Communicating culture in graduate admissions

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BOSTON COLLEGE
Lynch School of Education

Department of
Educational Leadership and Higher Education

Program
Higher Education

COMMUNICATING CULTURE
IN GRADUATE ADMISSIONS

Dissertation by
ADAM J. POLUZZI

submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

May 2015
Communicating Culture in Graduate Admissions

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study examines admissions professionals’ consciousness and perceptions of the role that institutional culture plays in attracting and enrolling graduate-level students. This research identifies and describes how graduate admissions professionals learn culture and how that culture is communicated to applicants. Data were gathered through a web-based survey that queried 102 admissions professionals at 236 graduate schools of theology throughout the United States of America and Canada. Additionally, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with practitioners directly involved in communicating culture to applicants. Survey and interview data were triangulated with a document analysis of printed promotional materials and website text.

Findings suggest that graduate admissions professionals consider culture a crucial factor in their efforts to recruit potential students, regardless of such factors as years of experience working in higher education or working specifically in graduate admissions; professional title; or school’s religious denominational affiliation. Across these categories, graduate admissions professionals perceive culture as a leading factor in enrollment decision making. Likewise, graduate admissions professionals indicate that culture is highly and intentionally incorporated into marketing and recruitment strategies. Findings also indicate there is little difference in how culture is viewed between those graduate admissions professionals who have had direct institutional academic experience as a current student/alumnus of the school and those graduate
admissions professionals who have not. Although the two populations may experience different ways of learning culture, both indicated similarly high perceptions of culture’s importance in the enrollment process. While digital technologies continue to create new potentials for communication methods, face-to-face communication—most notably through campus visits—is still viewed by graduate admissions professionals as most effective. This research highlights the importance of facilitating student discernment within the larger context of the admissions decision-making process. The findings also suggest that external candidates who are hired for their admission expertise can learn and communicate institutional culture effectively. Ultimately, this study reveals culture’s perceived importance in the admissions process and its potential as a principal factor in enrollment decisions.
Dedication

To my friends and to my family.

For supporting (and dealing with) me throughout this entire process.

I am extremely grateful.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation is the culmination of many years of professional and academic support. I would like to recognize those individuals who have provided mentorship, guidance, and encouragement throughout the years. To Robert Howe (who introduced me to enrollment management), Stephanie Autenrieth, Mick Smyer, and Candace Hetzner, thank you for providing me with my first experience working in higher education. To Mary Ellen Fulton, Arline Riordan, and Elizabeth Sparks, thank you for providing both the inspiration to pursue a doctoral degree and the time and space to begin the program. And to Mark Massa, Jackie Regan, Adam Kreuckeberg, and Maura Colleary, thank you for the support as I finished the degree. A special thanks to Jen Bader for the energizing and encouraging conversations.

To my team, Brian Niemiec, Ellen Romer, and Donna DeRosa, thank you for putting up with me during these last couple of years. I appreciate you tolerating my mostly exaggerated complaining and knowing exactly when to suggest I take a break to enjoy a sandwich (or a Mai Tai). I could not have focused on completing this degree without your superb work ensuring that everything with admissions and financial aid was taken care of.

To my friends, Peter Marino, Bryan Fleming, Jean McDonald, Denning Aaris, Marco Baldassarre, Jeremy Lamprey, Bob Sweet, Ken Barrett, Steven Frank, and Tommy Hafer, thank you for being there to remind me to maintain a healthy work-life balance. I appreciate you knowing when to ask and when not to ask how the dissertation was going.

To Danny Zepp, Derek Hottell, and Scott Radimer, my stats study group, thank you for letting me join the group. I would not have survived statistics without you!

To my wonderful committee, Jane Regan, Kelli Armstrong, Diana Pullin, and especially Karen Arnold, thank you for knowing exactly the right times to be supportive, enthusiastic, critical, or collegial. I am so grateful you all agreed to work with me and I have learned so much from each of you.

My experience in this program was greatly enhanced by an incredible cohort: Dave Stanfield, Kara Blackburn, Paul Brown, Adam Gismondi, and Jessica Pesce. We pushed, supported, and celebrated with each other throughout this process. I am thankful for our conversations, both inside and outside of class – they have greatly impacted the way I think about the work I do and I look forward to having you all as colleagues in the years to come. A special thank you goes to Jessica Pesce for, not only being a fantastic ringleader for us all, but also being such a supportive friend throughout our entire degree.

Finally, I am indebted to the participants of this study. Thank you sharing your time and your insights with me. Now, I look forward to sharing this study with you.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the problem

With increased competition for employment and the accompanying inflation of credentials required for professional jobs, graduate degrees are now required in many professions (Snowden, 2012; Tomlinson, 2008). Graduate education has evolved to serve this professional reality, most notably through master’s degree programs. Once viewed as solely academic and non-utilitarian, master’s degrees have come to be valued for improving practice and preparing leaders for various professions (Snowden, 2012). However, graduate enrollments remain volatile and have decreased in recent years, declining overall by 1.1 percent in 2011, 1.7 percent in 2012, and 0.2 percent in 2013 according to the most recent data released by the Council of Graduate Schools. The majority of these enrollment declines have occurred in the humanities where hiring and salary prospects, especially for master’s level graduates, are also in decline (Council of Graduate Schools, 2014).

Along with a reduction in new enrollments, a change has occurred in how prospective students and institutions connect. Recruitment, the process of attracting and yielding new students, once relied almost exclusively on graduate school fairs, in which college career centers typically brought recruiters from different schools to campus for face-to-face meetings with potential applicants. Now, especially as a consequence of the Internet, the recruitment environment is characterized by students choosing to research potential graduate programs virtually rather than in person (Noel-Levitz & Association for Graduate Enrollment
Management, 2012). As a result, prospective students increasingly learn about institutions with limited or no direct interaction with school\(^1\) personnel.

Despite the increased competition and decline in face-to-face contact between student and school representative, the need to recruit the right students persists. Institutions look to the graduate admissions professional to accomplish this task. The admissions professional, an institutional officer whose position includes representing and communicating specific institutional traits, characteristics, requirements, and other information to prospective students, is ideally positioned to influence the match that occurs between student and a particular school. As students discriminate among graduate school options, institutions struggle to create a niche and articulate their uniqueness. Admissions professionals are the key players in connecting students with these niches by helping to develop channels of communication that identify ways in which a school is distinct. These channels include school websites, social media presence, admissions procedures, campus visits and tours, view books and other printed materials, and off-campus recruiting events.

The distinction of a particular school can be found in an institution’s culture. Culture is variously defined as a term and often elusive to describe (Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Kuh, 1993; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Simplico, 2012; Smart, Kuh, & Tierney, 1997). This study asserts that culture can be an important influence on enrollment. I define culture as the behaviors, rituals, values, customs, traits, and way of life of a specific community. In thinking about how a place feels or

\(^1\) In this study, the term “school” will be used to indicate “graduate school.” Since different models exist for how graduate degrees are offered at different institutions, “school” will also be used as a collective term to describe graduate programs, departments, and stand alone institutions. The use of the term “school” is appropriate since the sample for this study will be chosen from the Association of Theological Schools, which commonly use the term “schools” to refer to its graduate-level member “schools” of theology, divinity, and ministry (Association of Theological Schools, 2013).
what makes it distinctive or particular—that is its culture. Implicit in this definition is the importance of how members of a culture interpret and translate it to non-members or potential new members. Applied to a higher education context, institutional culture (or school culture, which is more appropriate for some graduate schools that have a separate or more pronounced culture than their overarching institutions) refers to the campus or school community. Although culture has been previously explored within higher education, within a graduate context, and within undergraduate admissions (Bloomberg, 2007; Heller, 1989; Lincoln, 2012; Magolda, 2001; Pemberton, Ray, Said, Easterly, & Belcher, 2010), much remains to be learned about the potential influence of school culture in the graduate enrollment process. Graduate education, especially within professional schools (e.g. law schools, business schools), plays an important role in exemplifying an institution’s culture by signaling a university’s values and priorities (DeSantis, 2012).

Communicating the distinct culture of a particular school or program is one of the most important and powerful ways an institution can differentiate itself in the competitive enrollment market. Prospective graduate students typically have multiple options when making their enrollment choice. This choice can be shaped by an understanding of a school’s particular culture. This idea is not exclusive to education, as seen in the corporate world’s use of organizational culture to create brand identities and build customer loyalty (Audrerie, 2013). In the education world, however, culture’s role in the enrollment decision process is different from many of the other factors often cited in enrollment decisions. Variables like cost, geographic location, and size are inflexible factors that are mostly closed to interpretation (Stiber, 2000; 2001). Culture, on the other hand, can be experienced, observed, and interpreted (Magolda, 2001), serving as a key factor in differentiating schools thereby influencing enrollment.
Theological graduate education presents an interesting test case for how culture might affect enrollment, given its particular set of challenges. Graduate schools of theology, similarly to other graduate disciplines, train students to research and teach. In addition, theological schools often also prepare future ministers and those who are interested in working in service-related positions across different faith traditions (each theological school is usually connected to a specific faith or religion). Faith and religion have recently faced particular challenges related to culture. For example, secularization in America has negatively affected the place and role of religion within society (Schindler & Bouyer, 1990). Additionally, many Americans have stopped attending mainline churches (Pew Research Center, 2013), no longer feeling connected to their traditional faith communities. Declining attendance has precipitated the need for many closings and reorganizations. Abuse scandals and financial issues within the Catholic and Protestant Churches have accelerated this decline (Weddell, 2012). Finally, the job market for theology school graduates is limited and the existing positions often pay very little. As a result of these challenges, many schools connected to these faiths have recently faced enrollment difficulties.

The Association of Theological Schools (ATS), the accrediting body for theology schools offering post-baccalaureate programs for the practice of ministry and for teaching and research in the theological disciplines, has reported closings and limited institutional enrollment growth. ATS reports indicate that theological school enrollments have consistently been in decline since 2004 (Wheeler & Ruger, 2013). Of the approximately 270 member schools in the ATS, over 50% of schools experienced enrollments declines between 2013 and 2014 (Association of Theological Schools Commission on Accrediting, 2015). These developments and shifts in enrollment have required institutions to focus on graduate enrollment, considering such issues as
marketing, recruitment, financial aid management, and course offerings to attract the best students possible given the changing enrollment atmosphere.

In order for graduate schools of theology to compete for the limited number of students in the current enrollment market, it is essential for schools to identify what is special or unique about their school: their particular culture. Although culture may not be the only factor unique about a school, the communication of culture can help potential students gain an impression of what it might be like to become part of that institution. Arguably, since religion, community, and culture are so intimately connected (Tisdell, 2013), potential applicants’ expectations of culture within the theological schools context are higher than in other graduate disciplines. Patton (2002) would describe this phenomenon as an example of extreme sampling. In extreme or deviant sampling, the sample in question is unusual or special in some way and usually involves outstanding successes or notable failures. Extreme cases are useful because they often provide significant insight into a particular phenomenon, which can serve as examples of best practice that guide future research and practice. The case of theological schools is extreme due not only to recent challenges faith and religion have experienced, but also to the special connection between religion, faith, and community (Tisdell, 2013). As a result, prospective theology graduate students may have a high level of expectation in terms of the culture of their potential institution.

As a result of this expectation, admissions professionals, the institutional agents charged with determining how to communicate with prospective students, must develop a strategy, involving both direct and indirect channels of communication, to effectively relate a school’s culture to potential applicants. An institutional advantage in the competition among different schools for students comes from the ability to best communicate the nature of an institution’s
culture. Arguably the admissions professional, who is central to both developing and executing the communication of this culture, has the best opportunity to increase enrollments.

**Research question**

A study is needed to better understand how admissions professionals carry out this communication. Although a study that explores how culture is communicated to potential graduate students does not currently exist, a study like this could potentially inform current practices and help schools increase and sustain enrollments. Additionally, the role of admissions professionals and the experiences of recruiting students are valuable and important. Often, admissions professionals are the first point of contact for prospective students, either meeting them in person or corresponding with them electronically over e-mail. Admissions professionals are often charged with determining content and delivery method. A study examining how admissions professionals make these determinations, particularly within a theology school context and in light of student enrollment concerns, would benefit practice.

In order to address this problem, this study attempts to gain a perspective about the experiences of admissions professionals and how they express school culture to potential students, given the multiple options and different avenues available to communicate culture. As previously indicated, these channels can include direct communication methods (e.g. campus visits, off-campus recruitment events, and e-mail exchanges) or indirect methods (e.g. website content, view books, admissions-related policies). The research questions for this study are as follows: Are graduate admissions professionals conscious of communicating institutional culture as part of the admissions process? And, if so, how do graduate admissions professionals communicate culture to prospective students? Sub-questions include: (a) what mechanisms, strategies, and media are used to communicate this culture? (b) what mechanisms do admissions
professionals perceive as the most effective\(^2\) in communicating culture to prospective graduate students? and (c) how do admissions professionals learn and understand their institution and school’s culture?

Admissions professionals are the appropriate study participants because the research question asks about institutional enrollment management practices and strategies. Admissions professionals, the chief institutional representatives and communicators of institutional/school culture for prospective students, are not the only members of the community involved with culture. Faculty members, students, and other staff members are often involved in creating and communicating culture. However, admissions professionals are not only the main representatives of their individual program/school’s culture as they communicate information to potential graduate students, they are also involved in determining the strategies and approaches used to portray this culture. As previously indicated, these strategies involve admissions professionals directly communicating culture, as well as working to create media and experiences so that applicants can also experience culture indirectly.

**Conceptual framework**

**Need for study**

The literature related to the communication of culture within a graduate admissions context is incomplete. Relatively little has been written specifically on motivations behind why students choose particular graduate schools. Although practitioners are beginning to apply enrollment strategies and theories to the graduate level, the majority of literature on these topics deals with undergraduate samples. Finally, the majority of existing articles related to graduate

\(^2\) This study seeks to learn about admissions professionals’ perceptions of what mechanisms of communication are effective. The “effectiveness” of a mechanism refers to its success in influencing students’ decisions to apply and enroll.
admissions and enrollment are largely non-empirical thought pieces (Kranzow & Hyland, 2011; Snowden, 2012; Williams, 2008).

To begin addressing these issues, an understanding of enrollment management (EM) is necessary. While scholar-practitioners offer multiple perspectives and descriptions to characterize EM, the literature shares some standard concepts. EM is more than just admissions procedures and gatekeeper functionalities within a university. It is the proactive, strategic, coordinated, and data-driven approach to the student-centered activities that occur within universities that affect enrollment. This includes marketing and recruitment activities, the awarding of financial aid, projections of class-sizes and faculty-to-student ratios, the development of support services and other student retention tools, as well as admissions (Bontrager, 2008; Henderson, 2008). The strategies employed by EM practitioners will inform the research methodology and data collection process for this study. A review of essential EM concepts, theories, and strategies will be included in chapter two. To gain a comprehensive understanding of this research problem, chapter two will also include a review of the literature related to graduate admissions and institutional/school-based culture.

**Student choice theory in a graduate context**

Much of the literature on admissions and enrollment management is focused on understanding and identifying the factors that influence the decision making of students as they move on to enroll in college (and later graduate/professional school). Student choice theory, a guiding theoretical orientation in this literature, is concerned with questions about how students determine their enrollment. These questions include: (1) who enrolls (e.g. the demographics, previous education, or socio-economic status of the applicant pool) (2) how students determine to which schools they apply and (3) what factors contributed to the selection of the institution of
ultimate enrollment (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Poock & Love, 2001). A significant literature on undergraduate college student choice details reasons why college-going students prepare and decide to enroll in a specific undergraduate institution (Hossler, 1982; Lay & Maguire, 1980; Perna, 2006). Shifting demographics, increasing institutional competition, varying enrollment patterns, and a growing call for accountability have elevated the need for similar knowledge at the graduate level (Poock & Love, 2001). Although the literature on graduate student choice remains sparse, articles that explore factors that influence graduate student enrollment do exist.

Most of the articles that address graduate student choice mention the absence of literature on the subject (Kallio, 1995; Perna, 2004; Poock & Love, 2001; Ramirez, 2011). Kallio (1995) examined graduate students at the University of Michigan, noting that theories regarding the enrollment decision process did not exist and that the “need for greater understanding of why students choose to attend graduate school and how they go about selecting one” was pressing (p. 109). Almost twenty years later, this need is still present. It should also be noted that the majority of articles focused on the graduate level are over ten years old and use survey data that are potentially no longer relevant (Kallio, 1995; Perna, 2004; Poock & Love, 2001; Stiber 2000; 2001). However, these articles provide a foundation for the topic of graduate student choice and serve as a starting point for potential future work on this topic. Additionally, the existing literature does not treat graduate student choice as a singular, universal experience. Instead, most articles focus on issues related to a specific discipline (e.g. M.B.A. programs or doctoral programs in higher education administration) or to a specific group of students (e.g. Latino doctoral students or female graduate students) (Poock & Love, 2001; Ramirez, 2011; Stiber 2000; 2001; Treseder, 1995; Waters, 1992). A study on graduate schools of theology or graduate
theology students, however, is not present in the literature.

**School culture and faith-based schools**

Although most articles on choice and the enrollment decision process focus on students, there are limited works that explore the institution itself and its cultural norms, practices, and the transmission of values. For example, the work of Peter Magolda (2001) focuses on the institution and examines how culture is transmitted through the undergraduate admissions tour. Scripted by the college admissions office, the tour—through a series of rituals identified by the student tour guide—delivers cultural expectations and builds community (Magolda, 2001). Studies of faith-based colleges or universities, or faith-based organizations within secular higher education institutions, have further highlighted the importance of culture and community. An ethnographic study by Magolda and Gross (2009) at a large Midwestern public university reveals the role that a faith-based subculture/organization plays in sustaining community at a public institution. Morey and Piderit (2006) examine Catholic higher education, identifying the critical role of mission in creating welcoming campus cultures. By providing recommendations for the implementation of strategies to promote on-campus inclusion, they note the importance of balancing dominant group members and others. For example, the promotion of a Catholic campus identity should not happen at the expense of those who are not practicing Catholics (Morey & Piderit, 2006). While these studies provide valuable insight into faith-based schools and culture at undergraduate institutions, a study that applies similar ideas of transmitting culture to prospective graduate students does not exist.

**Enrollment management and Bronfenbrenner’s ecology framework**

Various factors affect enrollment decision-making. As previously established, enrollment management developed as an institutional response to address these multiple factors.
Those engaging in EM must consider not only the economic, geographic, sociological, psychological, and academic reasons for enrollment, but also the culture of institutions (Dennis, 1998). To help identify the various stresses and influences on graduate student decision-making, EM can be viewed within a framework that applies the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1993). This theory, which examines interactive development within the context of nested relational layers, can help explain interactions between both individuals and institutions. By applying Bronfenbrenner’s (1979; 1993) ecology concepts to EM, a series of microsystems (the interactions closest to the individual, involving face-to-face relationships and direct contact) emerge that both challenge and encourage graduate school enrollment. Additionally, an ecology framework for EM accounts for these issues of capital within the microsystem level (Perna, 2004). It is at the exosystem level, the layer encompassing larger social and institutional factors indirectly impacting the individual, that admissions professionals can help shape communications and recruitment strategies that might have a positive impact on enrollment. Through communication and interaction, including the accessing of online resources, the reading of print materials, or in-person contact, EM brings an individual’s exosystem into his/her microsystems. A full description of Bronfenbrenner’s theory will appear in chapter two.

**Significance of the study**

In creating a study to address the research question, both the gaps in the existing literature and the need of practitioners for usable enrollment management information were considered. The relevant research has been largely undergraduate-focused and the majority of studies have used quantitative methods (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Perna, 2006). Even those studies that address graduate-level programs have taken a quantitative research stance (Poock & Love, 2001;
A goal of this study is to add new scholarship to a number of significant issues and areas: (1) the field of graduate education, specifically the topic of graduate admissions and enrollment in a faith-based context, (2) the role of institutional and school culture in graduate admissions and enrollment, and (3) the role of admissions professional, especially as communicator of school culture. This study also attempts to add a qualitative perspective to a topic that has been addressed largely in quantitative terms. As graduate schools engage the enrollment challenges previously outlined, practice-based research will provide resources and strategies to effect change in an admissions/enrollment context. This study seeks to provide admissions professionals with information regarding potential strategies, programming, and practices to best communicate culture as a means to positively influencing enrollments. With this goal in mind, the findings of this study will be shared with the participants and the ATS.

Overview of the study

A study including a qualitative research perspective is ideal for understanding how admissions professionals communicate culture. Qualitative research is appropriate because this study will be exploratory given that little is known on this specific topic. Additionally, the expression and communication of culture requires a qualitative approach. According to Merriam (1998) and Yin (2003), qualitative research is appropriate to answer “how” questions, like how admissions professionals learn about culture and how that culture, through various mechanisms, is successfully communicated to prospective graduate students.

Sampling and data collection

This is not a study on how students receive messages about culture. Rather, this study is focused on admissions professionals and how they communicate culture for the purpose of influencing graduate school enrollments. As institutional agents, admissions professionals
control what messages they deliver, how they deliver them, and to whom they deliver. While the results of this study could later inform a study involving students and culture, addressing this topic from a student perspective would require consideration of multiple confounding sources, both institutionally and non-institutionally generated (e.g. independent graduate school websites/guidebooks like Peterson’s and Princeton Review, word of mouth from alumni and others, and impressions of culture from other institutional sources like faculty or administration not directly connected to the admissions office).

The sample for this study is graduate admissions professionals who work at schools of theology throughout the United States and Canada. The Association of Theological Schools (ATS), the accrediting organization for the majority of theological schools, was very helpful to me in obtaining greater access to this sample. The number of admissions professionals working at each school can range depending on school size. Larger schools, like Duke Divinity School, have up to five admissions professionals working for the school; smaller schools might only have one (Association of Theological Schools, 2013).

The study employs three forms of data collection. Two hundred thirty-six ATS school admissions professionals were contacted via a web-based survey about institutional culture, how institutional culture is communicated to prospective students, and how admissions professionals learn their institution’s culture. In-depth interviews with eight admissions professionals were conducted, exploring questions of effective mechanisms of communication and challenges specific to the field of graduate admissions. Finally, documents were gathered, in the form of printed viewbooks and online screenshots of ATS school webpages, analyzing web text to confirm and connect the data collected during the survey and interview process.
Positionality

It is important to note my role as an admissions professional who has worked in admissions offices in arts and sciences, education, and theology and ministry settings. In inviting research participants, I disclosed my status as both an admissions professional at a peer school and a doctoral student conducting dissertation research. Initially, my role helped gain me access to this group. As someone who has worked in the field of graduate admissions and enrollment management for over ten years, I believe there are ways for institutions to inform and improve their practice in regard to supporting prospective students. In my own work, I have found that communicating a school’s culture through marketing/recruitment and supporting the mission of a school have proven to be effective factors in influencing enrollment decisions for graduate students. The use of the survey and large sample size hopefully controlled for my potential bias. In approaching the data interpretation process, I remained aware of my interest and motivation in this research question. Also, I stayed conscious of the opportunity to view the research process as a valuable joint learning occasion, not just a required exercise of investigation on a group of outside individuals (Ryan, 2006; Wolcott, 1990).

Chapter outline

This dissertation consists of five chapters. Chapter two is a review of the relevant literature. To gain a comprehensive understanding of this research problem, it is helpful to have knowledge of the literature related to graduate admissions and enrollment, institutional- and school-based culture, and faith-based higher education. The scope of the review in chapter two includes the literature that provides a graduate-level context, however some of the literature related to undergraduates will also be included. Chapter two also includes a treatment and application of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979; 1993) ecology theory. Chapter three describes the
study’s mixed-methods research design and methodology in detail, including a discussion of my plan for data analysis, limitations, and research issues. Chapter four will present my research findings and provides a discussion of these findings. Finally, Chapter five will focus on the implications of my findings in light of the relevant literature and theoretical rationales, recommendations for practice and theoretical development, and recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER TWO
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter will provide a context for the discussion of communicating culture in graduate admissions by introducing a review of the pertinent academic and theoretical literatures related to enrollment, culture, and student development. Traditionally, explicit admissions and enrollment strategies were focused on the undergraduate level. Those charged with issues of graduate enrollment, however, have adapted these strategies within a graduate context. The scope of this literature review includes articles pertaining to issues of graduate enrollment, as well as some of the explanatory literature describing different approaches to enrollment management (EM). EM is an institutional concept designed to help colleges and universities gain control and influence over their student enrollments. The organized, synergistic set of activities comprising EM serves as a guide for this study.

The first section of this chapter will discuss EM, including its history and development as an approach within higher education. As Kurz and Scannell (2006) point out, institutions approach and define EM in different ways: “enrollment management means different things at different schools, and that is precisely how it should be. There is no one-size-fits-all, cookie-cutter approach. In truth, there can't be if it is to continue to serve American higher education, whose trademark is its diversity of mission, purpose, size, and control,” (p. 82). Building on EM’s diversity, this section of chapter two will also look to identify distinctive characteristics of enrollment management performed at the graduate level. A recent post-baccalaureate synthesis of EM by Snowden (2012) will help to provide structure to the limited number of research articles that address graduate EM. The many reports and case studies of institutions using EM to
address issues of financial aid, marketing, recruitment, and EM office structure are only tangentially related to this study and are not reviewed here.

The section that follows begins with an examination of the enrollment decision process, reviewing student choice theory and enrollment choice theory. Student choice identifies specific steps that students advance through as they make their enrollment decision. Enrollment choice acknowledges an institution’s role in a student’s decision-making, highlighting the importance of communication and combining EM with student choice to create a full picture of the activities taking place during the process. Articles focused on graduate-level student choice, especially Kallio’s article in 1995, provide a foundation for considering unique factors involved in the enrollment decision process for graduate students.

The next section explores institutional culture in higher education, one potential factor in the enrollment decision process. As Dennis (1998) points out, enrollment managers must evaluate the economic, geographic, sociological, psychological, and intellectual factors motivating potential students, as well as the culture of their institutions (p. 9). The importance of culture to those engaged in EM cannot be underestimated. Literature pertaining to culture at faith-based schools and schools of theology is included in this section. Building on the importance of communication, a subsection on how culture is communicated within a higher education context is also included.

Chapter two concludes with a section detailing the theoretical framework of this study, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979; 1993) ecological systems theory. After describing the theory, a treatment of enrollment management within the context of ecological systems theory is provided. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979; 1993) theory is useful in understanding the direct and indirect factors that may influence a student’s enrollment decision. Institutional culture, one such factor
involved in enrollment decisions, can be understood through ecological systems theory and highlighted in a number of ways (both through in-person experiences and through online or in-print mechanisms). The idea that graduate admissions professionals can potentially influence enrollment decision-making by connecting students with institutional culture serves as the basis for this study.

**Enrollment management**

While authors offer multiple perspectives and descriptions to characterize EM, the literature shares some standard beliefs. EM is more than just admissions procedures and gatekeeper functionality within a university. It is the proactive, strategic, coordinated, and data-driven approach to the student-centered activities that occur within universities that affect enrollment. This includes marketing and recruitment activities, the awarding of financial aid, projections of class sizes and faculty-to-student ratios, the development of support services and other student retention tools, as well as admissions (Bontrager, 2008; Henderson, 2008). As a concept, EM has existed for over 30 years (Henderson, 2008). During much of this time, the attention of EM practitioners and EM literature was on the undergraduate level. However, as the need for graduate programs to strategically address problems of enrollment, the concept of EM has expanded to the graduate level.

Graduate-level focused EM, despite lacking a distinctive literature of its own, is beginning to gain momentum as a movement within the larger enrollment management conversation. Demographic changes and institutional priorities have fueled this emergence as a new generation of students becomes eligible for graduate programs and institutions respond to this demand and opportunity (Hossler, 2008). In the era of the “multiversity,” an idea articulated by Clark Kerr (2001), the concept of university moves beyond one “single, unified community”
Therefore, outreach to potential students is no longer limited by mode or medium—nontraditional students and nontraditional delivery systems must be considered in graduate-level recruitment strategies. And as Snowden (2012) points out, the diversity among types of students and how they can access education (traditional campus-based versus online) creates potential increases in the population eligible for graduate education. With these changes, Kallio’s (1995) call for a greater understanding of why students decide to pursue graduate education and choose a specific institution is even more important now than twenty years ago.

**History and definitions**

While there are unique characteristics of graduate EM, many of the ideas and concepts are shared with its undergraduate foundation. To understand how EM can be effective at the graduate level, it is important to understand how it was originally developed for an undergraduate audience.

EM initially came into being as a coordinated response to a specific institutional problem: In the mid-1970s, a number of institutions faced serious enrollment deficits. Most notably, Boston College (BC), which in the 1970s served as a regional commuter college rather than a national research institution, faced multiple institutional threats, including: (a) the need to increase and diversify the undergraduate student population despite a national decline in the number of graduating high school seniors; (b) the desire to improve the university’s prestige, remain competitive regionally and become more recognized nationally; (c) and the requirement to focus on revenue in order to overcome financial difficulties (Epstein, 2010; Henderson, 2008). Administrators at BC—chiefly Jack Maguire and Frank Campanella, who served as dean of admissions and executive vice president, respectively—responded to the challenges by developing a strategy that removed the traditional silos that often kept functions like recruitment,
admissions, financial aid packaging, retention, and data tracking separate, and joined them in a coordinated effort. They termed the coordinated processes that resulted “enrollment management,” beginning a movement that continues to evolve and develop over forty years later. Within the EM literature that followed, Maguire’s first application of EM, at this important juncture in BC’s history as a problem solving mechanism, serves as the starting point for a majority of authors (Dolence, 1993; Henderson, 2008; Hossler, 1984; Huddleston, 1980; Maguire, 1976).

Much of the literature on EM has been focused on defining and explaining what it is: Is it a concept or theory? Is it a collection of activities? Does it involve research? Is it all of these things? (Dolence, 1993; Henderson, 2008; Hossler, 1984; Hossler & Bean, 1990; Maguire, 1976). The original definition has been altered and enhanced over the years to include different audiences and orientations, and continues to evolve as higher education scholars and administrators debate EM best practices. In understanding EM’s present and future contexts, it is helpful to investigate its past. Exploring the origins of EM and its development as a concept helps one understand how the literature on the topic evolved.

In the years immediately following the implementation at BC, the EM literature that emerged discussed the use of similar coordinated processes. Many of these articles were not empirical research pieces, however the early EM literature presented valuable suggestions on how to coordinate processes and view institutional structure and organization. The importance of marketing within an EM framework developed early. Tom Huddleston, the dean of admissions at Bradley University in Peoria, IL, began writing about the relationship between marketing and higher education, noting that it should not be limited to realm of admissions.
Marketing, as he saw it, should be driving institutional change and the development of new organizational structure:

There needs to exist an administrative component that formally examines the needs of internal and external student publics and considers the most appropriate organizational structures to further define and support their needs. This group of units should become the foundation for institutional marketing efforts (Huddleston, 1980, p. 4).

The units Huddleston envisioned included offices like admissions, financial aid, orientation, advisement, retention, and career services. The idea that EM could be both a concept and a set of procedures also developed in the early 1980s. In the first book on EM, Kemerer, Baldridge, and Green (1982) introduced eight interdependent procedural activities that defined EM: clarification of mission, program development, marketing, recruiting, admissions, financial aid, orientation, and retention. Henderson (2012) notes that Kemerer, Baldridge, and Green’s greatest contribution to the EM literature was introducing structural strategies to describe EM as a concept:

Every major researcher and practitioner to follow would refer to and refine the Kemerer, Baldridge, and Green architecture of the “marching millions” enrollment committee, the “somebody has enough time” to be enrollment coordinator, the “shared turf” matrix with multiple senior officers cooperating to reach enrollment goals, and the full-blown enrollment division with its own senior officer (p. 7).

In the mid-1980s, Don Hossler took a theoretical approach to advancing the EM conversation, positing that research could improve practice. Student financial aid and college pricing joined marketing and recruitment as essential components to the ideal EM plan. Hossler’s first book on EM (1984) built on the previously expressed ideas that EM should involve coordinated and
interdependent institutional units. Hossler’s model of EM involved the entire campus, and included academic and career counseling, orientation, retention, along with student-centered offices like athletics, residential life, student activities, and counseling services (Hossler, 1984; Hossler 1986). A few years later, Hossler revised his definition of EM to one that remains relevant and useful today:

An organizational concept and a systematic set of activities designed to enable educational institutions to exert more influence over their student enrollments. Organized by strategic planning and supported by institutional research, enrollment management activities concern student college choice, transition to college, student attrition and retention, and student outcomes. These processes are studied to guide institutional practices in the areas of new student recruitment and financial aid, student support services, curriculum development and other academic areas that affect enrollments, student persistence, and student outcomes from college (Hossler & Bean, 1990, p. 5).

Reliance on data-driven decision making and institutional research signaled that enrollment management was developing into a serious enterprise. This updated definition also highlights EM’s dual position as both a functional, procedural concept encompassing activities like recruitment, financial aid, and student services, and as a framework for research on student college choice, access, and persistence.

Beginning in the 1990s, organizations began to support EM as a topic for national conferences. The American Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), which was already publishing articles on EM in its journal, College and University, began hosting the Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Conference in November 1991. The SEM Conference has grown from its early years with an attendance of 200 to a robust conference
of over 1,000 attendees, addressing EM in diverse contexts including international, community college, and graduate-focused sessions (Henderson, 2012). Reflecting the success of the SEM conference, which described strategic enrollment management, authors began defining SEM characteristics. Dolence (1993) defined SEM in language that was both familiar and advancing: “SEM is a comprehensive process designed to help an institution achieve and maintain the optimum recruitment, retention, and graduation rates of students, where ‘optimum’ is defined within the academic context of the institution” (p. 2-3). Here, it is EM’s connection to the academic context that advances the conversation. For Dolence, EM and academics are dependent upon each other. Quality academic programs can only be developed and maintained under stable enrollments and stable enrollments are dependent upon the successful planning, development, and execution of academic programs (Dolence, 1993). The adoption of the concept that EM and academics are linked has continued to fuel conversations for higher education scholars and EM practitioners, as well as organizations like AACRAO. The academic connection, for example, stresses how important and influential faculty can be in enrollment and retention, given their ability not only to influence decision-making but also to work with students upon their arrival as advisors and instructors (Dolence, 1993; Kalsbeek, 2006). The academic connection is especially pronounced at the graduate level, where faculty members make admission decisions and often work one-on-one with research and teaching assistants (Snowden, 2012).

In synthesizing the various descriptions and definitions of EM throughout its short history, David Kalsbeek (2006) organized EM into four distinct orientations that stress the core aspects of EM along with its interdisciplinary nature. The four orientations are: the administrative orientation, which focuses on the coordinated and integrated institutional
processes that comprise EM; the student-focused orientation, which highlights the care of students who benefit from or participate in EM activities within an institution; the academic orientation, which stresses the creation of programming and curriculum that is accessible and that promotes student persistence; and the market-centered orientation, which focuses on institutional context in terms of market position in comparison to competitor schools and how to improve this position (Kalsbeek, 2006). These orientations nicely summarize the development of EM since its origins at Boston College—EM is a concept that is both administrative and academic in nature, it attempts to focus on students as the beneficial receivers of EM’s strategies, and it is intimately tied to market trends and competition.

**Graduate enrollment management**

Missing from the majority of EM’s historical narrative is the application of EM in a graduate context. Most of the EM concepts described in the section above were uniformly developed with an undergraduate model of education in mind. Although it has received little attention in writing, graduate enrollment management can potentially serve as an example for the larger EM community. Graduate education, by nature, varies significantly across institutions (and even greatly within many institutions) in terms of academic disciplines, structures, graduate student populations, and the role graduate education plays within a particular university’s mission and strategic plan (Williams, 2008). The possibility of a single, cohesive unit managing graduate enrollments is often unrealistic given different graduate schools and administrative offices within a single university. In the lone journal article in AACRAO’s *College and University* addressing graduate enrollment management (GEM), Williams (2008) argues that this structural diversity can serve as a strength. In working to promote Kalsbeek’s (2006) four EM orientations, the fact that graduate enrollment managers are often already used to collaborating
across campus offices is an advantage: “GEM’s decentralized and collaborative nature—often viewed as an organizational weakness by senior administrators more comfortable with the traditional centralized and hierarchical undergraduate model—has become a key factor in the merging of these multiple perspectives” (Williams, 2008, p. 57). Echoing Kalsbeek’s work, Williams (2008) identifies GEM as distinctly student-centered, since most admission decisions are discipline-specific and holistic, as opposed to concerned with creating an entering class that accounts for representation across disciplines (i.e. a well-rounded entering graduate class). Instead, admissions offices, and more often, faculty within departments are interested in recruiting individual students who are connected to the specific school, program, or faculty member.

Williams’ (2008) article is also valuable as it acknowledges the perception that at universities with both undergraduate and graduate programs, the resources and attention are often directed to the undergraduate side of the house. The author is realistic about the presence of resources, noting that graduate enrollment has traditionally received fewer resources than undergraduate enrollment management, even at institutions where graduate students are in the majority. However, Williams notes that in the context of tightening budgets, GEM has long needed to be cost effective, continually searching for solutions to do more with less and seeking out better technologies and resources to get the job done (Williams, 2008).

In a recent book chapter, Monique Snowden adds to the GEM conversation by discussing enrollment management in a postbaccalaureate context. Snowden’s (2012) work identifies the diversity in how graduate education is currently offered, ranging from programs at traditional undergraduate/graduate institutions to specific graduate or professional institutions:
Cutting across the landscape of higher education, postbaccalaureate education is delivered in different modalities at predominantly undergraduate institutions; freestanding professional schools; freestanding graduate universities and institutes; university-affiliated continuing studies/professional and extension schools; and public university extension agencies. Organizational configurations and educational delivery models abound, and akin to baccalaureate education, there is a phenomenon that remains a constant for postbaccalaureate education: *Enrollment matters.* (Snowden, 2012, p. 181)

Despite the differences in delivery, Snowden (2012) identifies faculty involvement as a unifying factor in postbaccalaureate EM. While the importance of faculty in the EM process is not exclusive to the graduate level, the discipline-specific nature of graduate education does make the role of program faculty in hands-on activities like recruitment essential to attracting new students and sustaining current ones. In this way, the role of faculty in GEM is similar to the role of high school personnel in affecting access to college (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). The effects of faculty can even be seen from indirect faculty activities—faculty scholarship and faculty reputation both serve as attracting factors for graduate students (Snowden, 2012).

Snowden (2012) also identifies the graduate learner as unique and unlike the undergraduate student. Combining adult learning theory and learning in adulthood, Snowden introduces a new orientation (building on Kalsbeek’s (2006) four orientations) to address EM at the graduate level, which she calls the learner-centered orientation. This learner-centered approach views the student as learner and is concerned with supporting learning development, measuring learning outcomes, and creating academic programs to support specific needs (Snowden, 2012, p. 188-193). This orientation is especially appropriate for graduate education as students enter with a variety of expectations, educational backgrounds, professional and
vocational requirements, and life experiences. Despite the plethora of educational structures and academic degree (and non-degree) programs at the graduate level, a learner-centered approach to EM provides some unity—regardless of educational field, the focus remains on the student as learner. Snowden (2012) offers this orientation in order to advance the overall EM conversation, as well as call attention to the specific interests of postbaccalaureate learners.

**Critiques of enrollment management**

While enrollment management originally developed as a positive solution for institutions facing enrollment challenges, recent critics of EM have described it as being too institutionally focused at the expense of the student. Increased scrutiny on issues like access originally forced institutions to introduce EM strategies, including factors like the strategic awarding of financial aid or the use of targeted marketing and recruitment, to positively impact enrollment efforts (Bontrager, 2008; Hossler, 1984). However, more recently EM has been viewed as a factor in perpetuating a “winner-takes-all” mentality. With college’s aiming to recruit the best and the brightest, EM has been blamed for privileging the already privileged and perpetuating access and equity in admissions and financial aid practices, (Hossler & Kalsbeek, 2008, p. 4). Arnold, Lu, and Armstrong (2012) describe EM’s relationship with financial aid distribution as negatively affecting access for low-income students, especially access to private colleges. Instead, institutions use EM to “purchase” the most talented students, in order to help institutions increase their rankings and reputation. As a result, middle- and upper-class families, who avoid paying full tuition bills with the support of institutional and federal aid, often benefit the most from EM financial strategies (p. 72). While approaches such as improving selectivity or enhancing the academic profile of an incoming class—ideals that critics have cited as detrimental to higher education’s relationship with the public and social good—could be part of an enrollment plan,
policies within EM can also work to increase diversity, expand access, and promote institutional mission (Hossler & Kalsbeek, 2008).

**Student choice theory**

In attempting to apply enrollment management to an academic context, Don Hossler, together with his colleague, Karen Gallagher, developed a theoretical model to help understand how students decide on attending college. Their student choice model is concerned with decision-making questions of students in the enrollment process, and includes questions like: (1) who enrolls? (2) how do students determine to which schools they apply? and (3) what factors contributed to the selection of the institution of ultimate enrollment? (Poock & Love, 2001). Like enrollment management, student choice theory was originally developed using an undergraduate model. Consequently, there is a significant literature on undergraduate college student choice, detailing reasons how college-going students prepare and decide to enroll in a specific undergraduate institution (e.g., Hossler, 1982; Lay & Maguire, 1980; Perna, 2006). Shifting demographics, increasing institutional competition, varying enrollment patterns, and a growing call for accountability have elevated the need for similar knowledge at the graduate level (Poock & Love, 2001). Although the literature that exists on graduate student choice remains sparse, articles that explore factors that influence graduate student enrollment do exist. This section will first explore some of the foundational studies on student choice, and then examine those articles specific to graduate enrollment.

**Student choice model**

Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) college student model involves three distinct phases that students move through during the enrollment process: predisposition, search, and choice. Figure 1 organizes the three stages by factors involved and outcomes achieved. The first stage of
Hossler and Gallagher’s model, predisposition, involves the development of students’ college aspirations and expectations. The outcome of this phase is the determination of students that they do (or do not) want to attend college and their entry into the next phase in the process of beginning to search for specific schools. Search, the second phase, describes a student’s formation of a set of choices (a list of schools) and specification of important institutional characteristics for where to apply. And finally, in the choice stage of Hossler and Gallagher’s model, students use information collected through the entire process to make an educated decision on where to attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

Figure 1. Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) Model of College Choice Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Influencing Factors</th>
<th>Student Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predisposition</td>
<td>Individual factors:</td>
<td>Students decide:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student characteristics</td>
<td>College is an option</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family/Significant others</td>
<td>Alternate option to college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educational activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational factors:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School characteristics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search</td>
<td>Individual factors:</td>
<td>Students decide:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Preliminary college values</td>
<td>Set of college choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student search activities</td>
<td>Alternate college options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational factors:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How schools search for students</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>Individual factors:</td>
<td>Students decide:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Choice set</td>
<td>Where to attend college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational factors:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>College courtship activities</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
While Hossler and Gallagher (1987) are mostly concerned with the student outcomes of their model, the organizational/institutional factors they describe—especially the courtship activities—connect to Hossler’s roots in EM. Additional authors have added to Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model by identifying and expanding on the influential institutional characteristics involved in the choice process. College cost, financial aid, location, academic abilities, and reputation have all been found to play an important role for undergraduate students in the college choice process (DesJardins, Dundar, & Hendel, 1999; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Perna, 2006).

**Enrollment choice theory**

In an approach that combines student choice theory (which views the matching of student and institution from the student perspective) and enrollment management (which views this process from the institutional perspective), Adams (2009) introduces the idea of enrollment choice theory. Like the college choice theory of Hossler and Gallagher (1987), enrollment choice theory includes three institutional steps that mirror the student steps Hossler and Gallagher use in student choice theory. These new steps—planning, communicating, and selecting—reflect the institutional side of college choice and provide another helpful way for institutions to think about supporting students throughout the enrollment process. The idea behind enrollment choice theory, that institutions can mirror the developmental decision-making steps involved in college choice, allows for institutions to anticipate and support the enrollment process. Additionally, Adams’ model highlights the importance of communication in the enrollment process, as institutions must communicate with students throughout every stage (predisposition, search, and choice) of college choice.
Graduate student choice

Although college student choice theory has been focused at the undergraduate level, there are a few articles that apply this idea to a graduate context. In fact, most of the articles that do address graduate student choice make mention of the absence of literature on the subject (Kallio, 1995; Perna, 2004; Poock & Love, 2001; Ramirez, 2011). It should also be noted that the majority of articles focused on the graduate level are already dated and use survey data that are potentially no longer relevant (Kallio, 1995; Perna, 2004; Poock & Love, 2001; Stiber, 2000; 2001). However, these articles provide a foundation for the topic of graduate student choice and serve as a starting point for potential work on this topic in the future. The literature that exists does not treat graduate student choice as a singular, universal experience. Instead, most articles focus on issues related to a specific discipline (e.g. M.B.A. programs or doctoral programs in higher education administration) or to a specific group of students (e.g. Latino doctoral students or female graduate students) (Poock & Love, 2001; Ramirez, 2011; Stiber, 2000; 2001; Treseder,
Graduate student choice is also not a completely unique concept from undergraduate student choice and shares many similar factors (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Kallio, 1995; Poock & Love, 2001). The following section outlines what has been written on graduate student choice and attempts to identify similarities and contrasts between graduate and undergraduate experiences, as well as identify overall themes within the graduate experiences.

In beginning to understand graduate student choice, scholars have applied models to the decision making process. Kallio (1995) establishes two hypotheses to guide her subsequent work. First, she determines that selecting a graduate school is a multilayered and complex process. A number of factors are involved: specific student characteristics, engagement in information gathering activities, an institution’s actions during the process, and institution/program characteristics (p. 110). Second, and unique to graduate education, the factors that might influence this process could differ for younger and older graduate students depending on life stage development—particularly in terms of familial and work influences.

Stiber (2000; 2001), in a descriptive study on business school programs, develops a model based on consumer/student behavior called the Business School Enrollment Process (BEP). BEP involves the stages of problem recognition, search, alternative evaluation, choice, enrollment, and outcomes and is described, in a similar way to Kallio’s model, as a highly involved process (Stiber, 2000). Stiber (2000) first developed the BEP to examine factors involved in doctoral enrollment, but subsequently applied the same model to understanding master’s enrollments (2001). Other studies have built on Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-stage model of student choice by applying it to graduate audiences. Poock and Love (2001) focus on Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) third stage (“choice”) by applying choice theory to doctoral students applying to programs in higher education administration using a survey they developed called the Program
Choice Questionnaire. A set of doctoral dissertations also uses Hossler and Gallagher’s model. For example, Waters (1992) applied the model to international graduate student choice and Treseder (1995) used it to examine decisions of students in an M.F.A. program. More recent studies have diverged from these multi-step process models to examine graduate student choice in terms of social and cultural capital theories\(^3\.\) Perna (2004) combines social and cultural capital with an econometric framework to address the complexities of the decision to pursue further studies. She identifies that once a student graduates with a bachelor’s degree there are several options: enroll in a graduate program, enroll in a professional school program, pursue foreign study, or enter the workforce on a full-time basis. A family’s current financial situation, how a family perceives debt, and current full-time employment status are all factors that play a role in the decision to attend graduate or professional school (Perna, 2004).

Factors including race, ethnicity, gender, and class affect graduate school choice. Ramirez’s (2011) use of a multiracial feminist perspective, which considers race, gender, and class as structures of inequality, allows her to suggest that race, class, and gender are all equally important in understanding Latinos’ experiences with graduate school choice. Perna (2004) posits that gender and cost are related, as men and women (and their families) may view the benefits and cost of a graduate education differently. Kallio’s (1995) concern about a potential shortage in the academic pipeline for doctoral students to meet the needs of the growing college-

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\(^3\) Social capital is a concept articulated by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) referring to the connections and social networks one possesses. A lack of social capital has been used to explain why college application and attendance rates are lower for some student groups than others. In contrast, studies on the effective use of social capital, for example in college preparation programs and college bridge programs, have shown improved access and retention rates (Gandara, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2011; Tierney & Jun, 2001). Cultural capital refers to the insider knowledge one possesses that can be used and passed on to future generations. Discussions guided by cultural capital theory often revolve around a lack of cultural capital regarding college-going, due to low parental education levels or socio-economic status (Bourdieu, 1986; Tierney & Jun, 2001).
going population, is echoed by Ramirez (2011), who writes more recently on Latino student experiences with graduate school applications. Low college access for students of color can have serious negative implications for future diversity within the academy. A shortage or underrepresentation of doctoral students of color, which could then affect future faculty representation, could in turn have deleterious consequences for undergraduates and their access to social capital within a university context (Ramirez, 2011, p. 205).

The literature identifies influential factors on post-baccalaureate choice that are both similar to undergraduate issues and unique to graduate education. Poock and Love (2001) found that, like college choice, factors influencing the choice of a potential program were reputation of the program, reputation of the institution, reputation of the faculty, opportunity for financial aid, and location. Unlike undergraduate college choice, factors involving faculty members were rated very high in their survey, including friendliness of faculty, positive interactions with faculty, and unsolicited contact from faculty (Poock & Love, 2001). In his two articles addressing program choice for doctoral and master’s students in a business school, Stiber (2000; 20001) identifies similar findings: quality faculty and responsive faculty were rated highest followed by the importance of how programs were advertised and marketed. Kallio (1995) also identified the importance of additional factors unique to graduate choice: spouse, family, and/or work considerations. This finding echoes an earlier study from Olson and King (1985) identifying the importance to prospective graduate students of academic issues of grade point averages and standardized tests, as well as logistical issues of educational and living expenses and employment opportunities for themselves and/or a spouse. Even though these findings are almost 30 years old, these concerns are still relevant. Work by Perna (2004) found that salary potentials and job preparation remain a top influential factor and Ramirez (2011) has found that
institutional standardized tests requirements, like the Graduate Records Examination (GRE), continue to serve as a deterring factor.

Although EM originally developed to address undergraduate issues of declining enrollment and tightening budgets, the coordinated concepts of EM are also applicable and have great potential for graduate education. With graduate enrollments declining in recent years and becoming more difficult to predict from year to year, an approach like EM, which relies on historical data as well as marketing and recruitment strategies, provides institutions with strategies to face these challenges. New scholarship, like Adams’s (2009) linking of student choice theory and enrollment management and Snowden’s (2012) introduction of a new EM orientation, also provides those scholars and practitioners interested in graduate enrollment with an approach that acknowledges the unique needs of the graduate student population.

**Institutional culture**

The following section briefly discusses institutional culture, especially within a higher education context. This is not meant to be an exhaustive review of the literature related to culture, but is intended to provide a context for discussing culture in the context of graduate admissions. In shifting topics from enrollment management to institutional culture, it is important to identify the connection. In providing a practical guide to EM, Dennis (1998) raise two important connections between EM and culture. In forecasting the challenges in moving from the 20th to the 21st century, she predicts the necessity for colleges to align their enrollment programs according to their traditions, history, and mission (Dennis, 1998). As institutions continue to compete for a more diverse group of potential students, it is imperative for institutions to communicate who they are to these potential students. As Lincoln (2012) notes, most school leaders can agree that they share goals of cultivating learning, knowledge, and
training. However they also want to communicate that there is something distinctive or that they have a way of doing things that separates their school from others (p. 205). Exploring more of the literature on institutional culture will provide an understanding for what this distinctiveness might entail.

**Defining culture**

Culture presents an interesting challenge for those seeking to research it because it is (or can be) defined in many ways (Kuh, 1993; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; 1993; Valimaa, 1998). Within higher education, the study of culture has evolved from primarily investigating student cultures to looking at academic cultures, cultures within institutions of higher education, and higher education itself as a distinctive culture (Tierney, 1988). In seeking to define (or at least describe) culture within a higher education setting, scholars have provided helpful working definitions and models for understanding culture in a higher education context.

In 1988, Kuh and Whitt provided a definition that serves as a foundation for much of the research on culture in higher education that followed. Noting, “almost as many definitions of culture exist as scholars studying the phenomenon,” (p. iii) they begin their study on culture in American colleges and universities by providing a helpful working definition:

> This report defines culture as *persistent patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that shape the behavior of individuals and groups in a college or university and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off campus* (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 5-6). (Emphasis in original)

To study culture, Kuh and Whitt (1988) recommend observations, interviews, and document analysis as appropriate methods of inquiry. The implications of their study are valuable in that they establish culture both as a powerful tool in articulating the distinct nature of a college or
university and as a complex concept. According to Kuh and Whitt (1988), in order “to understand and appreciate the distinctive aspects of a college or university, examine its culture” (p. 8). Its complex nature can make culture challenging to learn: “institutional culture is so complex that even members of a particular institution have difficulty comprehending the nuances” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. 8). These implications make an admissions professional’s role complicated because a singular method of learning culture does not exist.

Tierney (1988) provides a second definition and model of institutional culture within higher education. In this definition, culture is “reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it. It concerns decisions, actions, and communication both on an instrumental and a symbolic level” (Tierney, 1988, p. 3). Building from this definition, Tierney recommends a series of concepts (environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership) that should be evaluated by cultural researchers. Tierney has organized these concepts into a framework of organizational culture. Subsequent studies have used Tierney’s (1988) framework to advance research on culture in higher education (Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Valimaa, 1998). Studies that followed Tierney have used his framework in diverse ways, including viewing culture’s role in attracting, supporting, and promoting institutional change (Kezar & Eckel, 2002) and exploring higher education’s distinct academic culture and identity (Valimaa, 1998).

The framework of organizational culture that Tierney (1988) presents includes the following cultural dimensions: environment, mission, socialization, information, strategy, and leadership. While the framework shares a standard list of factors, these dimensions may be interpreted differently depending on the institution, allowing it to be widely applied. Within the context of higher education and graduate admissions, for example, it may be very important for
an institution to highlight one or more dimensions (e.g. connecting environment and mission through a choreographed campus tour) as part of its marketing and communications efforts. Magolda (2000; 2001) in his examination of the campus tour ritual notes that socialization and information (two of Tierney’s cultural dimensions) are highly visible in the campus tour. Tours allow for the admissions office (or the institution itself) to communicate what behavior is “normal” and to control who, what, and how information regarding the institution is transmitted. Magolda’s work will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

**Culture within theology and faith-based schools**

The limited number of studies examining institutional culture and theological schools provide a good foundation for this study. These studies employ quantitative and qualitative methods to examine dimensions such as student culture and administrative culture, and how online learning culture is involved in an on-line learning setting (Bloomberg, 2007; Lincoln, 2012). Although none of these studies discusses how an admissions office might use culture in the communication process with prospective students, their findings offer valuable insight to the role culture plays within the specific context of theological schools.

In his study on how theology students receive central institutional messages at a Presbyterian seminary, Lincoln (2012) examines how theological schools approach communicating messages of culture. A school’s central message (a dominant factor in a school’s culture) is best “disclosed in experience and may or may not cohere with official statements that a school makes about itself” (Lincoln, 2012, p. 206). There is, therefore, a consequence to showing and experiencing rather than just telling. In Bloomberg’s (2007) case study of a Jewish distance-learning program, a sense of culture was maintained throughout video conferencing, despite the challenge of lacking a physical classroom. Video technology provides students, like
those Bloomberg (2007) encountered, with intimacy, immediacy, and interaction (p. 51).

Although the students engaged in the Jewish distance-learning program interacted through digital means, the video conferencing technology enhanced their ability to experience the program together, reinforcing Lincoln’s (2012) emphasis on the power of experiencing culture.

The findings of Lincoln’s (2012) study, which involved interviews of 37 students, show two dominant messages: community and professional training for ministry. Thirty-seven percent of female students (as opposed to only 19 percent of male students) chose community as the leading message. Lincoln (2012) provides a summary of how they described community:

> Even though *community* is the cheesy buzzword, we are an open community for people to come and discover God. Hopefully, it’s an encouraging, supportive kind of community.

> The message is the winsome community message. We are here to have a theological education, but the most important thing is that we maintain community within our group. We are all interdependent (p. 209).

“Community” has been examined in other studies, as well. In a quantitative study conducted at a large urban, Catholic institution, Ferrari, Cowman, Milner, Gutierrez, and Drake (2009) report that faculty and staff differ in their outlook on sense of community. Employees within faith-based institutions, while often connected to the values of the institution’s mission (an important component of culture), are not necessarily interested in religious practices on campus. They may instead be interested in other activities (e.g. global and urban engagement activities) that connect to the college or university’s mission but are not necessarily related to religious practice or faith-formation (Ferrari et al., 2009).

The dominant message among male students in Lincoln’s (2012) study was training for ministry. This message refers to the practical and professional training in skills needed to
become a pastor, as well as balancing the academic curriculum with their calling to Christian ministry. In discussing the overall culture of the institution, Lincoln (2012) describes student reception of culture as a contest between the students’ pre-existing beliefs and the students’ openness to new experiences after enrolling: “The culture-producing forces of the seminary recast this sense of call and specified particular value, roles, and styles for ministers; [the seminary] transformed how students understood their vocational calling” (p. 213). To better understand how culture affects students, Lincoln (2012) recommends that institutions perform an audit or survey of how they communicate culture to students to learn what is perceived as important and effective. A discussion of communication strategies that might be included in such an audit is included in the following section.

**Strategies for communicating culture**

Lincoln’s (2012) study demonstrated the importance of institutional culture within a theological school context and identified a need for institutional awareness of how that culture is being communicated. Additional research examines these strategies for communicating culture. Tierney (1988) called for further study on academic organizational culture to better understand how communication is connected to culture. In the years since, articles have connected culture and communication within the higher education context, looking at successful mechanisms such as the campus tour (Magolda, 2000; 2001). More recently, improvements in technology, including web and social media, have provided new mechanisms for communicating and marketing an institution’s culture. This subsection explores both in-person mechanisms and virtual marketing strategies for communicating culture.

Marketing strategies within higher education, through channels including social media, web, and print, allow institutions to virtually communicate their cultures to prospective students.
However, marketing and communications within higher education can be complex, especially concerning culture. It can be especially complicated because applying to college or graduate school is not an everyday event for most students. Institutions have the added pressure of clearly communicating what they are about to consumers (potential students), who are not likely familiar with the process in which they are engaging (Canterbury, 1999).

Accessible communication tools, like social media, which include interactive sites like Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook, make the task of communicating culture potentially easier for higher education institutions. Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2011) identify communication through social media as an area where institutions of higher education can improve their messaging. Research has shown social media, which often relies on user-generated content, is not yet used as widely as other marketing channels (Boyd, 2008; Association for Graduate Enrollment Management, 2014; Noel-Levitz & Association for Graduate Enrollment Management, 2012). User-generated content (in this case, student- or applicant-generated), as opposed to supplier-generated content (institutionally-generated), allows for peer-to-peer communication and participation, which empowers student consumers but makes institutional control of a definitive narrative difficult. In an era of growing social media usage, clearly admissions professionals are not the only people communicating culture. Additionally, the rise in social media usage has reduced student trust in institutionally produced forms of marketing, e.g. view books, webpages, and mass e-mail communications (Constantinides & Zinck Stago, 2011; Nambisan & Nambisan, 2008; Shankar & Malthouse, 2009).

At the graduate level, admissions professionals have recognized this shift in marketing and communications. Building on the AACRAO’s organizational commitment to strategic EM, the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management (NAGAP), formerly known as the
National Association of Graduate Admissions Professionals, serves as a leading professional
ingorganization committed to EM at the graduate level. NAGAP has existed as a professional
development organization for over 25 years, and has recently begun surveying its membership to
learn demographic information, as well as information regarding successful recruiting and
communications practices. In a study conducted by NAGAP and Noel-Levitz of almost 250
respondents, the perceived most effective recruiting practices were identified by institution type
(private, doctorate-granting; public, doctorate-granting; private, master’s-only; and public,
master’s-only), (Noel-Levitz & NAGAP, 2012). In reading through the report of the results, it is
not clear, however, how “effectiveness” was defined. Respondents were given the options: “very
effective,” “somewhat effective,” “minimally effective,” and “method not used.” The rating of
each method and frequency of use are provided by institutional type in the results section of the
report. Results show that “follow up by e-mail with students whose applications are incomplete”
and “graduate program web pages” were ranked highly effective across institution types.
Respondents at doctorate-granting institutions ranked “campus visits for admitted students” as an
effective form of recruitment, signaling the potential importance of having prospective students
interact with current students and faculty and experience the campus in person.

Additional research indicates that experiential and interactive forms of communicating
culture may potentially be the best way to transmit culture within higher education. Magolda
(2000; 2001) addresses this transmission by examining the campus tour. His study, which
involved interviews with tour organizers and experiencing the tour itself several times, stresses
the power that the ritual of the campus tour can have on the communication of cultural
expectations: “The tour is more than an instrumental task of transporting guests around campus
conveying technical information. It is one of many formal rituals that transmit the institution’s
political, social, environmental, and cultural expectations and norms for perspective members” (Magolda, 2001, p. 2). The tour delivers, through expert storytelling, a script that communicates a plethora of institutional information and history. More importantly, Magolda (2001) identifies the tour as a vehicle for “creating and sustaining community” (p. 3). Throughout the tour, guides point out opportunities for students to connect with existing groups (e.g. the Honors Program or the Center for Black Culture and Learning), creating powerful ‘see yourself there’ moments.

These moments create an emotional and informational impact on the enrollment decision-making process, recognizing the human need for belonging and relational interaction (Magolda, 2000; 2001).

Magolda (2001) also indicates that as technology advances, the reality of virtual campus tours will make experiencing institutions online more possible:

I predict the university’s expanded use of the World Wide Web (for example, through virtual tours and distance education seminars) will no longer necessitate that students set foot on the campus, much less interact face to face with faculty, staff, or peers and thus being considered a community member. These changes will not likely squelch one’s thirst for community; they will only alter the flavor of the tour experience (p. 6).

Magolda’s prediction over 10 years ago has played out through increased usage of new and social media on university webpages. Recent advancements in video and digital technologies have pushed some campus tours entirely online. The site Youvisit.com, for example, allows prospective students to watch guided tours or to customize their experiences by clicking on exactly the information they seek.

While the research of Magolda (2000; 2001) focused on prospective undergraduate students, this study explores how the communication of culture might occur at the graduate level,
particularly in a theological school context. Magolda’s tour involves prospective undergraduate students, interested in such cultural components as the popularity of study abroad programs, the history of the university’s library, students’ commitment to community service, and faculty-student relationships (Magolda, 2000; 2001). However, the usefulness of this ritual could be extended to graduate admissions – especially given NAGAP and Noel-Levitz’s (2012) research on the perceived effectiveness of campus visits for admitted graduate students. Magolda’s work also emphasizes the idea of community, an idea that should be explored further at the graduate level. Previous studies have already identified community as a leading component of institutional culture for theology schools (Ferrari et al., 2009; Lincoln, 2012). This study examines the role that community plays in conveying culture through in-person mechanisms and through virtual channels of communication.

**Ecological systems theory**

Previous research has established the significance of institutional culture for prospective students and their enrollment decision-making (Bloomberg, 2007; Lincoln, 2012; Magolda, 2000; 2001; Tierney, 1988). The next section involves a treatment of the enrollment experience as a developmental process, discussing the importance of connecting cultural factors to a student’s immediate environment. Using the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1993) as a framework, this study explores the effectiveness of direct and indirect forms of communication on graduate enrollment decisions.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979; 1993) theory serves as a particularly helpful framework for understanding the complex direct and indirect individual and environmental influences and factors (i.e. an individual’s ecology) involved in graduate school enrollment decisions. A number of theories exist that include a person-environment contextual lens to examine student
development (Banning & Kaiser, 1974; Ford & Lerner, 1992; Lerner, 1991; Tinto, 1993). The advantage to using Bronfenbrenner’s theory as the framework in this context is that it examines the development that occurs from specific interactions between individuals and the layers of their environment. Originally applied to child development, Bronfenbrenner’s theory has been previously applied in higher education (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012; Renn, 2003; Renn & Arnold, 2003). Viewed in a higher education context, the theory can help inform the creation and implementation of institutional policies and programs. For example, enrollment management involves the coordination of institutional activities and programming to affect student decisions related to application and enrollment. Through interactions that can often be controlled and coordinated by the admissions office, institutions can positively influence enrollment decisions.

Bronfenbrenner identifies layered relationships that are nested (each layer is contained within the next) and interdependent. Together these layers form an individual’s overall ecological environment. Bronfenbrenner labels these ecological layers, which range from those that directly affect and involve the individual’s environment to those that have distant and indirect effects on choices, options, and decisions, as follows: (a) the microsystem level, the layer closest to the individual involving face-to-face relationships and direct contact; (b) the mesosystem level, the layer of interaction between an individual’s microsystems; (c) the exosystem level, the layer encompassing larger social and institutional factors that indirectly impact the individual; (d) the macrosystem level, the overarching layer containing cultural and societal values; and finally, (e) the chronosystem level, the layer pertaining to time and its importance to the overall environment in terms of when and how events happen. Development within the context of an individual’s layers of relationships focuses on four main components:
process, person, context, and time (PPCT). Together the elements of PPCT interact to either produce pro- or anti-developmental results.

**Process, person, context, and time**

Strong microsystems are integral to the development process, as solid relationships can be very influential. The work of Renn and Arnold (2003) uses Bronfenbrenner’s theory within a college student development context. They describe the occurrence of a group of strong microsystems as a “consonant mesosystem,” an environment in which one’s microsystems support each other (Renn & Arnold, 2003). The exosystem level is also very important, as many factors have indirectly influenced the choices individuals make, experience, and have access to. In choosing a college or graduate school, for example, institutional policies (which exist at the exosystem level) can impact the decision making process. At the highest levels, factors like cultural expectations and the current economic climate play a role within the macrosystem. These issues may also affect the perceived opportunities one has or the roles to which one is expected to conform. Finally, age, birth order, and current societal events, can all play a role in terms of timing and the chronosystem.

Bronfenbrenner discusses the way that environmental contexts influence individuals’ development with the idea of proximal processes. Bronfenbrenner (1995) and Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) describe proximal processes as those primary activities that take place between the individual and the environment on a regular basis. In order for optimal development to occur, these proximal processes should invite complexity from the individual experiencing the activities, i.e. positive development occurs if individuals have the opportunity to be involved in regular activities that grow in sophistication over time. A higher education example of a
proximal process would involve interactions between a student and faculty advisor that grow in depth and sophistication over the course of an academic year.

At the person level, Bronfenbrenner identifies “developmentally instigative characteristics,” those qualities that are most likely to affect how an individual will interact within his/her environment. Renn and Arnold (2003) further explain these characteristics and apply them directly to college students, identifying the concept of “selective responsivity,” the ability to engage and explore the surrounding environment. In a higher education context, selective responsivity could refer to the decisions one makes to join organizations, engage in campus activities, or even move on to further, more complex education. Those individuals with a predisposition to seek out more challenging activities may prove to have stronger structuring proclivities, the tendencies to search for more demanding pursuits.

Using Bronfenbrenner as a framework to evaluate college student development is extremely helpful in identifying the importance of PPCT to student experiences and their overall environment. The ecological systems theory is also useful in recognizing the larger contextual forces at play, including financial challenges and cultural/societal expectations. For example, financial barriers might prevent students from relocating to a new city to pursue a graduate program or might require them to seek on- or off-campus employment while enrolled in school. Pressure to obtain a high paying job may also play a role in development. Applying a framework like Bronfenbrenner’s ecology theory to college student development can further aid colleges and universities in responding to the challenges that certain students (first-generation students, for example). Colleges and universities might also, by creating policies and practices within the exosystem level, use Bronfenbrenner’s model to help influence enrollment. The final section of this paper discusses how this application might look.
The ecology of enrollment management

The concept of enrollment management (EM), which is proactive in nature, is concerned with identifying and understanding factors that might encourage or impede enrollment. The literature, discussed earlier, indicates that at the graduate level there are factors that are both similar to undergraduate EM and unique to graduate students (Kallio, 1995; Perna, 2004; Poock & Love, 2001). To help identify these various stresses and influences on student decision-making, EM can be viewed within an ecology framework. This section attempts to view EM within Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecology systems theory framework in two ways: (1) by describing the factors that affect student enrollment both directly and indirectly and (2) by discussing how admissions officers might use EM concepts to bring those indirect factors into direct contact with students through coordinated recruitment activities and interactions.

By applying Bronfenbrenner’s ecology map to EM, interactions between an individual’s microsystems in the mesosystem emerge that both challenge and encourage enrollment in graduate school (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Renn & Arnold, 2003). For example, the mesosystem relationship of a current job might prevent someone from enrolling in graduate school because (a) the level of work required for the job cannot be balanced with coursework, (b) time restraints of the job prevent class attendance, or (c) physical job attendance does not allow relocation for a graduate program located in another state. In contrast, others might have microsystems that encourage graduate school enrollment. Also in the microsystem, existing faculty mentors or a peer group with graduate-level educational aspirations could provide direct, positive support and influence regarding applying to graduate school. In the literature on factors affecting graduate enrollment Perna (2004) identifies the role of social and cultural capital. An ecology framework for EM accounts for these issues of capital within the microsystem level. For example, the
microsystem of family could potentially be a positive or negative influence on the decision to apply to graduate school. Some students may postpone or dismiss the idea of applying because
of family demands; others might belong to a family in which all members are focused on education, creating a culture that would encourage further enrollment.

The exosystem and macrosystem levels in Bronfenbrenner can also help explain challenges to enrollment. Figure 3 depicts a Bronfenbrenner ecology map that details factors that affect enrollment. In the exosystem, issues like the employment landscape (i.e. the likelihood of desirable employment following the completion of a particular degree) and the state of the economy are factors that play into the enrollment decision of many, especially those thinking of pursuing a professional degree (DeSantis, 2012). Additional issues within the exosystem include institutional financial aid policies and institutional academic offerings (programs, format (i.e. online vs. bricks and mortar), and faculty). It is at the exosystem level that admissions professionals can help shape the institutional priorities that might have a positive impact on enrollment. Simultaneously, it is imperative for admissions professionals to remain aware of macrosystem issues that might pressure the exosystem, like the role of religion and spirituality in American culture.

Essentially, the shaping and coordinating of these priorities is exactly what EM is. Hossler’s model of EM involved the entire campus, and included academic and career counseling, orientation, retention, along with student-centered offices like athletics, residential life, student activities, and counseling services (Hossler, 1984; Hossler 1986). EM is concerned with: (a) the creation of recruitment programming (prospective student open houses, in-person graduate recruitment fairs, and accepted student visit days); (b) the creation of marketing materials (now both print- and web-based materials); (c) the creation of policies (that recognize the stresses imposed by macrosystem issues—financial aid and scholarship priorities might be one policy); (d) the coordination between admissions and academics (e.g. advising, registration,
transferring of credits); and (e) even the creation of resources and virtual space for those “stealth” applicants—those who might prefer to remain incognito during the admissions process (Hoover, 2008). A successful enrollment manager is then able to take these priorities, which exist in the exosystem and exert an indirect influence on an applicant, and transform them into microsystem interactions that directly affect and influence an applicant’s decision to apply to graduate school and ultimately attend a specific institution.

To recall and apply Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model of college choice theory, it is the organizational influencing factors (e.g. school culture and characteristics, courtship activities) coming into contact with the individual that is important. These contacts and connections can be viewed as “proximal processes.” During the college search process, the contacts and connections with potential schools and their representatives serve as the primary activities that take place between the individual (the prospective student) and his/her environment. As prospective students get closer to the decision-making point, the processes students face grow in complexity and seriousness. EM offers a range of strategies, through different forms of coordinated communication and interactions, which help support students’ enrollment decision-making.

**Conclusion**

In developing successful strategies to communicate culture, it is essential for graduate admissions professionals to understand the principles encompassing enrollment management and institutional culture, as well as strategies and theories for connecting the two. As institutions continue to experience challenges to graduate enrollment, this understanding is imperative to sustaining existing enrollments and hopefully reversing any declining enrollment trends.
This study addresses these practical concerns, as well as gaps in the existing enrollment literature. To understand graduate enrollment, there must be a foundational comprehension of how students approach the process of enrollment decision-making. Student choice theory has given graduate admissions professionals, along with scholars and researchers, a framework to examine the factors and steps involved in the college (and later graduate school) decision-making process. More work, especially at the graduate level, should be conducted on student choice to determine if these factors have shifted in recent years, given the declining trends in graduate enrollments. This study, although focused on graduate admissions professionals as opposed to students, provides an updated approach to the choice process that is informed by Bronfenbrenner’s ecology theory, enrollment management, and field research.

Very little research-based scholarly work exists on the topic of EM. This study adds to that EM literature, providing a focus on graduate-level EM and graduate admissions professionals themselves. This is especially important since little has been written on graduate enrollment issues and most articles in this subject area are student focused. Of particular note, articles that do address graduate enrollment management (Kallio, 1995; Poock & Love, 2001; Stiber 2000; 2001) rely largely on quantitative work. This study combines a survey with qualitative interviews to provide a full perspective including voices from graduate admissions professionals on how they approach the task of communicating culture.

Enrollment management sits at the intersection of many concepts, including marketing/communications, financial aid distribution, and decision-making. EM provides a unique and collaborative institutional perspective that is useful in understanding how students and institutions relate to each other. This study builds on this idea of relationship, examining the following issues: the role of culture in the graduate enrollment process, how culture is
communicated throughout the enrollment process, and how graduate admissions professionals engage prospective students around the idea of culture. The next chapter details the methods, which included both a survey instrument and interview protocol, involved in developing and conducting this study.
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH DESIGN

Introduction

This study was based on the need to increase understanding of how admissions professionals communicate culture to prospective graduate students. The current lack of understanding has significant implications for practice in graduate admissions, as well as serious enrollment implications within the field of graduate education. This study explored the focal topic of culture in graduate admissions within the context of an ecology framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1993), suggesting the importance of gaining an understanding of influential factors at both the individual and institutional level. With greater comprehension of these factors, opportunities to influence the communication of culture, and therefore to influence graduate enrollment decisions, can be identified.

This chapter describes the approach used to conduct this study. The chapter begins by restating the research question and sub-questions that guided this study, followed by details of the design and methodology. The data collection instruments, a web-based survey and an interview protocol will be presented. The data analysis procedures will be explained in detail, followed next by a section on how the data will be presented and reported. Specifics on sample composition and the process used to obtain my sample will also be explained.

Research questions

As stated in chapter one, the main research questions and sub-questions appear below.

Main research questions.

Are graduate admissions professionals conscious of communicating institutional culture as part of the admissions process?
And, if so, how do graduate admissions professionals communicate culture to prospective students?

**Sub-questions.**

What mechanisms, strategies, and media are used to communicate this culture?

What mechanisms, strategies, and media are perceived as most effective in communicating culture to prospective graduate students?

How do admissions professionals learn and understand their institution and school’s culture?

**Research design and methodology**

In order to address the lack of empirical research on issues related to graduate admissions and to broaden the understanding of admissions professionals and their roles, I conducted an exploratory study of graduate admissions professionals working at schools of theology throughout the United States and Canada. A study involving a qualitative research perspective was ideal for learning how admissions professionals communicate culture. As Merriam (2009) suggests, qualitative research is concerned with learning and ultimately interested in improving practice. According to Merriam (2009) and Yin (2003), qualitative research is also appropriate to answer process questions that ask “how.” This study asked these process-related questions, like how admissions professionals shape culture and how that culture, through various mechanisms, is successfully communicated to prospective graduate students. The expression and communication of culture in higher education has been previously studied using qualitative research approaches (Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Kuh, 1993; Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Simplico, 2012; Smart, Kuh, & Tierney, 1997), so it was appropriate to apply qualitative methods to this study involving culture. Additionally, this study employed a qualitative design to address a gap in the
existing scholarship, which is largely quantitative (Kallio, 1995; Perna, 2004; Poock & Love, 2001; Stiber 2000; 2001).

Critiques of qualitative methodology include its lack of generalizability and ability to be replicated (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992; Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; Chamberlain, 1999; Reichertz, 2009; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2003). With these critiques in mind, this study involved a mixed-methods research methodology in order to provide as full and complex a context of graduate admissions professionals as possible. This study defined admissions professional as an institutional administrative officer whose position includes overseeing the admissions and recruitment processes. These processes involve determining the best mechanisms to represent and communicate specific institutional traits, characteristics, requirements, and other information to prospective students. Admissions professionals are often involved in developing and participating in these mechanisms. According to this definition, admissions professionals are not faculty members, graduate students, or support staff members.

First, a web-based survey was conducted of admissions professionals. A statistical, quantitative survey analyzes frequencies and relationships among characteristics of a population. This research tool was paired with qualitative inquiry to explore the diversity within a population rather than just the distribution (Jansen, 2010). This approach and the use of a qualitative survey as Jansen describes was well-suited for my study, which sought to explore and describe differences and similarities in the patterns and practices of graduate admissions professionals as they work to communicate culture to potential students. As questions and categories of communication were developed based on the previous literature, the survey was pre-structured or deductive in nature. For example, the survey explored diversity in the nature of communication channels (online, in-person, in print, over the phone), which were pre-determined. Some
advantages and characteristics of statistical, quantitative surveys applied here. First, a web-based survey was a useful and effective tool in reaching a large sample. Second, although I was most interested in analyzing the data through qualitative coding methods, the survey tool created the opportunity to report descriptive statistics regarding the sample group. Finally, the survey tool allowed respondents the option to remain anonymous, which helped to encourage greater completion rates (Fink, 2013; Merriam, 2009).

My research design paired this survey with semi-structured interviews. As Jansen (2010) notes: “In explorative surveys, well-performed interviews or observations may produce valuable sophisticated knowledge by concurrent validity checking (probing, replicating, triangulating)” (para. 35). These interviews were conducted after the administration of the survey in an attempt to do the following: (a) provide a more full and complex account of admissions professionals’ experiences related to the topic of communicating culture; (b) fill gaps in the data collection process from the survey; and (c) corroborate both the deductive elements used to develop the survey and the results of the survey with the interview responses (Fink, 2013). Although this study was largely qualitative—even many of the survey findings were treated in a qualitative manner—strategies of mixed-methods studies still apply. The collection of data through different approaches hopefully promoted greater validity and reliability. Likewise, the dual data sources were complimentary, which allowed for triangulation during the data analysis process.

In addition to the survey results and interview transcripts, I collected a third source of data: documents. I used the same ATS schools contact list used for the survey to collect examples of the marketing and promotional materials they use throughout the recruitment process (i.e., the same materials they would send to a prospective student). These documents (which are a combination of printed and online materials) were then coded to determine if the
same language admissions professionals used in their interviews with me and to some extent the language used in the open-ended answers from the survey were reflected in the actual communications material they produce. Text on both school homepages and main admissions pages were examined.

**Sampling procedures**

As an example of a competitive graduate admissions market, theology admissions was an appropriate focus of study in order to understand how admissions professionals present institutional culture effectively to prospective students. The sample for the web-based survey was determined first. As Jansen (2010) points out in discussing the difference in sampling techniques between quantitative (or statistical) surveys and qualitative surveys: “the statistical survey aims at estimating/evaluating the frequencies of characteristics of units in a population. This aim requires a probability sample” (para. 22). In contrast, the qualitative survey, which seeks to measure the diversity of characteristics or behaviors within the population, calls for a sample that represents that diversity. The goal of diversity could be gained through a large random sample. However, as Jansen (2010) notes, this technique is not always efficient. Instead he suggests a purposive approach to sampling with the intent of achieving saturation by including all of the characteristics or behaviors of the phenomenon or topic being examined.

My study was interested in studying graduate admissions professionals, specifically those working in the field of theology. To determine my sample, I spoke with colleagues working in the field of theology to confirm if there were groups or organizations related to admissions that may already exist in the field. As a result of these conversations, I was directed to the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). The current membership of the ATS includes more than 270 schools and “represents the full range of Christian denominations, including schools in
mainline and evangelical Protestant and Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, as well as multidenominational and nondenominational schools” (Association of Theological Schools, 2015, para. 4). Schools connected to other faiths (e.g. Jewish) can gain affiliate status with the ATS, but are not included as member schools.

For the survey, a purposive criterion sampling technique (Patton, 2002) was used. Those included in the study fit the specific criteria of employment at an ATS accredited school and work in the area of graduate admissions, as well as hold positions charged with communicating school culture to prospective students. Sampling procedures for this portion of the study included working with the ATS to identify admissions professionals. The ATS provided me with a spreadsheet of 236 admissions officers across schools. This number differed from the overall ATS institution number because not every ATS school offers graduate programs or employs admissions professionals. I reviewed this list to make sure all individuals were working at graduate-level schools and that any other issues of quality control were addressed (e.g. I removed myself from the list, as well as my predecessor who was incorrectly included on the spreadsheet). After reviewing and editing the ATS spreadsheet, a digital link to the survey was sent to all of the individuals on the list.

For the interview portion of the study, I reached out to specific admissions professionals working at schools of theology and invited them to volunteer to participate in the study. The goal of inviting specific admissions professionals was to create a representative sample. A representative sample of graduate admissions professionals from different kinds of theology schools (i.e. differing in size, religious affiliation, affiliation with a larger research university) was used so that one type of institution was not over-represented in these interviews (Fink, 2013; Patton, 2002). Because the interview sample was not limited by ATS membership guidelines, I
was able to invite graduate admissions professionals to participate from schools both affiliated and not affiliated with the ATS. Because participants were solicited and then agreed to participate in to the interview portion of the study, there was potential for bias since these volunteers may have agreed to be interviewed because they were more familiar with their schools’ cultures and more familiar with communicating that culture. The triangulation of my data sources, which included data from my survey tool and documents, hopefully helped limit this potential bias. Data triangulation will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Based on the literature, I planned to conduct between 6 and 12 interviews. I continued interviewing until I reached saturation, the point when no new information or themes are observed in the data, a point that research shows generally occurs in the range of six to twelve interviews (Guest, Bunch, & Johnson, 2006). For this study, I reached saturation after eight interviews. My approach to data collection acknowledged several issues related to the sample. Timing was important in administering the survey and scheduling interviews due to the work cycle in the field of admissions and the calendars of individual admissions professionals. The time and availability that these admissions professionals had to spend responding was limited. Additionally, the survey design took advantage of the fact that many admissions professionals had pre-developed responses (both written and verbal) to communicate with applicants that could be used in the survey responses.

**Instruments and procedures**

**Web-based survey**

The survey included 20 questions on how admissions professionals learn and apply culture in order to affect graduate enrollments. The survey began with a section of introductory demographic questions regarding institutional size, institutional religious affiliation, and
respondents’ connection to the institution. For the question regarding institutional religious affiliation (question 2), a listing of denominational affiliations was provided in a dropdown menu. This listing was based on the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) denominational list provided on the ATS website (Association of Theological Schools, 2013). This listing is included in Appendix C. A set of questions on culture—what it is, how it is learned, and how it is used—followed. This section used a combination of Likert scale response questions and survey ranking questions. A concluding section of demographic questions aimed at learning more information about specific respondents. Questions were developed based on the literature related to higher education institutional culture and enrollment management. The questions on demographics were based on a survey conducted by the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management entitled Understanding Graduate Enrollment Management (Association for Graduate Enrollment Management, 2014). The number of open-ended questions was limited to one: “Please comment on any other aspects of how you communicate culture to prospective students and the role you think your culture plays in students’ decisions to apply or enroll.” Other questions included an open field “other” option, where respondents were encouraged to type in their own answer if it was not one of the multiple choice options. The full survey appears in Appendix A. For ease of reference, the selected survey questions and response options are included below.

**Introductory questions.**
Religious affiliation of your institution.

How many total graduate students are currently/typically enrolled at your institution?

How many new graduate students do you typically aim to enroll each year?

Are you an alumnus/alumna of the ATS school at which you currently work?
- I have earned one degree at the school
- I have earned more than one at the school
• I am currently enrolled at the school
• I have a degree from the overall university but not the ATS school
• I have not earned a degree from my current school or the overall university

Questions on culture.

This study asserts that culture can be an important influence in enrollment. This study defines culture as the behaviors, rituals, values, customs, traits, and way of life of a specific community.

When you began your current role, how did you learn about your school's culture? Please rate the following:

• School website
• View book or promotional literature
• Your direct supervisor
• Faculty
• Other administrators
• Program guide/academic bulletin
• Professional development program
• Students
• Other (please list)

When you think about culture and present it to students, which of the following is included? Please rate the following:

• Academic reputation
• Connection to mission
• Location
• Opportunities for applied ministry
• Community
• Student and faculty relationships
• Other (please list)

A mechanism of communication is a tool that aids in the direct or indirect transmission of culture. For example, meeting in-person with students is a direct mechanism. Effectiveness refers to the success you perceive a specific mechanism to have in influencing application and enrollment.

Thinking about the ways you communicate culture, how would you rate the perceived effectiveness of the following mechanisms (from very effective to not effective):

• School webpages
• On-campus visits and events
• E-mails and electronic outreach
• Phone calls to applicants
• Online advertisements
• Social media websites
• Off-campus recruiting events
• Printed viewbooks
• Interviews
• Other (please list)

Thinking about your online resources for communicating culture, how would you rate the perceived effectiveness of the following (from very effective to not effective):
• School webpage content
• Facebook
• Twitter
• Instagram
• School blogs
• Video (e.g. Youtube or promotional videos)
• Online profiles of students or faculty
• Online viewbook
• Online/virtual campus tour
• Other (please list)

Thinking in terms of web browser search engines, what are the words or phrases (buzz words) that you personally use to describe your school's culture (e.g. academic excellence, supportive community, accessible faculty)? Provide up to 5.

How important do you think student's understanding of your culture is to choosing to enroll in your school? (rated from very important to not important)

Additional demographic questions.
Please provide your age.

Please share your full title.

Please provide the name of your institution.

How many years have you:
• Worked in your current position?
• Worked at your current institution?
• Worked in graduate admissions?
• Worked in higher education?

A survey was a useful data collection tool for several key reasons. Although my role as an admissions professional may have gained me an initial level of access to this sample, participants might have been willing to share more details in a survey that provided the opportunity for them to remain anonymous (the question that asked for name of institutional
could have been skipped if they preferred to remain completely anonymous). Providing them with a survey in a less busy period of the academic year (late April – early May) allowed them to answer when it was convenient for them, which might have helped increase the participation rate. Since the research question was concerned with how admissions professionals communicate, asking them to respond first in writing was an opportunity for them to provide responses exploring what they considered best practices (i.e. what was most effective for them in communicating culture). A survey also potentially helped reduce researcher bias, a particular concern given my role and potential bias.

The survey was sent to all who qualified with an introductory letter from my Boston College e-mail address. This letter disclosed both the fact that I was conducting this survey as part of my dissertation, as well as the fact that I was a full-time employee of Boston College working in the field of graduate admissions at a school of theology. I developed the survey using Qualtrics, an online survey creation program. Qualtrics also collected and securely stored the survey responses. Qualtrics was a helpful tool in attempting to achieve as high a response rate as possible. Survey responses encouraged anonymity and confidentiality—responses were not connected to admissions professionals directly (via e-mail address or internet protocol (IP) address). This safeguard provided a level of reassurance, in that the survey design accounts for respondents’ privacy (Fink, 2013). At the conclusion of the survey, Qualtrics directed respondents to a separate webpage that allowed them to enter their contact information so that I could send the results of this study to interested participants. Also, Qualtrics directed respondents to an incentive drawing for an iPad. Incentives, like an iPad drawing, have been cited as useful techniques in encouraging participation (Fink, 2013). Additional features of
Qualtrics allowed me to reach out or follow up electronically with the group of non-respondents, while ensuring their confidentiality.

To increase response rate, the survey instrument included only one open-ended question. As Fink (2013) notes: “All surveys hope for a high response rate. No single rate is considered the standard, however. In some surveys, between 95% and 100% is expected; in others, 70% is adequate” (p. 95). Several additional strategies were used to encourage as high a level of participation as possible. I kept the survey brief: it included 19 questions and was designed to take no longer than 10 minutes for respondents to complete. I originally sent the survey after the traditional admissions season was over in early May. Providing this group with a survey allowed them to answer when it was convenient for them. However, I believe timing still influenced the survey’s response rate and sample size. There was a very positive response to the survey on the days after the survey was immediately sent. However, responses declined quickly after the first week. After the initial four-week survey period, the survey had a 30% response rate. To improve this response rate, I sent out another invitation to take the survey at the end of the summer, accounting for the fact that many admissions professionals might have been on summer vacation when the first invitation was sent. The response rate improved to 43% after this second round (102 responses out of 236). In order to control for any sampling error between early responders and late responders, I compared Likert scale scores on two survey questions (level of integration of culture in recruitment strategies and perceived importance of culture in enrollment decisions) using T-tests. No statistical differences were observed between these two groups for either question, which allows the results of both groups to be generalized to the target population (Connors & Elliot, 1994; Lindner, Murphy, & Briers, 2001; Miller & Smith, 1983).
Interview protocol

Interviews serve as one of the most important sources of information in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2003). Qualitative researchers describe three common structures of interviews: highly structured/standardized, semi-structured, and unstructured/informal (Merriam, 2009). Since I also administered a survey (a tool that serves as a highly standardized way of collecting) as part of this study, I chose to use semi-structured interviews as part of the data collection process. The semi-structured approach allowed for a level of flexibility in asking probing questions and prompting participants for additional elaboration. This approach also recognized the expertise of the admissions professional that were interviewed, by allowing them to share their personal perceptions regarding communicating culture. By structuring the interview in this way, I hoped to create the opportunity for participants to provide responses and data that I was not initially expecting.

The initial draft of the interview protocol, based on the literature related to higher education institutional culture and enrollment management, was informed by an initial analysis of the survey responses. Additionally, questions were adjusted based on a piloting of the interview protocol with graduate admissions professionals at Boston College. The interview protocol consisted of twelve questions. It began with an introductory question aimed at learning about the participant’s experience in higher education and in his/her current role. Next, questions specific to culture explored how graduate admissions professionals learn their school’s culture and how they describe that culture. The interview protocol then investigated graduate admissions professionals’ perceptions of different channels of communication, related to the effectiveness of these different channels. The interview protocol concluded with questions related to the field of graduate admissions, probing for differences that might exist between
recruiting graduate and undergraduate students, as well as challenges that admissions professionals encounter. The final protocol used during the interviews appears in Appendix B. For ease of reference, selected interview questions also appear below.

**Introductory question.**
To begin, can you tell me about your position and the work you do in your current position?

Probe: For institutional context, where is your institution/school located (city/state, urban/suburban/rural)? How many students do you serve?

Probe: For experience context, how long have you been in your current position? How long have you worked in higher education? prior positions?

Probe: What are your day to day responsibilities? Especially -- do you communicate with students? In what contexts?

**Questions on culture.**
Next, let's talk about culture. This study asserts that culture can be an important influence in enrollment. This study defines culture as the behaviors, rituals, values, customs, traits, and way of life of a specific community.

Pretend I am a prospective student, how would you describe your school's culture to me?

Probe: Are there specific words/phrases you use to describe your culture?

Probe: What are the most important aspects of your culture?

Probe: What makes your culture unique?

Probe: What elements of your culture do you think distinguish your school from others?

Probe: Do you think that your culture is a "selling" point?

Probe: Do you have official (canned/saved) language/text that you use to communicate aspects of culture in e-mails and other correspondence with prospective students? What are some key phrases from this text?

Think back to when you began this job/began at this institution… how did you learn about the culture here?

Probe: Were there people that you spoke with? faculty? staff members? students?
Probe: Did you encounter someone you feel communicates culture in an exemplary way?

Probe: Does anything exist in writing that communicated this culture?

Probe: Did you use the internet/institution's website?

Probe: Was the culture easy to learn? Were there things about the culture that were hard to learn?

Probe: Are there things you still feel are unclear to you?

Probe: Has your view of your school’s culture changed or expanded over time?

(For those that this applies to) Would you describe your school/department's culture in a different way than your overall university/institution?

If yes,

Probe: What are the differences?

Probe: Why do you think these differences exist?

What role do you think culture plays in influencing enrollment decisions for your institution?

Probe: How important do you feel culture is as a factor?

Probe: Are there other factors you think play a more important role in influencing enrollment?

Questions on communicating culture.

Communication of culture can happen directly and/or indirectly. For example, an in-person meeting with a student is an example of a direct mechanism of communicating culture.

How do you communicate culture directly with student interactions and indirectly in print and online?

Probe: Do you use social media? Which sites do you use (FaceBook, Twitter, YouTube)? What do you post on these sites?

Probe: Do you have a viewbook? Do you determine the content (as opposed to a separate marketing office)?
Probe: What about your website? Is there multimedia on your website (e.g. video, photo slideshows)?

Probe: Info Sessions? In person? Online video? Online chat? Other formats?

Probe: Other events? On and off campus?

Probe: Recruitment events? What kinds of events do you attend? What materials do you use at these events?

Probe: Do you have policies (admissions, financial aid, or others) that might reflect your culture (and therefore indirectly communicate it)?

Probe: Are there any other mechanisms I haven’t asked about?

Out of the mechanisms you identified, what ones do you think are most effective at communicating culture?

Probe: Are there questions you get often from students about culture? What are they?

Probe: Which mechanisms do you think work best? Why?

Probe: Are there mechanisms you wish you had available but don't?

How are these mechanisms developed?

Probe: Do you and your office have total oversight over this development?

Probe: Are there other offices or populations you work with?

How do you figure out what works?

Probe: How were these assessment tools created? Did you create them or have a role in creating them?

Probe: Have you changed, added, reduced the use of certain mechanisms based on assessment?

Questions about graduate-level admissions issues.
What differences do you think there are in communicating culture with current graduate students as opposed to potential graduate students?

Probe: What are these differences?

Probe: Have you encountered the "helicopter parent" phenomenon?
Probe: Do you think graduate students are looking for different information regarding culture than undergrads?

What challenges have you encountered in communicating culture to graduate students?

Probe: What are these challenges?

Probe: Have you changed anything related to your operation to address these challenges?

Probe: Are there things you would like/are planning to change/implement that might affect communicating culture?

Is there any other information about communicating culture in graduate admissions that you would like to share?

This protocol aimed to collect a certain amount of common data and address certain topics. However, in following a semi-structured interview format, it was important to keep in mind that “the largest part of the interview is guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, and neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time” (Merriam, 2009). I had experience conducting interviews, both for academic and professional purposes. Like my colleagues in the field, I use the applicant interview process to communicate culture and have a level of comfort with this semi-structured format. However, for the purposes of this study, I developed one protocol to follow as a guide, keeping in mind that the order of questions may be altered or additional probes added based on the participant and the conversation.

DeMarrais (2004) defines an interview as the “process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (p. 55). As researcher, my goal was to engage in these conversations face-to-face with the participants. With advances in technology, “face-to-face” has different meaning now than it once did—the
possibility now exists of easily conducting video interviews where reactions, facial expressions, and, even to some extent, surroundings can be observed. When possible, however, the interviews were conducted in person and face-to-face. This allowed for both the observation of gestures and facial expressions and the opportunity to visit campuses and admissions offices. Those interviews that could not be conducted in person, due to geographical distance, were conducted via the video conferencing software Skype.

With the permission of the participants, I recorded each interview for later transcription. At the beginning of each interview, I provided a context for the interview, reminded the participant that they could decide not answer a specific question if they wished, and reviewed the informed consent document, so that the participant was at ease and understood that his or her identity would remain anonymous, as would the institution’s identity. These were important steps in beginning the interview and developing a good interviewer-participant rapport (Patton, 2002; Whiting 2008). In conducting the interviews, given my closeness to the topic, it was important to remain aware of my own potential biases. Throughout the interview process, I constantly attempted to remain as neutral as possible in regard to what was being said and allowed for the participant to fully respond, without sharing my personal opinions or assumptions (Patton, 2002; Siedman, 1991). Since the participants knew I also worked in the field of graduate theology admissions, many asked me questions during the course of the interviews. I think this conversational style was advantageous at keeping the participants at ease and willing to share information, however the possibility exists that they did not fully share information because they viewed me as a competitor.

Interviews were conducted in early fall, before admissions professionals’ calendars grew too busy with recruitment activities. Interviews with each participant lasted approximately an
hour. I planned to conduct between six and twelve interviews, continuing until I reached saturation. Based on the literature, saturation usually occurs in the range of six to twelve interviews (Guest, Bunch, & Johnson, 2006). Saturation was reached after eight interviews.

Table 1 presents a demographic overview of the eight interview participants. The table includes information on graduate admissions professionals’ titles, experience, school size, school affiliation with a larger research university, and their academic connection to the school at which they work. Classifications for the “school size” column include “small” (under 200 total
students), “medium” (200-400 students), and “large” (more than 400 students). The column “alumni status” refers to whether or not interview participants had a direct academic experience (as a current student or alumnus) at the school at which they are now working. Those who did have academic experience at the school at which they now work are labeled with an alumni status of “yes.” Those who had not had that experience were labeled as “no.” Interview participants were chosen from schools with the following denominational affiliations: American Baptist Church, Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, Inter/Multidenominational (two schools), Jewish, Roman Catholic Church, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church. I did not assign these denominational labels to the interview participants in Table 1, because in some cases this might jeopardize the confidentiality of my participants.

**Document collection**

I collected both printed and online materials, which are the primary textual sources of communicating culture in the admissions process. Using the list of ATS schools, I requested copies of printed recruitment materials, including view books and any other documents used in communicating with applicants. Documents were helpful to the data collection process for a number of reasons. Since they were produced for a reason other than this study, documents offered a source of data unaffected by the artificial nature of the data collection process. Additionally, documents were a ready-made, easily accessible source of data (Merriam, 2009) that most admissions offices still use (in one form or another). Viewbooks and other primary source materials created by or in conjunction with admissions professionals, serve as an example of an indirect mechanism of communication to applicants. Admissions professionals determine the content of these documents, deciding what aspects of culture to communicate through text and photography. The applicant then experiences the document at a later time, usually without
the admissions professional present. After receiving these documents in the mail or by e-mail, I determined if they were authentic. Since I issued the request for these materials, the likelihood that they were not authentic was extremely low, however I still verified that they had been sent from an institution and, if possible, that the documents sent were the most recent/currently-in-use versions (i.e. by checking any publication dates).

I also collected online text, taking screenshots of ATS schools’ homepages and main admissions pages and coding the language used. Websites can vary greatly, but these two pages, the homepage and admissions landing page, serve as the pages on which visitors initially form an opinion about a webpage and typically begin their search for information (Lindgaard, Fernandes, Dudek, & Brown, 2011). I examined both the text on school homepages and on main admissions pages. Collecting online materials, as well as printed documents, helped address the issue that some schools no longer print view books and therefore use their website exclusively.

**Field notes**

The use of field notes throughout the data collection process addressed the potential issue of researcher bias. Beginning during the survey phase of data collection, I kept a journal of questions, feelings, and personal opinions as an outlet for expressing this form of observation. As Merriam (2009) notes, there is an important reflexive aspect to field notes, which allows the researcher an opportunity to comment on ideas, feelings, reactions, and speculations in an appropriate format and location. Through the journaling process, I included my own thoughts on this topic and my thoughts on the progress of the data collection process.

Field notes can also serve as important data themselves. I recorded additional notes and observations before and after interviews began, including how I was greeted and if there was anything else that occurred that gave me a sense of the culture or atmosphere of the particular
school. These observations were especially helpful in getting a firsthand sense of a specific culture. There were occasions where additional, valuable information was offered after I stopped recording the conversation. As May (1991) notes, this is especially important since "interesting and valuable data 'come up' as good-byes are being said" (p. 198). Field notes were especially valuable in those situations, where I could indicate what was said even though it was not recorded. Merriam (2009) also explains that field notes provide a valuable opportunity to merge data collection and analysis: “In raising questions about what is observed or speculating as to what it all means, the researcher is actually engaging in some preliminary data analysis. The joint collection and analysis of data is essential in qualitative research” (p. 131).

**Data analysis**

This research design was created to allow for ongoing analysis to take place, beginning with the administration of the survey and continuing throughout my work in the field conducting interviews, collecting documents, and keeping field notes to record the process. As Merriam (2009) advises, the strategy of ongoing analysis accounts for the volume of material to be collected and helps control for issues like repetition in the data. As Merriam (2009) notes: “Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of data involves consolidating, reducing, interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read” (p. 176). Conducting my analysis in multiple, ongoing steps allowed for easier consolidation of data into common themes. This section details how I analyzed the data once it was collected.

**Web-survey data**

Analysis began as I received responses to the web-based survey. First, I used Qualtrics to
run a simple statistical analysis of the descriptive statistics of the sample. As King, Rosopa, and Minium (2011) note: “the purpose of descriptive statistics is to organize and to summarize observations so that they are easier to comprehend” (p. 3). Descriptive statistics allow for the presentation of introductory, summary data on graduate admissions professionals at schools of theology. These descriptive statistics include frequencies, summaries of the number of times or how often a category, score, or range of scores occurs in a data set (Privitera, 2012). Frequencies were used to summarize a large portion of the survey responses. Frequency distributions were useful in an exploratory study like this one because they showed the number of observations within all possible categories for each set of data (King, Rosopa, & Minium, 2011). For example, question two asked for respondents to provide the religious affiliation of their institution. Responses varied across the possible different denominations (possible categories), providing a broad picture of responses. Demographic frequencies are displayed in Table 2 to visually represent the distribution of responses.

I conducted a number of T-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests for two survey questions: (1) the level to which graduate admissions professional incorporate culture in recruiting strategies and (2) graduate admissions professionals’ perceived importance of culture in students’ enrollment decisions. I compared means across a number of independent variables, including school denominations, years of experience of graduate admissions professionals, professional titles of graduate admissions professionals, and alumni status⁴ of graduate admissions professionals. T-tests were used to compare means when the independent variable was alumni status, which only has two values (yes or no). Because there were more than three

⁴ Alumni status refers to whether or not a graduate admissions professional is attending, or has attended in the past, the school at which he or she currently works.
Table 2

**Demographics: Survey Participants**

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**Institutional Religious Affiliation (n=83)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Affiliation</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Episcopal</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
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<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
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<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Professional Title (n=65)**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Professional Title</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coordinator</td>
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<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant/Associate Director</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice-President</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Years of Experience (n=74)**

- **In Graduate Admissions**
  - 0-2: 22%
  - 3-5: 25%
  - 6-10: 30%
  - 11-15: 15%
  - 16 or more: 8%

- **In Higher Education**
  - 14%
  - 16%
  - 35%
  - 19%
  - 16%

---

**Alumni Status (n=89)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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5 The category of “Other” contains responses indicating nondenominational schools, as well as affiliation groups with only one respondent, like “Quaker” and “Church of God.”
levels of school denominations, years of experience, and professional titles, ANOVA tests were used in order to control the probability of committing a Type I error (i.e. rejecting a true null hypothesis). The results of all statistical tests showed that there were no significant differences among any of these groups when it comes to perceiving culture as important or in integrating it to a high level in recruiting strategies.

**Qualitative coding**

Second, I developed a coding scheme to analyze the open-ended survey responses, interviews, and documents. As Fink (2013) notes: “Not all survey data are amenable to routine statistical analysis. Some survey information consists of the answers to open-ended questions and respondents' comments…These data are often called qualitative and are contrasted with the statistical or quantitative data that result from the closed questions associated with most surveys” (p. 131). Following Saldaña’s (2013) approach to coding, responses were coded in stages: first cycle coding, second cycle, and post-coding. This coding model of moving from simple coding to complex themes and dimensions is mirrored in Patton’s (2002) description of content analysis. Content analysis refers to the process of data reduction and sense-making, which results in the researcher identifying core themes and concepts (Patton, 2002, p. 453).

The first level of coding involved identifying objects or codes, which are words or short phrases that represent meaning within the data (Saldaña, 2013). I began by reading through the open-ended survey responses (from questions 13 and 14), making notes and comments in the margins of the response transcripts generated by Qualtrics. This first round of open coding required openness to possible codes and categories (Merriam, 2009). After this first read through was complete and an initial idea of possible categories and classifications was developed, a second read through will be done to begin formally coding the responses (Patton, 2002). Since
the specific language used by admissions professionals to communicate culture was important, I used the In Vivo form of coding. In Vivo coding is concerned with portraying participant voices (Saldaña, 2013). Since this study examined how admissions professionals report their experiences in communicating culture, admissions professionals’ voices were important. I coded the open-ended survey responses with this approach, using my research question and sub-questions (how is culture communicated, what is most effective in communicating it, and how do admissions professionals learn culture) as a basis. For example, I created codes like “SHOW NOT TELL” or “NARRATIVE” to describe how admissions professionals explained their experiences communicating their specific institutional/school culture. Likewise, since I viewed this communication and recruitment as a process, action or process coding was also be used (Saldaña, 2013). For example, codes like “INVITING TO CAMPUS” or “USING SOCIAL MEDIA” were used to indicate actions used by graduate admissions professionals to communicate culture. As Saldaña (2013) indicates, an amalgam of coding techniques may be used to code data in the first cycle. I used the Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) program HyperRESEARCH to help code and analyze these data. However, as Patton (2002) points out: “The analysis of qualitative data involves creativity, intellectual discipline, analytical rigor, and a great deal of hard work. Computer programs can facilitate the work of analysis, but they can't provide the creativity and intelligence that make each qualitative analysis unique” (p. 442). So as not to lose the ability to creatively and intelligently analyze these data, I coded by hand, as well.

Next, I transcribed and coded the interviews. Two independent, outside individuals transcribed the interviews. I then reviewed each transcript for accuracy, making corrections when necessary. For example, there was a mistake in one of the transcripts related to a term used
in admissions jargon that I had to correct on one of the transcripts. After transcription was complete, I immediately began the data analysis process. I began by reviewing my field notes compiled after each interview. This helped give me a sense of the interview as a whole experience and provided positive momentum for coding and developing themes. Following a similar process as the open-ended survey responses, I reviewed each interview transcript, identifying sentences and quotations that provided details on the experiences of admissions professionals in communicating and learning about institutional culture. These sentences and quotes were then turned into codes using In Vivo and process coding (Saldaña, 2013).

I also coded the printed documents and webpage screenshots following the same coding scheme. I used undergraduate interns/volunteers to help with the capturing of webpages and the requesting of printed materials. Text from the printed documents and from the webpages were coded like the open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts. Particular attention was paid to the organizational headings used in the viewbooks and the menu options that appeared on each webpage. Images from viewbooks and webpages, which could have potentially provided a visual representation of culture, were not included because they were not used in a standard way across institutions.

**Connecting and combining the data**

The coded interview transcripts were compared with the codes developed in the surveys, connecting data sources and providing greater comprehensiveness in the approach to data analysis. Coding the interviews using a similar method as the coding of the survey responses but at separate times, allowed for additional codes to be developed from the interviews. Once first cycle coding took place, across the surveys, interviews, and documents, the collective lists of codes were combined. In the second round of coding, pattern coding was used to develop “a
statement that describes a major theme, a pattern of action, a network of interrelationships, or a theoretical construct of data” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 212) across the sources of data. In the second cycle of coding, categories, themes, and concepts were developed from the first round codes (Saldaña, 2013). In a similar way to grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), Jansen (2010) encourages the use of concept-oriented synthesis during second cycle coding to begin developing one core concept based on differences among categories. Finally, in the third level of analysis, multidimensional descriptions were created and used to explain the observed diversity within the results (Jansen, 2010).

Research issues

Validity and reliability

Throughout the research process, a number of steps were taken to address concerns of validity and reliability (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2003). To enhance the validity of this study, the following strategies were employed. Two independent transcribers were used to produce the interview transcripts. Data were collected from various sources, including surveys, interviews, documents, and field notes. The triangulation of these data (specifically from the interviews, surveys, documents—in the form of viewbooks and webpages) showed that each source had strong correspondence with the others, especially regarding the way in which culture was described. Although the findings of this study cannot be generalized beyond the field of graduate-level theology admissions, efforts were made to enhance this study’s usefulness beyond a theological schools sample. To enhance the theoretical transferability of this study, much of the findings section avoided delving too deeply into specifics of theological school culture, and instead focused on more transferable dimensions of the findings, for example, types of communication methods. Additionally, to enhance the credibility and validity of this study, three
member checks were conducted. Member checks involved three of the interview participants reviewing the findings section to affirm the narrative and interpretation that was developed. In these cases, the three participants agreed that the findings were representative of their experiences and of what had been shared in their interviews.

The notion of reliability, the question of whether my findings could be replicated by another researcher, is usually not applied in qualitative research studies (Merriam, 2009; Wolcott, 2005; Yin, 2003). However, to account for the possibility of reliability in this study, I have provided as much transparency in my research process as possible, detailing my methodology, data collection, and data analysis in previous chapters.

**My role as a researcher**

Throughout the entire dissertation process, I have remained aware of my role as an admissions professional and a researcher. I disclosed my dual status as both an admissions professional at a peer school and a doctoral student conducting dissertation research in both the invitation to participate in the survey and the individual invitations I sent to potential interview participants. In gaining access to other admissions professionals for the interview portion of the study, my role provided a valuable advantage. The interviews occurred as flowing back and forth conversations, with multiple participants asking me to share details of my school or my approach to communicating culture. Sharing this information allowed me to obtain a higher level of trust and encouraged openness during the interviews. I question whether my professional role was a benefit to the participation rate for the survey portion of the study. While I received many enthusiastic emails from individuals indicating they would fill out the survey, it took much longer than anticipated to reach the final 43% response rate. Additionally, it appears that no one from my school’s group of peers appears to have completed the survey, and very few
Roman Catholic schools participated, indicating a potential reluctance to participate in a study that might reveal trade secrets to a competitor.

I struggled with my own biases throughout the writing process. Admittedly, I entered this study with opinions on how communicating a school’s culture should take place. In order to avoid inserting my biases into the findings, I painstakingly reviewed the data to make sure the findings that emerged from the study were based on the findings and not a result of my own preconceived opinions. Attempting to limit my bias often involved re-editing sections of chapter four. Despite this struggle, I remain extremely passionate about this research question and believe (even more so now) that the role of culture in the admissions process is a crucial one.

This project has been extremely positive and beneficial for me, having gained the opportunity to learn from many colleagues and share with them. Additionally, the findings have already proven applicable and useful—even before the completion of this dissertation I had the opportunity to apply what I had learned from in this study to my professional role. I look forward to sharing the implications with this study’s many contributors and participants.

**Conclusion**

Chapters four and five, respectively, will present the findings of the study, discuss these findings, and offer implications for practice and for further research. Chapter four presents the findings of this research study. The findings have been organized into three overarching sections: methods of communicating culture, perceived effectiveness of these methods, and learning culture. Chapter five presents the implications of these findings for theory, with theoretical applications related to Bronfenbrenner’s ecology theory and to culture’s role in the enrollment funnel. Suggestions for further research and recommendations for using these findings to inform and improve practice conclude the dissertation.
CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS

Introduction

The findings presented in this chapter are based on an analysis of both interviews and survey responses, which were conducted over a six-month period and queried individuals working in the field of graduate-level admissions at schools of theology throughout the United States of America and Canada. The data suggest that there is consensus among graduate admissions representatives that culture is one of the central factors included in creating a recruitment strategy. The majority of respondents indicated that culture is a factor that is highly incorporated into recruitment and perceived as a very important factor as students make their enrollment decisions. In-person methods of communication were perceived as the most effective mechanisms for both communicating culture to prospective students and for learning about a school’s culture.

Although there appears to be great agreement regarding culture’s perceived importance in the admissions process and how best to communicate it, there is value to be gained in understanding the shared experiences of the study’s participants. The findings in this chapter are organized based on the research question and sub-questions. First: Are graduate admissions professionals conscious of communicating culture as part of the graduate admissions process? Second: If so, how is this culture communicated to prospective graduate students? Two sub-questions expand on the above question. First, what mechanisms, strategies, and media are perceived as effective in communicating culture to prospective graduate students? And, finally, how do admissions professionals learn and understand their institution or school’s particular culture?
Culture and the admissions process

This study suggests that culture matters in the graduate admissions process. Graduate admissions professionals incorporate culture into their recruitment strategies at a high level. All survey participants indicated that they incorporated culture to some degree, with 59% of the sample reporting that they incorporated culture very much. Similarly, survey participants indicated a high perception of culture’s importance in students’ decision-making, with 58% reporting culture is of the highest importance. Ninety-three percent of survey respondents indicated that culture was of highest or high importance. An analysis of survey data, through T-tests and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), indicates no significant differences between groups of graduate admissions professionals—by denomination, title, years of experience, or alumni status—regarding incorporating culture or perceiving its importance. This study suggests that participants perceive culture as effective and use it in their recruiting strategies regardless of their professional title, school’s religious affiliation, years of experience working in higher education or in graduate admissions, alumni affiliation. Table 3 presents an overview of the survey results regarding the levels to which graduate admissions professionals report they incorporate culture in recruitment and culture’s perceived effectiveness in the enrollment process. Because the survey results did not indicate much insight beyond “culture is key” during the graduate admissions process, the remainder of this chapter relies heavily on the interview findings.

Throughout the interviews for this study, participants shared their perceptions of culture’s importance. Most participants ranked culture among the top two or three factors they believed were important to prospective students making enrollment decisions. Other factors mentioned as top reasons graduate admissions professionals believed students enrolled included financial aid, location, and academic offerings. However, culture’s importance was seen as the factor that
might help students decide between two schools that had awarded similar financial offers.

Table 3

*Overview of Culture and the Admissions Process: Survey Results*

| How much do you incorporate culture when you recruit for and represent your institution to prospective graduate students? (n=80) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Extremely incorporated | Very incorporated | Somewhat incorporated | Slightly incorporated | Not at all incorporated |
| 59% | 35% | 6% | 0% | 0% |

| How important do you think students' understanding of your culture is to choosing to enroll in your school? (n=80) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very important | Important | Neither important nor unimportant | Unimportant | Not at all important |
| 58% | 35% | 7% | 0% | 0% |

Matthew shared his impression of the power of culture in decision-making:

*If someone really falls in love with the place, it's not going to matter how much [it costs], I knew I was going to come here no matter what. If I got in I knew, they could have given, they could have charged me extra and I would have shown up.*

Many participants reported that “fit” was a very important concept and directly related to school culture. One survey respondent shared that at his school “students achieve better and are more holistically healthy when they feel like they are in the right place for their personality and interests.” Additionally, culture can serve as an important factor in guiding the types of students
that graduate admissions professionals seek during the recruitment process. As Andrew noted:

“[Culture] affects the type of students we look for, you know, students with more ministry and different experiences bringing together students with diverse student experience is very important for us.”

In addition to the findings on perceived effectiveness and incorporation, the results of this study imply that many graduate admissions professionals talk about culture in a similar way, regardless of their schools religious tradition or theological approach. Although some participants indicated they preferred the terms “narrative,” “environment,” or “community” to describe how a school feels, the aspects of the description are alike. For example, when asked to provide “buzzwords” that described their schools’ communities, the most frequently occurring terms included: community (32), academic excellence/academic rigor (29), accessible faculty (12), spiritual formation (12), and diverse/diversity/inclusive (11).

Interview participants indicated that their descriptions of culture often begin with these larger themes rather than beginning with their school’s particular theological doctrine (if there was one). This level of detail was either reserved for later in the conversation or passed off to a faculty member with subject-area expertise. The following interview excerpts address the question of how participants would describe their schools’ cultures to prospective students. As Sarah explained, culture was an important tool for differentiating her school from its competitors, but her description was not focused on academics:

So I need to immediately define how we are different than our competitors and I would say that our culture has been our brand and our culture is, I would define it as the UC Berkeley equivalent of a religious school and our students are very independent, they're very inclusive. We're very pro LGBTQ. We embrace people who are not necessarily
[redacted, denomination/ethnic group⁶] by birth but invite people who are making decisions to be [redacted, religion] by choice and wish to study it in a graduate program. So, the more that I can talk about the types of individuals who come to our school I think I'm much more successful in gauging prospective students and enrollees. It's the stories that I tell about the individual students and what they're looking for and what their personalities are like and what their journeys have been. I don't go into the academics. It's much later in a conversation. So it would be as if you're considering going to a bed and breakfast and you're into contemporary design. I would be able to say you know, I don't think that this bed and breakfast is really going to cater to your personality but let me tell you about how quaint and how personalized and how boutique our service is and how we really celebrate the uniqueness of each individual and we're a small college and we pride ourselves that this is a culture of a strong community that really is compassionate and cares about one another. So I use all of those descriptors that I think are just a complete culture description. This is who we are and yeah. There were other distinguishers like our student/faculty ration, the type of courses, but from the enrollment perspective I try to create a flavor and a picture and a narrative and then if somebody seems like they're warming up then I'll go toe the next step and say you know, I think at this point it would be helpful for me to put you in touch with the graduate advisor of the school or the dean.

In describing his school’s culture, Joseph indicated he had to make sure potential students understood the ethnic influences on the school’s culture and community, because they permeated all social aspects of the school. Again, very little attention was paid to academic life:

—

⁶ I have redacted words that would indicate a specific religion, denomination, or ethnic group.
Culturally speaking, literally culturally we are [redacted, denominational/ethnic]…So if you are already [a member of this ethnic group] I don't think you realize how [redacted, denominational/ethnic] we are. If you're not [a member of this group], you will feel it. So I definitely try to get across to students that although we are [redacted, denomination] and [that denomination] is our common tie, we are a Christ-centered Christian community.

For Matthew, the discussion of culture begins with the availability of strong scholarship guided by incredible people:

So I would say that we're an ecumenically Christian environment. Our dean likes to say that we are proudly Christian but not narrowly so. We do not have a specific theological lens through which we filter our teachings we simply give you the best available scholarship and practice as possible and we manifest that in a variety of ways. We have three degree programs and I usually go on at that point about degrees. But what makes it more than just kind of an average seminary experience are the people here. The people here are really incredible and we're a world-class research university but we have amazing students who come to us from all over the country and the world.

For Ellen, the presentation of her school’s culture is contextual, depending on the student. In a similar way, however, her description includes what the community is like and highlights some distinct features of campus life, including faculty involvement:

I only ever talk about culture in context of the student’s interests and needs. There are important aspects of the community that all of us in admissions (I hope) are trying to convey, but I am trying to think of an example when it’s come up where I have simply said, ‘Here is what you need to know about what it feels like to be here.’ It probably has
come up in conversation that way, but we talk more about what it feels like to be on campus, what it feels like to participate in the community as a commuter student (whether that means physically or online), and that includes aspects of our curriculum, the way our faculty teach, what it’s like to be in the classroom here, which we think is probably different from what it’s like to be in the classroom at other schools in the area. We talk about what it feels like to be part of worship life, and what it feels like to be part of the campus life. It’s true that [the school] has a culture that values hands-on ministry and that plays out in many different ways in community life here. The fact that we are a residential campus and that half of our faculty lives on campus makes our community life very distinctive. I frequently say we are more like a high school boarding school than you might expect of a graduate school. We are about the same size with about the same sort of feel of having faculty members live on campus.

These findings provide good triangulation of data between survey responses, interview responses, and website data. The buzzword results from the survey were very similar to language found on theology graduate admissions webpages/viewbooks and echoed what interview participants described when communicating culture. Webpages and viewbooks most often highlighted the themes of “community,” “faculty and academics,” and “applied learning/ministry.” As Ellen pointed out, there is nothing revolutionary in how graduate admissions professionals verbally describe culture:

In my experience of observing what schools say about themselves, and then actually participating in a virtual recruiting fair, it’s odd, but schools use a lot of the same language to talk about themselves. What we at individual schools think is distinctive, ain’t so very distinctive. It’s being talked about all over the place…So I try to highlight
the factors that are contributing to community life. Lots of schools talk about their faith community, but what makes the community distinct is that you can’t just use buzzwords. You have to be able to illustrate what that means in that specific context. “Yes! We have a wonderful faith community!” Everybody is saying this, but they need to demonstrate it.

The remainder of this chapter describes how graduate admissions professionals attempt to demonstrate and communicate culture.

**Methods of communicating culture**

Graduate admissions professionals have several methods for communicating culture during the admissions process. This study identifies two different approaches through which the communication of culture occurs: explicit methods of communication and implicit methods of communication. Explicit methods employ outward actions, events, and tools to intentionally convey messages about a school’s culture. In contrast, implicit methods are subtler and include ideas, attitudes, and approaches that subliminally deliver culture messages. This section further details and provides examples of each of these methods.

**Explicit methods**

Explicit methods of communication directly deliver messages about culture to prospective students. Often, explicit methods are purposefully developed by graduate admissions professionals to convey specific aspects of culture. This study identifies three types of explicit methods of communication: in-person mechanisms, virtual mechanisms, and quasi-virtual mechanisms.

**In-person mechanisms.** On-campus visits and events, off-campus recruitment at conferences and graduate school fairs, and interviews are examples of in-person mechanisms for communicating culture. In-person mechanisms involve person-to-person interactions, with
graduate admissions professionals indicating a preference for face-to-face and on-campus interactions whenever possible. The on-campus visit, which was the most commonly identified example of an in-person mechanism for both interview and survey participants, can include a number of components. Visits may include a campus tour; conversations with different constituencies within the school, including admissions office staff members, current students, and faculty members; opportunities to participate in a class session; and other activities central to the culture of the school (e.g. liturgies, daily coffee breaks, shared meals).

Graduate admissions professionals indicated that visits often grow in detail and complexity depending on where an applicant is in the admissions process (e.g. applicants who are deciding if they will apply to a school, applicants who are already admitted). For applicants just beginning the process of deciding where to apply, campus visits may be more general, providing an overview of information. The goal of an early visit is to help potential students determine whether the school meets the threshold required by the applicant in order for him or her to add a specific school to the list of schools to which the applicant will eventually apply. Depending on the seriousness of the applicant, access to higher-ranking members of the faculty and administration is limited. As one interview participant pointed out: “the dean doesn't want to waste his or her time talking to somebody who is kicking the tires.” In the case of an early visit, the graduate admissions professional serves as the main institutional representative, conveying both the culture of the institution and answering questions regarding academics, faculty members, and current students.

For applicants who have already been admitted to a school, the visit can provide detailed information relevant to this point in the admissions process. Admitted student visits tend to be more comprehensive, involving many members of the school community in order to make a
compelling case for the applicant to choose that specific school. As Andrew pointed out, the
goal of a visit at this point in the admissions process is to provide the student with a moment for
them to see themselves at the school—a *see yourself there* moment. According to Andrew,
successful admitted student events allow students to fully experience aspects of the school’s
culture and interact more dynamically with members of the community:

> So the accepted student days are two day events where we invite students who have been
> accepted to the school here to campus to really experience—again, show don't tell—
> experience the culture of the school. So we provide them opportunities to meet with
> faculty and students and hear from them, sit in on classes, and engage in the liturgical
> life. We show them the city they’ll live in and so it really gives students a great
> understanding of what life is like as student and as a result, it resonates with many of
> them and quite a few have made their decisions because of the events.

As Andrew’s experience indicates, graduate admissions professionals work to create a
comprehensive presentation of culture during admitted student days. Details concerning
location, classes, liturgical and spiritual life, and the community are all included. Many
interview participants indicated that showcasing members of the community, through formal and
informal time during these events, is integral to communicating culture. The importance of
connecting potential new members of the community is also an important aspect of these events.
Graduate admissions professionals noted that most accepted student visits involve groups of
admitted students visiting at the same time. By structuring them in this way, there is an
opportunity for admitted students to interact with each other and begin forming relationships. By
crafting these as group events, graduate admissions professionals not only create space for
interactions between current and admitted students, but also opportunities for admitted students
to identify future classmates and potentially establish an early sense of belonging to the school culture.

Additional in-person mechanisms exist, including interviews with applicants and on-the-road recruitment events. Off-campus events lack the advantage of having the school’s environment to provide cultural context. Instead, graduate admissions professionals must use their communication skills to describe and create an image of the school. Although off-campus events prevent graduate admissions professionals from actually showing the school community to a prospective student, the face-to-face conversation still allows questions to be answered and clarified and for the prospective student to have a personal interaction with at least one representative from the school.

**Virtual mechanisms.** Interview participants observed that the opportunity to interact with students in person does not always exist. Additionally, they noted that the first point of contact for the majority of potential students is through a school’s website, printed viewbook, or other virtual mechanism of communication. Virtual mechanisms of communication are tools created by graduate admissions professionals (often in conjunction with other institutional representatives) to convey culture and other information on behalf of the school. School webpages and printed viewbooks are examples of virtual mechanisms. Prospective students experience these mechanisms independently, without an institutional representative present to guide them through the process of learning about the school. Unlike in-person mechanisms, virtual mechanisms are not interactive and rely on human initiative to update them.

**Websites.** Many graduate admissions professionals admitted they would like the text and other content on their websites updated more often than is currently occurring. As Joseph explained, his school’s website consisted mostly of text that had been imported from his school’s
printed viewbook and academic catalog:

But I think if you look on our website and if you look at our materials they're pretty anemic. I mean we have not done a good job—we don't have good materials. Like if you go to our website, there'll be three paragraphs on a degree. It's not interactive, it's not robust in any way saying this is why you should come here, this degree is fantastic you know?

In interviews, most participants indicated that their websites needed significant improvement. Others talked about enhancements that were recently made or would be made soon, but shared the frustration that their websites needed improvement.

In some cases, the available technology did not support the changes that graduate admissions professionals wanted to make. Matthew could identify what he would like added to the website, but did not have the technical knowledge to create the content himself. Multimedia, including video, was cited as an improvement that would be welcomed and very helpful in showcasing the culture of a school. Video content has the ability to actually show, not just talk about, a school’s culture. However, as Matthew confided, creating multimedia content often requires a specialized skillset:

I would love to see more videos on there, short two to four minute videos. I think that would be a really good way to talk about each of the degree programs and the different aspects of the school that are unique. I'd love to see the website be a little bit more updated but I am not a web designer, I do not know what goes into web design.

For others, website changes were scheduled to be made, but were not happening fast enough. As Ellen pointed out, the admissions season is cyclical and, therefore, there is a specific window of time when changes would impact the communication of culture the most: “There is a new
website coming. It’s just not coming yet. And in admissions, we already know…we needed it last spring.”

As a result of technical limitations, interview participants also expressed a concern that their websites did not accurately represent the school’s culture and all that it could offer its students. As one participant pointed out: “It's frustrating to know that that is the web representation from us and that we have all these other things that are so incredible and the website looks like it was designed in 1997.” Another participant expressed concern that the administration was pushing to replace many in-person activities with website enhancements:

Even now we are in the midst of revamping the web because most of the students will, there is a mindset here that most of the students get the information from us from the website and not from personal interaction. Students can, I mean I'm not saying that I think any of this is unique but students can register for the, we have visit days to come and visit on the website as opposed to calling. It used to be solely calling and now they can do that on the web. A lot of information about the programs and classes and program structure are on the website and there's a move to have a virtual tour on the website. Currently there is not, to make the website have more pictures. I mean there's some but maybe not as many as others would like. So there is a move to have the website be way more interactive and almost to take the place of an in-person visit.

There was an uneasiness during this conversation that many traditionally in-person actions, including the campus visit, were being automated and housed on the website. Although this move increased accessibility to information, the interview participant was apprehensive about moving everything to the virtual realm, questioning if these new virtual mechanisms could really take the place of face-to-face, in-person interactions. Because this participant was not in a
position to stop these changes, a “let’s wait and see” approach was adopted regarding these pending changes.

**Viewbooks.** Printed materials are another example of virtual mechanisms for communicating culture. According to interview and survey participants, many graduate admissions professionals have phased printed materials out of their communications portfolio. They elect, instead, to invest more time and energy on websites and in-person recruitment events. However, a number of interview participants discussed their use of viewbooks. A viewbook, as its name suggests, is a print publication that provides the reader a view of the particular school. Traditionally, viewbooks contained a general summary of the school, details of academic programs, and pictures of the campus and its resources. As graduate admissions professionals transfer much of this information to online websites, many are assessing whether this tool is still useful in communicating culture. As Sarah questioned:

> I think in this age of electronic communication we still have some print materials and I’m wondering whether or not communicating the culture through the print materials is still something, that, will people feel repulsed by seeing paper be wasted or is it still the industry standard to say I love talking to you, just thought you'd like to see our newsletter and our viewbook and our event calendar and here's a pen.

As printing costs and environmental/recycling concerns increase, the value of viewbooks has been assessed by many questions. Those schools that continue to print viewbooks still consider them relevant and effective at communicating an overview of the school. As Andrew shared, this sometimes involves editing both the format and content of a school’s traditional viewbook. Andrew’s school recently went through a project to revise their viewbook, favoring student, faculty, and alumni profiles over lengthy program descriptions and institutional history:
This new one coming out…we’ve sort of toned down the institutional language and given more profile language so that they could hear the culture being communicated with different student and faculty and staff voices and so I think that will be a more authentic way of reaching and communicating that information.

Through community member profiles, Andrew’s school’s revised viewbook presents a virtual representation of the culture through quotes and testimonials, which is considered as a more authentic way to convey culture than traditional, descriptive text. Many survey and interview participants indicated that prospective students valued what current students and alumni had to say about a school. By profiling students in the viewbook, schools allow prospective students to virtually hear from that valued source of information.

**Quasi-virtual mechanisms.** Traditional websites and print materials are static and lack any interactive component. However, advances in technology are blurring the lines between in-person and virtual mechanisms by creating ways for people to interact without being face-to-face. These “quasi-virtual” mechanisms provide the opportunity for virtual in-person interaction to take place. For example, phone and email communication allow graduate admissions professionals the ability to interact back and forth with prospective students without having to be in the same place. Skype and other video conferencing software can allow the graduate admissions professional and prospective student to see each other during conversations. Social media and other Web 2.0 technologies have made digital interactions more sophisticated. Interactions and types of content seem unlimited, with the option to post photographs, videos, and news items, and to comment back and forth on others’ posts, as well. Quasi-virtual mechanisms can stand alone as individual forms of communicating culture or can help enhance static websites with interactive tools.
Social media. Most graduate admissions professionals indicated they use some form of social media as part of their communications plan. Overall, Facebook and Twitter were the most commonly cited social media platforms. Interview participants explained that the time investment in using social media was very high and often involved multiple people or a committee. Jessica shared that many of the younger students requested a social media presence for her school. The task of social media coordinator fell to her:

I am our social media manager for both our Facebook and Twitter pages…I am posting every single day, probably multiple times a day. We utilize Sprout Social as our platform to manage those pages…We have a fairly robust interaction with folks through both of those channels. We try to do different kinds of campaigns where we can garner a little more attention and capture more followers…We try to have different campaign ideas and there is a social media advisory council made up of students, faculty, and staff here so that they can be supporting our social media channel and also generate content, giving us ideas for different kinds of contests and ongoing features and things like that. We are pretty strategic around how we handle social media.

Interview participants reported that the advantage to using social media was in the opportunity to diversify content through different posts. For example, graduate admissions professionals could create a post highlighting a faculty publication and then later in the day post a reminder about student social events. The ability to showcase different aspects of a school through social media, helps graduate admissions professionals represent the full culture of a school.

Social media tools also help graduate admissions professionals keep prospective students engaged with each other and the larger school community. Matthew indicated that social media was useful for pushing information about different aspects of school culture (upcoming research
conferences, housing opportunities, faculty updates) as well as logistical updates (e.g. application requirements, commitment deadline reminders). Social media also provides an opportunity to engage admitted students with the larger student community, helping them to interact with school culture before arriving to campus. He shared his approach to social media:

Exactly, yeah, to get them excited about meeting their cohort. To get them talking to one another. To get them, you know, because then they can direct message each other about their anxieties and their fears and what they're excited about and to post things like that. And then also we use it to disseminate information and so we'll say things like you gotta have your decisions to us by April 15th is the day. You've got to, here are some housing units that are coming up, here's a job opportunity in a local thing that people want you to know about, things like that. Here's a conference—I just posted about a conference yesterday.

Used in this manner, social media can also be used to keep students engaged after attending an on-campus, in-person event. Follow-up information from the graduate admissions office can be pushed to attendees. Relationships formed among admitted students can be maintained by keeping in touch through Facebook, Twitter, and other sites.

Implicit methods

Another category of communication method that emerged from the interviews was less obvious and less tangible. These implicit methods of communicating culture are subtler than the overt communication mechanisms described above. Instead, implicit methods include attitudes and approaches that indirectly convey images of a school’s culture to prospective students. Implicit methods can include customer service, inclusion and diversity, enthusiasm, and honesty. This section briefly explores how graduate admissions professionals use implicit methods of
communicating culture.

**Hospitality and service.** Graduate admissions professionals reported that customer service\(^7\) could communicate a school’s culture through the hospitality delivered during the admissions process. The hospitality and welcome that prospective students receive during the admissions process can signal a larger school culture that includes the ethos of support and care. The customer service ethic of some graduate admissions professionals was apparent as I set up meeting times to conduct interviews for this study. For example, Donna sent very warm and helpful emails to let me know exactly where to meet her:

Hi Adam,

Sure, meeting here would be great. In the event you are not familiar with our campus, here are directions and a campus map: [direct link to website map]. I am on the second floor of [Smith] Hall. When you take the stairs to the second floor, the Admissions and Financial Aid Suite will be to your right. Please feel free to give me a call at my direct line if you run into any issues. My number is [phone number].

Information, including where to meet her and how to get there, was clear and provided automatically. This created the sense that Donna was invested in meeting with me. Later during the interview, she explained that the welcome I received was similar to the one a prospective student would receive. She shared her philosophy behind offering prospective students warm hospitality and efficient service:

\(^7\) Although some audiences (e.g. faculty members, students themselves) may prefer not to label students as customers, many graduate admissions professionals used the term “customer service” during this study. While the use of the term customer service may be problematic for some audiences, the findings indicate that the term “customer service” is part of many admissions office cultures.
You know when I call in for a campus tour do you give me the run around or do you say oh I'm so glad to help you with that. We're waiting for you and absolutely going to be excited to see you when you get here. So even the tones that you send sort of reflect what's really going on in the community. So it's a critical piece but we do have to work at giving students a reflection of what our entire community is about.

Sarah indicated a similar approach to customer service. For her, the importance of the enrollment decision for students required understanding and support from her staff. She offers “concierge” service to applicants, creating a unique, high-touch experience for prospective students. This individualized service corresponds with Sarah’s description of her school’s culture as “individualistic” yet “supportive.” In offering such an involved level of service, Sarah was cognizant of balancing too much hand holding and getting people to enroll at her school:

So it's customer service. It's touching…I think of it as a concierge experience. I hate all of this hotel talk, but that's really what it is. We hold your hand as you're making this very important decision. Sometimes I fear that I spend a little bit too much time in the engagement and that I have to be much more proactive in converting. Okay, let's get transactional here, but I think that's such a subjective kind of decision because some people move quickly and other people just meander, take the scenic way to making a decision.

Graduate admissions professionals indicated their awareness of the treatment of applicants and that treatment’s impact on enrollment decisions. Having a positive experience during the application process, one participant noted, was going to matter after students were admitted, which in turn will matter when they make their choices to enroll.
Honesty and authenticity. Many respondents also reported that they approach their roles as professionals who must communicate the characteristics of their schools in an authentic way. This attitude of authenticity and honesty connects to the practice of discernment that many working in theological school graduate admissions described. Discernment, a term familiar to many in the theological disciplines, is a process that involves mindfulness, prayer, and reflection to make judgments, to distinguish among, and understand the implications of different courses of action. Discernment is a practice used by Christians, but also found in other traditions, for example Buddhism (Luévano, 2009). Many graduate admissions professionals involved in this study noted that their applicants viewed the application process as a time for discernment. Valuing the importance of this process, Constance explained that she was open and honest with prospective students:

I try to narrate our story as clearly and honestly as I can. So I just sort of put it on the table and then if it resonates with the student and they discern that this is someplace that they should be then great. But then obviously the opposite can happen too. It can happen too that they hear it and no, that's not what I'm looking for and then they either don't apply or don't enroll so I think for the students for whom something like this resonates there's a selling point and for students who want something totally other then it's not.

Accurately and authentically representing one’s whole school, as opposed to only highlighting certain positive aspects, appears to be central to the way many graduate admissions professionals working at theological schools approach their roles. They indicated that helping students through a process of discernment would help them enroll the best students, in terms of school fit. The value placed on discernment during the application process may implicitly signal to applicants that the school culture includes an emphasis on discernment, as well. There was also
an awareness and an acceptance by graduate admissions professionals that, by providing such openness, applicants may decide to attend another school. As Matthew recognized: “If it's us great, if it's not us, you know, great too. You can get a great education at that other school.”

Honesty and transparency also guides how respondents described working with their applicants. Many graduate admissions professionals identified the fact that they treat their applicants as adults, providing them accurate information about the school and trusting them to use that information to make an informed decision. As Ellen explained, she needs to trust that applicants will use the information she provides about school culture to arrive at the best decision for them:

The only method I can use genuinely is the truth. I need to be as explicit and straightforward as possible and assume that the people who are considering the school I work at are adults. As adults, what they need is enough information to understand the decision that they’re making. Then I let them make the decision that they are going to make.

By treating her applicants as adults during the admissions process, Ellen is potentially helping implicitly communicate a culture of maturity and independence at her school. Likewise, Donna explained that it was important for her to be authentic in her communication of culture so that applicants did not have an unrealistic understanding of her school’s culture. She confided: “I'm always very careful not to give people an over optimistic perception of what this is.” This approach potentially helps portray culture in an accurate way, as well as limits the number of students enrolling with idealistic expectations.

**Diversity and inclusion.** In describing culture, some graduate admissions professionals included descriptions of their schools’ openness to diversity. They spoke comfortably about
their schools’ approaches to multiple dimensions of diversity, including race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. There was an awareness that not every student’s experience would be the same and that a recruitment plan must acknowledge that an applicant’s background might influence the details he or she searched for during the application process. Donna recognized that she might highlight different aspects of her school’s culture depending on the applicant with whom she was speaking:

I also think that how I communicate culture is going to be different based on a student's background as well, particularly ethnic background, racial ethnic background because there are going to be things that a Korean student is going to want to know that are going to be very different from something that a white student would want to know. Also along the same lines, sexual identity, gender identity, that kind of discussion is also going to be very different as well.

Donna’s approach is to connect applicants with cultural traits of the school that they can connect with their preexisting ideas of community. Much is done early in the recruiting process to communicate the fact that Donna’s school is inclusive and is seeking a diverse applicant pool. Helping applicants determine fit, especially when applicants have concerns about diversity within a community, remains a challenge. As Donna explained:

I think that if a person feels a sense of belonging within a community, if they can envision themselves here they'll come. If the student, and that's the other thing, is that we often times have to demystify [our school] for a lot of students, particularly students that we're looking to attract because we're always looking to attract very diverse student body. So a lot of it has to be done very, very early on because a lot of students kind of self select themselves out of the entire application process because they just don't think that it
would ever even be a possibility and so we have to make an effort to really explore some of their concerns and figure out exactly what it is that they are looking for and help them to determine whether or not it's a good fit or put the information before them so that they can determine if it's a good fit.

Ellen also identified the need to be aware of how a specific student’s need might require shifting the conversation taking place during the admissions process:

So Admissions is constantly bringing people in who are going to face resistance from some aspect of the culture, whether it’s expected or unexpected…In order to create successful graduates, you have to really think about what that person’s experience will be in that culture…and will they have to be counter-cultural or fit in? And that has implications for the conversation that you have with people in the recruiting arena.

Three out of the eight total interview participants identified their schools’ inclusiveness—or the improvement of their schools’ inclusiveness—of students of color and students who identify as LGBTQ when describing school culture. Graduate admissions professionals, who can show awareness and understanding in communicating and addressing parts of the culture that might be of concern to specific applicants, may benefit from implicitly conveying a message of openness, diversity, and inclusion to all potential applicants. By addressing or not addressing issues of diversity and inclusion, some graduate admissions professionals may also unintentionally help potential students determine school fit.

**Enthusiasm and support.** Graduate admissions professionals recognized that choosing a graduate school was a complicated process for applicants that involved weighing both factual and emotional aspects. During interviews with many of the graduate admissions professionals, when I asked them to pretend I was an applicant and describe their school’s culture to me, it
became clear that they showed enthusiasm for their specific schools and for the study of graduate-level theology. This enthusiasm could potentially help an applicant emotionally connect with a school, by helping them get excited about potentially attending that school. For example, Matthew spoke very enthusiastically throughout his interview about his role and the activities offered at his school. He accredited this enthusiasm to having had a positive time as a student and now wanting to ensure others could share that same experience. He effused:

Okay. So in terms of communicating the culture I think the enthusiasm and commitment of the admissions staff is a huge boon. I'm an alum, my boss is an alum. We both love and care for the school deeply and that itself sends a message. It's not a job for us. I mean it is a job, they're paying me, but it's a lot more than that as well and they see the vibrant sincerity I feel that we bring to it, that we really believe in what we're doing and we're energized by it. We bring that energy to them and that energy is very appealing to a lot of people because you think of, when you think of graduate theological education it's an image that's rather mundane and it's like, yes, now we're going to read Aquinas, and Aquinas is great, he's fun, but you don't have to be that way about Aquinas. So we try to communicate what C.S. Lewis would call the joy, the joy for what we do and the energy that galvanizes you to keep doing it. And that you know, I'm starting my seventh year here. It feels like a year ago when I moved up. It really does. My time as a student flew by and my time as a staff member.

Jessica’s experience signaled the influence that leadership can have on promoting the emotional side of decision-making over the more data and information driven side. In her case, Jessica’s school had been focused on communicating a culture of involved support, i.e. faculty and staff were accessible and involved in all dimensions of the school’s education, before her new boss
joined the school. Since then, under the new director’s mandate, a more results-oriented culture has emerged. Jessica explained:

Our new director, who has now been in that position for, I guess, two years…yes, this is his second academic year…has definitely shifted the culture away from that touchy-feely family mentality to “this is where we work; these are what are goals are; are we meeting our goals?” He has been cleaning up the finances and really looking at things objectively and seeing if they are profitable for the school. He definitely has a stronger emphasis on enrollment numbers…So it’s definitely less like the faculty are here to mentor and care and be intimately involved with students’ lives, and it’s more towards the fact that faculty is here to teach and mentor, but to do that professionally. I would say that incoming students are not experiencing that same kind of touchy-feely family feel that [the school] historically has been. It’s much more: “This is a professional school and we are here to prepare you to be church and world leaders.” So yes, there has been a culture shift.

Graduate admissions professionals must be ready for strategic changes, like the one Jessica described, so that adjustments in recruitment practices can be made without losing the emotional connection with potential applicants. In periods of school change or adjustment, graduate admissions professionals are challenged to remain aware that their communication of cultural changes, if not presented neutrally or positively, could imply an unenthusiastic reception of that change, which might potentially affect applicants’ impressions of the school.

Both explicit and implicit methods of communicating culture play important roles in the graduate recruitment and enrollment processes. Having identified the ways culture can be communicated during the admissions process, the next section explores graduate admissions
professionals’ perceptions of the effectiveness of these different methods for communicating culture.

**Perceptions of effectiveness**

As defined earlier, the effectiveness of a method of communication refers to its success in influencing students’ decisions to apply and enroll. This study seeks to learn about which mechanisms graduate admissions professionals perceive as effective. This section explores the perceptions of in-person, virtual, and quasi-virtual mechanisms are perceived, as well as how graduate admissions professionals view the role and effectiveness of the admissions office. The section concludes with a discussion of how graduate admissions professionals indicate they assess which communication strategies are successful.

**In-person mechanisms**

When asked during the interview which mechanism was most effective at communicating culture, responses were very similar.

Jessica: “The way we most effectively communicate our culture to students is through our Open House.”

Matthew: “We have open houses, we have a big open house in the fall and then we have two open houses for our admitted students in the spring. That's a great way to communicate culture.”

Constance: “I really think the visit is most effective in communicating culture.”

Ellen: “Face-to-face is always going to be the most effective at really conveying reality.”

Overwhelmingly, face-to-face on-campus visits and events were cited by graduate admissions professionals as the mechanism they perceived as most effective. Table 4 presents a listing of
Table 4

Methods of communicating culture and their perceived effectiveness: Mean Survey Results (n=77)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explicit Methods</th>
<th>Implicit Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>In-person Mechanisms (3.80)</strong></td>
<td>Communicating culture through…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-campus visits and events (4.79)</td>
<td>Hospitality and service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews (3.40)</td>
<td>Enthusiasm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-campus recruiting events (3.20)</td>
<td>Inclusion and diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quasi-virtual Mechanisms (3.64)</strong></td>
<td>Honesty and authenticity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone calls to applicants (4.01)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mails and electronic outreach (3.70)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media website (3.22)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Virtual Mechanisms (2.98)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School webpages (3.66)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printed Viewbooks (2.88)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online advertisements (2.39)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

mechanisms and how they were ranked in terms of their perceived effectiveness. The table is organized by explicit and implicit methods of communicating culture. Survey participants rated each mechanism on a scale from one to five, with one representing the score for “most effective.” The survey also asked participants to rank the top three mechanisms they perceive
effective with ordinals (i.e. 1, 2, 3). ‘On-campus visits and events’ scored highest in this ranking, with 81% of respondents placing ‘on-campus visits and events’ as their highest mechanism of perceived effectiveness. Although implicit methods are identified in Table 4, this category emerged from an analysis of the survey and interview data and was not included in the initial survey. Therefore, implicit mechanisms are listed in the table but their perceived effectiveness scores are not listed. Following on-campus visits and events, the next highest rated mechanisms were quasi-virtual forms of outreach: telephone calls and e-mails to prospective students. On average, in-person mechanisms scored highest with an average rating of 3.80, followed by quasi-virtual mechanisms (3.64 average rating) and virtual mechanisms (2.98 average rating). These averages suggest that the more interactive and personal a mechanism is, the more effective it is perceived.

In discussing the perceived effectiveness of on-campus visits and events with interview participants, it became clear why this mechanism, in particular, was viewed so highly. It is not that the idea of an in-person visit is unique; rather, it is the opportunity for prospective students to engage with individual, unique members of the school’s community by participating in a visit. The majority of graduate admissions professionals indicate they facilitate some form of campus visit so that applicants gain a full sense of the school’s culture. Jessica explained her open house as an opportunity for admitted students to hear not just from her, but also from many other constituents:

The way we most effectively communicate our culture to students is through our open house because they have an opportunity to hear from me and from our director and to hear from our faculty and from current students/alums. That’s sort of all we are able to
represent—it’s all sides of the story and of the picture. Students get the most full picture of who we are culturally at an open house experience.

Constance believed that her school’s visit days were most effective because they were authentic, noting: “it's not a polished production for the sake of this day…whatever happens here is real.”

At Constance’s school, there was no directive to current students, faculty, and staff to “be on their best behavior.” Prospective students were told that these visit days were normal, representative schools days. The opportunity for prospective students to experience a real day in the life of the school added to the visit day’s effectiveness, according to Constance. When asked to provide an example of how these days remained authentic, Constance shared the following poignant story:

The best example that I can give of that is a couple of years ago, we had our normal visit day and it was the morning after a student died and our director told our visitors in tears that the student passed away, sort of wanting to kind of prepare them to keep that in mind as they went throughout the day. None of us knew, we expected that the tone of the community would be somber and then also so if students saw, if prospective students saw current students sobbing in the hallways they would understand. You know, just to give them some context for what they may experience that day. And so they went to class and they went to chapel, and thankfully one of our professors was the preacher that day as opposed to a student because it would have been one of their classmates. So even for God's providence to shine in that way was really a grace, but throughout the whole service students and faculty sobbed audibly and visibly and I'm sure that had a tremendous impact on those students who visited that day. There was no effort to cancel the day, to polish or sugarcoat anything that happened, or to separate prospective students
from the rest of the community. That was a really powerful experience for me, and something I had never really appreciated before about the authenticity of our visit days. The on-campus visit has the opportunity to not only show off the school’s setting, but also to help prospective students connect with the community. As in Constance’s case, the opportunity for this connection is constructed so that as authentic an experience as possible takes place. These experiences often trump what students read online or in viewbooks. As one graduate admissions professional indicated:

You can read about culture in a viewbook, but it's something different to experience it. And it's something you can read on a website—what a great community, or this is our community or we're a community or whatever—but then you come here and have a tour…or you see faculty having lunch with students. Any number of things communicates community in the way that words alone cannot.

The ability to (1) show not just tell and to (2) foster authentic, personal experiences keeps on-campus visits and events at the top of the list for effective mechanisms of communicating culture.

Although the majority of graduate admissions professionals rated on-campus, face-to-face interactions high in perceived effectiveness, realism about on-campus limitations also existed. Many prospective students never get to visit campus. Graduate admissions professionals explained that there were several reasons preventing students from visiting, including time constraints, financial reasons, and distance. Other students, they explained, prefer online communications and would rather engage with the school virtually without committing to anything. Even at theological schools, where ideas of community, formation, and experiential and faith learning emerge more prominently than in other graduate disciplines, and graduate
admissions professionals believed that most students first encounter a school virtually through the website before setting a foot on campus (if they ever do). Ellen explained these challenges:

Face-to-face is always going to be the most effective at really conveying reality, but, increasingly, we are seeing a population that is inclined towards online education. As much as I think for ministry and theological education, face-to-face is the ideal, that’s not going to be the first encounter for most people. Students are willing to forego face-to-face contact for convenience. Therefore, schools HAVE to be effective at communicating what their environment is like in a medium that is unnatural for us.

That’s likely going to be online, on the web. Maybe e-mail. It could be a text. But it’s web-based. It’s the art of compromise.

Given this technological reality, graduate admissions professionals must attempt to be effective at communicating culture both in-person and virtually. They must also be aware that most students’ first impressions of a school’s culture will be made online. This means that prospective students do not first engage with a school’s culture through the mechanism rated highest in perceived effectiveness (on-campus visits and events) by graduate admissions professionals, and therefore the mechanism that could potentially do the best job communicating culture. Instead they most often first encounter a school through virtual mechanisms, like school websites, and proceed from there. Graduate admissions professionals must strategize how to make virtual mechanisms as effective as possible. The next section discusses graduate admissions professionals’ perceptions of effectiveness regarding these virtual mechanisms.

**Virtual and quasi-virtual mechanisms**

The school website was the highest scoring virtual mechanism in terms of perceived effectiveness, with an average rating of 3.66. Andrew’s assessment of his school’s website
reinforced what Ellen observed regarding students’ preferences for web versus face-to-face interactions:

The website is probably our most important recruitment piece. It's where most of our prospective students meet us for the first time…There are some limitations with the technology that hopefully will be worked out. There are also limitations with us not having the necessary time to make it effective and then we sometimes just don't have the knowledge. You know, how do you write for, you know, it's a very niche field being able to write for the web, being able to design content that's most effective on the web. So I would say it's still an area in which we need work but it's definitely probably our most important area, one we need to be better with.

Despite identifying the website as his most important recruitment tool, he recognized, as many other graduate admissions professionals did, that his website and the skills needed to maintain it required improvement. These skills include writing for the web, time management in order to make updates, and the ability to add media and other quasi-virtual mechanisms (e.g. blogs, social media) directly to the website. As Andrew recognized:

We need more. We need to be able to share culture in a more diverse way on our website. Right now it's mostly just text and pictures and even the pictures aren't that good. So we need to do a better job…video clips, better pictures, maybe embedding our Twitter feed.

Graduate admissions professionals indicated that offices throughout campus, including marketing and information technology services, often help support the task of communicating culture. The level to which these offices are involved varies depending on school. Survey and interview experiences indicated that these offices mostly provide technical support and high-
level design input, as opposed to day-to-day assistance. Regardless of these offices’ involvement, most graduate admissions professionals indicated that making sure that school culture is being communicated correctly, fully, and effectively still falls to them. Donna, who was relatively new to her role, immediately recognized both the importance of the website and the need for her involvement in it. She was enthusiastic about auditing the website to make sure it was doing its job of communicating culture: “While I’m here, I really want to take a look at our website and make sure it is truly reflective of what's going on here. I think there's room for some tweaks.” For those graduate admissions professionals who perceived the website as an effective tool at communicating culture, this constant push to assess and improve the website’s content was a recurring theme.

Survey and interview results suggested that graduate admissions professionals perceived social media tools, like Twitter and Facebook, as less effective than websites and in-person mechanisms. One reason for this lower ranking could be social media’s lack of face-to-face contact. However, some graduate admissions professionals also noted that it could also be a lack of clarity on how best to focus social media tools on the admissions effort. For example, the Twitter and Facebook accounts that most interview participants discussed were intended not only for prospective students, but also for the school community at large. Additionally, many graduate admissions professionals cited a preference for keeping separate work (i.e. admissions or school-related account) and personal social media accounts. However, this creates a challenge of maintaining multiple accounts at the same time. Despite these concerns, social media’s perceived effectiveness score was still relatively high and the majority of interview participants indicated they engage in some form of social media.
One way to maximize the effectiveness of social media tools, according to one interview participant, is to use software that coordinates messaging across platforms—a “cross-pollinating of content” among a school’s multiple social media sites. Managing the efficiency of these sites is especially important for those graduate admissions professionals who post and tweet multiple times a day. As Matthew explained, checking his school’s social media sites multiple times a day also helps him remain informed and up-to-date on happenings at the school while he is traveling for recruitment purposes:

I tweet a couple of times a day. I use [Twitter] to communicate both to applicants and current students. It's great to check in with the community because a lot of my students are on Twitter so I can see what's happening especially when I'm on the road. Now it's on my phone and it goes off constantly.

Several graduate admissions professionals indicated a preference for Twitter over Facebook, discussing the versatility of Twitter as an advantage to communicating glimpses of the school’s culture through short posts. However, the challenge of constantly updating content and the necessity for daily posts was identified by multiple interview participants. To address this challenge, schools have developed contests and other social media campaigns to keep users engaged. One participant explained why his admissions office did not have a specific Facebook page:

Someone is really only going to like [an] Admissions [Facebook page] for a nine month period, because at the end you're either going to get in or you're not and if you're not you're probably not going to still like [that] Admissions [page].

Graduate admissions professionals reported they were still adjusting to the boom in social media tools. As the Facebook example above indicates, there is still work to be done to determine
which social media tools will be most effective in an admissions context. With new social media platforms being introduced every year, communication through social media will continue to develop in the years ahead.

**Figuring out what works**

Questions regarding the assessment of communication methods were asked on the survey and during interview conversations. Survey respondents noted that questionnaires administered by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) were useful in figuring out what methods were effective during the recruitment process. The ATS Entering and Graduating Student Questionnaires ask a number of overarching demographic and student life questions, as well as a limited number of questions about the student’s recruitment and application experience. Individual schools distribute the premade surveys to their students, but schools have the option to add additional school-specific questions. This function allows graduate admissions professionals the opportunity to ask more probing questions regarding specific aspects of the recruitment process, including the communication of culture.

The process of surveying students, both those who choose to attend and those that do not, was also discussed during interviews. Andrew described how his office relies on the student employees to tell them what was successful and what was not during the application and recruitment process. This information is then used to change and update recruiting strategies. Andrew noted the importance of continual “fine tuning” as part of the regular assessment process in his office. He explained how his office surveys students:

Yeah, we ask the students. We survey new students, we have three students that work for us and they're always not shy about telling us about what worked for them and what didn't work for them and you know, the biggest thing is not to be complacent. You're
never going to, as the banner in my high school band room said, perfection is our goal, excellence will be tolerated so you're always, regardless of how excellent you get your admissions office to run you're always looking to fine tune and to think of new ways of communicating culture, new ways of telling the story because the story also changes because the church is changing and the people in the church are changing and the issues are changing. And so if you are not current with the signs of the times then you become irrelevant.

Graduate admissions professionals noted that it was harder to question students who did not attend. As Ellen observed, it is even more challenging to survey or access individuals who might be interested in theological education but chose not to apply to that specific school. Accessing this population, Ellen explained, would allow graduate admissions professionals figure out the reasons causing students not to apply. She noted:

I guess the biggest tool that I am constantly wishing I had access to was a focus group of prospective students who are not necessarily in our pipeline. Like being able to test messaging on a population that hasn’t already started thinking about graduate school for theological studies. That’s where I really feel I want those guinea pigs, and I haven’t been able to find them.

Joseph expressed a similar frustration. For him, the concern was not getting applicants to choose his school over a competitor; rather it was finding interested applicants at the beginning of the process so that he could expand his applicant pool. Ellen echoed this, adding that the challenge was expanding the applicant pool with the right applicants: “It’s not just about getting applicants, it’s about helping the right applicants understand what that experience is going to be so that it is a good fit for the long run.”
Multiple graduate admissions professionals indicated they used their printed viewbook to measure serious interest. The viewbook, which often has a higher cost attached to its production than traditional web and social media sites, is reserved for students who have expressed genuine interest in a school. Donna explained that students who are still exploring multiple graduate school options might only receive digital resources. She further described the process of distributing viewbooks:

Our viewbook is our main road piece and so when we go and see students and we know that they're very serious we usually offer them a viewbook. If they're just sort of looking and browsing then they'll get the “at a glance” sheet and when students inquire and complete our request for information our communication is prompted to direct them to an electronic version of both the viewbook and the “at a glance” sheet unless they indicate they want something else.

At Jessica’s school, applicants must provide demographic information about themselves in order to receive a viewbook. She explained that gaining demographic data helped the school build its applicant pool by collecting contact information in exchange for the viewbook. However, Jessica remained skeptical about this tradeoff, questioning whether it would be more effective for potential applicants to receive or takeaway something with the school’s branding rather than walk away with nothing at all:

The way marketing for graduate enrollment works is that they don’t want to give somebody a viewbook without them at least expressing genuine interest, which to them means they’ve given us their contact information. That’s sort of the price of the viewbook from their perspective. I look at things differently because I would rather have people walk away with something with our name on it in their hands than to walk away
empty-handed, but I don’t manage the budget, so I understand where that rub is. I would love even just a flyer, like a two-sided flyer that I could hand to people.

Joseph expressed a concern about how to track the many different points of contact that take place between school and applicant. While it may be easy for graduate admissions professionals to collect contact information from applicants, it can be harder to determine which point of contact was most effective. As Joseph pointed out, without sophisticated technical software, it can be difficult to determine whether the printed viewbook or a monthly email correspondence was the more effective method of communication. This lack of clarity could potentially affect knowing how to follow up with applicants effectively. Joseph disclosed:

I'm still wrestling with all of the communication methods. We don't have a CRM [constituent relationship management software system] so I can send out that email to the 8,000 students but then how do I follow up and get them to apply...so I just really wrestle with the front end. Once they're interested. It's like we're talking right now. Most of them will come visit. I feel like I'm good at judging why they're coming.

Survey and other interview participants shared this concern. Many respondents indicated a desire for the ability to better track students who participated in an in-person event, met with an admissions professional on-the-road, or who requested information virtually, for the purpose of determining whether prospective students gained a better understanding of school culture. These findings suggest a strong need for greater technology in order to better measure and assess success in communicating culture in graduate admissions.

**Learning culture**

The context in which graduate admissions professionals entered their current roles is highly influential on how culture is learned. Two major routes exist: (1) the graduate
Table 5

Views of Culture by Alumni Status: Survey Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Alumnus/current student (n=48)</th>
<th>Not Alumnus (n=32)</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How much do you incorporate culture when you recruit for and represent your institution to prospective graduate students?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 = extremely incorporated</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>63%</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 = very incorporated</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 = somewhat incorporated</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 = slightly incorporated</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 = not incorporated at all</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 5 = very important | 57% | 61% | 58% |
| 4 = important | 35% | 36% | 35% |
| 3 = neither important nor unimportant | 8% | 3% | 7% |
| 2 = unimportant | 0% | 0% | 0% |
| 1 = not important at all | 0% | 0% | 0% |

admissions professional has had direct institutional academic experience as a current student or an alumnus of the school or university or (2) the graduate admissions professional has not had academic experience at the school or university. Throughout the analysis process, these routes were coded as “yes” or “no” under the label “alumni status.” Those who had had academic
experience at the school at which they worked had an alumni status equal to “yes.” Those who
had not had that experience were labeled with an alumni status of “no.” In this study, there was
relatively even distribution between these two routes: 60% of survey respondents and 62.5% of
interview participants had an alumni status equal to yes. Both the group with previous academic
experience and the group without were similar in the weight they placed on integrating culture
into the admissions process and the importance they perceived culture held as a factor in the
enrollment decision process. T-test results showed that there was no significant difference
between these two groups for either variable (incorporation of culture and perceived importance
of culture). Table 5 shows how similarly and how highly these two groups rated the
incorporation of culture and the importance of culture. Through interviews, however,
differences emerged in how graduate admissions professionals learned culture in their current
roles and arrived at the decision to perceive culture as an important factor in the admissions
process and to integrate it thoroughly into recruitment strategies.

Using previous academic experience

For those graduate admissions professionals who had previously attended the school at
which they worked, their own experience was a powerful tool for them in communicating culture
to prospective students. For example, Jessica now uses her personal experience of
transformation through courses and interactions with the faculty when she speaks with
prospective students. She shared:

I usually speak from my own student experience, which is that I did feel like I found my
people here, that I was transformed, that I found in faculty mentors and people who
challenged me to be more than I could even imagine for myself. It’s probably pretty
similar to what I already said, this notion of coming home, this promise that you will be
transformed, and that the promise is really lived out and we hear that from our alumni and that I personally experienced that transformation.

Those with previous academic experience at the school at which they worked explained that the ability to connect with prospective students by sharing firsthand knowledge of the experience was essential to their jobs. Jessica was open about colleagues at her school that did not have previous academic experience at that school. They had confided in her that, although they could provide technical answers and help connect students with others, they wanted the ability to share firsthand knowledge about the student experience and could not:

They struggle at times because they haven’t had the student experience, so they can speak theoretically and they can also get prospective students connected to current students and alums, and there are ways around that. But at times they really wish they could speak more directly about what it is really like to be a student here at this particular school/program. So I definitely see that as an advantage and it helps me do my job better than if I didn’t have that in my wheelhouse.

Those that have this previous academic experience feel it is a great advantage to their work. In fact, Matthew placed so much value on this factor, he questioned whether someone who did not attend the school would be able to have success in the role:

I think that I could not have done this job without my experience as a student. So much so that I question that whoever has this job after me has to be a student or an alumni. The person who had it before me was an alumni and I think to really communicate what we do here and what makes us so unique really requires a person who has been through it. It's one thing to say you know, everyone should take Old Testament. It's another thing to say well I didn't take Old Testament but I took New Testament in my first year and it was
fantastic. And to talk about the different changes and how it changes your life, and how you change within it, that I think requires a person who has been through the process to really be effective.

Jessica and Matthew both described the sharing of their own experiences as an asset to their work in admissions. Being able to comment on a specific class they took or a specific relationship with a faculty member creates a firsthand authority for them as they work with prospective students. The ability to provide examples of their own experiences can also potentially help them create authentic connections with prospective students and address application concerns through the sharing of firsthand experiences.

The advantage of having firsthand experience can extend to the hiring process. Jessica shared that she believes she was hired because of her previous experience as a student. The hiring committee was familiar with her and her positive student experience. As a result, she believes the hiring committee had confidence in her ability to share her experience and convince prospective students that they could have a similar experience. In speaking with prospective students, Jessica indicated a lot of the discussion is cultural:

There is a streak in me that says, “Ok, well if you come here and you talk to me, you are going to leave here wanting to go to school here.” Which is what they knew when they were hiring me, and that’s why I got hired, because I did have such a positive graduate school experience here and I can talk about that pretty eloquently and convincingly. For me, a lot of that conversation is cultural. “This is how I was transformed. You know, partly from my classes, and obviously the academics are super important and the most important thing, but you know that. That’s why you’re here. You wouldn’t be investing time and money in a school that you didn’t think was strong academically, so let’s talk
about the other stuff. The esoteric stuff that I can put an experience to and help you feel vicariously through me.

Joseph’s experience and connection to the president of the school led to his hiring. Joseph indicated that even though he was not working in higher education at the time, the president of the school offered Joseph his job because of Joseph’s student experience and his ability to bring this firsthand knowledge to the position.

**Transitioning from student to graduate admissions professional**

Although prior experience often helps during interactions with prospective students, those who make the transition from student to full-time employee face an adjustment period. Many interview participants spoke of an eye opening experience when they began interacting with faculty, staff, and students in a new way. Constance, despite being an active student, was unaware of some of the institutional politics and dynamics that went on behind the scenes. After transitioning from student to employee, she was exposed to a new dimension of the school’s culture:

I spent a lot of time here as a student and I was really active here as a student and I was intentional about forming certain relationships so I felt like I understood in as much as a student could, that I understood the school fairly well but there was still certain elements for instance about politics or faculty dynamics or faculty staff dynamics or any of those things that I didn't know at all and I'm still learning those things.

Similarly, Andrew’s new position within the school community created a moment for him to pause and evaluate how to best use his previous experience as a student and his new position in admissions. The school’s culture was a major consideration for him as he transitioned from someone living the culture to someone who needed to communicate it:
I think the biggest piece of those first couple months was trying to figure out how to sort of handle my new role as a staff person versus a student person. How do my relationships with perspective students and current students and faculty and staff sort of shift because of that and I think the cultural piece became more of an intentional thing in my mind at that point. I had lived in the culture and in talking to people about the school that came out more. Obviously it came out, but then how do I intentionally target certain things or bring up certain events that sort of highlight the focus of culture.

Andrew’s awareness of shifting relationships was also a theme in other interviews. Moving from student to employee involved approaching existing relationships in new ways. Often graduate admissions professionals needed to establish themselves as employees with the previous graduate school professors. The adjustment could be a challenge if the graduate admissions professional was not taken seriously and still treated as a student. Matthew had an interesting solution to this issue that involved him dressing more professionally and changing his behavior:

So one of the challenges that I knew I was going to face coming in was that my colleagues would see me as still a student that had a job as opposed to a colleague who had been a student. So there are a couple of things that I had to do to intentionally overcome those. I started dressing up, I wore a suit every day that I never stopped doing. Most people don't wear ties around here so the fact that I showed up in a suit was impressive to a certain extent. I stopped hanging out with students. I had many friends who were still students but I wouldn't really be with them during the school day. I didn't want people to see me as kind of walking around like this is another class that I can show up to or not. I wanted them to know that I took it seriously.
Despite these transitional challenges, many interview participants noted an advantage to having already been at the school when it came time to learn their new full-time roles. Direct supervisors played an important role in this training. The study’s survey results indicated that people play the largest role in helping graduate admissions professional learn about school culture. Top sources for learning culture, according to the survey results, included direct supervisors, students, and faculty. Because they have already been members of the community as students, it was often noted that it was easy to gain information or set up conversations with supervisors to learn about the role (both before taking on the full-time role and after). Constance had worked in the admissions office as a student before moving to a full-time role. This allowed her easy access to current employees in the admissions office and to other important members of the school community:

But I talked a lot with our then admissions director and I had been, I had worked in this office for a couple years helping to give tours and do visit days for prospective students so I spent a lot of time in this office even as a student. So I had a lot of conversations with the then director and then assistant director when I switched over. I talked with other staff mostly in, probably most intimately in the office of financial aid. And then there were many faculty members as well.

Andrew pointed out the advantage of having been exposed to successful staff members when he was a student. For him, continued participation in the life of the school was important to both his own faith life and his professional development. Knowing that other staff members could successfully balance work with other school-related activities (e.g. attending daily liturgies) gave him the encouragement to do so, as well:
I was a student here before I was employed here so I had my own more narrow vision of the school but then I think it was important that the staff also participated in the life of the school and I had a few really good examples of staff that did that and so continuing to immerse myself in the school’s activities and culture sort of helped me to then be able to communicate more effectively.

Andrew’s continued immersion in the school also allowed him to remain aware of cultural activities and events. He was then able to speak with prospective students in a more informed way about the opportunities both in and out of the classroom.

**Previous academic experience without previous admissions experience**

A concern emerged during the interviews related to the question of whether previous academic experience at the school should overshadow previous experience working in admissions. Training and professional development programs, either offered by the institution or created specifically by the graduate admissions office, addressed some of this concern. For example, Andrew, who did not have previous admissions experience, benefitted from a formalized training process that involved an informational binder compiled by his predecessor and his supervisor (who did have admissions experience). However, not everyone received this level of training when taking on his or her role in admissions. Joseph identified the challenge of knowing the school but not knowing admissions. For him, knowing and understanding the culture of his institution was a safety net as he worked to catch up on the “how-to’s” of admissions. He recalled how this lack of admissions knowledge deterred him from initially taking the job:

I get a call from the president [of the institution] saying we've been talking and we'd like you to come be the director of admissions. And I said I'm not an admissions person. I
said I have no—I mean I have some sales background…but I know nothing about admissions. And so they kept trying to get me and after about three efforts my wife and I finally said okay and just dove in not really knowing nothing. Knowing the culture of the place very well as a student, loving the place, being really passionate about the place, which is a good start, but really knowing nothing about admissions.

Joseph’s experience could signal a larger trend in theology schools. Admissions offices at theological schools may be hiring with the impression that it is easier to learn the details of admissions and enrollment management rather than learn the details of the student experience and the school’s culture on the fly. Joseph reported some additional feedback based on his participation in a conference for admissions professionals working at schools accredited by the Association of Theological Schools:

I really felt like the culture wasn't the issue for me. I felt like I had that in my back pocket. For me the issue was admissions…I'm shocked and relieved at the number of people that get hired in this position who are not trained in this position. At the ATS breakfast we had [people were saying], “I'm two years in,” “I'm a student,” “I got my degree in psychology and I got hired on.” And so admissions is interesting because there is a skill-set that needs to be there, but I feel like schools are looking for personality, they're looking for good people skills, they're looking for those over and above any knowledge of recruitment strategies.

However, not everyone that works in theology school admissions is new to the profession. Of the 102 survey respondents, only 21% have less than 2 years of experience working in graduate admissions. The largest demographic represented in the survey was the group that has worked in graduate admissions for 6-10 years. It is unclear, however, if this group has previous training in
admissions or if representatives from this group are participating in the collegial/professional development events that Joseph describes.

**Building on cultural cues**

Graduate admissions professionals, who have not attended the school at which they work, must rely on other ways of learning the school’s culture besides firsthand experience. This group, like the group who had previously studied at their school of employment, also relies most on other people to help them learn about school culture. Again, direct supervisors, who are easy for new employees to identify, played an important role in the learning process for this group of graduate admissions professionals. However, the graduate admissions professionals who have not had a prior student experience at a school must figure out how to identify other potential allies in learning culture. For some, this process was facilitated directly by the school, through rituals like the interview/hiring process. For example, Donna, who had recently gone through the hiring process, recalled her lengthy interview process:

One thing that I really appreciated they did when I came in for my interview was I had a two day long, twenty-person interview. It was intensive. Our dean of students, who is my supervisor, put me through the ringer and she openly admits it.

For Donna, the seriousness with which the entire school community approached the hiring process for her position was a signal that the position mattered to the life and culture of the school. Even before she was hired, Donna was aware that the community was invested in ensuring a successful hire. Six months into the position, Donna could joke about the intensity of the process. She shared that members of the hiring committee had since apologized for such a rigorous vetting process. However, for Donna, no apologies were necessary. She reflected:
Yes, I was in the hot seat! And, so I knew just from that that this was not only a community decision but that this role in particular was important to the community and what I do has meaning and value to a lot of different people. So I tell them don't make any apologies about doing that. That was actually really good for me because I wanted to be in a community where I felt that sort of value and support.

The hiring process had been a positive learning experience regarding the culture of the school and helped her understand the importance of her role in a new environment.

Sarah remembered her interview process in a similar, positive way. As a job applicant, she used many of the existing virtual mechanisms that a prospective student would use, including reading the website. This allowed her to have a very open and honest conversation with the president of the school during her interview:

I did a lot of homework before I had my first interview and I read the website start to finish. I had a very honest conversation with the President who was the first point person for my interview and he was very candid about this is who we are, this is what we need, and this is whom we're looking for. I was able to convince him that I was a very out of the box thinker and that I had so much experience with marketing and recruitment and communication. I felt like I was up to the job.

Once both Donna and Sarah began their roles, they engaged with members of the community to continue learning about their schools’ cultures. Sarah’s experience indicates that there is value to being able to identify strong cultural communicators early. Sarah was able to intuit who both the strong and weak cultural communicators were.

But in order to really imbibe and understand the culture I spent, as most new employees would do, I made it a concerted effort to meet with people and I knew who the strong
people were, I knew who the sleepers were, I knew who had charisma, I knew who had a pulse and was innovative and there was a lot of, I would say that there was a fairly consistent understanding and expression of the culture of this school. There was a shared mindset but I think that some people were so forward thinking that they were excited about really wanting to take the school, and there were other people who were still stuck 20 years ago—this is what we are and there was a lot of disconnect—but I stuck with the bright and energetic people.

Donna formed a collegial relationship with her predecessor, whose willingness to continue meeting with Donna was another cue indicating the supportive, generous nature of the school’s culture. Donna shared the impact that this relationship had on her impressions of her school’s community:

The fact that she was even willing and caring enough to have an informational interview with me knowing that I could be a potential applicant for this role and the fact that she still keeps in touch and is willing to plan bi-weekly meetings with me even after she's left lets me know the impact that this community has had on her, lets me know what kind of person this community attracts so that even sent me a lot of different signals.

Donna and Sarah were both able to read cultural cues with the school community in order to form strong relationships. Both Donna and Sarah cited these relationships as the most helpful way they learned about their new school’s culture.

**Understanding the role of graduate admissions professional**

Participants in this study reported a number of details related to their understanding of the role of graduate admissions professional. The role of graduate admissions professional was described as part marketing director, part salesperson, and part counselor. This varied skillset
can provide challenges in balancing the duties of the role and in helping other administrators understand the tasks and responsibilities related to the role. Sarah provided this description of her role:

So I'm overseeing everybody's recruitment efforts and I report to the President on a weekly basis and I'm part of the senior administrative leadership team. I have been conveying that recruitment and enrollment is really a university or college wide effort. I haven't been that successful getting people to engage but at least I'm trying to send that message out. That's the macro message of what I do.

For Sarah, gaining buy-in and involvement from the community was essential to her role. Part of the challenge was helping the community at large understand the culture of admissions and how that culture intersects with the larger school culture. This included (a) what she did on a daily basis related to recruitment and enrollment, (b) the importance of recruitment to the life of the school, and (c) the possibility that everyone could be involved in these efforts. Other role related challenges that were identified included understanding the cyclical culture of admissions and developing the more technical, statistical skills required to work with admissions data.

Another issue related to understanding the role of graduate admissions professional is the debate over whether to view admissions as a sales profession. Some participants indicated there was a negative stigma associated with viewing admissions work as sales and reinforced that they did not view their work in this way. Matthew noted that he did not view his work as selling something, but instead he presented information (including school culture) to applicants in an open and honest way. He described his approach to admissions work as attempting to avoid pressuring applicants by providing them with information and letting them process it. He stated:

I don't do a hard sell… I don't like the guys who are like this is the only place you can go
and they [other schools] are a bunch of idiots. I don't like that. That to me is unethical. I just try to be as open and honest about it as possible and say that yeah, if you incur costs you will, and only you know if it's going to be worth it for you or not. I can't answer that question, only you can and I found that people really respond to that in a very positive way.

Sarah took a different approach to the idea of selling. By treating it as a positive concept, selling has become something essential to her school’s livelihood and reflective of her school’s culture, which is focused on care for individual students. Sarah shared:

I have an interesting anecdote. At our senior staff meeting every six months the president picks a book that we all talk about and this six-month period we're talking about how to sell. So we're taking the dirtiness out of selling and saying it's an integral part of everything we're doing. We have to sell and it's okay to promote, to explain, to engage, this is all about customer satisfaction and knowing what your commodity is really and how to get people excited about it. It ain't dirty anymore.

Sarah and her team have focused on connecting the idea of selling to proactively advancing the school’s mission and communicating that mission to a larger audience. At her school, selling is a necessary mechanism for engaging and exciting potential applicants.

As Ellen pointed out, the sales aspect of admissions can be a helpful way to guide and attract individuals who could potentially become successful applicants. However, Ellen identified the need for graduate admissions professionals to recognize that a “one size fits all” approach does not often work in the graduate school admissions process. She explained: “It’s really not so much about getting people to apply to schools; it’s about helping people understand which of the schools that will admit them will serve their needs best.” In a similar way, Joseph
recognized the tension between wanting to help counsel applicants and wanting to meet enrollment numbers. He was aware of his role as chief enrollment officer, while simultaneously wanting to help applicants discern and enroll at a school that would best fit their interests and needs. He disclosed:

I'm still trying to discern my role as, am I counseling? Am I just increasing that bottom line? I feel like my job is to help them, yeah, I'm biased, I want them here, but at the same time, to help them make sure that this is the best pair of shoes. I don't want to sell them some pair of shoes they're going to be miserable in and walking around cursing the day they bought them you know?

This tension was exacerbated by pressure from Joseph’s boss, the chief financial officer (CFO). Joseph reported feeling conflicted about his role because the CFO focused more on numbers and the bottom line than on student fit and satisfaction. However, as the findings in this study indicate, other graduate admissions professionals working at theological schools share Joseph’s concerns in regards to wanting students to choose the best schools for them. Whether this tension is sensed by other graduate admissions professionals could be addressed in future research.

**Conclusion**

This chapter explored the findings of interview and survey responses regarding the views of graduate admissions professionals regarding communicating school culture to prospective students. The chapter began with an overview of the findings, which indicated that culture is a factor that graduate admissions professionals are conscious of during the application process. The findings also suggest that culture is universally valued and perceived as important to both institutional recruitment strategies and to students’ decision making. Survey data, which were
analyzed using T-tests and ANOVA statistical tests, showed no significant differences among different populations of graduate admissions professionals and how they viewed and used culture. The survey data did, however, provide an important context for the interviews that were conducted.

Guided by this study’s research questions, the remainder of the chapter explored how the communication of culture takes place. Different methods of communication were identified and examined. These methods included both explicit and implicit methods of communication. The findings of this study suggest that overt strategies that are developed by graduate admissions professionals, as well as other implied behaviors and attitudes, could communicate culture to applicants. Perceptions of effectiveness were also addressed. The findings largely point to a preference for in-person, on-campus methods of communication, with many graduate admissions professionals citing formal visit days or school open houses as the perceived most effective mechanism. The findings suggest that the less person-to-person interaction a mechanism offers, the less it is perceived effective. Finally, this chapter considered how school culture is learned. In a similar way to perceived effectiveness, there was a preference for learning culture through in-person interactions. Graduate admissions professionals learned and understood their own roles through interactions with their direct supervisors, other school administrators, and students. Overall, these findings provide new understanding to the graduate admissions profession. In the next chapter the implications of these findings and their significance for practice and theory will be addressed.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

In the final chapter, the findings of this study are summarized and discussed, highlighting culture’s perceived importance in the enrollment process, the perceived effectiveness of specific methods of communicating culture, and the experiences of graduate admissions professionals learning school culture. This is followed by a presentation of the theoretical implications of these findings. The dissertation concludes with recommendations for future research and for future practice in the field of graduate admissions.

Discussion of findings

The findings of this study strongly suggest that culture plays a crucial role in the recruitment of potential students. The perceived importance of culture in influencing enrollment decisions and the level to which graduate admissions professionals include culture as a factor in marketing and recruitment strategies are both very high. Culture’s positive perception and its high-level incorporation are found to be consistent across a number of variables, including years of experience working in higher education or working specifically in graduate admissions; professional title; or school’s religious denominational affiliation.

Findings also indicate that there is little difference in how culture is viewed between those graduate admissions professionals who have had direct institutional academic experience as a current student/alumnus of the school and those graduate admissions professionals who have not. Although the two populations may experience different ways of learning culture, both indicated similarly high perceptions of culture’s importance in the enrollment process. Graduate admissions professionals, who entered their role from outside of the institution, indicated they
relied on their direct supervisor to help them navigate learning and adjust to the school’s culture. They also indicated a reliance on previous experience in higher education and admissions to help smoothly transition into their roles and to help inform and improve the communication of culture at their new schools.

While digital technologies continue to create new potentials for communication methods, face-to-face communications—most notably through campus visits—are still viewed by graduate admissions professionals as most effective. The findings of this study suggest that the more opportunities for interaction, with the preference clearly for face-to-face methods, the higher graduate admissions professionals perceived its effectiveness. After face-to-face methods, quasi-virtual mechanisms like phone, e-mail, and social media tools—which all allow for back and forth interaction between graduate admissions professional and prospective student—were rated next highest in perceived effectiveness. Finally, static methods, like viewbooks and informational webpages, were identified as being frequently used but not perceived as effective as other methods.

This study also suggests that culture can be communicated in less overt ways. Those graduate admissions professionals who recognized the possibility of communicating through implicit methods perceived these methods to be very important, as well. Implicit methods, graduate admissions professionals recognized, help portray the feeling of the school and its culture to applicants. For example, the warmth and hospitality an applicant receives during the application process can go a long way to indicate that the school has a friendly and supportive culture.

This research highlights the importance of facilitating student discernment within the larger context of the enrollment decision-making process. Graduate admissions professionals
indicate they see themselves as providing honest information regarding their school’s culture, counsel prospective applicants regarding vocational and career paths, and allow students space and time to determine institutional fit. A number of respondents indicated an approach similar to the one described above. However, emphasis on student/institution fit during the admissions process might take on particular forms and language in different disciplines. In particular, “discernment” is a theological term and its explicit use might be inappropriate or ineffective outside of schools of theology. In addition to the student discernment implication, the findings of this study identify some potential cultural tensions that graduate admissions professionals must address. These include balancing the vocational needs of applicants with the financial reality of enrollment—schools must enroll students in order to remain financially viable. Additionally, admissions offices must employ some level of customer service to ensure, for example, that applicants receive helpful and timely answers to inquiries and that the details of essential on-campus visits are not overlooked. Graduate admissions professionals must be aware that the term “customer service” may not be accepted by the entire school community, while still effectively executing many ideals of good customer service. This study suggests that graduate admissions professionals might attempt both: they should offer great customer service and portray the mission and culture of a school in such a way that applicants do not feel like customers.

Limitations

This research focuses on a specific graduate-level discipline and a specific factor within graduate admissions. The fact that this study only focuses on culture at graduate theological schools and cannot be generalized beyond these schools is a major limitation of this study. Despite this limitation, this research has provided valuable new perspectives to the field of
graduate admissions, which lacks a substantial literature of empirical research. The fact that graduate admissions professionals spoke of culture in very similar ways and engaged in a number of general enrollment management strategies, should not be overlooked. Although the study cannot be generalized, the structure of this study could be used to support future studies that investigate how graduate admissions professionals in other disciplines communicate culture. A comparative study of graduate admissions professionals across several disciplines could also be conducted. Despite the contributions of this research, there are other limitations of this study that should be noted.

First, responses to this study’s survey may be biased in favor of culture. Those that did respond to the survey indicated a high awareness, integration, and perceived importance of culture in the admissions process. Those that did not respond (57% of the population) might have a negative view of culture, might have no awareness of culture, or might not consider culture important in the admissions process. Those respondents who agreed to participate in the interview portion of the study might also have had a stronger affinity for communicating culture in the graduate admissions process. Culture may also play a larger role in theological school admissions than in other disciplines. Additionally, this study only explored perceptions of effectiveness. The possibility exists that the mechanisms for communicating culture that graduate admissions professionals perceive as effective may not be effective at all. Further research should continue to explore the perceptions that graduate admissions professionals have of culture both in theological schools and beyond, as well as develop ways to assess effectiveness and to connect graduate admissions professionals’ perceptions and prospective students’ perceptions.

The effort to honor the anonymity and confidentiality of my participants occasionally
limited the information I could provide. For example, I elected to conceal the religious affiliations of the interview participants’ schools, as that information may have risked revealing the individual’s and the school’s identities. Despite removing details that would have revealed the identity of a specific school or individual, I do not believe this had great effect on the presentation of data. However, this is a limitation that should be identified.

Another limitation of this study relates to survey design. Demographic questions, like age for example, were not asked on the survey. These details might have been helpful in determining if culture was viewed or used differently depending on other demographic qualities. I relied on the demographic data that did exist on the survey to conduct statistical tests. For example, in the absence of age, I used years of experience. Further research could explore other demographics to determine if any significant differences exist in how different populations view and use culture in admissions. Previously mentioned, the survey did not ask questions about participants’ engagement in professional organizations or in professional development programs. These details arose after the survey was administered during the interview process. However, future survey research could investigate the number of graduate admissions professionals at theological schools take advantage of such offerings.

**Theoretical implications**

This dissertation offers two theoretical implications for issues related to graduate admissions. The first implication, the ecology of graduate enrollment management, is an application of graduate enrollment management (GEM) to Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory. Then, a cultural model of the enrollment funnel is considered, with particular attention paid to student discernment.
The ecology of graduate enrollment management

Bronfenbrenner’s ecology theory can help graduate admissions professionals identify and understand the different functional aspects of GEM and the diverse concerns of prospective students.

Figure 4. Ecology map depicting how graduate admissions professionals might connect exosystem activities with microsystems.
graduate students. GEM strategies can address exosystem issues like institutional financial aid policies, housing options, and curriculum planning. Relevant to this study, GEM also includes marketing and recruitment strategies for communicating culture to prospective students. The findings of this study suggest a strong perception by graduate admissions professionals that in-person, face-to-face communication are most effective at communicating culture. The study also indicates that, while in-person methods are preferred, applicants often first encounter a school through virtual mechanisms. Gaining an understanding of the ecology of GEM will provide graduate admissions professionals with a theoretical framework to effectively connect with students.

Viewing the application process as a developmental occasion, graduate admissions professionals should ask how to move exosystem institutional activities, for example the creation of communications plans, into prospective students’ microsystems. The first step in using Bronfenbrenner’s theory in a GEM context is for admissions professionals to identify the issues that exist in prospective graduate students’ exosystems. Exosystem issues may vary depending on academic discipline, however common issues may exist for all prospective graduate students. School culture is embedded in many of these exosystems issues. Figure 4 presents a Bronfenbrenner map of common pre-existing enrollment issues. Exosystems, including geography, academic offerings, and the approach to developing institutional policies, have the potential to reveal school culture to prospective students.

For these exosystem issues to be impactful within recruitment and communications, they must connect with a student by moving into his or her microsystems. In this GEM ecology model, the graduate admissions professional can create or initiate the proximal processes that Bronfenbrenner (1979; 1993) identifies as the actions that drive development (or in this case
enrollment decision making). In this context, these proximal processes could include on-campus visits, as well as virtual mechanisms for communicating culture. These activities, which are developed and initiated by graduate admissions professionals, also have the potential to positively affect a potential student’s social networks and improve his or her social capital. Through on-campus events, for example, potential students are introduced to faculty and current students. These new relationships could influence a prospective student’s decision to enroll. A discussion of recruitment strategies that allow institutions the ability to engage students directly through their Microsystems is included later in this chapter.

**A cultural model of the enrollment funnel**

Many admissions professionals use the metaphor of a funnel to explain how individuals move through the admissions experience. There are several versions of enrollment funnels, some more detailed and complicated than others. Figure 5 provides an example of a simple enrollment funnel that includes five groups: prospects, inquiries, applicants, admits, and enrollees. The largest end of the funnel includes the population of individuals that could potentially be interested in pursuing graduate study. These prospects form the pool of individuals from which applicants and enrollees will later emerge. The funnel gradually decreases in size, as the groups become more focused and engaged. Inquiries, for example, have made at least some contact with a potential school or institution, indicating an initial interest in learning more.

The findings of this dissertation suggest that culture could play an important role in helping graduate admissions professionals successfully move individuals through the enrollment funnel. This section organizes the enrollment funnel into three stages of cultural involvement: the determination phase, the engagement phase, and the commitment phase. Like the steps in the
enrollment funnel, these cultural stages increase in focus and engagement with individuals as they move closer to making an enrollment decision.

**Determination.** Unlike the transition from high school to college, the decision to pursue graduate school is not as obvious and involves a prospective student first deciding that a specific career or a specific field of study is his or her desired next move. The findings of this study show that graduate admissions professionals in theology spend a good deal of their time speaking

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**Figure 5. Enrollment Funnel and Cultural Considerations**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stages of the Enrollment Funnel</th>
<th>Cultural Considerations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prospects</strong></td>
<td>Determination: Graduate admissions professionals answer cultural questions: “why this school?” “why this field of study?” “why graduate school?” Communications should include: general, accessible information that justifies the field of study and answers initial concerns regarding school culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inquiries</strong></td>
<td>Engagement: Still must answer “why this school?” Communications should include: cost-effective updates regarding school culture through social media and other tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Applicants</strong></td>
<td>Commitment: Must answer specific questions about culture and everyday student life Communications should include detailed, “see yourself there” methods, like on-campus events</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Admits</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Enrollees</strong></td>
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</table>
to potential students during this determination phase. These conversations include a general discussion of the fields of theology, pastoral ministry, and service, in addition to discussions of school specific details, as students determine if a career in this area is the move they wish to make next. As a result, graduate admissions professionals must be prepared not only to answer the question “why this school?” but also answer the questions “why this field of study?” and “why graduate school?” The information that graduate admissions professionals communicate regarding culture during this point in the enrollment funnel (during the pre-application stages), must include both school-specific information, such as academic programs, school mission, accessible faculty members, opportunities for applied learning, student activities, and student life offerings, as well as information justifying graduate school and presenting the school’s approach to the field of study in general.

**Engagement.** Once an individual has applied, it is important for graduate admissions professionals to keep them engaged and interested in attending that school. This engagement period, the time between applying to the school and receiving an admissions decision, can last several months. Graduate admissions professionals must work to keep these applicants updated in aspects of the school’s culture. The findings of this study suggest that quasi-virtual mechanisms, like social media websites, could serve as useful tools to maintain this engagement. During this phase, graduate admissions professionals must maintain applicants’ excitement for potentially attending the school as well as providing continual reasons for “why this school.” As the findings in this study indicate, many schools use the same language to describe their cultures and engage applicants. Taking a “show not tell” approach during this phase in the enrollment funnel may aid graduate admissions professionals in continuing to hold the attention of applicants. For example, school culture can be showcased through video features, news updates,
and coordinated e-mail campaigns featuring members of the school community. Social media and other quasi-virtual and virtual tools are especially helpful at this point in the enrollment funnel because of their accessibility and affordability. As many of the study’s participants pointed out, social media accounts can be established for little to no financial commitment. This is of particular importance at this point in the enrollment process because applicants have not yet been admitted. Some applicants may not be offered admission and an awareness of the amount of financial resources being spent on accepted and rejected applicants may be of interest to graduate admissions professionals, as well as other financial/budget officers at an institution. Social media accounts can also be accessed from any location, so graduate admissions professionals can post and respond to others’ posts from anywhere. Applicants can also gain a sense of the culture without being on campus by staying engaged with the school’s social media.

**Commitment.** The commitment phase involves an admitted student determining that he or she will attend a specific school. As many of the study’s participants indicated, a student’s decision to enroll in a specific school can be the culmination of months or years of recruitment work to guide the student through the enrollment funnel. As the findings of this study suggest, there is strong agreement that the use of culture by graduate admissions professionals at this point in the enrollment funnel can be very influential in a student’s enrollment decision. Specifically, the use of in-person, on-campus events is crucial. Visit days can create impactful, emotional experiences for admitted students, helping them to connect and image themselves becoming part of the school community. Graduate admissions professionals must continue to answer “why this school?” but also address even more specific concerns now that a decision is about to be made. These concerns include cultural questions like “how will I learn, how will I be trained, and will I live?” To help answer these questions, graduate admissions professionals can
help facilitate mock classroom experiences, as well as informational panels that discuss student involvement opportunities. Visits may also showcase opportunities available to students because of the school’s location, including social activities, service/volunteer possibilities, and options for exploration and travel.

**Discernment within the enrollment funnel.** This study suggests that graduate admissions professionals are aware that prospective students engage in discernment throughout the enrollment process. Additionally, many of the study’s participants valued a culture of discernment when describing their approach to working with potential students, in a sense viewing their work in admissions as a ministry in and of itself. The idea of discernment in admissions, used commonly in a theological school context, is an important concept to be shared with a larger graduate school admissions community. As discussed earlier, discernment is a process that involves mindfulness, prayer, and reflection to make judgments, to distinguish among, and understand the implications of different courses of action, especially ones related to vocation and calling. Discernment can include weighing competing options and seeking advice from an assortment of knowledgeable individuals. The recognition by graduate admissions professionals that prospective students engage in discernment distinguishes the theology admissions process as one of constant reflection and consultation. As many of the participants in this study indicated, it is advantageous for graduate admissions professionals to recognize and support the discernment taking place throughout the enrollment process.

This dissertation offers the consideration that graduate admissions professionals should support student discernment during the enrollment process. As the findings show, many graduate admissions professionals already value student discernment in the admissions process and are willing to have conversations with potential applicants that include questions, such as
“what is my calling?” “what is my vocation?” and “is the timing right for me to pursue graduate studies?” The findings indicated that graduate admissions professionals approached these conversations by providing open, honest answers about the field of graduate theology and about their schools in general. There was an understanding by the graduate admissions professionals that some individuals may decide not to apply. In valuing the discernment process, there must an acceptance that some individuals may determine that a specific school is not a good fit. The findings of this study indicate that most graduate admissions professionals have accepted this consequence and also believe that allowing students to discernment reflects their schools’ cultures. The key for graduate admissions professionals is maintaining the ability to provide students with the honesty and authenticity they need to discern, while still maintaining enrollment numbers to promote the good financial stability of their schools.

In anticipating how graduate schools outside of the field of theology may address the idea of student discernment, a more secular approach may need to be developed. Some schools or academic disciplines may prefer a less spiritual, religious approach than the idea of discernment (i.e. the term discernment may be culturally specific to theological schools and an unfamiliar term in other graduate disciplines). The suggestion of this dissertation is that ideas within student discernment can still apply in these cases. Schools may want to call the discernment process a period of student reflection or guided decision-making. Regardless of how this discernment is labeled, the important lesson is an awareness of the complicated decision-making process students undertake. In recognizing this process, it is beneficial for graduate admissions professionals to provide resources, time, and space for applicants to arrive at their decisions.
Recommendations for future research

This study examined issues of graduate admissions exclusively through the perspective of graduate admissions professional. A natural next step would be to conduct a similar study focused on applicant experiences and perceptions. Existing studies involving graduate applicants/students rely heavily on quantitative data to interpret what factors influence graduate enrollment decisions (Poock & Love, 2001; Stiber, 2000; 2001). Future research projects should include a qualitative research dimension. Interviews, which proved to be a very valuable research method for this study, especially in uncovering details of culture’s role in graduate admissions and enrollment, could be used to conduct research with applicants or newly enrolled students.

Additionally, this study focused on one specific academic discipline: theology. Although findings from this study cannot be generalized beyond theological school admissions, there may be aspects of theological education that are representative of all graduate education. New studies could use a similar research framework and focus on different disciplines or compare disciplines. During multiple interviews, for instance, participants cited business schools as having well-articulated cultures. Future research could examine this particular perception or could compare and contrast the cultures of different academic disciplines. The latest enrollment data from the Council of Graduate Schools continues to indicate that graduate enrollments in the humanities and education are in decline (Council of Graduate Schools, 2014). These disciplines, in particular, may want to use this study as a reference for conducting their own research or communications audit related to culture and the admissions process.

After this study’s survey was created and distributed, issues of professional development and training for graduate admissions professionals emerged. Questions regarding participation in
specific training programs and areas in which graduate admissions professionals need additional training and development were, therefore, not included on the survey. This is a limitation of this study and these questions should be included in future research related to the work of graduate admissions professionals. Likewise, other factors that influence enrollment decisions emerged as part of the interview process. Future studies could expand on this study’s focus on culture to include other influential factors including financial aid, location, academic offerings, and faculty involvement in the graduate admissions process. These factors could be explored individually or potentially compared to each other in terms of their perceived importance to enrollment decisions.

Different aspects of this research raised a number of additional interesting questions and additional areas for research. These potential questions and areas include:

- The role of school culture as an influential factor beyond enrollment, including culture’s influence on persistence, graduation, and alumni giving.
- The effect of online education on the role of school culture in recruitment, persistence, graduation, and giving.
- The relationship between social capital and Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, and whether it is possible to investigate ways in which graduate admissions professionals might expand the number of prospects and inquiries in their enrollment funnel even if potential applicants lack strong social capital.
- The relationship between graduate admissions professionals and other campus administrators, including student affairs officers, marketing/communications professionals, and chief financial officers.
- Student perceptions of the qualities that make a successful graduate admissions
• Student perceptions of the influence of alumni, faculty members, and non-institutionally sponsored materials versus institutionally sponsored efforts in communicating culture.

• Faculty perceptions of culture’s effectiveness in graduate admissions.

• Potential tensions between graduate admissions professionals and budget officers regarding enrollment targets.

• Further examination of how methods of communication are developed, including website redesign, creating social media campaigns, viewbook production, and event planning related to on-campus visit.

• Further exploration of GEM policies, strategies, and best practices across different academic disciplines.

• Opportunities for academic research, training, and professional development through organizations including the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) and the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management (NAGAP).

• Further investigation of methods and effectiveness of communicating school culture to international applicants, that cannot often visit campus or access digital resources due to internet restrictions.

Although this research addressed certain aspects of the graduate admissions process and the role of graduate admissions professional, many additional research questions exist. As the landscape of graduate education continues to change, more research is needed, especially regarding how graduate admissions professionals address and react to the issues of financial constraints, online graduate education, an increasing emphasis on digital marketing, and a fluctuating international
applicant population. New research is also needed to continue expanding the understanding of GEM as a professional area within higher education. As demographic, economic, and technological demands continue to interface with higher education, more research and understanding is needed to address them and to consider how these demands affect the culture within higher education institutions.

**Recommendations for future practice**

This section presents practical implications resulting from the research of this study. First, strategies for creating impactful cultural connections with individuals’ microsystems are discussed. Next, recommendations for the hiring and training of graduate admissions professionals are provided. Finally, additional considerations, outside the topic of culture, are offered with a focus on how graduate admissions can approach graduate enrollment management (GEM) in the coming years.

**Connecting culture in microsystems**

Through direct and indirect communication and interaction (e.g. in-person contact, the reading of print materials, or the accessing of online resources), the efforts of graduate admissions professionals connect an individual’s exosystem with his/her microsystems. Figure 6 depicts how these interactions might move from the level of exosystem into microsystem. These interactions provide opportunities for students to determine institutional best fit; simultaneously, these interactions provide opportunities for institutions to demonstrate their niche areas and communicate their unique cultures. Examples include: (a) the awarding of financial aid/scholarship, which provides direct resources to an admitted student and acknowledges the exosystem and macrosystem stresses of financial aid policies and economic realities; (b) formal visit days, which directly connect a prospective or admitted student with culture of an institution
through interactions and activities with current students, faculty, and staff; and (c) providing online resources, including social media sites, videos depicting school life and culture, and other interactive or responsive web capabilities. The next section explores in-person and virtual strategies for how graduate admissions professionals might engage exosystem activities within an applicant’s microsystems.

**In-person strategies.** In-person visits to campus can allow prospective students to directly experience what it feels like at a specific school. Coordinated visits provide an opportunity for graduate admissions professionals to intentionally showcase potential individual relationships. A visit that includes meeting time with a faculty advisor, for example, can address concerns of academic rigor, opportunities for mentorship, and faculty accessibility. Financial aid counselors can provide information and clarify questions regarding loans, assistantships, external grants, and consequences of full- and part-time enrollment. New student concerns, like questions of housing; opportunities for social activities; and institutional support for students with families, can be addressed by current student panels. Admitted student events can also allow newly admitted students to meet and form relationships among themselves. These meetings can lead to new roommates, study partners, and other modes of peer support.

Campus resources can also be highlighted through these events. The goal of an in-person, on-campus event should be to create opportunities for prospective students to experience a ‘day-in-the-life’ of a current student so that they can get an authentic feeling for the institution’s culture. This might include having students participate in a real or simulated class session, special lectures showcasing faculty research, student social events, and any other events integral to the institution’s particular culture. This might include facilitating connections for
prospective students and allies across campus (e.g. student affairs, career services, and diversity resources).

**Virtual strategies.** Visit days can address common yet important concerns regarding academic and social life. Applicants preferring to remain anonymous throughout the admission process might access the same information online or in print if the resources exist, perpetuating the importance of strong marketing and online presence. Recognizing the shift from face-to-face recruiting to a more online, anonymous process may require admissions professionals to construct space and structure that support this new phase of EM.

Online, print, and other virtual mechanisms of recruitment address this desire for anonymity, but face the challenge of potentially not coming into contact with a prospective student’s microsystems. The goal for admissions professionals is to create an in-person impact in an online or virtual format. To address this concern, information must be presented in as accessible, clear, and comprehensive a manner as possible. Focus groups of prospective and/or current students can be helpful in identifying areas for improvement on admissions websites. Feedback from those who seek the content and information can be helpful for organizing and streamlining website text, links, and material.

Other online strategies can substitute for in-person experiences. For example, creating a comprehensive virtual tour can provide similar information to a real campus visit. Video, audio, or visual student, faculty, and alumni profiles can answer concerns about the community, including the backgrounds and demographics of current students, research interests of the faculty, and career opportunities upon graduation. There are also advantages to virtual over in-person mechanisms. If website information is presented clearly and addresses concerns of all potential audiences, it can allow prospective students to do preliminary research before
contacting the institution. For example, students with anxieties over course requirements and sequences can research sample course outlines, if they are easily accessible. Any technical or cost limitations (i.e. if your website does not support the bells and whistles of some other websites or your budget cannot afford substantial video production costs) can be countered by referencing your applicants’ exosystem factors and presenting information to address those factors in as clear a way as technically possible.

**Hiring and training issues**

The findings in this dissertation have implications for those charged with the hiring and training of graduate admissions professionals. The first part of this section discusses specific qualities hiring committees should identify in candidates for positions in graduate admissions. The second part considers the training and professional development offered to graduate admissions professionals once they have been hired.

In order to grasp the culture of a school and be successful in an admissions role, it is not essential that a candidate be an alumnus of the school. As this study suggests, there is little difference in how graduate admissions professionals who had a direct academic experience at the school at which they now work and those who did not value culture’s role in the recruitment process. In fact, the findings indicate there may be an advantage to candidates coming from outside of the institution, since they can bring in different perspectives and often have previous experience in graduate admissions. Therefore, it is not necessary for institutions to only seek to hire those with prior academic experience at that institution. Beyond alumni status, there are other factors to consider during the hiring process that could potentially indicate a candidate’s successful transition into an admissions role.
Ability to make connections and form relationships. First, the ability for an individual to form relationships with a number of different constituencies appears to be key. The findings of this study indicate graduate admissions professionals form a number of potential integral relationships. These relationships include the individual’s direct supervisor, from whom the graduate admissions professional may seek guidance regarding key aspects of the school’s culture. Additionally, the potential to build relationships with faculty members is essential. Faculty members are often involved in the graduate admissions process. Their involvement may range from directly reviewing applications to serving as a panel member during an on-campus event. As this study indicates, many graduate admissions professionals feature faculty involvement in their description of school culture. Fostering strong faculty alliances allows the admissions office the ability to access faculty members during the recruitment process. In a similar way, successful candidates must also be able to form strong relationships with current students. Students also play an important part in recruitment, serving as ambassadors, tour guides, and conversation partners for applicants. Much of an admissions officer’s work is collaborative, so the ability to cultivate collegial and effective relationships with other campus administrators should also be considered. For example, because of the importance of digital communications, admissions must have a productive collaboration with the marketing and communications office. Other offices to consider include student affairs, advancement and fundraising, career services, and the budget office.

For those candidates with prior experience at the school, these relationships may be easily formed because of prior familiarity with certain individuals or offices. However, these candidates will still face the challenge of establishing themselves in a new role. Those candidates who were prior students at the school must have the maturity to navigate this role
transition and help faculty members and staff members recognize a change in the dynamic has occurred. For those seeking to move directly from student to employee, the ability to set boundaries and the possession of a strong sense of professionalism are essential, as it is likely they will need to establish new relationships with current students. Regardless of alumni status, successful candidates for a graduate admissions role must also possess the ability to make connections across the community. This involves being able to pick up on cultural cues that implicitly exist at the school. Sensing that an event or activity is important to the community, without it being labeled that way, is an example of recognizing a cultural cue.

To assess the ability to build relationships and make connections during the hiring process, a search committee should consider a job applicant’s previous experience. An invitation to share prior examples of relationship or consensus building may be helpful. Asking the candidate to research the school’s website or other communications and then share a few aspects of culture he or she felt were important would also be a potential way to evaluate these qualities.

**Customer service excellence.** The importance of a strong customer service background should not be overlooked in searching for any admissions position. The idea of higher education as consumerism, with students expecting choice, convenience, and service, is not new—although some audiences (e.g. faculty members, students themselves) might not view it that way (Kirp, 2005). In this study, however, many graduate admissions professionals specifically used the term “customer service” to describe aspects of their roles. While the use of the term customer service may be problematic for some higher education audiences, the findings indicate that the term customer service is part of school cultures and is viewed more as care, support, and the welcoming of applicants, rather than high-pressured sales tactics. Additionally, admissions professionals are conscious of the tensions that exist among needing to offer services to students,
needing to meet tangible revenue goals, and needing to maintain higher education’s academic, learning-centric approach. As the findings indicate, many admissions professionals do not view selling in a negative way. Instead, they view selling as an opportunity to feature mission, culture, and experience through service. The remainder of this section offers three additional considerations regarding customer service related to the hiring process.

**First impressions matter.** The hospitality, support, and welcome that admissions officers provide prospective students during the application process can potentially create an impression of the entire school and student experience. As many participants indicated during the study, they are cognizant of how impressions send implicit messages of culture to applicants. A positive, hospitable experience can help deliver an implicit message of warmth about the school culture and community. Job applicants for admissions positions must be able to exude this warmth and hospitality.

**Understanding applicant concerns.** Successful graduate admissions professionals understand the concerns and challenges of the application process and help their applicants navigate the process. The findings of this study illustrate the importance that graduate admissions professionals place on counseling and guiding applicants through the admissions process. This may involve the ability to explain specific required elements of the application to someone or it may involve recognizing that an applicant just needs a short email to confirm and reassure him or her that materials have been received. The findings indicate that graduate admissions professionals also value the importance of the ability to identify where a specific applicant is in his or her discernment/decision-making process. Admission applicants may need more or less support depending on where they are located in this process. Often, patience, clarity, and attention to detail are required for excellent applicant service.
Experiences are everything. The findings of this study indicate that in-person, on-campus events are perceived by admissions professionals as the most successful tools for converting applicants to attendees. There was overwhelming agreement by graduate admissions professionals that on-campus events were most effective in driving enrollment. According to graduate admissions professionals, these events allowed applicants to experience culture and community firsthand in an atmosphere of an authentic day-in-the-life of a student. Successful events, according to graduate admissions professionals, created emotional experiences that attracted students to a school. Job applicants for admissions positions must be able to illustrate that they can help craft these impactful experiences for prospective students. These experiences must leave visitors with a positive impression of the school and its community. These experiences can help directly influence the enrollment decisions of those who attend campus events. Experiences can also help generate positive buzz via word of mouth or social media if those who attend events continue to talk about their experiences within their social networks. To be considered during the hiring process: someone who cannot create positive, impactful experiences risks creating a negative perception for the school.

To gauge excellence in customer service, hiring committees must be aware of all of the job applicant’s interactions with the committee (e.g. first contact, cover letter quality, first moments of the interview as the candidate is meeting the committee). Situational questions, which ask the candidate to respond to “real-life” applicant concerns, may be both helpful and revealing in terms of an individual’s approach to hospitality and service.

Technical skills and design ability. Recognizing that gradually more admissions experiences occur virtually, it is essential that an admissions candidate possess some understanding of digital marketing and communications. As more admissions tools (e.g. online
application systems, database query tools, filing systems) are digitized, strong technical skills should also be required of potential admissions employees. Many graduate admissions professionals indicated a need for specific technical and design skills—especially skills that would allow them to make “on-the-fly” updates to websites and online admissions tools, as well as interact with design and informational technology (IT) employees.

At a minimum, job applicants should be conversational in areas of marketing and design, including web design, print design, and video production. Although it is not essential that a candidate possess expertise in these areas, having a working knowledge of these design formats can help with on-the-fly updates to websites or the unexpected request for a flyer or online correspondence to promote a program. Candidates with an understanding of design may have more success collaborating with those employees tasked with the actual design work.

Many admissions offices are now fully online, in terms of their application and filing systems. Job applicants for admissions roles must be experts in this area. Hiring committees should look for previous experience with systems that track interactions with prospective students (i.e. CRM systems), as well as familiarity with other online communications and data mining tools. As one graduate admissions professional indicated, having more skills to take advantage of his CRM system would be very beneficial to determining which communications campaigns were most impactful. Ideally, the candidate would possess both the customer service skills described above and the analytical mindset to access and utilize admissions data in an effective way.

**Professional development issues.** Supporting the newly hired individual once she or he begins is as important as hiring the right candidate for the admissions role. The research of this study suggests that not all graduate admissions professionals receive the support they require.
For example, some graduate admissions professionals, who were hired for their knowledge of the school’s culture, lacked technical skills or an understanding of the graduate admissions yearly cycle. Additionally, it appears that individuals are hired who may be excellent in certain areas of the role (in communicating culture, for example) but may lack other skills that would help them succeed. For example, some admissions professionals might benefit from introductory design training. Others, who wish to improve their quantitative skills, might benefit from workshops on statistics or specific database trainings. As institutions increase scrutiny on their finances, the ability for admissions professionals to interpret and predict trends using admissions and enrollment data will only become more important.

For those who supervise admissions professionals or for any other individuals or organizers wishing to support professional development of admissions professionals, this study presents the following considerations.

Supervisors should encourage graduate admissions professionals to take advantage of the professional development opportunities that already exist. Organizations like NAGAP and AACRAO offer multiple conferences, workshops, and consulting options, which serve the needs of admissions novices to experts. Participation in these organizations may provide graduate admissions professionals with a network of colleagues or with strategies to better communicate culture. Through conducting research for this study, it became clear that many people working in theological admissions are not aware of the resources that professional organizations offer. This may signal an opportunity for these organizations to increase their outreach. There is clearly a population that is interested in increased training and development, as well as the occasion to network with others in the admissions field. Institutions or individual employers may also want to consider creating a specific enrollment management training program that
helps new employees understand the different dimensions of their roles. Training materials (e.g. a manual or binder) could also be referenced throughout a new employee’s adjustment period. Training manuals were identified during the study as particularly helpful resources. Materials that explain the diverse aspects of EM may also be useful in other ways. For example, these materials could be shared with faculty members to help explain the role of a new graduate admissions professional. Findings indicate that helping other constituents (e.g. administrators, faculty, current students) understand the role of an admissions officer or the potential opportunities to become involved in EM themselves benefits the entire institution.

Additional considerations

The following considerations emerged throughout this study’s research process and should also be included in future practical implications related to graduate admissions and graduate enrollment management (GEM). These additional considerations relate to this study by offering thoughts on factors that might affect how culture is communicated, received, developed, or supported throughout the enrollment process.

Graduate students are often at different developmental phases in their lives

Differences exist between graduate students and undergraduate students, as well as among graduate students themselves. Often graduate students must balance their education with other factors, including family concerns, professional obligations, and financial responsibilities—often including previous educational debt. GEM must include strategies that meet students where they are in their lives. The findings of this study indicate that many graduate admissions professionals are aware of many of these competing factors. In this study, the recognition of these factors played out in graduate admissions professionals indicating they provide applicants with time and space to discern, as well as provide applicants with honest
answers regarding the reality of cost, program offerings and fit, and community support.

Graduate students should be treated as adults

Graduate admissions professionals in theology indicated that their approach to treating applicants as adults helped communicate a culture of maturity. Respondents described their schools as places of that respect and trust students and prioritize their needs. Approaching graduate students as adults includes trusting that they will make informed decisions about signal life moments, including the decision to pursue advanced education. The treatment of graduate students as adults is especially relevant considering the phenomenon of helicopter and bulldozer parents, who remain intimately involved in their children’s lives throughout college. Respondents in this study indicated that they did not often encounter helicopter parents. However, they did recognize the need to address this growing phenomenon, with an appreciation that (a) parents may still want to be involved in their children’s lives, (b) parents may be the one’s paying for their children’s graduate education, and (c) graduate education often involves professional training that requires maturity and independence on the part of the student.

Digital technologies will continue to influence enrollment management

As today’s undergraduates become tomorrow’s graduate students, GEM must be ready to meet these students with technical proficiency and with formats that appeal to the millennial generation. Specific graduate disciplines may need to balance this appeal to the younger generation while also seeking to increase and diversify their applicant pools with older students. The reality of this need to diversify arose during the study in a discussion about on-campus education, which was still attracting traditional aged students in the late twenties and thirties, versus online education, which seemed to appeal to a larger age range and was therefore more difficult to target.
Partnerships are crucial to successful GEM

A GEM definition must acknowledge the importance of faculty, current students, and alumni in the admissions and recruitment processes. Partnerships between graduate admissions professionals and each of these audiences is essential to sustaining strong enrollments. The findings of this study identified various ways that graduate admissions professionals featured each of these audiences in communicating culture. Other important aspects of these constituencies’ relationships to admissions were identified during this study. For example, faculty members were identified as being highly involved in determining which applicants to admit. Alumni, in addition to articulating institutional culture out in the world, help sustain the physical and financial resources by participating in institutional giving.

External forces impact GEM success

External forces, including the economy and job market influence graduate enrollments in many disciplines. GEM strategies must address this volatility and be prepared to work with institutional partners in budget and finance to account for this unpredictability. The findings in this study indicate the need for graduate admissions professionals to possess great balance: they must be aware of and react to these external challenges, respond to internal institutional requests from budget and financial officers, and—without losing the ability to positively portray culture—represent the school to external audiences.

Clearly, there are additional factors that could be recognized. The considerations provided here highlight areas of noteworthy concern as GEM continues to develop as a separate area of focus and inquiry. As professionals continue to develop strategies and ideas that establish GEM as a field of inquiry, it is also important to acknowledge that GEM will continue to share functionality and strategy with undergraduate-focused EM.
Final thoughts

This study, through an exploratory research design of survey and interviews, sought to share insights on the experiences of graduate admissions professionals at theological schools as they communicate culture to prospective students. Culture’s role in the admission process has been shown to be a crucial and influential one. As graduate admissions professionals create recruiting strategies to reach out to potential students, culture is highly integrated into these plans. Likewise, graduate admissions professionals believe culture is a highly important factor in converting admitted applicants to enrolled students. As this study pointed out, culture is not the sole element in these decisions; factors like financial aid and location are also perceived to play a large part in students’ decisions. However, culture is unique because its communication can be malleable. Graduate admissions professionals can create mechanisms to showcase and emphasize specific aspects of school culture. Additionally, through implicit actions, they can transmit different qualities of the culture in order to appeal and attract certain students. For this reason, culture remains a powerful factor in influencing enrollment decisions.

Despite the context of an advancing technological world, face-to-face interactions were shown to be the method of communication most valued by graduate admissions professionals for passing culture on to applicants, as well as for learning about school culture themselves. A challenge for graduate admissions professionals in the years to come will be to maintain this commitment to face-to-face methods of communicating in a world that may (may have already) become more reliant on digital communications that in-person ones. For theological school admissions officers, this means figuring out how to facilitate and support the student discernment process in a digital, virtual way. For the larger graduate enrollment management community, this may require converting many methods of communication from an in-person format to a
digital one. For example, virtual campus tours, a mechanism that many survey respondents indicated they had yet to use, may need to become common practice as less prospective students visit schools in-person during the early stages of the enrollment process.

This study has also sought to expand the knowledge regarding graduate admissions and graduate enrollment management in general. Although these findings are not generalizable beyond a theological schools sample, they hopefully provide a new material for graduate admissions professionals interested in empirical research related to graduate enrollment issues. New research related to GEM and other areas of graduate education is essential, especially as graduate admissions professionals seek new strategies to effectively communicate culture and positively effect student enrollments.
APPENDIX A

Survey Instrument

Statement of informed consent
You are being asked to participate in a research study titled “Communicating culture in graduate admissions.” You were selected to participate in this project because you work in admissions at a school accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS).

Purpose of the study
The purpose of this study is to explore how graduate admissions professionals express culture.

Procedures
The study will be conducted through this online survey, which has been sent to 236 admissions officers in the ATS. The survey contains 19 questions and should take you approximately 10 minutes to complete. I encourage you to use the “other” open text boxes and to “cut and paste” if you have saved emails or responses you often use with applicants.

Confidentiality
All reasonable efforts to keep your responses and your identity confidential will be made. Your institution’s name (if provided) will be substituted for an alias during the data analysis process. All responses will be securely stored using password protected online survey software. Your participation is voluntary. If you choose not to participate it will not affect your relations with Boston College or the ATS.

Potential risks
There are no expected risks. This study may include risks that are unknown at this time. You are free to withdraw or skip questions for any reason. There are no penalties for withdrawing or skipping questions.

Benefits
No direct benefit is expected to come to you as a result of your participation. However, your participation may help improve our understanding of the role of graduate admissions professionals, the graduate admissions process, and the role of culture in graduate admissions. At the conclusion of this project, the findings of the study will be made available to you.

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation in this study. There is no cost to you for participating in this study. At the end of the survey you will be directed to a separate page not connected with the survey that allows you to enter your name and contact information for a chance to win an iPad. This contact information will also be used to share the results of this study with you if you are interested.

Contact information
If you have questions or concerns concerning this research you may contact Adam Poluzzi at 617-552-6533 or adam.poluzzi@bc.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office for Research Protections, Boston College, at 617-552-
4778 or irb@bc.edu. This study was reviewed by the Boston College Institutional Review Board and its approval was granted on May 8, 2014.

I have read this statement and understand the possible risks and benefits of the study. I know that being in this study is voluntary. I choose to be in this study. I know that I can stop being in this study at any time. You can print a copy of this consent form by clicking the button below.

If you agree to the statements about and agree to participate in this study, please press the "Consent given" button below.

**Informed consent**
1. I acknowledge that I have read the above information and agree to participate in this research, with the knowledge that I am free to withdraw my participation at any time.
   - Consent given
   - Consent not given

**Introductory questions**
2. Religious affiliation of your institution:
   - See Appendix C for listing

3. How many total graduate students are currently/typically enrolled at your institution?
   - Open field

4. How many new graduate students do you typically aim to enroll each year?
   - Open field

5. Are you an alumnus/alumna of the ATS school at which you currently work?
   - I have earned one degree at the school
   - I have earned more than one at the school
   - I am currently enrolled at the school
   - I have a degree from the overall university but not the ATS school
   - I have not earned a degree from my current school or the overall university

**Questions on culture**
This study defines culture as the behaviors, rituals, values, customs, traits, and way of life of a specific community. Less formally, when you think about how a place feels or what makes it distinctive or particular, this is its culture.

Some people involved in graduate admissions assume that the culture of their school can be an important influence on an applicant's decision to enroll.

6. If you have any comments or concerns with this definition of culture, please include them here.
   - Open field
7. How much do you incorporate culture when you recruit for and represent your institution to prospective graduate students?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>very much</th>
<th>not very much</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. What evidence, if any, do you have that communicating culture to prospective students plays a role in recruiting and enrolling new students (e.g. student surveys, verbal feedback)?

Open field

9. When you began your current role, how did you learn about your school's culture? Please rate the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>most helpful</th>
<th>not helpful</th>
<th>didn't use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the above list, please rank the top 3 most helpful ways you learned about your school’s culture:

1. 
2. 
3. 
10. When you think about culture and present it to students, which of the following is included?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>don't include</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic reputation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to mission</td>
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<tr>
<td>Location</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opportunities for applied ministry</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student and faculty relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (please list)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the above list, please rank the top 3 most included descriptors of your school’s culture:
1. 
2. 
3. 

*A mechanism of communication* is defined as a tool that aids in the direct or indirect transmission of culture. For example, meeting with students in-person is a direct mechanism.

**Effectiveness** refers to the success you perceive a specific mechanism to have in influencing application and enrollment decisions.

11. Thinking about the ways you communicate culture, how would you rate the perceived effectiveness of the following mechanisms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mechanism</th>
<th>very effective</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>don't use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School webpages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-campus visits and events</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mails and electronic outreach</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Phone calls to applicants</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Online advertisements</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social media websites</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Off-campus recruiting events</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Printed view books</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (please list)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From the above list, please rank the top 3 most effective mechanisms for communicating your school’s culture:
1. 
2. 
3. 

12. Thinking about your online resources for communicating culture, how would you rate the perceived effectiveness of the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>very effective</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>don't use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School webpage content</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
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<tr>
<td>School blogs</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video (e.g. YouTube or promotional videos)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online profiles of students or faculty</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Online view book</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online/virtual campus tour</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (please list)</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the above list, please rank the top 3 most effective mechanisms for communicating your school’s culture
1. 
2. 
3. 

13. Thinking in terms of web browser search engines, what are the words or phrases (buzz words) that you personally use to describe your school's culture (e.g. academic excellence, supportive community, accessible faculty)? Provide up to 5.
1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5.
14. How important do you think student's understanding of your culture is to choosing to enroll in your school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>very important</th>
<th>not important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. When you respond to emails from applicants about your culture, do you have saved/commonly used text that you use?

- Yes
- No

If yes, please copy and paste this text:

Open field

16. Please comment on any other aspects of how you communicate culture to prospective students and the role you think your culture plays in students’ decisions to apply or enroll in your school.

Open field

**Additional demographic questions**

17. Please share your full title:

Open field

18. How many years have you:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worked in your current position?</th>
<th>0-2</th>
<th>3-5</th>
<th>6-10</th>
<th>11-15</th>
<th>16 or more</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worked at your current institution?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked in graduate admissions?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked in higher education?</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

19. Please share the name of your institution:

Open field

20. **Thank you very much for your participation in this survey. Your help is greatly appreciated!**

To be entered to win an iPad, please click "Yes" below to be directed to an unconnected survey where you can provide your contact information. Your contact information will also be used to share the results of this study with you.

- Yes
- No
Separate survey

Again, thank you for your participation in this survey.

1. Would you like the results of this research project sent to you?
   • Yes
   • No

2. If yes, please provide e-mail address:
   Open field

3. To be entered in a drawing to win an iPad, please enter your name and contact information below.
   Open field
APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Statement of informed consent

As part of my dissertation, I am conducting a research study that investigates how graduate admissions professionals report they communicate culture. As part of this study, I am conducting interviews with graduate admissions professionals to record their perspectives on communicating culture in graduate admissions. Interviews will last approximately 1 hour. With your permission, I would like to record this interview for accuracy purposes and so that direct quotations from you can be included as part of my data presentation. Your identity will remain anonymous and confidential. Any unique identifiers, including your name and your institution’s name will be substituted for aliases during the interview transcription process. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can choose not to answer any questions asked or discontinue the interview at any point. Your responses will contribute to knowledge about graduate admissions professionals, the graduate admissions process, and the role of culture in graduate admissions. At the conclusion of this project, the findings of the study will be made available to you. Thank you for your involvement in this study. I greatly appreciate your willingness to participate.

The interview

The interview will contain the following sections: (1) introductory questions and questions on culture; (2) questions on how you communicate culture; and (3) questions related to graduate-level admissions.
**Introductory question**

1. To begin, can you tell me about your position and the work you do in your current position?

   Probe: For institutional context, where is your institution/school located (city/state, urban/suburban/rural)? How many students do you serve?

   Probe: For experience context, how long have you been in your current position? How long have you worked in higher education? prior positions?

   Probe: What are your day to day responsibilities? Especially -- do you communicate with students? In what contexts?

**Questions on culture**

Next, let's talk about culture. *This study asserts that culture can be an important influence in enrollment. This study defines culture as the behaviors, rituals, values, customs, traits, and way of life of a specific community.*

2. Pretend I am a prospective student, how would you describe your school's culture to me?

   Probe: Are there specific words/phrases you use to describe your culture?

   Probe: What are the most important aspects of your culture?

   Probe: What makes your culture unique?

   Probe: What elements of your culture do you think distinguish your school from others?

   Probe: Do you think that your culture is a "selling" point?

   Probe: Do you have official (canned/saved) language/text that you use to communicate aspects of culture in e-mails and other correspondence with prospective students? What are some key phrases from this text?

3. Think back to when you began this job/began at this institution… how did you learn about the culture here?

   Probe: Were there people that you spoke with? faculty? staff members? students?

   Probe: Did you encounter someone you feel communicated culture in an exemplary way?

   Probe: Does anything exist in writing that communicates this culture?

   Probe: Did you use the internet/institution's website?
Probe: Was the culture easy to learn? Were there things about the culture that were hard to learn?

Probe: Are there things you still feel are unclear to you?

Probe: Has your view of your school’s culture changed or expanded over time?

4. (For those that this applies to) Would you describe your school/department's culture in a different way than your overall university/institution?

If yes,

Probe: What are the differences?

Probe: Why do you think these differences exist?

5. What role do you think culture plays in influencing enrollment decisions for your institution?

Probe: How important do you feel culture is as a factor?

Probe: Are there other factors you think play a more important role in influencing enrollment?

Questions on communicating culture

Communication of culture can happen directly and/or indirectly. For example, an in-person meeting with a student is an example of a direct mechanism of communicating culture.

6. How do you communicate culture directly with student interactions and indirectly in print and online?

Probe: Do you use social media? Which sites do you use (FaceBook, Twitter, YouTube)? What do you post on these sites?

Probe: Do you have a viewbook? Do you determine the content (as opposed to a separate marketing office)?

Probe: What about your website? Is there multimedia on your website (e.g. video, photo slideshows)?

Probe: Info Sessions? In person? Online video? Online chat? Other formats?

Probe: Other events? On and off campus?
Probe: Recruitment events? What kinds of events do you attend? What materials do you use at these events?

Probe: Do you have policies (admissions, financial aid, or others) that might reflect your culture (and therefore indirectly communicate it)?

Probe: Are there any other mechanisms I haven’t asked about?

7. Out of the mechanisms you identified, what ones do you think are most effective at communicating culture?

Probe: Are there questions you get often from students about culture? What are they?

Probe: Which mechanisms do you think work best? Why?

Probe: Are there mechanisms you wish you had available but don't?

8. How are these mechanisms developed?

Probe: Do you and your office have total oversight over this development?

Probe: Are there other offices or populations you work with?

9. How do you figure out what works?

Probe: How were these assessment tools created? Did you create them or have a role in creating them?

Probe: Have you changed, added, reduced the use of certain mechanisms based on assessment?

Questions about graduate-level admissions issues

10. What differences do you think there are in communicating culture with current graduate students as opposed to potential graduate students?

Probe: What are these differences?

Probe: Have you encountered the "helicopter parent" phenomenon?

Probe: Do you think graduate students are looking for different information regarding culture than undergrads?

11. What challenges have you encountered in communicating culture to graduate students?

Probe: What are these challenges?
Probe: Have you changed anything related to your operation to address these challenges?

Probe: Are there things you would like/are planning to change/implement that might affect communicating culture?

12. Is there any other information about communicating culture in graduate admissions that you would like to share?

Again, thank you for participating in this interview.
APPENDIX C

Denominational List

For survey question 2 (see Appendix A), a listing of denominational affiliations will be provided in a dropdown menu. This listing is based on the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) denominational list provided on the ATS website (Association of Theological Schools, 2014).

African Methodist Episcopal
African Methodist Episcopal Zion
American Baptist Churches USA
Anglican Church of Canada
Anglican, Other
Assemblies of God
Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church
Baptist
Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec
Baptist General Association of Virginia
Baptist General Conference
Baptist General Convention of Texas
Baptist Missionary Association of America
Baptist State Convention of North Carolina
Brethren Church (Ashland, Ohio)
Brethren in Christ Church
Byzantine Catholic Archeparchy of Pittsburgh
Canadian Baptist of Western Canada
Canadian Convention of Southern Baptists
Canadian Reformed Churches
Christian and Missionary Alliance
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Christian Churches and Churches of Christ
Christian Methodist Episcopal
Christian Reformed Church
Church of God (Anderson, Indiana)
Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee)
Church of God in Christ
Church of the Brethren
Church of the Nazarene
Churches of Christ
Churches of God, General Conference
Conservative Baptist Association of America
Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
Cumberland Presbyterian Church
Episcopal Church
Evangelical Congregational Church
Evangelical Covenant Church
Evangelical Formosan Church
Evangelical Free Church of America
Evangelical Free Church of Canada
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada
Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in Canada
Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches
Free Methodist Church
General Association of General Baptists
General Baptist State Convention of North Carolina
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America
Heritage Reformed Congregations (USA and Canada)
Inter/Multidenominational
Korean American Presbyterian Church
Lutheran Church-Canada
Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod
Mennonite Brethren Church in North America
Mennonite Church Canada
Mennonite Church USA
Moravian Church in North America
National Baptist Convention
Nondenominational
North American Baptist Conference
Orthodox Church in America
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Church in America
Presbyterian Church in Canada
Presbyterian Church International
Progressive National Baptist Convention
Reformed Church in America
Reformed Episcopal Church
Reformed Presbyterian Church
Religious Society of Friends
Roman Catholic Church
Salvation Army
Seventh-day Adventist Church
Southern Baptist Convention
Unitarian Universalist Church
United Church of Canada
United Church of Christ
United Methodist Church
United Pentecostal Church International
Wesleyan Church
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