

Graduate Students in Transition: Assisting Students Through the First Year

By *Kenneth A. Tokuno, Editor*

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To our credit, orientation has become commonplace on most undergraduate campuses across the country. We have studied and reported, in multiple venues, about the benefits of orientation as a transition agent for our new students. In the long run, this provides benefits for our institutions as well. We have moved beyond the lore and intimidation of introducing students to campus with the line, "Look to your left...now look to your right...."

In recent years we have started to realize that our graduate students may be just as vulnerable as our undergraduates when it comes to transitioning into our academic programs and institutions. Thinking that graduate students arrive with an understanding of campus life and how to negotiate the culture may be correct in some respects, but at the same time it could be an overgeneralization. The notion that graduates students do not need to be welcomed and provided with an orientation into our programs and institutions is the wrong approach. It seems to invalidate our *Student Personnel Point of View* (American Council on Education, 1983) philosophy and beliefs about working with the whole student. Research shows that individuals at the master's, doctoral, and professional school level seem to be just as vulnerable as the undergraduate population; some may be even more at risk.

The Graduate Students in Transition monograph published by the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition is an excellent resource that could be shared with many faculty, staff, and administrators on campus. The information offered in this publication would be just as helpful for the student affairs division as it would be for the provost's office. The ideas and information in the book would also benefit entire graduate schools as well as individual graduate programs. The publication provides a solid context for collaboration between campus departments or divisions. Additionally, this publication could help student affairs staff make connections with faculty members to create assessment and/or research opportunities for publication. Some

examples could include research on the effectiveness of the introductory and transition graduate classes discussed in the monograph. Articles addressing programmatic improvements and the collaborative efforts would seem to provide empirical evidence that college is a holistic co-curricular journey for students.

Monograph Structure

The publication is divided into two main sections. The first five chapters of the monograph provide the reader with an overview of graduate students and the graduate education. Chapters Six to Ten provide numerous examples of how strategies, programs and initiatives have been implemented on many campuses to benefit graduate students. Editor Kenneth Tokuno provides the introduction and concluding chapters. His understanding of graduate students' needs helps set the stage and transition the reader into understanding the importance of the first year of graduate school. The final chapter includes a summary of the publication and offers the reader four recommendations for practice. The entire monograph offers the reader a myriad of best practices for intentionally improving graduate programs.

Part One: Overview of Graduate Education

Transitions in Context

The first chapter, written by Kim Rapp and Chris Golde, provides data on U.S. graduate education, institutions, academic programs, and first and foremost, the graduate student. The authors claim that doctoral and professional school students have been studied and discussed to a greater degree than master's students. The authors posit that this could be due to the short amount of time and the delineated programs of study constituting most master's degrees. They point out that a graduate education is more than academics and supply answers to the question, "Is this going to be on the test?" Graduate education is about the socialization process of helping students move from being an applicant to student to paraprofessional and, finally, to professional. This transition—in, through, and out (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995)—is where our expertise as college student development professionals and faculty is situated. Graduate school is about helping graduate students acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitude of our respective professions. Graduate school creates a space that moves the student into a community of scholars and practitioners that will contribute to our disciplines.

Theories Relating to the Transitions into Graduate Study

The editor, Tokuno, presents a chapter that guides the reader through the theoretical framework with ease and precision. This chapter offers a cogent view of student development theory—both theories of developmental change and college impact models—starting with Erikson (1950, 1959) and extending to theories and

models specifically about graduate students. The latter category includes Tinto's (1993) theory of doctoral persistence and Conrad, Haworth, and Millar's (1993) decision-situation characterization of master's degree programs. In addition to the well-known theories of Chickering (1969)/Chickering and Reisser (1993), and Perry (1970), Tokuno applies the work of Levinson (1978) and Katz (1976). A strength of the chapter is the inclusion of combined theories, such as Lee and Roth (2003), Baird (1993), and Parent (2003).

Our understanding of the undergraduate experience can help us more fully develop theories and models for the graduate student, but there is more to it than cut-and-paste methodology. Tokuno suggests that a theory to explain "why graduate students succeed" (p. 28) is needed. He provides a nice foundation of traditional college student development theories and then elaborates with graduate/professional student theories. In addition, he illustrates that the demographic and life experience complexities of graduate students can be different than the undergraduate population. At the same time, these older and more mature students are still new to the graduate school process. Tokuno helps to explain that graduate students should be supported as new students in similar fashion as the undergraduates.

Tokuno also adds to the conversation about acquiring more support for the master's level students. His evidence shows that we tend to study professional school and doctoral students, but we neglect the master's level students. Some discussion seems to exist that master's degree programs are shorter and, therefore, might have less importance for research support. This chapter is a wealth of information that could be used as the connecting point between student affairs and academic affairs. It provides the theoretical basis for the overall conversation that should be happening in our colleges and universities.

The overview section includes chapters on the *Transitional Needs of Master's Students*, *Graduate Students of Color*, and the *International Graduate Student*. These chapters do a first-rate job of expanding the overall picture and complexity of graduate studies and graduate students. These chapters build on the transition theme of the monograph while highlighting the theories, models, and specific data needed to add depth to our understanding of graduate students. The context, empirical data, theories, and discussions of specific student groups provide an entrée into the next section of the monograph.

Part Two: Strategies, Initiatives, and Innovations

The creativity of American higher education is seen in the many unique programs that manifest through the implementation of data and theories. This section provides information about the graduate student and programs that have been created to address the transition concerns presented in Section One. The flow of the section again models the transition into and through graduate programs for our students. Chapter Six addresses *Orientation Programs* to help the student deal with the identity issues and the socialization process. *The Transition Course* (Chapter Seven) is the first-year experience of graduate studies. This course subtly adds to

the socialization process while moving the student from an undergraduate student identity to a graduate level scholar. *A New Context for Mentoring* addresses the importance of faculty/student relationships and the community of scholars in learning communities. The chapter authors suggest that in graduate school, mentors could also take on many forms from peers to faculty in other departments. This is due to the breadth of knowledge and experience that student peers may possess or to the collaboration possibilities of working across disciplines to increase connections.

The chapters on *Graduate Student Centers* and *An Expanded Perspective on the Graduate Transition* provide examples and explanations of services and programs to assist students. The student center could be a physical location or gathering points for graduate students, or a resource center type of program/service. To complement that feeling of having a *space*, the best practices and resources to help students' transition in and through the graduate process are addressed in the strategies section.

Conclusion

The Graduate Students in Transition monograph is a great resource that could be used by a variety of personnel on campuses as a coordinating document to create energy around this important concept of graduate student retention and persistence. It has a cogent argument supported by examples to help faculty, staff, and administrators in academic departments, graduate schools, colleges, and universities create similar programs on their respective campus. The monograph is well worth reading and keeping as a resource for ideas and references during the dynamic evolution of a graduate program. If suggestions from this monograph are implemented on a campus, this reviewer believes that outcomes could include a better working relationship between admissions and academic programs. In addition, graduate student retention would seem to be positively affected. Enrollment staff and administrators will notice the recruitment, orientation, support, and happy alumni when they see the transitions of increased and sustained tuition dollars and alumni contributions. In short, students who feel supported throughout their graduate program will be satisfied alumni. These satisfied alumni recommend their alma mater to future students, and they give money to the institution. It is this reviewer's opinion that graduate programs that respect the time and effort of their current students will be rewarded in the future.

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