. The cognitive-ecological perspective revealed that students saw themselves in one fashion upon entering graduate school and they also saw their future selves. Participants were

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unclear about personal goals at the beginning, but as student progressed, refinement in views changed. Robinson used Tinto's departure theory to look how participants attempted to establish themselves in their academic and social communities. This allowed participants a level of experimentation to explore personal environments which had an affect on their level of success. The last perspective was socialization where Robinson noted the roles that the students were fulfilling. Socialization was used in order to look at the different roles students chose and how they fitted into pre-existing groups and cultures.

Glasgow (2004) conducted a dissertation on the socialization experiences of African American doctoral students compared to Caucasian doctoral students and their interactions among the faculty. Metropolitan University, a private institution, is the location of where the study was conducted in a Southern California city. Additionally, Glasgow looked at the degree of effect of socialization experiences on African Americans and the impact of these experiences of their graduate education.

Recruitment of the majority participants was conducted through referrals from other graduate students who held leadership positions at Metropolitan University. In addition, Glasgow was introduced to potential participants and recruited participants as well. Glasgow used purposive sampling and contacted the participants through email to determine if they would be willing to participate in the study. As a result, 60 participants agreed to participate in the study, yielding 15 African American females, 12 African American males, 18 Caucasian females, and 15 Caucasian males. Initially, Glasgow conducted one-on-one interviews that ranged from 45 minutes to one hour. During the individual interviews the questions consisted of asking the

participants about their expectations, graduate student experience, socialization

process and general statement of their overall evaluation. Afterwards, Glasgow set up

follow up interviews to clarify information. Glasgow organized three focus groups to

follow the interviews to check for consistency and validity. In the focus groups, the

questions addressed areas of the students' expectations, experience in the program,

and their socialization process.

Participants reported positive relationships with faculty advisors and indicated

that their environments were successful in promoting paths towards academic

success. Depending upon the size of the academic department, participants reported a

lack of cohesiveness. The smaller departments did not find a cohesiveness problem,

but the larger academic departments had less cohesiveness among the faculty and

students. Participants highlighted that they did feel lack of cohesiveness across the

institution because the institution focused its resources on undergraduates neglecting

the needs of graduate students.

Four themes that emerged as similarities among the African American and

Caucasian students were mentor-protégé race matching, early departure of mentors,

being the "only" in a class that consisted of students from other ethnic backgrounds,

and classroom dynamics. On selecting mentor-protégé relationships, participants

indicated that other factors such as social economic status and similar interests should

be taken into consideration when assigning mentors, instead of focusing on race as a

deciding factor. Participants highlighted the difficultness of finding new mentors

once their old ones left the university saying it was a time consuming process. Some

participants felt that when classroom discussions turned towards races, certain

students banded together and made other students feel isolated. In turn, the isolated students decided not to participate in classroom discussions, which in turn affected their academic interactions. Classroom dynamics was felt more competitive than collegial for the participants. The participants indicated that they did not feel the support of sharing and valuing ideas of one another, instead they felt performance anxiety and intimidation.

Three themes emerged that were different among the African American and Caucasian students. One of the first differences that Glasgow found was the Caucasian students were better prepared to navigate through their programs. Most of these students were not first generation students and they had access to available resources such as family, friends who had gone through the process. These resources enabled the students to ask questions and find the information that was needed. A second difference was how the students viewed the doctoral experience. African Americans sought to see how fast they could get through the program. Reasons that were cited were they were first generation students and they wanted to minimize debt as much as possible. Most of the Caucasian students were satisfied with their interactions with peers and faculty inside and outside of the classroom. The Caucasian students in the humanities department voiced the greatest discontentment with their program because of poor academic and social support. African American students had varied interactions with most of the students and were integrated in the smaller departments. African American students were noted to build relationships with peers and faculty outside of the academic units more so than Caucasian students.

Applying Theory to Rowan University

Kolb's theory on experiential learning can be applied to the experiences of Rowan University's graduate students. Kolb (1984) defined learning as, "...the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 41). When a student comes to Rowan University for the first time, there is the potential for a new learning experience. Students bring personal experiences to the classroom. The population of students for graduate school is primarily made up of nontraditional students who have been in the work force and have gained experience in dealing with the real world. Combined with their moral beliefs, they have adjustment issues to address when returning back to school and must find ways of integrating those experiences into their new role.

Van Maanen (as cited in Schein, 1978) defined entry into an organization for an individual as a process of breaking in and joining up, of learning the ropes, of figuring out how to get along, and how to survive. Schein (1978) lists three stages that new individuals have to go through in order to be granted full membership into an organization. In the first stage, Schein (1978) calls it entry, which includes a period of preparation and training on the part of the individual, the recruitment and selection process which occurs prior to accepting a job. A graduate student applying to Rowan University will go through a recruitment and selection process. The prospective student submits an application to the university and the graduate program reviews the candidate's initial criteria. If the applicant meets the initial criteria in the Higher Education Administration program the potential candidate is invited to

campus to speak with Dr. Burton Sisco, program advisor, to see if the candidate's goals will match with the program that Rowan is offering.

The second stage is socialization, which includes all of the early processes of "learning the ropes," how to make it in the organization, how to get along, and how to work. In this stage, graduate students became acclimated to the university campus. They are experiencing what is required as graduate students from their professors and meeting other students from different backgrounds and cultures. The students will be learning what expectations that faculty members have and what expectations they must place upon themselves in order to succeed in graduate school. Other factors that graduate students will have to take into consideration are if they have outside family obligations and how pursuing a degree could affect family life. The third stage is mutual acceptance, which includes the various processes of formally and informally granting full membership to the new employee through initiation rites, the conferring of special status, more challenging and important job assignments, and the working out of a viable psychological contract. In this stage graduate students are forming relationships with the faculty and cementing relationships with other graduate students. The graduate student is fully initiated into graduate school because of a connection to the campus. In relation to the faculty, the graduate student develops a deeper relationship and a mentorship with a faculty member. Once the graduate student has formed relationships with other graduate students, he/she has the opportunity of sharing classroom and non-classroom experiences.

## Research at Rowan University

Broyles (2005) conducted a study at Rowan University during the 2004/05 academic year. Her research focused on addressing the issues, needs, and concerns of graduate students. Broyles focused on the first year graduate student experience within the framework of a student's academic and social integration at Rowan University. Broyles used a mixed method design to obtain information pertaining to her study. She conducted interviews with the staff of the Graduate School of Rowan University to gain the student services perspective and what they were doing to meet the needs of graduate students. In the second portion of the research study, Broyles surveyed a population of 80 graduate students. The survey was posted as a link on the Graduate School homepage and surveys were administered to five graduate classes on the Rowan University campus.

Overall, Broyles found that the transition into graduate school was easy for graduate students. Some of the themes that emerged from the graduate students were the demand of time to juggle jobs, family obligations, and school work. Orientation was another factor addressed in the study. Ninety percent of the respondents said they did not know or attend the orientation that was held at the school. Some of the reasons participants did not attend is the time conflict of when the orientations sessions was presented. Participants indicated that the times were too early and they were not comprehensive in covering all of the information they needed.

Financial concerns were another major finding of Broyles study. Participants were asked to what degree they agreed with the statement, "Rowan provided information on the financial assistance options available to me." Over 50% of the

respondents stated they disagreed with the statement. Graduate students incur costs for attending school and respective financial situations sometimes are the deciding factor to whether or not a student attends full-time or part-time. The study further addressed student's level of satisfaction with their academic department and respective advisors. Seventy-three percent of the respondents indicated that their academic advisors did not make initial contact with them prior to admission into the respective programs. This was concern for students who had questions or anxieties about program requirements. Having this contact with the faculty member prior to enrolling in the program would have helped the students to make a smoother transition.

Moreover, 61.1% were not made aware of departmental changes, which included course content that affected them as a student. Participants indicated that their advisors could have prepared them better as students for what to expect in courses and given more information on changes to the program requirements. Over 48% of the respondents indicated that they had met with their advisors once or twice and 18.8% indicated that they never met with their advisor. This finding indicated a lack of amount of time, but not the quality. Over 62% of the respondents stated that they did not have a problem with the quality of their advisors, just the ability to meet more frequently.

Participants reported on their level of awareness of graduate services offered. Sixty-three percent of the participants were not aware of services offered specially for them, but if they had attended the orientation as Broyles did, they would have been made aware of services offered. This finding supported Broyles finding about the

status of orientation and when they were held at Rowan. Broyles included an aspect

of social activities in the survey asking about whether participant's lives were too

hectic to be involved in Rowan's extracurricular activities. Over 80% of the

participants agreed that they were and their time was limited. The area of interest that

participants indicated that they would like was workshops on thesis and dissertation

writing, along with networking events.

<div align="center">Summary of the Literature Review</div>

Graduate students entering school often go through an initiation process in

order to become acclimated to the institution. Research on connections that students

make on a campus has been conducted primarily at the undergraduate level. Recent

enrollment trends in graduate school show increasing numbers of women with male

enrollments rapidly declining. With the rising costs of tuition, non-profit institutions

are finding ways to tap into the online course market to increase enrollments and offer

accessibility for graduate students who are looking for career advancement offered in

a convenient way.

Some of the concerns that graduate students face include a lack of support

while in graduate school. Research suggests that first year students or second year

students, who have not developed relationships with faculty members or other

graduate students, often feel alienated or disconnected from the campus. The

socialization of graduate students into a campus community helps in students feeling

supported and contributes to students' successfully pursuing a degree.

Graduate students enter into graduate school with certain program

expectations. When graduate students make the decision to enter into graduate

<div align="center">26</div>

school, they are making a transition. During the transition experience, graduate students may not have the proper tools or knowledge about the graduate school experience. The knowledge gap is there is limited research at the graduate level looking at how graduate students form connections to a college or university campus. This study sought to explore how connected graduate students felt to a campus community. What are the expectations, goals that the students have of their programs and have they been met? The study sought suggestions about how to improve the connection of graduate students at Rowan University.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Context of the Study

The study was conducted at Rowan University, in Glassboro, New Jersey. The university is the only public four-year university located in Gloucester County. In 1923, Rowan University began as a normal school to educate elementary school teachers for the southern New Jersey classrooms and evolved into one of New Jersey's leading public institutions. The university is currently composed of six academic colleges: Liberal Arts & Sciences, Fine & Performing Arts, Engineering, Communications, Business, and Education offering 42 undergraduate majors. Graduates students can choose from 21 master's degrees programs and a doctoral program in educational leadership. The College of Professional & Continuing Education (CPCE) is a new unit added in the fall of 2006. The CPCE is available to those students who wish to access education in a different format with added flexibility. Undergraduate students, graduate students, and lifelong learners are all able to take courses. The CPCE offers undergraduate programs and three master's degree programs. As of October 2006, undergraduate enrollment for Rowan University was 8,430 and graduate enrollment was 1,148 (Institutional Research, 2007).

## Population and Sample Selection

The target population for this study consisted of all first and second year graduate students attending a public university in New Jersey. The available population consisted of 66 full-time and part-time graduate assistants, attending Rowan University in the 2006-2007 academic school year. Participant's names were drawn randomly and were assigned numbers based in the order they were drawn. The first 10 participants were contacted via email (Appendix E) and were asked to participate. The first round of emails yielded an participation rate of four willing participants. A second email was sent to the six non-respondents with time allotted for response and they were contacted via an internet medium called *Facebook*. When the potential participants failed to respond, an email was sent to the next set of participants and this was repeated until 10 graduate assistants agreed to take part in the study. An interview with 10 randomly selected graduate assistants was conducted from the campus population based upon published Board of Trustee meeting notes. The total Rowan University graduate student population as of fall 2006 was 1,148. The number includes 221 full-time and 927 part-time students. The students consisted of different ethnic/racial backgrounds, majors, and age ranges. The majority of the participants were Caucasian students, with one African American student, and one Hispanic/Latino student. Different majors were represented from the higher education administration program, counseling in educational settings, masters of business administration, and the writing program. The majority of the participants were in the age ranges of 18-24.

## Instrumentation

The instrument used for data collection was an interview schedule (Appendix B) based upon the work of Robinson (2005) who conducted a study at The University of Wisconsin, Madison campus about entry-level doctoral students' expectations, beliefs, and goals. Robinson (2005) built his study on socialization and cognitive-ecological theory looking at the beliefs of incoming doctoral students as well as their experiences over the first year of study. The participants in Robinson's study were selected using purposeful sampling and consisted of the departments of Botany, Physics, and Chemistry.

Also, interview questions came from the work of Glasgow (2004), who conducted a dissertation on the socialization experiences of African American Ph.D. students compared to Caucasian Ph.D. students and their interactions among faculty. The study was conducted at a private university, located in Southern California. Glasgow looked at the impact of socialization experiences on African Americans and the contributions these experiences had on the participants' graduate education.

The interview schedule (Appendix C) consisted of background information and 13 open-ended questions. Information collected in the background section consisted of education level, gender, ethnicity, social status, children, age, and study status. The first open-ended question covered the area of impressions and expectations of Rowan University that the participants may have had. This was to determine what the participants expected prior to enrolling into graduate school and whether these expectations were met as a result of being in their respective programs.

Another area that was addressed was the interactions that students had with their peers and faculty inside and outside of the classroom. Systems of support was addressed as well, asking about role models the participants may have identified and times when they felt more like a graduate student versus a professional-in-training.

Other areas of inquiry were how the students navigated around their department and who showed them the ways to gain information. This aspect affects the socialization that students go through and the students were asked about their goals as well. Probed were goals that students had upon entering the program and any changes that had occurred. Further inquiry was made in the areas of any experiences that impacted personal and professional goals and suggestions for improving graduate student program satisfaction.

## Pilot Testing

The instrument was pilot tested with two doctoral candidates representing the doctoral program in educational leadership at Rowan University. Participants were asked to critique the consent form and interview instrument by focusing on the clarity, appropriateness of items, and content validity. Both individuals were current students at Rowan and were able to gauge the appropriateness of the questions for graduate students. As a result of the pilot testing, it was determined that the initial interview was lengthy and some questions were redundant. The final instrument resulted in the consent form being clarified and the interview questions reduced in length. Pilot testing of the interview instrument allowed the researcher to gauge the time it would take to conduct the interviews and practice interviewing skills.

## Data Collection

An application was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of

Rowan University (Appendix A), and permission was granted for the study to be

conducted on February 21, 2007. Data were collected by interview starting in March

of 2007. Using the Board of Trustees meeting notes, a listing of graduate assistants

was obtained. A random sample method was employed to assign numbers to each

participant as they were drawn. The first 10 participants were emailed (Appendix E)

and this contact produced four participants. The ones that did not respond the first

time were emailed again and contacted through and internet medium *Facebook*. This

process was repeated until 10 participants agreed to participate in the study.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face, over the phone and through email. Six

interviews were conducted in face-to face format, in which all participants were given

a consent form (Appendix B) to read and sign. Immediately after obtaining the

required consent, forms were removed, and placed in a separate envelope so as to

ensure anonymity of the participants and to maintain confidentiality of responses to

the interviewing process. Three interviews were conducted through email, because

the participants could not schedule a convenient time to conduct face-to-face

interviews. One participant opted to do a phone interview because of time constraints

as well. Each participant was given the option to choose a different name, in order to

protect personal confidentiality.

## Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed into a written record so as to conduct a

content analysis. The background demographic data were analyzed using the

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Then, the interview questions were analyzed using a content analysis designed by Sisco (1981) (Appendix D) resulting in a coding system. The responses were categorized according to the research questions and grouped according to themes. Themes that held similar meanings were collapsed and placed into broader groups. The data are presented in table format in chapter four.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Profile of the Sample

The participants in this study consisted of 10 randomly selected graduate assistants at Rowan University. The researcher selected the total population of first and second year graduate assistants from the various departments at Rowan University. The 10 selected graduate assistants were asked to participate in an interview that consisted of demographic data and 13 interview questions.

Table 4.1 depicts the demographic information of the participants. The first part of the table depicts the gender distribution of the subjects from the interviews; four (40%) were female and six (60%) were male. The next part of the table represents the concentration area that the graduate assistants were majoring in at Rowan University. The two highest concentrations were Higher Education Administration (40%) and Counseling in Educational Settings (30%). Next, the table describes the age range of the participants. Seventy percent were under 25 years old with the lowest percentage of participants between 29-35 years old (10%). A majority of the participants were of a full-time status (70%), with only thee students (30%) attending school part-time. The last part of the table shows the ethnic background of the students who participated in the study. Eight (80%) of the students were Caucasian, one student (10%) was Hispanic, and one (10%) was African

American. Nine (90%) of the participants were single, one (10%) were married, nine (90%) did not have children and one (10%) had one or more children.

Table 4.1

*Participant Demographics*

n=10

| Variable | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|
| *Gender* | | |
| Female | 4 | 40 |
| Male | 6 | 60 |
| Total | 10 | 100 |
| *Concentration* | | |
| Maters in Business Administration | 1 | 10 |
| Counseling in Educational Settings | 3 | 30 |
| Public Relations | 1 | 10 |
| Writing | 1 | 10 |
| Higher Education Administration | 4 | 40 |
| Total | 10 | 100 |
| *Age Range* | | |
| 18-24 | 7 | 70 |
| 25-29 | 2 | 20 |
| 29-35 | 1 | 10 |
| Total | 10 | 100 |

*Table 4.1 Continued*

*Participant Demographics*

| Variable | Frequency | % |
|---|---|---|
| *n*=10 | | |
| *Status* | | |
| Full-time Student | 7 | 70 |
| Part-time Student | 3 | 30 |
| Total | 10 | 100 |
| *Ethnicity* | | |
| African American/Black | 1 | 10 |
| Caucasian/White | 8 | 80 |
| Hispanic/Latino(a)/Chicano(a) | 1 | 10 |
| Total | 10 | 100 |
| *Social Status* | | |
| Single | 9 | 90 |
| Married | 1 | 10 |
| Total | 10 | 100 |
| *Children* | | |
| 0 | 9 | 90 |
| 1 or more | 1 | 10 |
| Total | 10 | 100 |

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What are the attitudes of selected graduate assistants who attend Rowan University in relation to the connection they feel to the campus community?

Inspection of the data for Table 4.2 revealed the top recurring themes to be (a) relationships, (b) academic workload, and (c) lack of social interaction outside of the classroom setting. Participants stated more frequently that they built relationships with peers than they did with the faculty. Further analysis of the data, indicated that a majority of these relationships were built because of the sharing of the academic course work.

Analysis of Table 4.3 revealed five themes that the participants highlighted when it came toward the faculty. Support was the strongest theme that emerged from the data analysis when the participants answered about faculty interactions inside and outside of the classroom. Teaching and relationships were the second strongest themes that emerged when participants were discussing attitudes towards the faculty.

Table 4.2

*Results of Content Analysis Describing Attitudes of Graduate Assistants towards Peers*

| Group | Theme | Frequency | Rank |
|-------|-------|-----------|------|
| Peers | Relationships | 11 | 1 |
| | Academic/Workload | 10 | 2 |
| | Lack of Social Interaction Outside the Classroom | 5 | 3 |
| | Total Frequency | 26 | |

Table 4.3

*Results of Content Analysis Describing Attitudes of Graduate
Assistants towards Faculty*

| Group | Theme | Frequency | Rank |
|-------|-------|-----------|------|
| Faculty | Support | 4 | 1 |
| | Teaching | 2 | 2 |
| | Relationships | 2 | 2 |
| | Mentorship | 1 | 3 |
| | Attitude | 1 | 3 |
| | Total Frequency | 10 | |

Research Question 2: To what extent do the students feel that the institution is meeting their needs as graduate students?

"What were your expectations for your program of study and what did other students tell you? Have your expectations been met? If not, how have your actual experiences differed from your expectations and were there any obstacles in the early stages of your program?"

Table 4.4 contains the results of the expectations of the participants upon entering a graduate program. Seven themes emerged addressing the expectations that students held upon entering their program. Class content and program communication were two themes that the participants indicated as being expectations that were not met. Other themes that emerged on a lesser scale were program focus, class availability, employment status being affected, and the expectation that they thought their graduate student experience would be similar to their undergraduate

experience. Participants seemed to have little difficulty discussing how their expectations were not met. Conversely, they did not indicate strong responses to what expectations were met. Four themes emerged with academic workload and lowered expectations being the two most prominent.

"How have you 'learned the ropes' around your department (e.g. what to do and not to do, who to talk to and not talk to, how to get through the system, who to work for and not to work for, what to expect about grad school, etc.)."

Table 4.5 contains the sources of who showed the participants the ropes around their departments. Of these important sources, seven were determined. Students indicated that they had to learn the ropes themselves and the other popular source was various staff members in the different departments on campus. The other sources were faculty members, peers, and to a lesser extent, the participants relied on an online source and their internship supervisor.

"Have your initial goals (personal or professional) changed in any way? If so, and what has made them change?"

Table 4.6 provides information on the themes that emerged as participants discussed issues that have affected their goals for graduate school. Only three themes emerged from this question. Most of the participants indicated that their goals had not changed. The foremost theme that emerged was that of career choice availability. Participants were not aware of certain career choices that were available as an option and their program experience opened up a greater range of options to explore. Personal accountability was realized by some of the participants in the fact that their experience made them take a personal accountability for their goals. Program change

was noted by one student who indicated that the faculty are actually considering a complete program change.

Table 4.4

*Content Analysis Describing Graduate Assistants Program Expectations*

| Group | Theme | Frequency | Rank |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Expectations Not Met | Class Content | 6 | 1 |
| | Program Communication | 4 | 2 |
| | Program Focus | 2 | 3 |
| | Class Availability | 1 | 4 |
| | Employment-Lack Of | 1 | 4 |
| | Similar to Undergraduate | 1 | 4 |
| | Total Frequency | 15 | |
| Expectations Met | Academic Workload | 2 | 1 |
| | Lowered Expectations | 2 | 1 |
| | Class Choice Flexibility | 1 | 2 |
| | Faculty Teaching | 1 | 2 |
| | Total Frequency | 6 | |

Table 4.5

*Sources Where Graduate Students Learned the Ropes Around their Department*

| Theme | Frequency | Rank | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Self Taught | 6 | 1 | |
| Staff Members | 6 | 1 | |
| Graduate Assistantship | 3 | 2 | |
| Faculty | 3 | 2 | |
| Peers | 2 | 3 | |
| Internship | 1 | 4 | |
| Online | 1 | 4 | |
| Total Frequency | 22 | | |

Table 4.6

*Analysis of Graduate Students Goal Changes*

| Theme | Frequency | Rank | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Career Choice Availability | 3 | 1 | |
| Personal Accountability | 2 | 2 | |
| Program Change | 1 | 3 | |
| Total Frequency | 6 | | |

Research Question 3: What factors contributed to the connection between the campus and graduate assistants at Rowan University?

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"Have you identified a role model/advisor? Who are they, and what makes them a role model/advisor for you?"

Table 4.7 provides the information on the role models/advisors that graduate students chose. Mainly the participants identified staff members outside of their department as role models. Faculty and program advisors were the other two role models that were identified. Participants mostly identified with role models who were not in their program. One of the strongest reasons was the academic/program support that the role model provided. Demeanor of the role model was a second indicator that influenced participants to identify individuals as their role models. Ethnicity and professional/personal support offered by role models was also an indicator, although not as strong as the program support that the role models provided.

"How often do you normally feel like you are treated as a graduate student versus a professional-in-training?"

Table 4.8 provides information on whom and certain aspects on when they felt they were treated at as a graduate student versus a professional-in-training. For a professional-in-training, certain students indicated that some faculty treated them professionally and in their work settings they felt as if they were treated as professionals. In other settings participants indicated that in a professional development situation, they felt they were treated as professionals. Conversely, the participants indicated that faculty still made them feel as a graduate student. Professionals in other areas of the program were another source indicated by participants that made them feel like graduate students. On a less significant scale,

participants indicated that academic work and program separation served as contributors to helping them feel like graduate students.

"In what ways do you think you have been successful or unsuccessful your first year in graduate school?

Table 4.9 provides information on the ways graduate students identified how they were successful and unsuccessful during their first year in graduate school. Academics was identified as the strongest component that they felt they were successful with networking identified as a second area they felt strongly about. One area that students felt they were unsuccessful was the lack of challenge that assignments brought to their course work. Another area of note is the socialization with peers. Students indicated this as an area they felt unsuccessful and felt needed improvement. Other identified themes were employment during graduate school and the lack of involvement in other office areas.

Table 4.7

*Content Analysis Describing Graduate Assistants Chosen Role Model/Advisor*

| Group | Theme | Frequency | Rank |
|---|---|---|---|
| Role Model/Advisor | Staff Member Outside Department | 5 | 1 |
| | Faculty | 2 | 2 |
| | Program Advisor | 2 | 2 |
| | Total Frequency | 9 | |
| Reason | Academic/Program Support | 4 | 1 |
| | Demeanor | 3 | 2 |
| | Ethnicity | 1 | 3 |
| | Professional/Personal Support | 1 | 3 |
| | Total Frequency | 9 | |

Table 4.8

*Content Analysis Describing Graduate Assistants Feeling Like a Graduate Student Versus a Professional-in-Training*

| Group | Theme | Frequency | Rank |
|---|---|---|---|
| Professional-in-Training | Faculty | 3 | 1 |
| | Work Setting | 3 | 1 |
| | Professional Development | 2 | 2 |
| | Total Frequency | 8 | |
| Graduate Student | Faculty | 3 | 1 |
| | Professionals | 2 | 2 |
| | Academic Work | 1 | 3 |
| | Program Separation | 1 | 3 |
| | Total Frequency | 7 | |

Table 4.9

*Content Analysis Describing Graduate Assistants Successful and Unsuccessful First Year Experiences*

| Group | Theme | Frequency | Rank |
|---|---|---|---|
| Successful | Academics | 7 | 1 |
| | Networking | 3 | 2 |
| | Peer Relations | 2 | 3 |
| | College Environment | 1 | 4 |
| | Total Frequency | 13 | |
| Unsuccessful | Challenge of Assignments | 2 | 1 |
| | Socializing with Peers | 2 | 1 |
| | Employment | 1 | 2 |
| | Involvement in Student Affairs Office | 1 | 2 |
| | Total Frequency | 6 | |

Research Question 4: What are some suggestions for enhancing the connection of graduate students at Rowan University?

Table 4.10 provides suggestions for improving the graduate experience at Rowan University. Out of these suggestions, 13 different themes emerged with course offerings being the strongest theme cited. Class variety and faculty teaching were the second most mentioned themes that participants suggested for improvement. Frequently, students discussed the lack of various class offerings and the different instances where the quality was lacking in how the faculty was conducting the classes. Other strong themes that emerged were faculty involvement and faculty availability.

Table 4.10

*Content Analysis Describing Suggestions for Improvement*

| Theme | Frequency | Rank |
|---|---|---|
| Course Offerings | 6 | 1 |
| Class Format Variety | 4 | 2 |
| Faculty Teaching | 4 | 2 |
| Faculty Involvement | 3 | 3 |
| Faculty Availability | 2 | 4 |
| Graduate Community | 2 | 4 |
| Assistantship Placement | 1 | 5 |
| Class Size | 1 | 5 |
| Faculty Attitudes | 1 | 5 |
| Job Placement | 1 | 5 |
| Internship Experience | 1 | 5 |
| Professional Treatment of G.A. | 1 | 5 |
| Thesis Requirement | 1 | 5 |
| Total Frequency | 28 | |

# CHAPTER FIVE

## SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Summary of the Study

The needs of graduate students are continually changing with new advances in technology, information, and knowledge-development driving forces. Graduate students have different needs and expectations than traditional undergraduate students. Ironically, most student development literature focuses solely on traditional undergraduate students with little attention paid to graduate students. Connections that students form in college help build deeper relationships that translate into loyalty and commitment to a campus community. This study was conducted to explore the connections that graduate students developed on a university campus. Selected graduate assistants were interviewed to explore the connections they have developed to the campus using socialization theory.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the connections that full-time and part-time graduate assistants felt at the graduate level. The study sought to learn how selected graduate assistants felt about the degree to which the university is meeting their needs as a student. In addition, the study examined ways of improving the connection among and between graduate students and the campus community.

## Methodology

The researcher interviewed 10 graduate assistants from Rowan University during the Spring 2007 semester. To ensure the rights and privacy of each participant, an Institutional Review Board (IRB) application was submitted on February 8, 2007 (Appendix A). The application included an interview consent form (Appendix B) and interview schedule (Appendix C). The application was approved on February 22, 2007.

Upon receiving approval from the IRB, potential study participants were randomly selected to be interviewed and contacted through email. Most of the interviews took place on the Rowan University campus except for one interview completed over the telephone and three through email. An email (Appendix E) was sent to the randomly selected participant's which explained in brief the purpose of the study and asked for permission to participate. The interview consisted of background demographic data and 13 questions based upon the work of Robinson (2005) and Glassglow (2004).

A total of 10 randomly selected graduate students who held either full-time or part-time graduate assistantships participated in the study. Several email contacts were necessary to yield the 10 participants who agreed to be interviewed for the study.

## Data Analysis

The background demographic data and interview questions (Appendix C) were transcribed verbatim into a word document. The background demographic data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The

interview questions were analyzed using a content analysis designed by Sisco (1981) (Appendix D) resulting in a coding system. The responses were categorized according to the research questions and grouped according to themes. Themes that held similar meanings were placed in broader groups and the data were presented in table form.

## Discussion of the Findings

Research Question 1: What are the attitudes of selected graduate assistants who attend Rowan University in relation to the connection they feel to the campus community?

### *Attitudes Towards Peers and Faculty*

There were three distinct themes that emerged as the graduate students discussed their attitudes toward peers. The first theme identified by more than half of the graduate students was the interactions with peers on an academic level and this helped the participants to build relationships inside of the classroom. Participants cited the sharing of academic course work load as a contributing factor towards forming connections inside of the classroom. Another theme that emerged from five of the participants was the lack of social interaction outside of the classroom. It seems that once class was over this is where the connection stopped as a majority indicated they went on their separate ways.

Four participants indicated that they developed a connection with faculty inside and outside of the classroom due to the support they received from the faculty members. These findings support the research Fuehrer and Lawson (2001) who found that faculty support accounted for one of the strongest support systems for

graduate students. Even though there is a strong indication of support, mentorship was noticeably absent in the participants' responses. Moreover, only two participants talked about the teaching and personal relationships they developed with faculty. Glasgow's (2004) findings were similar in that the students in the education department indicated positive interactions with their peers and faculty both inside and outside of the classroom. The humanities students were susceptible to isolation due to the lack of interactions with faculty. This was one of the smaller departments and findings showed that these students were less pleased with their academic and social interactions. Students in the social sciences department were to be the most socially integrated with peers and faculty out of all of the departments. Some of the reasoning was the smaller class sizes, funding for students, and diverse student cohorts.

Research Question 2: To what extent do the students feel that the institution is meeting their needs as graduate students?

*Graduate Assistants Program Expectations*

Participants cited the expectations they had of their respective graduate programs prior to enrolling in the programs and whether these expectations were met. Responses from half of the participants indicated that many expectations were not met after entering their programs which is consistent with the findings of Hoskins and Goldberg (2005). Class content was cited frequently as an expectation that was not met. Participants indicated that the information presented in class did not match with program expectations. Participant Kate stated,

> "I found the graduate program to be a little different than the undergraduate. It is more lax and I am a bit disappointed in the lack of consistency among the

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professors and what they teach. For example, I have to take the

comprehensive exam; however I do not feel that the professors prepared us for

it."

President Margret McKenna of Lesley University (as cited in Goral, 2004) noted that

students are demanding consumers and their expectations have risen in graduate

education. It appears that participants expected more from their classes and wanted

periodic communication about program information as this theme emerged as another

expectation that was not met. Robinson (2005) found that the doctoral students had

no idea of the policies and procedures in order to navigate through their programs.

Moreover, some of the participants noted that changes had been made in

regards to the requirements to graduate and the way they were not notified led to

some dissatisfaction. These findings are consistent with findings found in Broyles

(2005) study noting the lack of communication on the academic department end.

Participant Bob stated,

"I think a lot of people in my program have had different experiences, but I

would say the majority of people I meet in my program are dissatisfied with it.

Mainly because things change in the program a lot and no one is really

notified, we usually find out from each other."

Participant Kathy noted the same about lack of communication from the program in

not telling the students about the change in hours required for course work and

internships. This had an effect on Kathy's employment situation, "…I had to leave

my job, my full-time job, so to do that, and that is not something I had originally

planned when I first started the program, so I am unemployed right now and I am not

very happy." Ebersole (2004) noted that because of rising costs in education, more students would have to attend school part-time and remain gainfully employed. Ebersole did not take into account external factors such as a program changing its core requirements, thus forcing students to actually make a choice to finish their education or choose employment.

Only five of the participants indicated that some of their expectations were met regarding their respective programs. Academic workload was a theme that emerged as one of the expectations. Upon entering the graduate programs Keegan stated, "...a lot of different students were telling me it was a real good program. I would have to invest a lot of time as far as the workload is concerned." Lowered expectations was another expectation that two participants acknowledged, "My expectations have been met, mostly because I lowered them quite quickly once I saw how busy most of the professors were and how lightly some of the other students in the program took the work." Here, the participant indicated that personal expectations were met because they saw the quality of the program and how the students actually participated in regards to handling the course work.

*Graduate Assistants Learning the Ropes*

Participants entering their graduate programs during the first semester were not always aware of the different policies and procedures of the institution. Four of the participants attended the institution as an undergraduate, so in retrospect they already possessed information about the institution. For those participants who did not attend Rowan University as an undergraduate, they had to learn the ropes of their academic departments and what was expected of them as graduate students. Self-

taught was one of the strongest themes to emerge where five participants learned things on their own and did not seek additional help. The assistance provided by staff emerged as a second theme, where more than four participants indicated that they learned about the departments by just asking staff members. Although faculties were mentioned as a second strong theme, they were not the first ones mentioned in the participants' responses. Participants indicated in several of their responses that they learned from other staff members and the majority noted information came from their assistantships. Glasgow (2004) found that students were disconnected from the university and their connection was based on their respective departments. Students indicated that the connections with their departments were not strong and this led them to make connections outside of the departments. Three participants spent most of their discretionary time, in the location of their assistantship and learned much from their respective assistantship advisors. Peers did not emerge as a strong source of learning the ropes. A few participants noted that peers helped them to navigate around the department in regards to what classes to take, ones to avoid, and professors to stay away from.

*Graduate Students Goal Changes*

Half of the participants noted that their goals remained the same from program entry to exit. The other half of the participants noted that upon entering their graduate program, they became aware of different career choices. Joe stated that

> "Coming into the program, I really did not know anything of what it is about, I did not know if it was necessarily you could be a principal at a high school or anything. I had no clue."

However as the student took classes and learned more about the discipline, new career options emerged. This example is consistent with some of the themes that emerged from Clark's (2005) study about overcoming an obstacle, seizing an opportunity, adapting to a change, and pursuing a goal. Schlossberg et al. (1995) highlighted three kinds of transitions. The one that applies to this participant is a non-event transition, in which "...an individual had expectations which did not occur, thereby altering his or her life..." (p. 29).

Personal accountability emerged as a second theme. Two participants noted that although their original goals had not changed, they were inspired to increase personal accountability in terms of academic consistency and rigor. These events are related to non-event transitions as well. Here, the participants were not expecting their life course to be altered in any format. As a result of different influential factors, this led the participants to examine their lives and change their course of direction in life.

Research Question 3: What factors contributed to the connection between the campus and graduate assistants at Rowan University?

*Graduate Assistants Chosen Role Model/Advisor*

Participants indicated that staff members outside of their departments, served as role models. More than half of the participants indicated their graduate assistantship supervisor was a key role model. Further probing revealed that participants were spending significant time in their assistantships, and this time allowed them to build rapport with their supervisors. Participants explained that they began to turn to the supervisor for help with concerns about their program as more

than half had internships in an area related to their major. Weidman et al. (2001) used socialization theory as a way of describing entry into an organization. A graduate student who is learning the ropes around the department is not going to know who to talk too, classes to take, and having someone as a guide will help them navigate the campus. Glasgow (2004) found that Caucasian students were better prepared for getting around the departments than African American students. One of the reasons is the Caucasian students were not first generation college graduates and they had family members who had already gone through the educational process. They also had family members who gave advice on how to pay for graduate school, the correct questions to ask which is, in direct contrast of African Americans, who did not have the same experience. African Americans participants in the study were first generation students, who did not have access to the kind of firsthand knowledge that their Caucasian counterparts did, and this created a difficult path for them to make adjustments.

On lesser scale, two participants identified faculty as a role model. One of the reasons is the participants discussed how these faculty members carried themselves around campus and their attitudes. Participants noted the level of respect that the faculty showed towards colleagues and how the respect was reciprocated. One participant noted the reason he/she chose the faculty member as a role model was because of their common ethnicity. As participant Kathy stated, "For me one of the biggest things is that he is also Latino…so I think that was a big, big plus to see someone with a Ph.D. that is similar to my background." Kathy indicated that she felt

more comfortable because she could identify with her advisor which enhanced the bond and this made the transition to graduate study easier.

*Graduate Student versus a Professional-in-Training*

According to six of the participants, faculty members were the ones that treated the respondents equally like professionals-in-training and graduate students. Here, the students were asked to identify instances of when they felt like a novice graduate student and when they felt like they were professionals. Work setting was the second theme identified by participants who felt like professionals-in-training at their graduate assistantships. Here, their assistantship supervisor treated the participants on the same level as professionals instead of making them feel like graduate students. In contrast, professionals in other departments still treated graduate students as if they were undergraduate students. Some of the other reasons that participants felt like graduate students is in one instance, the participant noted how separate their program feels from the rest of the campus. They do not feel a part of the campus community for their program level and thus they felt like a graduate student in this instance.

*Graduate Assistants Successful and Unsuccessful First Year Experiences*

Participants were asked to evaluate their first year in graduate school; the top theme was academic success. In addition, participants noted the support they received from the faculty which confirms the research of Fuehrer and Lawson (2001) on the importance of fostering support and student success. Networking was another strong theme that participants noted as they talked about engaging with other professionals in their respective fields and learning about professional opportunities in the future.

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In contrast, peer relations and socializing with peers produced mixed results. For the peer relations, participants indicated that they felt they were successful in forming bonds with some of their program peers, while other participants acknowledged that they were unsuccessful in this area. The participants noted success in building a classroom bond, but outside of the classroom, participants did not socialize, which is consistent with the earlier findings of attitudes that the participants had about the lack of socialization. Weidman et al. (2001) talked about the formal stage of socialization, in which role expectations are idealized. Communication is essential in this stage because this allows students to interact, build relationships outside of the classroom, and create a support system outside of the classroom.

Research Question 4: What are some suggestions for enhancing the connection of graduate students at Rowan University?

*Suggestions for Improvement*

The participants had a long list of suggestions that could help to improve the quality of the programs and courses offered. Course offerings were the strongest themes that emerged as an area for improvement. Billy stated that, "I would also ask that more classes be made available. Though I realize that certain classes can only be offered at one time or another, to have considerable time passed between offerings is something that should not happen." When reviewing the course catalogs, the academic departments list all approved courses including those that are required and those that are electives. If a student is looking to make choices for their elective classes and they see one that interests them, these types of classes may not be offered

which could lead to student disappointment or dissatisfaction. Class variety format was a second theme that emerged as a suggestion for improvement. Participants noted that most of the classes are offered in the late afternoons or at night and the rigidness of coming to campus every week for a three hour class takes a toll. Offering classes in a hybrid format or online courses could alleviate some of the pressure of traveling to the university once or twice a week.

Faculty teaching was another theme that emerged as a suggestion for improvement. The quality of the faculty teaching was noted as inconsistent and this affected how the participants felt about the quality of classes. Faculty involvement was another theme noted by the participants as faculty were viewed as detached from the students. Participants felt a void of faculty being available to meet with students outside of the classroom. Office hours were cited as inadequate and some participants suggested having faculty office hours in the evening would help those who could not get to campus during the day. Another theme that emerged from the interviews was the lack of a "graduate community" at Rowan University. In short, participants noted the resources are geared towards undergraduates as are nearly all student services.

## Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that the participants have a stronger connection with their peers than they do with faculty. One of the main reasons mentioned is the common academic workload the students share, especially inside of the classroom. Unfortunately, this bond did not extend outside of the classroom, as most of the participants spoke of course-related connections. A few of the participants indicated that they were friends inside and outside of the classroom with

certain peers, but that finding was for only a few students. Less than half of the participants indicated that they felt support, but only two of the participants alluded to actually building relationships with faculty members. Relationships with faculty are important in helping to socialize graduate students to new experiences. The lack of relationship and mentorship between the faculty and graduate students is noticeable in the lack of responses from the participants.

Many of the expectations that the participants had about graduate school were not met. Class content and program communication were the two expectations that participants indicated as not being met. Participants learned how to navigate the departments by staff members and by themselves. This conforms to the third stage in socialization theory about role expectations. Participants had expectations placed upon them just as they place expectations upon the institution. Upon entering into the institution, participants were expected to fulfill their roles as graduate students, by doing the work, going to class, and in return the participants were expecting the institution to meet their academic and social needs. Some of the needs were met for the participants and responses from more than two-thirds of the participants indicated that their goals had not changed. A conclusion can be drawn that not all of the immediate needs of the participants are being met, but the long term goals for the participants programs has stayed on course.

More than half of the participants that selected a role model picked someone outside of the department. Typically, the person participant's spent the most time with ended up being a mentor/role model. Only two participants picked faculty members which indicate that improvement can be done to increase the relationships

between faculty and graduate students. Participants were divided on when they felt treated like a professional-in-training versus a graduate student. On one end of the spectrum, the people who come into contact with the graduate assistants treated them as equal peers and on the opposite end they were treated as graduate students. Here was an indication that not all faculty and professional staff members viewed graduate students on the same levels as they were. Participants indicated success in grades and to a lesser extent success in networking. A large majority of the participants were satisfied with where they were in terms of building connections to the campus.

Some suggestions that were made for future practice included strengthening class content and expanding course format variety. A conclusion can be drawn that the courses did not always meet expectations as far as how they were taught and how they met program requirements. Rowan University has demonstrated evidence of catering towards the undergraduate population, and graduate students are normally adult learners. There was mention of limited class variety format, which Rowan could do more to offer classes in different formats and make it more convenient for non-traditional students. The College of Continuing and Professional Education will start this fall to address this issue, by offering some master degree level courses as well as undergraduate courses in different formats. In conjunction with class content, how faculty members teach the classes was also mentioned. Although participants indicated that faculty members offer support, there is a lack of involvement from the faculty members in terms of availability outside of the classroom.

Recommendations for Further Practice and Research

Based upon the findings and conclusions of the study, the following

suggestions are presented:

1. A larger study involving additional higher education settings should be done.

   Further studies would allow for a broader scope of current issues facing

   graduate students.

2. It is recommended that a larger study at Rowan University be initiated to

   include all of the graduate students. Comparisons across the graduate

   programs may reveal certain areas that need to be addressed.

3. A follow-up study is recommended to include the Graduate School and

   representatives from the different departments on campus who serve graduate

   students. This may reveal areas that the departments can collaborate in

   creating a strong network for graduate support resources.

4. Rowan University should invest resources into graduate students by looking

   into a collaborative partnership with the graduate students. Expand the

   funding focused at the undergraduate level towards the graduate level and

   include graduate students in making decisions about future services offered

   for the graduate student population.

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APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Approval

**Rowan University**
**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**
**HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW APPLICATION**

INSTRUCTIONS: Check all appropriate boxes, answer all questions completely, include attachments, and obtain appropriate signatures. Submit an **original and two copies** of the completed application to the Office of the Associate Provost.
NOTE: **Applications must be typed.**
Be sure to make a copy for your files.

FOR IRB USE ONLY:
Protocol Number: IRB-_2007_ - _122_
Received:_____ Reviewed:_____
    Exemption: ___Yes ___ No
    Category(ies):_____
Approved _2|21|07___ (date)

**Step 1: Is the proposed research subject to IRB review?**
    All research involving human participants conducted by Rowan University faculty and staff is subject to IRB review. Some, but not all, student-conducted studies that involve human participants are considered research and are subject to IRB review. Check the accompanying instructions for more information. Then check with your class instructor for guidance as to whether you must submit your research protocol for IRB review. If you determine that your research meets the above criteria and is not subject to IRB review, **STOP**. You do not need to apply. If you or your instructor have any doubts, apply for an IRB review.

**Step 2: If you have determined that the proposed research is subject to IRB review, complete the identifying information below.**

Project Title:
STUDENT CONNECTION: HOW FULL-TIME GRADUATE ASSISTANTS OF ROWAN UNIVERSITY CONNECT TO THE CAMPUS COMMUNITY

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Researcher: Janelle Duncan

Department: Educational Leadership      Location Rowan University

Mailing Address: 883 B Scotswood Court      (Street)
                 Mt. Laurel, NJ 08054      (Town/State/Zip)

E-Mail: duncan61@rowan.students.edu      Telephone: 856-914-0058

Co-Investigator/s:

_____

Faculty Sponsor (if student)* Dr. Burton Sisco
Department Educational Leadership   Location: Rowan University
E-Mail: sisco@rowan.edu      Telephone: 856-256-4500 ext 3717

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APPENDIX B

Consent Form

**Informed Consent Form: Interview**
**Principal Investigator: Janelle Duncan, 609-668-3232 duncan61@students.rowan.edu**
**Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Burton Sisco, 856-256-4500 ext. 3717, sisco@rowan.edu**

As a graduate student of Rowan University you are being asked to participate in a research study being conducted by Janelle Duncan through Rowan University in fulfillment for graduation requirements to complete my master's degree program. The University and the Institutional Research Board requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this study.

The purpose of this study was to examine the connection that graduate assistants feel to the campus at the graduate level. The study seeks to learn how students feel about how the connection graduate students feel to campus using socialization theory. In addition, the study further seeks how to engage students on ways to improve the connection among graduate students and the campus community.

All that you will have to do is complete this interview session that will only take about 20 minutes to complete. Since the consent form will be kept separately from your interview, your name will not be linked to your response in any way. In order to further protect your confidentiality of this study, you can choose an alternative name to protect your identity. In addition, upon receiving your approval, I would like to record the interview using a recording tape. This interview is for the sole purposes of completing my research study and fulfilling the requirements for my course. If you are willing to participate in my study, please sign below and return the form to me before beginning the interview. This interview is completely voluntary and you can choose to decline at any time during the interview.

*I agree to take part in Janelle Duncan's research study by completing the interview session mentioned above.*


_____          _____
Signature                                                                      Date

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

**Interview**

**Demographic Data**

_____ Master Level          _____ Doctoral Level

_____ First Year          _____ Second Year

_____ Major/Concentration

☐Male  ☐Female

Ethnicity:  ☐African American/ Black  ☐ Hispanic/Latino(a)/Chicano(a)

           ☐Asian/Asian American  ☐ Native American  ☐ Caucasian/White

           ☐ Middle Eastern  ☐ Biracial  ☐ Other (specify) _____

Status:    ☐Single      ☐Married        ☐Widowed        ☐Separated        ☐Divorced

Children: _____ 0          _____ 1 or more

Age Range: ☐under 18  ☐ 18-24  ☐ 25-29  ☐ 29-35  ☐35+

_____ Full Time Student          _____ Part Time  Student

_____ Full Time Graduate Asst          _____ Part Time Graduate Asst

**Questions**

1. Describe some of your first impressions/expectations of Rowan University as an incoming graduate student?

2. What were your expectations for your program of study and what did other students tell you? Have your expectations been met? If not, how have your actual experiences differed from your expectations and were there any obstacles in the early stages of your program?

3. Describe your experiences/interactions with your peers both inside and outside the classroom? Faculty?

4. Who do you think are your strongest sources of support (both personal and academic) in terms of graduate program support?

5. Have you identified a role model/advisor? Who are they, and what makes them a role model/advisor for you?

6. How often do you normally feel like you are treated as a "grad student" versus a "professional-in-training"?

7. How have you "learned the ropes" around your department (e.g. what to do and not to do, who to talk to and not talk to, how to get through the system, who to work for and not to work for, what to expect about grad school, etc.

8. Have your initial goals (personal or professional) changed in any way? If so, and what has made them change?

9. In what ways do you think you have been successful or unsuccessful your fist year in graduate school?

10. How have your experiences this year impacted your goals for graduate school, and your career choice(s)? Have your career goals changed at all? If so, how?

11. Please give a general statement that reflects your overall evaluation of your studies and what changes, if any, would you suggest be made in your program in terms of supportive networks?

12. How might your experiences be improved (if any)?

13. What can be done at the institutional level, department, or classroom level to improve graduate student program satisfaction?

APPENDIX D

Rules and Procedures for Logical Analysis of Written Data

## RULES AND PROCEDURES FOR LOGICAL ANALYSIS OF WRITTEN DATA

The following decisions were made regarding what was to be the unit of data analysis (Sisco, 1981):

1. A phrase or clause will be the basic unit of analysis.

2. Verbiage not considered essential to the phrase or clause will be edited out-e.g., articles of speech, possessives, some adjectives, elaborative examples.

3. Where there is a violation of convention syntax in the data, it will be corrected.

4. Where there are compound thoughts in a phrase or clause, each unit of thought will be represented separately (unless one was an elaboration of the other).

5. Where information seems important to add to the statement in order to clarify it in a context, this information will be added to the unit by using parentheses.

The following decisions were made regarding the procedures for categorization of content units:

1. After several units were listed on a sheet of paper, they will be scanned in order to determine differences and similarities.

2. From this tentative analysis, logical categories will derived for the units.

3. When additional units of data suggest further categories, they will be added to the classification scheme.

4. After all the units from a particular question responses are thus classified, the categories are further reduced to broader clusters (collapsing of categories).

5. Frequencies of units in each cluster category are determined and further analysis steps are undertaken, depending on the nature of the data—i.e., ranking of categories with verbatim quotes which represent the range of ideas or opinions. (p. 177).

APPENDIX E

Initial Email Request

Dear Participant,

My name is Janelle Duncan and I am a full-time graduate student here at Rowan University. I am a student in the Higher Education Administration program, where Dr. Burton Sisco is my advisor.

The reason I am writing to you, is you have been randomly selected and I am requesting an interview with you that should take about 20 minutes. I am completing my thesis entitled, "Student Connection: How Graduate Assistants of Rowan University Connect to the Campus Community."

If you are willing to participate please contact me at 609-668-3232 or email me at duncan61@students.rowan.edu. Your participation will be greatly appreciated. Please call or email if you have any questions.

Thank you in advance.

Sincerely,

Janelle Duncan