

Take Your Time; Don't Waste Your Time:  
Memorable Messages about Graduating in Four Years

By

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## Abstract

This study investigated the memorable messages that undergraduates recalled about how long it should take to graduate. Eleven focus groups were conducted with undergraduates at the University of Kansas. Parents were found to be the most common source of memorable messages. Memorable messages fell into two categories: 1) “Do it in four years” and, 2) “Take your time.” “Do it in four” messages motivated students to work harder to graduate on time. “Take your time” messages reduced stress about academic progress. Messages regarding KU’s Four-Year Tuition Compact motivated students to graduate before their 4-year, fixed tuition rose. An urban legend about walking through the university’s campanile prior to graduation supported memorable message reflected in the literature.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

“Time-to-degree should be a concern to students, institutions of higher education, and society at large” write Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson in their 2009 book *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America’s Public Universities*. The researchers continue:

Students who take longer to graduate use more of their own time and resources (including family resources) to earn a bachelor’s degree. Universities may receive more tuition revenues from students who take longer to graduate, but these tuition dollars are generally only a fraction of the cost of providing an undergraduate education, particularly at public universities where in-state tuition is kept below market rates. Society at large is absorbing much of the cost of increased time-to-degree through the tax dollars that fund these public universities (p. 65).

Other researchers have also examined the time-to-degree problem in American higher education. In his *Answers in the Tool Box* study (1999), Adelman argues that what matters most for college administrators, state legislatures, parents and students is degree completion, not retention to the second or third year or persistence without a degree. National rankings of higher education quality place a heavy emphasis on the percentage of freshmen who graduate (Belcheir, 2000). Federal reporting requires that potential college students be informed of the percentage of freshmen who graduate within six years so students can make more informed decisions about where to attend college (Belcheir, 2000).

In addition, other scholars argue that timely graduation benefits society at large. Zhu (2004) writes that timely graduation from a college or university is considered a key social asset. It is argued that a society will be better off with more college educated citizens by collecting more tax revenues, spending less on social welfare and dealing with fewer crimes. Jencks and

Edlin (1995) and Murphy and Welch (1993) found that college graduates' spouses are often well-educated too. Their children usually do better in school and are less likely to get in trouble with the police. Avalos (1996) found that completing a bachelor's degree within four years has a significant positive effect on students' income level. This positive effect on income likely occurs because those who finish college in four years experience no delay in entering the labor market and have had more opportunities for promotions and merit increases.

Despite the individual rewards and social benefits, however, timely graduation from colleges and universities in the United States is far from certain (Zuh, 2004). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2006), the four-year graduation rate for bachelor degree-seeking students at four-year, Title IV institutions is only 29.3%. The five and six-year graduation rates increase to 47.7% and 53.1% respectively. Private, not-for-profit institutions have higher graduation rates than do public institutions. The four, five and six-year graduation rates for four-year private institutions is 44.9%, 57.4% and 60.8% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2006). Levine and Cureton (1998) remark, "In reality, obtaining the baccalaureate degree in four years is an anomaly today, particularly at public and less selective institutions" (p. 6).

Carey (2005) writes that the pressures of global competition, once limited to lower-skill jobs, are steadily moving up the economic ladder. The well paying jobs that remain require far more in the way of skills, knowledge and training than they did in the past. Carey continues that while the education system in the United States has yielded a well-educated workforce, recent data show that other industrialized countries around the world are catching up.

"A generation ago, countries like Canada, Japan, Great Britain, and Korea ranked far below the United States in terms of the percentage of young adults with a four-year

college degree. Since then, each of these countries has increased its B.A. attainment rate significantly, while the American rate has stayed virtually unchanged" (Carey, 2005, p. 2).

Carey concludes that the problem of low graduation rates is of central importance to our education system, economy and society at large. He states, "We cannot afford to keep wasting the aspirations and potential of countless young Americans" (p. 2). Bowen, Chingos and McPherson (2009) echo this sentiment: "When resource constraints are challenging (as they are in 2009), a long time-to-degree is especially problematic, and universities are well advised to find ways to encourage more students to complete their programs of study within the traditional four-year time frame" (p. 65).

### **The KU Context**

Timely graduation is not only a national problem, but it is also a problem at the University of Kansas (KU). The University of Kansas is a public, Research I university in Lawrence, Kansas, that enrolls approximately 30,000 students. In 2005, a task force was assembled to determine why KU's undergraduate graduation rate was lower than other similar institutions. According to the *University of Kansas Graduate In Four Task Force Report (2005)*, graduation rates at KU are lower than rates at other similar comparison institutions. For example, KU's four-year graduation rate of 29% ranks it 31 out of 34 American Association of Universities (AAU) public institutions and 5 out of 11 public Big XII institutions (p. 2). The authors of the report argue that on-time graduation is important for students as well as the institution. First, timely graduation is considered a key component to student success. The authors of the report argue that, "students develop and perform best under conditions that both challenge and support their endeavors. By not encouraging timely graduation through

appropriate advising and institutional policies and procedures, KU does a disservice to students” (p. 2). Second, when a student does not graduate in a timely manner, it costs the student and his/her family in terms of additional educational expenses and lost wages. In addition, when students fail to graduate in a timely manner, it costs the university and the state of Kansas because low graduation rates affect KU’s academic reputation and the ability to recruit faculty and high ability students. Fourth, higher graduation rates would reinforce the understanding that KU is a serious academic institution and would help create “a student body that is more engaged and actively participates in learning” (p. 2). Finally, the authors claim that raising graduation rates would create a competitive advantage and increase efficiencies at the University of Kansas.

Despite the call for improved four-year graduation rates in the 2005 report, time-to-degree rates did not improve, and in August 2009, Kansas Governor Mark Parkinson made another plea to the Kansas Board of Regents (the state higher education governing body):

If you make the right decision and improve retention and graduation rates for our students, you will save tens of thousands of students the misery of a failed education, wasted spending and a lost career...The retention of college freshmen and the ultimate graduation rates of those freshmen in the United States is dismal. Only 60 percent of freshmen who enter a four-year university graduate within the next six years.

Unfortunately, our performance in Kansas is even worse than the national average (pp. 2-4).

Not only is the governor of Kansas calling for improvements in graduation rates at public universities, but the new Chancellor of the University of Kansas has made timely graduation a top priority for the university. In a speech to the State of Kansas House Appropriations Committee in February 2010, KU’s Chancellor Bernadette Gray-Little said:

First, the university must ensure that a student's time at KU ends with a degree. We send 6,000 graduates into the workforce each year, but far too many student careers end at KU short of graduation. This not only leaves their personal potential unfulfilled, but it reduces their ability to contribute to our economy (p. 2).

In order to increase timely graduation, Chancellor Gray-Little appointed yet another task force to investigate the retention and graduation problem at KU and to develop recommendations that would result in encouraging students to stay in school and reduce the time it takes to earn their degrees. According to the April 2010, *Retention and Timely Graduation Task Force Report*,

From the perspective of students, the longer they stay in school, the less likely they are to finish, which means that families are looking more closely at retention and graduation figures as well. When undergraduates add years to their graduation, they also impact their classmates by clogging the pipeline from admission to graduation, and taking seats that could be occupied by other students (p. 3).

The report continues that only 32% of KU students graduate in four years, and only 60% of students graduate after six years. As a result, KU ranks near the bottom of comparable institutions. Other universities with comparable student profiles have four-year graduation rates closer to 40% and six-year rates above 65%.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In response to the problem of low four-year graduation rates, administrative staff at the University of Kansas implemented messaging efforts designed to encourage changes in student behavior. The efforts consisted of sending undergraduates intentional messages about graduating in four years at venues such as New Student Orientation, KU Traditions Night and Student Convocation. In addition, academic advisors in the University Advising Center encouraged

students to enroll in at least 15 credit hours each semester, new freshmen were given “Class of...” Jayhawk tee shirts to support their four-year class identity, and the four-year tuition compact was publicized.

Knowing that KU staff and faculty had been intentionally sending messages to encourage undergraduates to graduate in four years, the purpose of this study was to investigate the memorable messages that undergraduates at the University of Kansas recalled about how long it should take to graduate with a bachelor’s degree and how these messages affected the students’ behavior. The following research questions were developed to guide the study:

1. What was the content of messages that students recalled regarding how long it should take to earn a bachelor’s degree?
2. Who/what was the source of these memorable messages?
3. What was the context in which these messages were received?
4. What messages did students recall from KU’s Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts?
5. What was the impact, if any, of these messages on students’ behavior?

### **Research Perspective**

Memorable message research was the perspective that guided this study. In their foundational work, Knapp, Stohl and Reardon (1981) defined a memorable message as a message that an individual remembers for a long period of time that had a major influence on his/her life. Memorable messages tend to be short, discursive units that articulate behavioral injunctions through the use of such linguistic devices as proverbs, colloquialisms and “rules of thumb.” Much of the memorable message literature examines the new member socialization process in order to shed light on how these messages affect an individual’s behavior in particular organizations. For the current study, undergraduate students were asked about the messages they

recalled about how long it should take to earn a bachelor's degree. Examining these memorable messages may help staff at the University of Kansas determine what messages are the most effective in encouraging students to graduate in four years.

### **Significance of Study**

The Kansas governor, the Chancellor of the University of Kansas and other administrators strongly believe that KU's four-year graduation rates need to improve. As explained earlier in this chapter, timely graduation from college benefits the student, his/her parents, the university, the state and the United States as a whole. This study is significant because it will help administrators at the University of Kansas determine if their messaging efforts have been effective. Administrators at the University of Kansas would like to improve the four-year graduation rate, and the results of this study could help administrators determine the effectiveness of KU's Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts. In addition, data from this study could help guide university administrators as they evaluate programs, publications and policies that are designed to encourage timely graduation. In my role as the Associate University Registrar, I am involved with efforts to improve graduation rates, and I have a vested interest in gathering data to help KU reach its goals. This data will inform administrators about what messages are effective and what messages are not. Additionally, this study utilized memorable message theory in a way that has not been done previously. The results should help not only administrators at KU in their quest to improve four-year graduation rates, but also add to the literature on memorable messages.

In addition, Knight (1994) argues that there are two main reasons why time-to-degree, rather than rate of degree attainment after a given time period, is important to study. First, students are more interested in how long it will take to complete their degree than whether or not

they will graduate in a given time period. Knight explains that, “predicted enrollment periods can help students (and their families) plan for tuition expenses, entry into the labor force, and for many other important concerns” (p. 6). Second, being able to predict how long students will be enrolled and knowing whether time-to-degree varies among, for example, male and female students, minority and majority students, resident and non-resident students and students of varying academic ability would provide important planning information for university personnel. For example, improved estimates of instructional demand, residence hall capacity, and utilization of academic and student services could be accomplished with better information on predicted time-to-degree.

### **Improving productivity in higher education.**

This research study is not only important because it will help student services personnel at KU make better decisions, but it may also contribute to improving efficiency with higher education resources. Improving productivity in higher education is another facet of the timely graduation problem in the United States. According to a 2007 national report by Callan, Ewell, Finney and Jones, there is an urgent need for higher education institutions in the United States “to significantly increase the numbers and proportions of Americans who complete degree and certificate programs” (p. V). These authors explain that for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States expanded educational opportunity for its residents and served as a model for other countries around the world. In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, the United States faces some disturbing facts. International comparisons reveal that the United States is losing ground in student achievement and graduation. More specifically, among adults ages 25 to 34, the United States ranks 10th among industrialized nations in the share of its population that has at least a high school degree. In the same age group, the United States also ranks 10<sup>th</sup> in the

share of young adults who hold a college degree. On both measures, the United States was 1<sup>st</sup> in the world as recently as 20 years ago. These authors suggest that “while other countries have responded to the knowledge economy by aggressively seeking out more opportunities for their citizens, the United States has stagnated in the educational attainment of its population” (p. 2).

Callan, Ewell, Finney and Jones (2007) continue that “American higher education needs to address productivity challenges in order to sustain itself in the future” (p. 15). These researchers point out that tuition increases have already priced many students out of the system, and public funds are not expected to grow fast enough to make up the difference. Part of the solution lies in improving public accountability for performance to ensure taxpayer support for making investment in higher education a priority. However, part of the solution must be found in improved productivity – using resources more effectively to ensure better results. Improving productivity “encompasses a range of actions, including system and institutional audits, redesigning courses to introduce more technology, developing incentives and better aligning course offerings with student demand, and shortening time to degree from five or six years to three or four” (p. 15).

It is clear from the report by Callan, Ewell, Finney and Jones (2007) that reducing time-to-degree in American colleges and universities is a national problem, not just one unique to the University of Kansas. The next chapter will examine relevant theory and literature on time to the baccalaureate degree at colleges and universities in the United States.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Review of the Literature**

According to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (2006), “In the field of higher education accountability, few metrics have attracted as much attention – or controversy – as the institutional graduation rates” (p. 1). Since the establishment of a graduation rate definition in the federal Student Right to Know Act of 1990, university leaders, state and federal policymakers and researchers have extensively analyzed and debated this indicator of student success. One particular component of graduation rates is how long it takes a student to graduate from college. The effect of messaging efforts on students’ understanding of and behavior relative to time-to-degree is the specific focus of my study.

The purpose of the current study is to determine the effectiveness of a Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts at the University of Kansas. In this chapter, I will begin by examining the memorable message literature that provides a theoretical framework for this research study. Then, I will review the body of literature that focuses on time-to-degree for undergraduates in American colleges and universities. Time-to-degree models will be considered first, followed by a section concerning Factors of Timely Degree Completion including Student Background and Characteristics, College Environment, Student Involvement and Enrollment Behavior. Finally, literature on Anticipated Time-to-Degree, Extender Research and Strategies for Reducing Time-to-Degree will be examined. Since the subjects for this study were first-time, full-time undergraduates of traditional college age, the literature reviewed in this chapter reflects this student population.

#### **Memorable Messages**

Knapp, Stohl and Reardon (1981) write that during the course of a single day, hundreds

of verbal messages are directed to us for evaluation and response. Most of these messages have a relatively short life; they are processed, responded to and forgotten. Yet, there seem to be a few verbal messages that may be remembered for long periods of time and that people perceive as a major influence on the course of their lives – memorable messages. Stohl (1986) defined a memorable message as a message that individuals remember for a long period of time that had a major influence on their life. Memorable messages tend to be short discursive units that articulate behavioral injunctions through the use of such linguistic devices as proverbs, colloquialisms and rules of thumb.

Knapp, Stohl and Reardon (1981) gathered a large number of memorable messages as well as information about the circumstances surrounding their transmission and reception. The interview data were classified and coded according to four major categories: the structure of the message the form and organization of the message; the content of the message; and the circumstances surrounding the transmission and reception of the message. The major findings of their study are as follows:

1. The messages most people recalled tended to be explicit guidelines or rules to follow (p. 28).
2. The content of memorable messages is also most often (72 percent)
  - a. action-oriented – i.e., contains prescriptions of what one should or should not do rather than passive remarks on the state of the world (p. 32-33).
3. These messages were most often received from a person who was older and of
  - a. higher status (p. 33).
4. When these messages are remembered, the reasons are complex and involve
  - a. the nature of the recipient, the sender, and the message itself (p. 34).

5. Messages perceived as memorable are most often brief and injunctions that
  - a. prescribe rules of conduct for solving a personal problem (p. 36).
6. Whereas proverbs serve as guidelines for the collective experience of many
  - a. people, memorable messages appear to be master rules when derived from
  - b. the collective experience of a single person – i.e., personalized proverbs
  - c. (p. 39).
7. Memorable messages are a rich source of information about ourselves,
  - a. our society and our ways of communication (p. 40).

In their book *Made to Stick*, Heath and Heath (2007) came to some similar conclusions about memorable messages. They explored the question: Why do some ideas succeed while others fail? In addition, these researchers studied how people design messages that “stick,” in other words, messages that are memorable. They collected, coded and analyzed “naturally sticky ideas” such as urban legends, wartime rumors, proverbs, conspiracy theories and jokes and found six principles at work (p. 11).

**Principle 1:** Simplicity – Memorable messages “are both simple and profound” (p. 16). For example, the Golden Rule is the ultimate model of simplicity: a one sentence statement so profound that an individual could spend a lifetime learning to follow it.

**Principle 2:** Unexpectedness - To get an audience to pay attention to one’s ideas, “unexpectedness” is often utilized. Memorable messages often use surprise, but surprise does not last. For an idea to endure, one must generate “interest and curiosity” (p. 16).

**Principle 3:** Concreteness – Ideas must be explained in terms of human actions, in terms of sensory information. Naturally sticky messages are full of concrete images; “speaking concretely is the only way to ensure that our idea will mean the same thing to everyone in our

audience” (p. 17).

**Principle 4:** Credibility – External authorities can often lend credibility to messages in order to make them memorable. However, in the absence of an external authority, internal credibility can be created through the use of vivid details that symbolize and support the core idea. In addition, statistics can be used as long they engage the audience.

**Principle 5:** Emotions – One way to get people to care about an idea is to make the audience *feel* something. Research shows that people are more likely to make a charitable donation to a single needy individual than to an entire impoverished region. Humans tend to feel things for other people, not for abstractions.

**Principle 6:** Stories – Telling stories helps get people to act on ideas presented to them. Research shows that mentally rehearsing a situation helps people perform better when they encounter that situation in the physical environment. Similarly, hearing stories acts as a kind of “mental flight simulator,” preparing people to respond more quickly and effectively (Heath and Heath, 2007, p. 18).

The above research concerning memorable messages by Knapp, Stohl and Reardon (1981) and Heath and Heath (2007) provided a theoretical framework for my research on KU’s Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts. This literature will inform succeeding analysis and discussion of the data collected in this study. In the next sections, the body of literature that exists pertaining to time-to-degree is examined. In an attempt to provide a broad foundation, Time-to-Degree Models will be discussed first.

### **Time-to-Degree Models**

Astin (2004) writes that the major problem with the graduation rate as a measure is that it is usually a misleading indicator of an institution’s ability to retain its students. Graduation rates

depend on the kinds of students a university or college admits. Astin continues that most institutions' degree completion rates are primarily a reflection of their entering student characteristics, and that differences among institutions' completion rates are primarily attributable to those differences. Using data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshmen Survey, researchers from the University of California at Los Angeles developed the "Actual-to-Expected" graduation rate model. This research produced a set of formulas that any institution can use to compute a customized "expected" degree completion rate to compare to the institutions' "actual" degree completion rate. This model helps researchers decide how much of each institution's graduation rates should be attributed to institutional policies and practices, and how much to the characteristics of the students who enroll.

A second degree completion model outlined by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (2006) is the "Actual-to Peer" graduation rate model. In 2004, researchers with the Education Trust conducted an analysis of graduation rates and looked at institutional factors that might explain the wide variation in graduation rates. Using statistical calculations that took into account some of these factors – including SAT/ACT scores, institutional mission, financial resources and others – analysts were able to assess how well specific institutions were doing relative to peer institutions that enroll similar students.

A third model described by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (2006) is the "Disaggregated Graduation Rate" approach. This model calls for the development of a series of graduation rates for each institution, where the overall rate is disaggregated into separate rates for categories of students known to graduate at different rates. For example, research indicates that socioeconomic status correlates with expectation of college graduation and that institutions vary as to the socioeconomic make-up of their student body. Federal student

aid eligibility could be used as a proxy measure for socioeconomic status and graduation rates could be calculated for four subsets of students: full Pell Grant eligibility, partial Pell Grant eligibility, subsidized loan eligibility and no eligibility for Pell Grant or subsidized loans. Researchers could compare these disaggregated graduation rates across institutions rather than a single graduation rate.

A fourth model from Gillmore and Hoffman (1997) also appears in the literature. These researchers argue that the number of calendar years between when a student first enrolls and when he/she graduates “is not a valid measure of the efficiency by which colleges are producing degrees and using resources, and as a measure it has unfortunate consequences” (p. 880). They continue that a more appropriate measure is one that is based on the amount of instructional space that a student occupies over the course of his/her postsecondary studies. As a result, Gillmore and Hoffman (1997) propose the Graduation Efficiency Index (GEI), which is intended to be “a single, easily computable index of the efficiency with which students move through the higher education system” (p. 880).

Gillmore and Hoffman (1997) argue that their GEI model avoids many of the problems that are associated with calendar years as a measure of institutional efficiency. The authors claim that the GEI is a much more defensible measure of the efficiency with which an institution is producing graduates in that it takes the following five variables into account: 1) *The total number of credits that have been earned.* Earning more credits than the degree demands reduces efficiency. 2) *The number of credits for courses that have been dropped.* Dropped courses, leaving empty seats, add to inefficiency. 3) *The number of credits for courses that have been repeated, including failures.* Students who fill the same seat twice add to inefficiency. 4) *The minimum number of credits required by the major for graduation.* Degree programs that

legitimately require more credits do not necessarily add to inefficiency. 5) *The number of credits that have been transferred*. Given that students move from institution to institution, prior coursework needs to be recognized but not credited to the degree-granting institution (p. 880-881).

While these preceding models provide a foundation for understanding how time-to-degree is calculated, the following section examines four major groups of factors that affect timely graduation. These groups of factors include: Student Background and Characteristics, College Environment, Student Involvement and Enrollment Behavior.

### **Predictors of Timely Degree Completion**

Knight (1994) argues that influences on educational attainment (whether or not students obtain a degree within a given time frame) similarly influence time-to-degree as well. For this reason, the influences of student background and characteristics, college environment, student involvement and enrollment behavior comprise much of the time-to-degree literature . Student background and characteristics will be examined in the following section.

#### **Student background and characteristics.**

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (2006) states that there is an abundance of data documenting that the characteristics of beginning students are strongly correlated with their likelihood of graduation from college in a six-year period, or graduation at all. The data show that graduating from college depends largely on 1) academic preparation and college readiness and 2) various aspects of socioeconomic status. Similarly, using a national data set from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, Astin (2004) found that most institutions' degree completion rates are "primarily a reflection of their entering-student characteristics and that differences among institutions' completion rates are primarily

attributable to those differences” (p. 2). Anderson (1986), Astin (1993), Ishitani (2005), Ishitani and Snider (2003), Knight (1994), Knight and Arnold (2000) and Stoecker, Pascarella, and Wolfe (1988) cite higher academic ability (as measured by high school grade point average, SAT scores and undergraduate grade point average) as the best predictor of earning a bachelor’s degree within a given time period. DesJardins, Kim, and Rzonca (2003) reported that for every full-grade increase in college GPA, a student’s odds of graduating in a timely fashion more than doubled. Similarly, the Oklahoma Council on Student Affairs (1996) found “the importance of academic preparation for timely movement of students to baccalaureate degrees cannot be overemphasized” (p. 11). In addition, DesJardins, Kim and Rzonca (2003) found that students who enter higher education institutions with prior college credits (either by taking college courses in high school or earning college credit by exam) have odds of graduating in four years that are higher than other students.

Other student characteristics that researchers found influence degree attainment include gender, religion, age, race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. The research shows that females tend to complete their baccalaureate degrees faster than males (Adelman, 1999; Astin, 1993; Ishitani and Snider, 2003; Knight 1994; Oklahoma Council on Students Affairs, 1996). Astin (1993) found that Jewish and Roman Catholic students had higher graduation rates. The age of the student affects time-to-degree as well. Knight (1994) and the Oklahoma Council on Student Affairs (1996) found that older students took longer to earn a bachelor’s degree than younger students.

Race/ethnicity is another student characteristic found in the literature on time-to-degree. For example, the Oklahoma Council on Student Affairs (1996) studied college students in Oklahoma and found that the racial/ethnic groups with the highest proportion of students

*expecting* to complete a baccalaureate degree within four years were Hispanics (60%) and students who classified themselves as “Other” (59%). The racial/ethnic groups with the lowest proportion of students expecting to graduate in four years were Asian Americans (44%) and Native Americans (52%). However, when actual time-to-degree was measured, Non-Resident Aliens had the highest proportion of students actually earning their baccalaureate degree within four years and Asian Americans had the second highest graduation rates by race/ethnicity. The racial/ethnic groups with the lowest proportion of students completing their degrees within four years were African Americans and Hispanics. Researchers with the Oklahoma Council on Student Affairs (1996) explained that while race appeared to have a direct impact on time-to-degree, Astin (1993) explains its impact is indirect. Astin concludes that the direct impact on time-to-degree comes from the student’s socioeconomic status that is usually stratified along racial lines.

Ishitani and Snider (2003) report that students from low and middle income families were less likely to graduate than students from high income families. For fifth year graduation, students from low and middle income families were 44% and 34%, respectively, less likely to graduate than students from high income families. These researchers explained that lower degree completion rates among students from low and middle income families may reflect the inequalities of secondary education access among students of different socioeconomic status.

The literature indicates that the availability of financial resources has an impact on time-to-degree as well. Campbell (2003) interviewed students and their parents and found that finances were a motivating factor to finish a degree as quickly as possible before their college funds or personal savings ran out. Students and parents in this study also mentioned rising tuition costs as a concern. In addition, Campbell found that one-fourth of the students surveyed

had to work more to pay for college expenses, thus increasing the time it took to obtain a degree.

For many students, financial aid is a critical financial resource. Lam (1996) explains that financial aid is awarded in two basic forms: gift aid and self-help aid. Gift aid includes grants, scholarships and waivers for which recipients carry no obligation to repay. Self-help aid includes loans and employment. Loans are generally payable after graduation, and employment adds additional duties and time obligations to students. Lam continues that gift aid is superior to self-help aid. While a loan dollar will cover as much educational expenses as a gift dollar, students understand that they face a cost difference between grants and loans. Grants are free while loans must be repaid at a future date, and therefore have a cost associated with them. The role of loans in financing higher education may serve as an incentive for students to complete their degrees in a timely manner. Lam studied non-transfer undergraduates who entered a large, urban, public university as freshmen out of high school and eventually earned a bachelor's degree. Lam wanted to know how different types of financial aid and work impacted time-to-degree. Lam found that students who received only loans took the least registered time to complete their degrees ("registered time" was defined as the total number of actual enrolled semesters). However, students who received gift aid and were employed at the same time had the shortest elapsed time to degree (elapsed time was defined as the total length of time starting from the beginning of undergraduate study to degree completion). In fact, students who received gift aid and worked also performed better academically, enrolled part-time less frequently and changed majors less often. Students who relied on work income alone to support their education were more likely to work during the summer than students in the "loans and gifts" and "loans only" subgroups. Lam concluded that "as loans can provide needed funds for students to pay educational expenses, it may allow students to attend classes all year round, and thus accelerate

the rate of progression toward degree completion” (p. 20).

Besides socioeconomic status, another student characteristic that appears in the literature on time-to-degree is whether or not a student is the first member of his/her family to attend college. Ishitani (2005) studied first-generation college students and found that they were 51% and 32% less likely to graduate in the fourth and fifth years than students whose parents graduated from college (p. 18).

Research also indicates that a student’s state residency classification has an impact on how long it takes the student to graduate. For example, DesJardins, Kim, and Rzonca (2003) studied time-to-degree for students at the University of Iowa. Non-resident students had higher odds of graduating in four years than students from the state of Iowa. The researchers conclude that the increased cost of attendance for non-resident students may propel them to graduate sooner.

The literature suggests that a student’s major has an impact on time-to-degree as well. DesJardins, Kim and Rzonca (2003) found that students studying social sciences have odds of graduating in four years that are about 14 times higher than students majoring in health-related fields. Engineering and natural science students are also less likely to graduate in four years than students in the social sciences. Business students, however, have odds of graduating that are about 1.6 times higher than social science students.

Changing one’s major also may have an impact on the time-to-degree for a student (Adelman, 2006; Campbell, 2003; Florida Board of Governors, 2004; Oklahoma Council on Student Affairs, 1996). According to the Oklahoma Council on Student Affairs (1996), students who change majors may have additional course requirements to complete, therefore requiring more time to complete a baccalaureate degree. Garcia (1994) observed that the more times a

student changed his/her major, the greater the lapsed time-to-degree. Knight (2002, 2004a, 2004b) also included multiple changes of major among the set of variables which significantly impacted time-to-degree. A survey of parents' opinions by Sanford (1994) showed changing majors to be the most common reason for delaying their children's graduation.

Noxel and Katunich (1998) conducted a survey of graduates from the Ohio State University to explore alumni perceptions of the most important factors that helped or slowed their progress to a baccalaureate degree. The greatest percentage of four-year graduates interviewed (20%) reported that their personal motivation and goal setting were the most important factors that helped them obtain a degree. Campbell (2003) discovered that for many students it is difficult to feel a sense of urgency regarding degree completion if they do not have a commitment to definite career goals. Additionally, 18-year-old high school graduates "are often unprepared to make decisions regarding college major and future career aspirations" (p. 11).

In sum, this section showed that student background and characteristics have an impact on how long it takes to earn an undergraduate degree. The literature indicates that academic ability, gender, religion, age, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, first-generation status, state residency classification and choice of major all have an impact on time-to-degree in some way. The next section in this review of literature focuses on the impact of the college environment on time-to-degree.

### **College environment.**

The second factor that influences timely graduation is the *college environment*. The literature shows that some college environment characteristics positively influence degree attainment. These characteristics include being a four-year institution (Dougherty, 1987; Velez,

1985), being a private institution (Ishitani, 2005; Smart, 1986), being a more selective institution (Ishitani, 2005; Stoecker, Pascarella and Wolfe, 1988) and being a smaller-sized institution (Astin, 1993; Stoecker, Pascarella and Wolfe, 1988). In addition, living in a university residence hall (Astin 1993), participation in college orientation activities (Pascarella, Terenzini and Wolfe, 1986), receipt of financial aid (Lam, 1996), institutional provision of a true core curriculum, the percentage of women and the percentage of Ph.D.'s on the faculty and the percentage of resources invested in student services (Astin, 1993) all impact time-to-degree.

An example of resources invested in student services is the quality of undergraduate advising at an institution. Campbell (2003) found that some students were dissatisfied with the academic advising that they received from university staff and faculty. These students indicated that poor advising was a factor in prolonging their degree. One student said, "I have been repeatedly advised to take my time, slow down, enjoy college. While I see this point, there is also a financial reality to taking my time" (p. 12).

### **Student involvement.**

While student characteristics and the college environment affect timely graduation, the third factor in this section is *student involvement*. Positive student involvement effects include the quality and quantity of student relationships with faculty (Astin, 1993), with peers (Astin, 1993; Stoecker, Pascarella and Wolfe, 1988), involvement in intercollegiate athletics (Pascarella and Stuart, 1990, as cited in Knight, 1994) and part-time employment on campus.

Research by the Florida Board of Governors (2004) found that the more students work per week, the fewer credits they take, and vice versa. As the *Enrollment Behavior* section below reveals, enrollment in fewer credit hours per semester tends to lead to a longer time to degree. Research by the Oklahoma Council on Student Affairs (1996) found that student employment

can negatively impact time-to-degree because it takes time directly away from classes and study time. Similarly, Lam (1996) concluded that student employment was detrimental to students' timely academic progress. Lam found that employment alone delayed graduation at a rate of one half semester if all other variables were held constant.

The Oklahoma Council on Student Affairs (1996) wrote that extracurricular activities compete with time for coursework and study. When students do not achieve an adequate balance between extracurricular activities and studying, many students delay degree completion.

The fourth and final factor that affects timely graduation is *enrollment behavior*. This literature will be discussed in the next section.

### **Enrollment behavior.**

Research on time-to-degree behavior suggests that enrollment in fewer credit hours per term was associated with a longer time to graduation (DesJardins, Kim and Rzonca, 2003; Florida Board of Governors, 2004; Ishitani and Snider, 2003; Knight, 2004; Knight, 1994; Knight and Arnold, 2000; Noxel and Katunich, 1998; Oklahoma Council on Student Affairs, 1996; Volkwein and Lorang, 1996). Garcia (1994) wrote, "the basic recipe for completing an undergraduate degree program within the 2- and 4- year templates for time-to-degree is to maintain continuous enrollment and to earn more than 30 semester units each academic year" (p. 6). In their study on students at Indiana State University, Ishitani and Snider (2003) found that earning more than 31 credit hours each academic year had the largest impact on graduating in four or five years. Volkwein and Lorang (1996) write that many baccalaureate programs require a student credit hour load of 16-17 or greater per semester for students to graduate in four years without enrolling in summer classes (this also excludes the need to take remedial classes or change majors). Yet many campus policies allow students to be considered as "full-time" for

registration, fee payment, financial aid and other purposes if they enroll in just 12 credit hours per semester (Knight, 2004). Knight (2004) continues, “While a lighter class load may be in the best academic or personal interest of some students, a systematic approach to academic advising that encourages students to take higher class loads when warranted would significantly decrease time-to-degree attainment for most students” (p. 9).

The Florida Board of Governors (2004) found that the number of years a student takes to graduate was also determined by the total number of credits students earned toward their degrees. Credits taken by students that are not required for their degree are classified as “excess” hours (Florida Board of Governors, 2004, p. 2). The biggest source of excess hours is courses that students withdraw from, fail or repeat in order to earn a higher grade. Research by the Florida Board of Governors (2004) also found that students who change their majors have more excess hours due to withdrawals, repeats and failed courses, as well as more excess upper division credits, than students who do not change majors. Similarly, Adelman (2006) found that excessive no-penalty course withdrawals (W) and non-credit repeats (NCR) were damaging to time-to-degree. Adelman (2006) writes, “...every seat at every available hour in every facility of an institution of higher education is at stake, and every seat marked with a W or NCR bars another student from sitting down” (p. 161).

Ishitani (2005) found that continuous enrollment had the largest positive impact on timely graduation than any other factor in his study. Specifically, Ishitani found that students who continuously enrolled were 11 times more likely to graduate within four years (p. 19). Ishitani and Snider (2003) discovered that the number of semesters a student missed in their first three years in college had a significant impact on timely graduation through years four to six. Similarly, Belcheir (2000) found that freshmen who continuously enrolled were about twice as

likely to graduate after four years as their discontinuously enrolled counterparts. The Florida Board of Governors (2004) reported that, “interruptions in attendance reduce the rate at which students earn credits” (p. 4). An interruption, or “stop out,” occurs when a student does not enroll for at least one fall or spring term (Florida Board of Governors, 2004, p. 4). A stop out may occur when a student needs to work, becomes ill or needs to take care of family members or when he/she has academic or financial difficulty maintaining continuous enrollment. Garcia (1994) found that a major reason California State University students extended their time-to-degree was taking time off. Garcia found that fully 67.8% of the student cohort studied took at least one term off from school before they graduated (p. 7). The two factors that contributed most to stopping out behavior were changing disciplines and changing campuses.

Even when a student remains continuously enrolled, if the degree program the student is seeking requires extra credit hours, time to a degree may be extended (Campbell, 2003). Based on his research on time-to-degree, Knight (2004) recommended that Bowling Green State University review its 122 credit hour graduation requirement with an eye toward possibly reducing it to only 120 credit hours in order to decrease time-to-degree. Adelman (2006) writes that many disciplines require credit hour production that, when translated into standardized semester metrics, exceeds the 120 credits that would be produced by students who attended only during the regular academic year and carried a standardized full-time load of 15 credits per semester.

Additionally, Pitter, LeMon, and Lanham (1996) found combinations of university programs that ranged from 122-124 credits in social sciences, foreign languages, psychology, mathematics and protective services, for example, to 130-142 credits in fields such as architecture, engineering and health professions. These researchers found five-year bachelor

degree programs in pharmacy, for example, with a median credit hour requirement of 161. Garcia (1994) found that California State University students who pursued science, engineering and agricultural degrees often completed total unit loads that exceeded the traditional 124 semester unit standards. Adelman (2006) continues that any requirement over 120 credit hours will either add time to degree attainment or encourage students to 1) earn credits by examination or Advanced Placement, 2) enroll in summer courses and/or 3) carry credit loads in excess of 15 per semester in order to graduate “on-time” (p. 160).

Dwyer (2005) conducted a study to determine if there was a correlation between general education course enrollment and timely degree completion at the University of Arkansas. The findings showed that students enrolled in general education classes past their sophomore year. Dwyer found a slight correlation between university core completion by the end of the sophomore year and length of time to graduation. In addition, there was a moderate correlation between completion of university core courses prior to the fourth year and length of time to graduation. The most frequently postponed area of the university core delayed until after the third year was the advanced composition requirement, followed by the social studies and then the science requirements. The most commonly delayed course to the senior year was a sophomore level English composition course. And finally, Knight (2004) found that enrollment in cooperative education classes had a relatively strong effect upon increased time-to-degree.

Attending multiple institutions has been shown to affect time-to-degree as well. Garcia (1994) found that loss of credit upon transfer from one institution to another could negatively impact time-to-degree. Garcia found that upper division transfer students took an additional 3.5 years beyond their prior educational experience to complete their baccalaureate degree. Belcheir (2000) found that transfer students were 6.8 times more likely than freshmen to graduate after

four years, 4.1 times as likely after six years and 3.1 times as likely to graduate after ten years. The most important variables in Belcheir's study in predicting graduation for both transfer students and freshmen were continuous enrollment, mainly full-time enrollment, and first semester grade point average. Discontinuous enrollment reduced the odds of graduating for transfer students as well as freshmen.

The preceding sections have reviewed four broad categories of factors that affect timely graduation from college: *Student background and characteristics, the College environment, Student involvement and Enrollment behavior*. In order to better understand college student behavior beyond these four factors, several researchers have asked, "Do student even *plan* to graduate on time?" The data from this line of questioning is reviewed in the following section.

### **Anticipated Time-to-Degree**

Hoe and Richlin-Klonsky (2002) studied how many years incoming freshman at the University of California at Los Angeles *anticipated* taking to complete their baccalaureate degrees. These researchers found that 80% of entering freshmen expected to graduate within four years. However, the real time to degree statistics for these students from the 1995, 1996 and 1997 cohorts showed 42%, 46% and 52% graduated within four years (p. 3). Clearly, there was a gap between students' anticipation and their real life experience. The leading reasons for anticipating more than four years to graduate were to get good grades, accommodate double majors, plans to take part in extra-curricular activities and to work part-time. In addition, students who intended to major in Engineering, Math, Fine Arts and Physical Sciences anticipated longer time-to-degree, while students who intended to major in English, History and Political Science were less likely to anticipate extending time to degree. Hoe and Richlin-Klonsky concluded that time-to-degree seems to be a "thinking-to-action" process that starts

prior to college and continues through a student's post-secondary career (p. 5).

Researchers with the Oklahoma Council on Student Affairs (1996) discovered that the majority (52.4%) of students surveyed expected to complete baccalaureate degrees in four or fewer years. Thirty percent of students surveyed expected to take between four and six years, while only 5.4% expected to take six or more years to graduate. However, the actual data revealed that only 4.5% of all students surveyed completed their baccalaureate degrees within four years. In addition, students who had earned Advanced Placement (AP) credit, had taken college preparatory classes, or had participated in the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) were more likely than students who had not participated in these programs to anticipate earning a baccalaureate degree within four years.

Despite the fact that many college students expect to graduate on time, the data show that many student wind up extending their undergraduate college education beyond four years. Research on "extenders" follows in the next section.

### **Extender Research**

Volkwein (1995) writes that existing enrollment management literature generally concentrates on two student populations – persisters and dropouts. Volkwein's research, however, investigates a third population that he calls "extenders" (p. 39). Extenders are "those ostensibly full-time students who take longer than four years to complete the B.A." (p. 39). *Vocational* extenders are those students who have "higher levels of financial need and loan indebtedness" who report that they have to work in order to meet expenses, thus they have to enroll in fewer credit hours per semester (p. 5). *Collegiate* extenders are those students who take a lighter credit load because they "desire more free time, or because they dropped more courses after the semester began because it was too difficult and/or because they were dissatisfied with

their grade” (p. 5).

Volkwein (1995) wanted to know the reasons that some students took longer than normal to complete a baccalaureate degree and whether these extender students were more like students who took only four years to graduate or more like students who dropped out. Volkwein found that extenders have some of the same characteristics as those students who graduated in four years – both had semesters in which they enrolled in fewer than 15 credit hours, they had similar college work experiences and they expressed similar problems with course availability. Four-year graduates and extenders also employed similar strategies in earning additional credits to supplement regular semester credits. Volkwein also found that taking longer to graduate was significantly associated with only 3 out of 30 measures in the analysis: financial need, protecting a high grade point average and registering for fewer than 15 credit hours in multiple semesters. In addition, extenders had neither more nor less academic and social integration nor institutional commitment than non-extendors.

Researchers at Southeastern Louisiana University (2005) conducted a telephone survey of students who were taking longer than four years to complete a baccalaureate degree at their university. Results indicated that while students were satisfied with services provided by the university, such as library resources, campus response to crime and the friendliness of faculty and staff, the students were less satisfied with “availability of courses needed for graduation” (p. 1). Of the 35 possible reasons presented to students, “You had trouble completing all of your major field courses because some of them are/were not offered during the semesters you needed them” was the reason most cited (69.3%) for not graduating in four years (p. 1). Other reasons that received high percentages were having trouble completing major field courses because of scheduling conflicts and having to drop courses because students were dissatisfied with the

teachers. In addition, during a typical week, extender students spent a majority of their time working for pay (see also Campbell, 2003). Other major activities engaged in during the week included spending time interacting and caring for family members, attending classes/labs and studying and socializing with friends.

Campbell (2003) found that some extenders surveyed desired to take courses and learn about subjects that were outside of their degree plans. This additional coursework, although enriching, may lengthen their time to graduation. Students indicated that they were intentionally staying in college longer to complete a double major or minor or to study abroad. Some students and their parents viewed extended time-to-degree as an opportunity for the student “to mature, take advantage of social and organizational activities, and to simply enjoy the college experience” (p. 14-15).

Campbell (2003) also wanted to know if students, parents and university administrators viewed it as a major problem that many students are not earning a baccalaureate degree within a four-year time frame. While Campbell’s study had a small sample size, the general sentiment was that students who came to college with a fixed major in mind should be able to finish a degree in four years if they choose to do so. Campbell found that the reality that most students do not complete their undergraduate degree in four years does not seem to alarm anyone – students, parents or university administrators.

This review of relevant literature began with a discussion of memorable message literature that provides a theoretical structure for this current study. Then, time-to-degree models were presented, followed by a review of factors that impact timely degree completion. Research on anticipated time-to-degree and students who extend their time in college have also been reviewed. The final section in this review describes *Strategies for reducing time-to-degree* found

in the higher education literature.

### **Strategies for Reducing Time-to-Degree**

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (1996) recommended ten strategies to reduce the time it takes students to earn their baccalaureate degrees. These strategies have either been implemented by a state, discussed by the Texas State Legislature or have been suggested in the literature:

**Strategy 1:** Require universities to guarantee time-to-degree – The State Legislature could require that universities guarantee that admitted students who attend full-time, follow a prescribed program of study and pass every course would be able to enroll in the courses needed to graduate in an established period of time (usually four years). States that had a four-year guarantee at the time of the report were Florida, Iowa, Montana, Oregon, South Dakota and Washington.

**Strategy 2:** Reduce credits required for degrees – The State Legislature could establish limits on the number of credits that an institution requires for baccalaureate degrees in different disciplines.

**Strategy 3:** Encourage students to earn college credits while in high school – The State Legislature could require higher education institutions to aggressively encourage potential students to acquire college credits prior to enrollment at college through Advanced Placement (AP), the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) and concurrent enrollment.

**Strategy 4:** Charge block tuition: The State Legislature could adopt tuition schedules that allow students who are taking 13 or more credit hours per semester to pay the same total tuition as students taking 12 credits. This type of tuition structure would provide an incentive for students to enroll in more courses because credits over 12 hours would be essentially tuition-free. Block

tuition is a common practice in independent institutions, and students at these institutions typically take more courses, have higher graduation rates and shorter time-to-degree.

**Strategy 5:** Use technology/distance education - The State Legislature could authorize the Coordinating Board to: (a) charter five Texas higher education institutions to offer five high-demand, undergraduate core courses statewide via distance education, and (b) require all public institutions to accept transfer of these five courses for full credit, and (c) establish the reimbursement rate for these courses and all equivalent courses offered at all institutions at 70% of the current reimbursement rate. Technology and economies of scale could allow the distance education courses to be offered at 70% of the current cost of teaching these courses. To provide an incentive for institutions to use the statewide courses rather than teach them on their own campuses, all equivalent courses would be reimbursed at 70% of the current rate.

**Strategy 6:** Increase summer school opportunities – The State Legislature could require that no less than 25% of the credit hours generated by each institution be generated in summer school. Mandatory summer school attendance would create problems for students who earn a portion of their college expenses by working in the summer. For students who must pursue their studies on a part-time basis, the availability of a full range of courses during the summer could do much to reduce time-to-degree.

**Strategy 7:** Provide financial rewards to students who graduate in three years – The State Legislature could require universities to provide tuition rebates in the amount of \$1,000 to students who complete requirements for baccalaureate degrees within 36 months from their initial enrolment. At the time of this report, the Texas Legislature provided \$1,000 grants to students who completed high school in three years. These grants could be used to defray the costs of tuition at Texas public colleges and universities.

**Strategy 8:** Impose surcharges for excessive credits – The State Legislature could require universities to charge undergraduate students tuition equal to the full cost of education for more than 150 credits attempted in public institutions of higher education. This strategy would provide a positive financial incentive to encourage students to identify a major early and to minimize extraneous courses.

**Strategy 9:** Limit enrollments to required courses – The State Legislature could require that institutions allow students to enroll in no more than three courses that are not required for the degree program they are currently pursuing. This strategy would be extremely difficult to administer and would require that institutions do a much more comprehensive job of advising students.

**Strategy 10:** Provide state subsidies only for required courses – The State Legislature could authorize the Coordinating Board to disallow formula funding for courses in which students are enrolled but which are not required for the degree program they are currently pursuing. This strategy would provide a strong financial incentive for institutions to limit the availability of courses outside the major, but would not prohibit them. Institutions would be required to maintain much more sophisticated student tracking systems. Significantly more staff efforts would be required for student advising and processing changes of major.

Other strategies in the literature include a recent national report by Callan, Ewell, Finney, and Jones (2007) that focuses on showing how colleges and universities can be more efficient, including shortening time-to-degree. These researchers write that because graduation is the desired goal, the development and use of incentives for timely degree completion would better align state fiscal policy with state educational goals. An example of such an incentive for students to complete their degree is loan forgiveness. Often this type of incentive requires the

student to complete a degree program and to practice in the field in the state for a specified period of time. Other common incentives include direct state payments to degree completers (also know as post hoc scholarships) and payments or rebates to students who complete a degree program with fewer than 120 state-funded hours of college credit (for example, through Advanced Placement).

## **Summary**

This chapter presented a review of relevant literature that informed not only my research questions, but also the theoretical framework upon which the study rests. Research on memorable messages by Knapp, Stohl and Reardon (1981) and Heath and Heath (1997) was reviewed at the beginning of the chapter. As will be discussed in chapters four and five, the results of my study reflect the principles and characteristics of memorable messages described in the literature review. Then, several time-to-degree models were presented. Next, relevant literature pertaining to student background and characteristics, college environment, student involvement and enrollment behavior was presented. And finally, the chapter ended with research on students who extend their time at college beyond four years and strategies to reduce time-to-degree. After reviewing the literature on time-to-degree, I felt that many of my original questions had been answered. The research supports actions taken by the University of Kansas to improve time-to-degree. For example, promoting enrollment in at least 15 credit hours per semester , limiting students' ability to drop classes and reducing the overall number of hours required for a degree have all been addressed by current or future university policies. I discovered, however, a surprising lack of qualitative research on the time-to-degree issue. As I reflected on the efforts that university staff have made over the years to address the problem of low four-year graduation rates, I began to wonder if these efforts had made any difference on

student behavior. I thought about how I could approach the problem from a different perspective. The literature review showed me that few researchers have used a qualitative approach, so I decided to use my experience in the Communication Studies field to inform a study on time-to-degree. The next chapter describes the research design and method I eventually chose for this study.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Research Design and Methods**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the memorable messages that undergraduates at the University of Kansas recalled about how long it should take to graduate with a bachelor's degree and how these messages affected student behavior. As a review, the research questions that guided this study were:

1. What was the content of messages that students recalled regarding how long it should take to earn a bachelor's degree?
2. Who/what was the source of these memorable messages?
3. What was the context in which these messages were received?
4. What messages did students recall from KU's Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts?
5. What was the impact, if any, of these memorable messages on students' behavior?

This chapter provides a complete explanation of research methods that were employed to conduct the study. The following sections include information regarding research design, the role of the researcher, human subjects compliance, participant selection, data collection, data analysis, validity and reliability.

#### **Research Design**

Maxwell (1996) explains that qualitative and quantitative research methods are not just different ways of doing the same thing. Instead, both approaches have different strengths and are best used to understand different questions. Maxwell continues, "The strengths of qualitative research derive primarily from its inductive approach, its focus on specific situations or people, and its emphasis on words rather than numbers" (p. 17). In addition, Strauss and Corbin (1990)

write that, “Some areas of study naturally lend themselves more to qualitative types of research, for instance, research that attempts to uncover the nature of persons’ experiences with a phenomenon” (p. 19). Since my study was an initial investigation that sought to understand students’ perceptions and experiences regarding memorable messages they had received in the past, I chose to employ qualitative research methods.

As will be explained later in this chapter, my initial investigation into KU’s Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts was a series of person-to-person interviews I conducted with five KU administrators. Dexter (1970) writes that interviews are “conversations with a purpose” (p. 136), and since the details of the messaging efforts had never been written down, I had to collect information from these administrators to determine the scope and substance of the messaging efforts. Once I understood the content of the messaging efforts, I chose a type of group interview – the focus group – as the method to collect data from research participants. As Blankenship (1991) notes, qualitative research allows for free expression of perceptions, experiences, feelings and memories. Since I wanted to explore the past experiences of students and their memories about messages they recalled, qualitative research methods were the most appropriate.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Merriam (1998) writes that the investigator in a qualitative study is the primary instrument for gathering and analyzing data, and as such, “can respond to the situation by maximizing opportunities for collecting and producing meaningful information. Conversely, the investigator as human instrument is limited by being human – that is, mistakes are made, opportunities are missed, personal biases interfere” (p. 20). Merriam warns that human instruments are as fallible as other research instruments can be. Before using qualitative

research, one should assess the types of personality characteristics necessary for such research. More specifically, Merriam writes that qualitative researchers need: enormous tolerance for ambiguity, sensitivity to the research context and data and good communication skills.

As the researcher for this study, I also had to recognize my relationship to the study participants, the research questions and the research site. Regarding the research participants, since I am an administrator at the university where the study was conducted, I tried to choose research participants whom I did not know personally. Out of the 60 subjects who participated in the focus groups, I only knew 3 of them personally. Even though I knew three of the participants, I asked them the same set of questions as all of the other participants and treated their responses just like I treated the responses from the other subjects. I do not think knowing these three participants personally impacted my role as the researcher or the ultimate outcomes of this study.

In addition to my relationship to the study participants, it was important to consider my relationship to the research questions and research site. As a KU administrator, I am dedicated to helping the institution achieve its goal of decreasing the time it takes most undergraduates to obtain their bachelor's degrees. I work full-time in the Office of the University Registrar, which is under the purview of the Office of the Vice Provost for Student Success. Several of my professional colleagues (as well as the Vice Provost for Student Success to whom I ultimately report) have been personally involved in KU's Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts. However, I did not allow my personal biases or relationships to KU staff to impact the research project. My role was to conduct focus groups and to analyze the data, regardless of the outcome and its impact on my professional colleagues and superiors. I intend to share the results of this study with my colleagues and superiors at KU, and hopefully, help improve the programs, services and

policies at the university.

In order to help reduce more researcher bias, I often consulted with people I knew at KU including, faculty in the Department of Educational Policy and Leadership Studies and Communication Studies, colleagues who work under the Vice Provost for Student Success and graduate students in Counseling Psychology, Educational Leadership and Policy Studies and Applied Behavioral Sciences. Two graduate students in Counseling Psychology assisted me with conducting, transcribing and analyzing the research data. In sum, the following assumptions applied to this study:

1. Respondents gave honest answers to the focus group questions based upon their opinions, experiences, memories and perspectives.
2. Researcher bias did not interfere with selection or treatment of research participants, data collection or data analysis.

### **Human Subjects Compliance**

Another important role for the researcher is to follow ethical research guidelines and practices. After completing the ethical research practices training program, I requested and received research approval from the Human Subjects Committee – Lawrence Campus. This approval was required since human participants were the primary source of data in this study. This committee is KU's Institutional Review Board and ensures compliance with federal regulations concerning human research (see Human Subjects in Research [http://www.rcr.ku.edu/hsc/about\\_hsc.shtml](http://www.rcr.ku.edu/hsc/about_hsc.shtml)). In addition, I requested that study participants fill out the approved research consent forms and stored the forms and data in a private, secure location.

### **Participant Selection**

Once I received approval from the Human Subjects Committee at KU, I began the actual process of participant selection. Before I could investigate the effectiveness of KU's Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts, I first needed to understand the scope and substance of the efforts. Since the messaging efforts were not documented in writing anywhere I could find, I conducted person-to-person interviews with five KU administrators who had participated in, or who had knowledge of, the messaging efforts. I chose these administrators through *network sampling* (Merriam, 1998). After an initial discussion of my research topic with Dr. Marlesa A. Roney, Vice Provost for Student Success, she referred me to other KU administrators who could provide me with additional details about the content and history of the messaging efforts. As I interviewed other administrators, they also gave me suggestions about whom to interview. The five KU administrators I interviewed were:

1. Dr. Kathleen McCluskey-Fawcett, Professor in the Psychology Department and former Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs
2. Emily Malin, Assistant Director, University Advising Center
3. Dr. Kathryn Nemeth-Tuttle, Associate Vice Provost for Student Success and former Director of the University Advising Center
4. Dr. Marlesa A. Roney, Vice Provost for Student Success
5. Kristin Trendel, Director, New Student Orientation

Once I understood the scope and substance of KU's Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts, I interviewed a student assistant in the Office of the University Registrar in order to pilot my initial interview questions. The selection of this student was an example of *convenience sampling* (Merriam, 1998) since she worked in the same office I did, and it was easy to schedule this interview.

Once I conducted this pilot interview with one student assistant, my faculty committee and I decided to switch research methods from personal interviews to focus groups. The undergraduate student subjects selected for this focus group research were a *typical* sample. Merriam (2002) explains that since qualitative research seeks to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants, it is important to select a sample from which the most can be learned. This is called a "purposive or purposeful sample" (p. 12). Merriam explains that there are several types of purposeful samples, but for this study, a *typical* sample was selected. According to Merriam, a *typical* sample reflects the average person, situation or instance of the phenomenon of interest. Since the vast majority of literature on time-to-degree focuses on first-time, full-time traditional-aged undergraduate students, I selected subjects who represented the average or typical undergraduate student at the University of Kansas. Additionally, graduation rates for first-time (non-transfer) undergraduate students are of primary interest to university administration and make up the majority of students at KU. These students were the target population for KU's Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts.

Since my study was grounded in memorable message literature, and this body of literature tends to be found in the field of Communication Studies, I asked an associate professor in this department to serve on my committee. In addition, this Communication Studies associate professor put me in contact with the graduate student who coordinated recruiting students for research in the Department of Communication Studies at KU. Students enrolled in Communication Studies 130 (a general education course at KU) have a research requirement as part of their course curriculum. I posted my study on the KU Blackboard site where qualified students were able to sign up to participate and, in turn, receive research credit. In order to qualify for this study, students needed to represent a traditional undergraduate student.

Specifically, each student had to be:

1. of traditional age (18 – 22 years old)
2. a freshman (earned fewer than 30 credit hours), a sophomore (earned between 30 – 60 credit hours), a junior (earned between 60 – 90 credit hours) or a senior (earned more than 90 credit hours)
3. enrolled full-time (minimum enrollment of 12 credit hours) for at least part of the fall 2009 or spring 2010 semester
4. single (not married)
5. childless (not be a parent)
6. first-time college student (not a transfer student)

In addition to these characteristics, I attempted to obtain a sample of students who represented the traditional undergraduate population at the university in terms of gender and race/ethnicity. For example, according to the University of Kansas Office of Institutional Research and Planning (2008) in Fall 2008, 50.1% of students were female and 49.9% were male. In terms of race/ethnicity, 76.8% of students were white/non-Hispanic. Thus, female students should make up about half of the sample, and white/non-Hispanic students should make up approximately 75% of the sample. Students of color should make up approximately 25% of the sample. However, I was not able to match the subject pool exactly to the profile of current KU students in terms of gender and race/ethnicity (see Appendix A for research participant demographic data).

### **Data Collection**

As described in the section above, I interviewed five administrators who had knowledge of KU's Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts. I contacted each of these administrators by email

and asked if they would agree to be interviewed. During the spring of 2009, I met with each administrator in their office on the KU campus. The interviews were semi-structured in design and took between 45 and 60 minutes each. I recorded each interview on a digital voice recorder and took notes during each interview. The interviews were later transcribed verbatim. For a summary of KU's Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts see Appendix D.

Once I understood the content of KU's Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts, I conducted an initial interview with one female undergraduate student to pilot my interview questions. The interview was conducted in my private office in the main administration building on the KU Lawrence campus. The interview was recorded on a digital voice recorder and later transcribed verbatim. Upon consultation with my faculty dissertation committee, we decided to conduct focus groups instead of person-to-person interviews with students. We decided that the focus group environment would facilitate more discussion and produce more data on the research topic.

Since I had never conducted a focus group session, I observed the Communication Studies associate professor on my dissertation committee facilitate several focus groups. She mentored me on how to conduct focus groups, how to encourage reluctant participants to talk, how to collect and transcribe the data and helped me create a short questionnaire and consent form. After this preparation, I conducted eleven focus group sessions during the fall 2009 and spring 2010 semesters. The focus groups were conducted in reserved rooms in the Kansas Memorial Union on the Lawrence campus. Three graduate assistants (two majoring in Counseling Psychology and one majoring in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies) helped me conduct the focus groups by checking-in research participants, taking notes during the focus groups and recording the focus group proceedings on two digital voice recorders. I used two

digital recorders in case one malfunctioned. At the beginning of each focus group session, participants completed a demographic questionnaire and signed a research consent form (see Appendix C for copies of each form used). Most of the focus group questions were open-ended, and the research participants were encouraged to speak freely. The following questions were posed to all of the focus group subjects, and I frequently probed deeper with follow-up questions:

1. How long should it take to earn a bachelor's degree at KU?
2. Do you plan to graduate in four years with a bachelor's degree? Why or why not?
3. Are you on track to graduate in four years? Why or why not?
4. Is it important to you to graduate in four years from KU? Why or why not?
5. What do you remember someone telling you about how long it should take to graduate?
6. From whom did you hear/receive this message/advice?
7. Please describe where you were when you received this message/advice.
8. Please explain how this message impacted your behavior.
9. What would you tell someone else about how long it should take to graduate?
10. Is there anything the university could say or do to encourage students to try to graduate in four years?
11. KU thinks it has done some things to encourage students to graduate in four years. I am going to name some of them, and I would like to know if you remember any of them:  
"Class of..." tee shirt handed out after orientation, sessions during New Student Orientation, speeches at Traditions Night or Student Convocation and messages from your academic advisor.
12. Are you familiar with KU's Four-Year Tuition Compact? If so, does it encourage you to finish your degree in four years? Why or why not?

As I conducted focus groups during the fall 2009 semester, it became clear that the vast majority of study participants were freshmen and sophomores. This was not surprising since Communication Studies 130 is a freshmen level course. I was concerned that I was not obtaining the views of juniors and seniors. After consultation with my faculty advisor, I worked to recruit more juniors and seniors to make sure the perspectives of upper classmen were included in the data. As a result, I conducted two focus group sessions with only junior and senior level participants. Not only was I able to include older students in the subject pool, but this enabled me to compare the responses of upper classmen to the responses of freshmen and sophomores.

### **Data Analysis**

Once all the focus groups had been conducted and responses transcribed, I analyzed the data from the transcripts. Merriam (1998) explains that the content of qualitative research (such as focus group data) can be analyzed for themes and recurring patterns of meaning. The first step in analyzing the focus group data was to sort all the responses to the questions using Excel spreadsheets. Then, I sorted the responses again in relation to each of my research questions and attached each answer to an index card. As I sorted the index cards, I developed categories as different themes emerged from the data. The process I followed was similar to that described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) who wrote, “The process of grouping concepts that seem to pertain to the same phenomena is called *categorizing*” (p. 65). Throughout the entire analysis process I consulted with my graduate students and the University Registrar when I had questions about how the data grouped into particular categories (the University Registrar holds a PhD in Education).

Merriam (1998) explains that many qualitative researchers analyze data while they are

collecting the data. As I facilitated focus groups and transcribed the data, I continuously analyzed the data throughout the process. I continually compared new data from the focus groups to the categories I had already developed, modifying and refining the categories as new data were added. As I conducted the focus groups during the spring 2010 semester, I became aware that the responses from each additional focus group were the same as previous focus groups. Since I was no longer receiving any new data from the research participants, I stopped collecting data after eleven focus groups.

### **Validity**

Internal validity, according to Merriam (1998), “deals with the question of how research findings match reality” and “Are investigators observing or measuring what they think they are measuring?” (p. 201) Merriam explains that there are six basic strategies to enhance internal validity:

1. *Triangulation*: This technique involves using multiple investigators, multiple sources of data or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings.
2. *Member checks*: This technique consists of taking data and/or tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking them if the results seem plausible.
3. *Long-term observation*: This could be conducted at the research site or one could make repeated observations of the same phenomenon – gathering data over a period of time in order to increase the validity of the findings.
4. *Peer examination*: This occurs when researchers ask colleagues to comment on the findings as they emerge.
5. *Participatory or collaborative modes of research*: This method involves participants in

all phases of the research from conceptualizing the study to writing up the findings.

6. *Researcher's biases*: At the outset of the study, the researcher's assumptions, worldviews and theoretical orientation are clarified.

In order to ensure validity in this study, I utilized several of the methods listed above. For example, while I was attempting to understand the scope and substance of KU's Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts, I compared the answers of the KU administrators with each other and to some written documents I found on the subject, thus utilizing some triangulation. In addition, throughout the research process I asked colleagues to comment on the focus group data and my analysis of the data. These colleagues included the University Registrar (who holds a PhD in Education) and five graduate students (two seeking advanced degrees in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, two in Counseling Psychology and one in Applied Behavioral Sciences). I also collaborated with faculty in the School of Education throughout the entire research process. Finally, my research biases and perspectives were considered (clarified earlier in this chapter in the section *Role of the Researcher*.)

### **Reliability**

Merriam (1998) explains that *reliability*, in the traditional sense, does not seem to fit when applied to qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 288, as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 206) suggest that researchers think about “dependability” or “consistency” of the results. Instead of insisting that others get the same results, a researcher “wishes outsiders to concur that, given the data collected, the results make sense – they are consistent and dependable” (Merriam, 1998, p. 206). Merriam continues that, “The question then is not whether findings will be found again, but *whether the results are consistent with the data collected*” (p. 206). Merriam suggests the following techniques to enhance reliability in qualitative studies:

1. *The investigator's position.* The investigator should explain the theory and assumptions that form the foundation of the study, his or her position vis-à-vis the subjects, the basis for selecting informants and a description of them and the social context from which data were collected.
2. *Triangulation.* Especially in terms of using multiple methods of data collection.
3. *Audit trail.* Independent judges can authenticate the findings of a study by following the trail of the researcher. In order for an audit to take place, the investigator must describe in detail how data was collected, how categories were derived and how decisions were made throughout the research.

For the current study, I discussed memorable message theory and relevant literature on time-to-degree in Chapter Two. I also described my researcher biases, methods of research and subject selection earlier in this chapter. In addition, I collected and maintained an audit trail of all research activities in a secure location, and I followed ethical human subject guidelines throughout the research study.

In addition to qualitative research being dependable and consistent, Merriam (1998) explains that *external validity* is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations. In other words, how generalizable are the results of the study? Merriam writes that the question of generalizability has plagued qualitative investigators over time. She continues that a researcher can enhance generalizability by using the following strategies:

1. *Thick, rich description.* The researcher provides enough description so that readers will be able to determine how closely their situations resemble the research situation.
2. *Typicality or modal category.* The researcher describes how typical the program, event

*or individual is compared to others in the same category so that readers can make comparisons with their own situation.*

3. *Multisite designs. The researcher uses several sites, cases and/or situations so that readers can apply results to a greater range of situations.*

The current study is an initial investigation at a specific university conducted in order to shed light on the topic of time-to-degree for university administrators. Since the design of this study is institution specific, external validity strategies were not a priority. That being said, I am confident that this qualitative research will add to the body of literature that currently exists on time-to-degree. The memorable message theory and data collection techniques could be applied to other college or university settings.

#### *Summary*

This chapter explained the overall research design employed in this study. The specific information in this chapter included: the role of the researcher, human subjects compliance, research participant selection, data collection, validity and reliability. In the next chapter, the data from the interviews and focus groups will be presented.

## Chapter Four

### Study Findings

#### Introduction

This chapter provides an analysis of the focus group data used to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the content of messages that students recalled regarding how long it should take to earn a bachelor's degree?
2. What messages do students recall from KU's Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts?
3. Who/what is the source of these messages?
4. What is the context in which these messages were received?
5. Do any of the memorable messages affect the student's behavior?

In order to find answers to these research questions, the focus group protocol consisted of eleven questions. The first four questions were designed to introduce the topic to the subjects and to obtain some background information about the participants' opinions on the importance of earning a bachelor's degree in four years. These introductory questions were:

- A) How long should it take to earn a bachelor's degree?
- B) Is it important to graduate in four years?
- C) Do you plan to graduate with a bachelor's degree in four years? Why or why not?
- D) Are you on track to graduate? How do you know you are track?

The remaining seven questions in the focus group protocol related directly or indirectly to messages that participants had received about how long it should take to graduate with a bachelor's degree. These questions included:

- E) What do you remember people telling you about how long it should take to graduate?

- F) From whom did you hear/receive this message?
- G) Where were you when you received this message?
- H) How did this message impact your behavior?
- I) What advice would you give a student about how long it should take to graduate?
- J) Is there anything the University of Kansas could say or do to encourage students to graduate in four years?
- K) The University of Kansas thinks it has done some things to encourage graduation in four years. I am going to name some of them, and I would like to know if you remember any of them and if the messages had any impact on your behavior: 1) Class of... tee shirts handed out at the end of New Student Orientation; 2) information sessions during New Student Orientation; 3) speeches made at Traditions Night; 4) speeches made during Student Convocation; 5) messages from your academic advisor; and, 6) KU's Four-Year Tuition Compact.

### **KU's Messaging Efforts**

KU's Graduate-in-Four Messaging efforts were not a formalized strategy or organized campaign, nor was there a specific faculty or staff member in charge of leading the efforts. Instead, several university leaders and unit directors decided to make efforts to communicate to students an expectation that they should graduate in four years if they were in a four-year academic program. Since these efforts had never been collected and documented, during the spring of 2009, I conducted person-to-person, semi-structured interviews with five KU administrators who had been involved with the messaging efforts. I contacted each administrator via email and scheduled interviews in each of their offices. I recorded each interview on a digital voice recorder and later transcribed the interviews. I conducted one-hour interviews with the

following KU administrators: Dr. Kathryn Nemeth-Tuttle, Associate Vice Provost for Student Success; Emily Malin, Assistant Director in the University Advising Center; Dr. Kathleen McCluskey-Fawcett, former Senior Vice Provost for Academic Affairs; Dr. Marlesa A. Roney, Vice Provost for Student Success; Kristin Trendel, Director of New Student Orientation.

According to Dr. Roney, Dr. Nemeth-Tuttle and Dr. McCluskey-Fawcett, the impetus for the Graduate-in-Four efforts was former Provost David E. Shulengerger's concern with KU's low graduation rates and time-to-degree for undergraduates, as compared to peer institutions. Dr. Nemeth Tuttle explained that during the late 1990s, the Kansas Board of Regents expressed concern that students were not graduating in a timely manner. As part of the solution to this problem, the Board wanted universities to provide written four-year degree plans to students. Dr. Nemeth-Tuttle was the director of the newly-created Freshmen-Sophomore Advising Center at the time, and she and her staff decided to make efforts to encourage students to graduate in four years (if they were in a four-year academic program). The strategy they chose at the time was to create *Graduate in 4* notebooks for students. These notebooks were distributed to students when they came to the center for their first advising appointment. The notebook content was designed to help students understand a variety of academic issues from careers and academic pathways to academic policies to effects of dropping below twelve hours. The notebooks even contained a checklist for every year (freshmen, sophomore, junior and senior) with relevant information and milestones for every semester. These checklists were used years later to develop an on-line degree planning tool for KU students (K. Nemeth-Tuttle, personal conversation, May 5, 2009). Dr. Nemeth-Tuttle pointed out that the notebooks opened with a letter from Provost David E. Shulenburg. A portion of this letter from the 2003 notebook reads:

We take your education seriously and provide planning assistance so that most first-time undergraduates can complete their programs within four years. (KU has a few five- and six-year baccalaureate programs.) Knowledgeable people from peer undergraduate advisors to senior faculty and professional staff will help you navigate through the many learning and research opportunities KU offers.

Besides the notebooks distributed in the Freshman-Sophomore Advising Center, there were no other major messaging efforts until Provost Shulenburg convened a committee to study the issue of low graduation rates at the University of Kansas. The committee's work culminated in the September 2005 *Graduate in Four Task Force Report*. Vice Provost for Student Success, Marlesa A. Roney, said the Graduate-in-Four task force, among other things, wanted to know if students who took honors courses and studied abroad were negatively impacting the four-year graduation rate. The research showed, however, that the majority of these students still graduated in four years. Dr. Roney explained, "We wanted to make sure that we weren't institutionally doing some things that caused students to have to take a fifth year" (M. Roney, personal communication, April 29, 2009).

Dr. Roney continued to explain that the task force also took a closer look at the presentations and speeches that university staff were delivering to students and found that many of these messages were not communicating an expectation to graduate on time. Dr. Roney said, "We saw all this evidence that we were sending a message that didn't encourage people to graduate in four [years]" (M. Roney, personal communication, April 29, 2009). For example, Dr. Kathleen McCluskey-Fawcett explained that Chancellor Robert Hemenway would frequently joke in his speeches about students taking five or six years to graduate (K. McCluskey-Fawcett, personal communication, April 22, 2009). Similarly, Dr. Kathryn Nemeth-Tuttle said that some

of KU's orientation assistants would introduce themselves to incoming freshmen by saying, "I'm a fifth-year senior or a fourth-year sophomore. But we just stopped that. We were trying to get our messages aligned [with the four-year graduation message.]" (K. Nemeth-Tuttle, personal communication, May 5, 2009).

While the university engaged in various unconnected efforts, it did not have a coordinated message campaign. As a result of the findings in the task force report, university staff increased efforts to send intentional messages to students about graduating in four years. As part of these efforts, KU administrators were encouraged to refrain from joking about taking five, six or seven years to graduate and began sending intentional messages to students about graduating in four years. Dr. Roney said, "We wanted to be straight forward with people and create the expectation that unless you are enrolled in one of those four [academic] programs that doesn't graduate in four [years], then you should plan to graduate in four. You can take care of everything you need to do at KU - study abroad, do all these different enrichment opportunities, be involved in co-curricular [activities] - and you can still graduate in four [years]" (M. Roney, personal communication, April 29, 2009). Dr. McCluskey-Fawcett explained that university staff wanted to "try to get the message as many places as possible" (K. McCluskey-Fawcett, personal communication, April 22, 2009).

Another messaging strategy was for university staff to deliberately send messages to students to try and stay on track to graduate in four years (for those students who were in four-year academic programs). One of these intentional messages came even before students arrived on campus for summer orientation – Dr. Roney's "math letter." Dr. Roney explained that by Kansas law, the university must admit students who may not be academically prepared for the curriculum at KU. Therefore, a major question arose: what could KU do to improve the four-

year graduation rate despite our admission requirements? Dr. Roney explained that math preparation was a significant obstacle for many KU freshmen, and historical data showed that math skills were one of the best predictors of success at KU. Students who had to take Math 002 at KU tended to drop out after their freshman or sophomore year. So, beginning in 2006, Dr. Roney sent letters to incoming freshmen who did not have adequate math skills encouraging them to obtain these math skills before they attended KU. An excerpt from the math letter reads:

Because KU is committed to your success as a student, I am providing you with important information regarding your academic preparation. Our studies indicate that math preparation is one of the best predictors of academic success at KU. Your math score on the ACT/SAT indicates you currently lack sufficient preparation in this area. So that you can be better prepared for success at KU, you will be required to build your math skills by completing additional preparatory math coursework to prepare you for MATH 101, the first math course for which you may earn credit toward graduation at KU.

In addition, university staff began to stress the importance of enrolling in and completing at least fifteen hours per semester. These messages are most often sent during new student orientation programs and during academic advising appointments. For example, Kristin Trendel, Director of New Student Orientation, explained that orientation staff and KU administrators talk about the importance of enrolling in at least fifteen hours each semester and graduating on time during several orientation sessions including the University Welcome, Your Jayhawk Journey and Student Success at KU. Upper administrators also explained to parents, students and guests the cost of staying in college an additional year during the “Paying for KU” session. This cost includes tuition, room and board and lost wages as a result of delayed entry into the job market.

During this session, orientation staff explained KU's "Four-Year Tuition Compact" as well (K. Trendel, personal communication, April 10, 2009). *The New Student Orientation Guide: 2010*, summarizes the Four-Year Tuition Compact:

All first-time freshmen at KU will participate in KU's Four-Year Tuition Compact. This tuition program provides a fixed tuition rate (either resident or nonresident) for four years, protecting you and your family from sudden spikes in tuition, giving you the confidence that college will remain affordable, and enabling you to more accurately estimate and budget for college expenses. Four-year schedules of course fees and required campus fees will also be set so that all major college costs are known in advance (p. 1).

Dr. Roney explained that "[While] the tuition compact was not designed to focus on graduate-in-four, it is a very wonderful reinforcement to graduate-in-four... So we have not marketed it absolutely as graduate-in-four, but it is clear that if you earn your degree within 48 months, then financially it is a better deal" (M. Roney, personal communication, April 29, 2009).

In addition to orientation sessions and speeches that encourage new students to graduate in four years, Kristin Trendel described a new orientation session that began in 2009 called "Your Jayhawk Journey." During this session, orientation assistants explained that after a student's freshman year, he/she should have completed 30 credit hours in order to be classified as a sophomore. The assistants went on to explain to new students what academic levels correspond to a certain number of credit hours. During these sessions, new students should have learned that university staffs expect them to progress toward their degrees.

Promoting "class identity" is another strategy university staff utilized to encourage students to graduate in four years. For example, Dr. Roney explained that during an orientation

session offered by staff from the Office of the Vice Provost for Student Success, a welcome slide is on the screen when the students walk into the session that reads, “Welcome Class of 2012” (or whatever the appropriate four-year graduation class is for the particular group of students). Then, at the conclusion of new student orientation, students receive a tee shirt from KU staff with a logo that reads, “Class of 2012” (or whatever the year that is four years from the start of their freshman year). KU staff began distributing these “Class of...” tee shirts during the summer of 2001. Dr. Roney explains, “These tee shirts were begun prior to the Graduate-in-Four [messaging] efforts. [But] since then, we have really thought about it as a message for graduate-in-four. [The shirts] send a message that they are a member of a four-year graduating class” (M. Roney, personal communication, April 29, 2009).

Not only were messages sent during new student orientation sessions, but academic advisors also were asked to make efforts to encourage four-year graduation. Both Dr. Roney and Dr. McCluskey-Fawcett cited institutional research that showed KU students had not been enrolling in an average of fifteen hours each semester, the minimum number required to graduate in eight semesters. Dr. Roney said:

One of the interesting things we learned was that it was because of compassion for students that some advisors were thinking let [students] start slowly, get their feet under them and then they can take more hours after their first year. The sad part was that [institutional research showed] if [a student] started with twelve hours [he/she] always took twelve hours. You never raised the bar. We are not serving our students well by starting them off with low expectations. (M. Roney, personal communication, April 29, 2009)

Along with encouraging students to enroll in at least fifteen hours each semester, the Assistant Director in the University Advising Center, Emily Malin, explained some graduate-in-four strategies in her office. For example, in the fall 2008, semester, KU advisors had a new electronic system called the “KU advising tool.” During academic advising sessions, academic advisors were able to show students their personalized page on the advising tool. This page has a field that indicates the student’s “expected graduation date.” Five years prior to the on-line advising tool, Emily had updated the student “Program Planning Form” to indicate an expected graduation date and the number of credit hours the student needed each semester to meet this goal. The paper form was discontinued when the new advising tool came online.

In addition, Emily Malin explained that advisors in the University Advising Center often met with students in a graduation planning meeting. During these special sessions, advisors meet with students for one hour appointments to make a graduation plan. These appointments were separate from the 30-minute sessions during main enrollment. The advisor created an Excel spreadsheet which is kept on a shared drive in the University Advising Center that tracks the progress toward degree. The Excel spreadsheet can help the student map out how many semesters it will take to reach 124 credit hours needed for graduation from KU. Advisors then sent out the Excel spreadsheet to a student via email and ask him/her to fill out the sheet for his/her intended major. Then, the student emailed the spreadsheet back to the advisor who reviewed the document for errors. This spreadsheet formed the basis of the graduation planning meeting. As a final strategy, Emily said posters that tell students to enroll in 15-17 hours each semester were displayed in advising rooms. (these efforts are still being done).

In sum, once the interviews were completed and transcribed, I was able to create the research questions that guided the data collection. The information in these interviews helped

me hone in on aspects of the messaging efforts I could discuss with current KU students. The following section examines the data from four background questions I used to begin discussions in each focus group.

#### **Four Background Questions**

In order to introduce the topic of time-to-degree and to obtain some initial opinions about it, I began each focus group with four background questions. The first question was: “How long should it take to earn a bachelor’s degree?” The vast majority of students stated that it should take four years to earn a bachelor’s degree, but five years was also very acceptable. One male student said, “I like four as a general guideline and if you switch majors or fall behind, then you’re at five.” Many students said that the length of time depends on factors such as personal background, one’s choice of major, whether or not one changes majors and how many credits a student earned during high school. A male student said, “I feel like it has become more acceptable to graduate in five [years] because so many people change their majors now.”

Several students said that personal finances affected how long it takes to earn a degree. One student stated that since college was so expensive one should try to graduate in four years. Another student stated that it may take more than four years if a student could not afford to be enrolled as a full-time student each semester. A student athlete said it would take her five years because she could not handle taking more than 12-14 hours per semester. On the other hand, two international students said they had to earn their degree in four or four-and-a-half years due to immigration laws.

While most students felt that four or five years were perfectly acceptable, several students mentioned that six years was too long. For example, a male student said, “Once you get over probably six years to get a bachelor’s degree, then that’s probably where it becomes an issue.”

Study participants in most of the focus groups expressed the idea that students should not be looked down upon if it takes them more than four years to graduate. As an example, a female student said, “I mean, some people can do it in four, but you shouldn’t be judged or penalized if you do it in five.”

### **Super senior.**

The term “super senior” arose during several different focus groups. Several participants used this term to identify students who were in their fifth year as undergraduates. For college students, this label can be a positive one, but for high school students it has a negative connotation. During high school, a “super senior” is one who has failed several classes and has to stay in high school longer than his/her peers. One female student said, “In college there are a lot of super seniors. If you are in high school, there may be one to two max.”

In order to encourage the students to think more deeply about the topic, I then asked, “Is it *important* to graduate in four years?” The majority of students felt it was important to graduate in four years. When students were asked to explain why it was important to graduate in four years, their responses fell into three categories: *financial*, *personal* and *workforce needs*.

First, many students talked about how expensive college was, how tuition will continue to rise, and therefore, it is important to graduate in four years. One female student explained “I think it is a waste of money if you don’t [graduate in four years]. I am out-of-state tuition, and it would get pretty expensive after four...it already is.” Another female student said, “Financially, it is important to graduate as quickly as possible. If you are paying for college yourself, it is hard, and KU doesn’t have a lot of scholarships for people who are rather smart, but not extremely [smart].”

Second, research participants expressed several *personal* reasons why it is important to graduate in four years. Personal reasons included: personal goals, immigration rules, desire to go to graduate school and independence from parents. For example, a female student expressed her personal goal: “I came with a set mind of what I was going to do. I gotta get it done in four years so [I] can go on with my life.” Getting on with one’s life may include graduate school, starting a career and/or becoming more independent. A female student put it this way, “I think it’s important to graduate in four years [because it is] time to start your life, get a job and not rely on your parents anymore.” Not only are some students interested in starting their careers after four years, but one student even mentioned workforce needs in her field of study. She explained, “[We] need more math and science teachers and [if you] drag out your education it takes away from you actually becoming a teacher.”

On the other hand, some students responded that it was *not* important to graduate in four years. The most common reason for this opinion was the importance of a student’s GPA. A female student said:

If you can get good grades and graduate in four years that would be good, but if graduating in four years means sacrificing your GPA, I don’t think it is as important...If you take lighter course loads and concentrate on the quality of your work, it might be worth your money to take it slow.

Another female student tells herself, “Don’t think about graduation; think about my GPA.”

Other research participants offered several reasons why graduating in four years was not important to them. Two students said it was too difficult to get a job, so timely graduation was not important. A female student believed that earning the degree is more important than the length of time it takes. Another female student commented, “I don’t think it is important [to

graduate in four years] ...If it takes a while, that's fine. So if you need an extra year or [you are] a little behind, that's okay. College is the time to figure it out. I think it is completely normal."

One female participant who had recently applied for admission to the elementary education program explained that graduating in four years would be "ideal," but she said, "If it makes me a better teacher to stay a little longer, than I'd like to."

Since most students had expressed the intention to graduate in four years while discussing the first few questions, I asked them how they knew they were on track to graduate. Some focus groups seemed to struggle with this question, but once they had time to think about the question, most students described using a paper tracking system or having discussions with academic advisors. Most students track their progress on class lists given to them by their academic departments or on ARTS forms (a document from KU's legacy degree audit system that lists degree requirements by major). One male student said his advisor reviewed his ARTS form with him, but the student created a spreadsheet on his own to track his progress. Only two students mentioned using departmental websites to track their progress. Lists tailored for specific majors seemed to be more helpful than catalogues. One male student remarked, "Just looking in the big booklet can be overwhelming." Some research participants pointed out how important it is to enroll in at least 15 credit hours each semester in order to stay on track. A female participant said, "[I pay] attention to the number of credits I am taking per semester. I figured it out ahead of time. If you take 15 or 16 each semester you can graduate on time." Course lists from the Schools of Education, Engineering, Nursing, Social Work, and Pharmacy were mentioned repeatedly throughout the focus groups as ones that were particularly detailed, specific and helpful.

I asked participants what the University of Kansas could do to help students graduate in four years. Participants struggled with answers to this question. I allowed silence in order for participants to think about their answers. Most students could not come up with anything. The most common response was that KU has done all it can do to help students. One male subject expressed it this way:

I think it's all personal motivation for the most part. I mean, you decide when you wake up if you want to go to class or not, and if you want to be there for the lectures. It's basically how you get decent grades to pass in four years. KU already does a decent job at getting you the resources, so I think it's more of a personal motivation problem if you can't graduate in a certain amount of time.

A female participant echoed these sentiments by saying, "I think KU is doing all they can. I really think it is up to the student." All but one of the suggestions - more scholarship money - were things the University of Kansas already has in place.

It is important to note in this section that several research participants expressed the opinion that the University of Kansas makes more money when students stay enrolled more than four years. For example, a male student said, "If I was KU, I wouldn't be complaining because I would be getting more money if students went longer. So I wouldn't be that bummed out if kids were taking five years."

In summary, I began the focus groups with four basic questions about graduating in four years. Most of the students in this study felt it should take four years to earn a bachelor's degree, but five years was acceptable as well. In fact, the term "super senior" refers to students who take five years to graduate, and the study participants said this was not a negative label. Six years, however, was perceived as too long to be an undergraduate. Most student said it was *important*

to try and graduate in four years for *personal reasons*, *financial reasons* and *workforce needs*. For those students who felt it was *not* important to graduate in four years, protecting one's GPA was the most common reason offered. In the next section below, data regarding the messages that students recalled about how long it should take to graduate will be discussed.

### **Memorable Messages**

The next seven questions I asked the participants in each focus group were designed to discover the content, source, context and impact of messages that students could recall about how long it should take to graduate with a bachelor's degree. Research question 1 asks, "What is the content of memorable messages that students receive regarding how long it should take to earn a bachelor's degree?" The content of messages recalled during the focus groups fell into two broad categories I am calling "Do it in four" and "Take your time."

#### **Do it in four.**

Several students recalled specific messages that clearly urged them to earn their degrees in four years. These "Do it in four" messages fell into two categories: *family expectations* and *institutional expectations*. The vast majority of "Do it in four" messages reflected guidelines and/or expectations from the students' family members. For example, several participants explained that their parents were only willing to pay for four years of college. A female student recalled, "That's just what I was taught by my parents. They [said] 'we are paying for four years, so if you go over it, you'll have to pay for it!'" Another female student told us about her father who was a math major in college and became a computer programmer, so "he's very much a numbers person." She continued to explain that during her senior year in high school her dad sat down with her, "and had a detailed list of how much he estimated a year of college is going to be. [He] had the cost down to the food, the car, a sorority, - every single detail you could

possibly think of!” She explained how he had a financial sheet that detailed how much her parents would pay and how much she was expected to pay. She said, “It’s definitely been a message from my parents to do well in school. Do what you enjoy but get it done [in four years].” In addition, she explained that every year her dad comes to campus for parents’ weekend, and usually on the Saturday night, he sits down with her to “reassess the finances.”

Another female student told us that both of her parents had always told her she had to be done with college in four years. I asked her if she remembered when she received this message, and she replied, “Probably since I was running around in diapers as a baby.” When she chose to enter a five-year teaching program, she said her parents were willing to pay for the extra time since it was part of her program, “The extra required fifth year is okay [with my parents]. I am not going to get shunned or anything for that.” I asked her if she had to pay for her fifth year, and she explained shy she did not have to pay, “It’s kind of a joke in my family...my sister got braces, so my fifth year is like my braces because [my parents] didn’t have [to pay] for braces for me.”

Similarly, a male student explained, “Well, anything past four, unless I’m getting a master’s, is on my bill.” He continued, “It’s understandable, I mean, there’s just no room to mess around or to take my classes lightly.” The expression “mess around” arose several times during the research to describe family expectations that students need to focus on their schoolwork. A female student put it this way: “My parents expect me to graduate in four [years] or less. If I took more, they would think I messed around.” Another participant’s mother even expected him to graduate in fewer than four years. He explained, “She [his mother] has been on my case ever since I started taking college courses in high school. She said, ‘since you [are taking] them now, you are going to graduate a year or semester earlier than you are supposed to.’”

Research participants not only remembered specific messages from their parents, but also from their siblings. For instance, a female student said, “My older brother is a junior here [at KU], and he told me while I was still in high school to start taking classes at the community college to get ahead so you can [do] the four-year plan.” The older brother of another female student said to her, “It’s better to graduate in four and get it over with...get it done!” Siblings often seem to set the standard for some students. For example, a male participant said, “I was told by my parents growing up, my whole life in high school, to [graduate in four years]. And my brother, that’s what it took him to get out so [that is the expectation] for me.” Another male student talked about how his brothers and sisters want him to graduate in four years. I asked him why his siblings felt this way, and he replied, “Just because they all graduated from [KU], and my family, they’ve all been through [college]. It is important to them.”

Siblings not only offered advice to participants, but they also often set the standard for time-to-degree in their families. While some participants could not recall *specific* messages, they explained that they were expected to follow their sibling(s) example. For instance, one female student said, “My two older sisters both graduated in four years so it is kind of expected that I would too.”

Messages that reflected *family expectations* to earn a degree in four years were certainly more prevalent than messages that communicated *institutional expectations*, the second category of “Do it in four” messages. Only two students recalled messages from university staff that encouraged them to graduate in four years. For example, one female student remembered a presentation she attended during “Senior Days” at KU. The student said, “There was a whole presentation about graduating in four years. It seemed very money-driven.” The other research participant described how her freshman advisor at KU said, “Let’s make your four-year plan and

see where you're going in order to graduate in four [years]. You don't have to follow it, but [you must] take this many credit hours or you're not going to graduate in four."

### **Take your time.**

While the content of memorable messages described above encourages students to graduate in four years, roughly the same number of other messages recalled urged student to take their time to earn a bachelor's degree. The title of this category came from a female participant who said she would advise other students to "Take your time, but don't waste your time." I found her advice to be memorable myself, and it summarizes how many parents, students, siblings and teachers seem to feel about the college experience. Messages in this "Take your time" category fall into four broad groupings I have chosen to call: *Don't waste your time*, *Find your calling*, *College is fun* and *Siblings set the standard*.

### ***Don't waste your time.***

One of the themes that continued to arise during the research was that of "Don't waste your time," or as many student participants put it, "Don't mess around!" For example, a female student told us her father did not mind if she took longer than four years to earn her journalism degree. Her father said:

I will pay for you to go to college as long as you are working hard. [If] I can tell you are working hard and tell that you are dedicated, I'll pay for it. But if I see you start just wanting to stay to have fun, you will probably have to pay for that.

Another female student told us that as long as she was not failing any of her classes, her parents would let her take another semester or year to complete her degree. She continued, "But if I'm failing, [my parents] would make me leave KU and go to a community college or something. They wouldn't put up with that!"

One female participant told us that her father had told her it was okay if it took her more than four years to graduate, so as a result, she spent too much time during her first two years socializing, partying and neglecting her schoolwork. This student remembered going home for winter break during her sophomore year and her mother telling her, “You need to get it together or we aren’t paying for you to go [to KU]. You will need to come home.” Since the student did not want to come home, she decided to “kick [herself] into overdrive and do good in school!”

Another aspect of “taking your time” that surfaced during the focus groups concerned one’s GPA. For example, a male student explained how his stepfather told him, “Your GPA is more important than graduating in four years...so if you need to take 13 hours instead of 15 to get a better GPA, you should.”

### ***Find your calling.***

While earning a high GPA is a priority for some students (and their parents), college can also be a time for choosing a career path, or as one participant put it, “find your calling.” The student who used this phrase told us about his high school teacher who, during a college preparatory meeting said, “You should finish in five years because once you get to college, you aren’t going to know what to do. It will take you a while to find your calling.” Another male student said:

I remember my advisor freshman year telling me that a lot of people are beginning to switch their majors multiple times, and it is taking longer [for them] to graduate. She [told] me it’s okay if I change my mind...just do whatever I end up liking most.

### ***College is fun.***

As the results in the above paragraphs reveal, extending one’s time-to-degree is acceptable as long as a student is not wasting his/her time and/or finding a calling. In addition to

these reasons, some students told us about parents and sibling who felt it was acceptable to stay on campus because “college is fun!” For example, a pre-nursing student told a story about a discussion she had had with her stepmother, who was a nurse. Her stepmother felt she had missed out on part of her own college experience on campus when she left after her first two years to attend nursing school. The stepmother explained that nursing school was more like a full-time job, and that she missed her friends back on campus. As a result of this experience, the stepmother, along with the student’s father, said they would support their daughter if she wanted to spend an extra year on the Lawrence campus. They both supported a delay in attending nursing school in order for her to experience another year of “real campus life with her friends.”

Another female student told us about what her brother had said to her, “[He] always told me to take as long as you can because he is so upset with the fact that he is in the real world. So his advice to me was to always prolong the experience as long as you can get away with it.” I followed up by asking her if she thought his advice was helpful. The student replied, “Yes and no. I think that someone shouldn’t just go to college for an excessive amount of time. I just don’t think that builds any good character or skills for yourself, but college is fun!”

***Siblings set the standard.***

The final theme in the “Take your time” category relates, once again, to the standards set by older siblings. For example, a female participant said, “My brother graduated in five years, so that’s the only reason why I’m allowed to take five years. [Otherwise] my parents would not let me.” Another female participant told the group how her brother kept changing majors until he grew frustrated and gave up on college all together. She said his behavior caused a financial hardship for her parents, and she vowed “not to put my family through that again.”

The preceding *Memorable Messages* section revealed that roughly half of the student participants recalled messages about how long it should take to graduate. Of these students, half of them recalled messages that encouraged them to “Do it in four” while the other half of the students described “Take your time” messages. The primary source of “Do it in four” messages were parents. Only two participants recalled messages from KU faculty or staff. Many “Take your time” messages, however, came with stipulations. For example, parents would only approve extending time-to-degree as long as their students were focusing on schoolwork and/or exploring different career options. In the next section, specific elements of KU’s Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts will be examined in greater detail.

### **KU’s Graduate-in-Four Messaging Efforts**

As explained in the section above, only two study participants could recall any message from KU faculty or staff regarding how long it should take to graduate. In order to prompt students to remember more messages about time-to-degree, I explained to the focus group participants that KU thinks it has done some things to encourage students to graduate in four years. As I named specific actions taken at specific venues, the participants were asked if they remembered hearing or seeing any messages about graduating in four years. The following sections discuss each of these specific messaging efforts which include: “Class of...” tee shirts, new student orientation sessions, academic advisors, traditions night, student convocation and the tuition compact.

#### **“Class of...” tee shirts.**

“*Class of* [2012, 2013, etc]” tee shirts are given to students at the completion of each New Student Orientation program. The purpose of these tee shirts is, “to send a message that [the students] are a member of a four-year graduation class” (M. Roney, personal

communication, April 29, 2009). Based on the feedback from participants in the current study, almost all of the students remembered these tee shirts. In fact, three participants actually wore their tee shirt to the focus group session. At the beginning of the tee shirt discussions, many of the students talked positively about how much they liked the shirts; many students referred to them as “cool shirts.” One female participant said, “I just like the look of it. I like the early Jayhawk and that’s what’s on my shirt. So it has a date, and I can’t wear it past the date.” Some students explained that the shirt was either too large or too small, so they gave it away to someone else. For instance, one male participant recalled, “It took like 18 hours to enroll, so I was literally the last person to leave orientation, so I got an extra large tee shirt, but I gave it to my brother.” Overall, most of the students remembered receiving the tee shirts and had positive reactions to them.

In order to go beyond reactions to the look and size of the tee shirts, I asked more probing questions about what the tee shirt read and what the students thought about the message on the tee shirt. A male student said, “Well, you should be in the class of whatever – four years after you come in – and if you aren’t, then that is kind of bad, I guess.” However, most of the students did not seem to correlate the words “Class of 2012” with the “you should graduate in four years” message. When a focus group participant, one of my graduate assistants or I explained the link between the two messages, many students seemed surprised and said they had never made that connection before that day. Therefore, many students thought it was a “subliminal” or “unconscious” message. A female student commented, “I think it is a subconscious message. I never thought about that before you just said it.”

When I asked students what they thought about the message on the tee shirts, many participants responded that the tee shirt *identified* them in some way. For example, one female

student said, “I think [the tee shirt] categorizes students. I see someone wearing it [and] I think, okay, they are a sophomore.” She continued, “I see people wearing the same shirt I have, [and] I think of them as in my class or as a sophomore.” Another female participant said the tee shirt “pinpoints me as a freshman easily.” Another student agreed and said, “It just shows you’re a freshman. There is nothing wrong with being a freshman at all.” One female student was worried the shirt would identify her for a joke or prank: “On Traditions Night, I didn’t know what to expect. They [told me to] wear that shirt, and I didn’t know what they were doing. Was it some sort of freshman prank they liked to do?” Another female student explained that the shirt helped her identify other freshmen on campus: “On those nights [Traditions Night] you were easily able to talk to anyone with the same shirt on because they are doing the same thing [as I am]. So if it doesn’t classify you as graduating in 2011, at least it helps [you identify people of your same age].”

As the discussion of the tee shirts continued, I probed with another question: “Did those Class of... tee shirts have any impact on encouraging you to graduate in four years?” A female student said, “I came in knowing I would not be graduating in four years, so when I got the shirt I [thought] that’s not even when I’m going to graduate, but whatever, it’s a cool shirt.” Similarly, a male participant’s response to the shirt was, “I’m not graduating in 2012. I was like, oh that’s not me.” Another male student said, “It made me feel kind of bad. If everything goes according to my plan I won’t be graduating by the time my shirt says. So, in that respect I was disappointed – I was like, I don’t want this shirt.” Another female student said, “[My shirt] was 2012, so you are part of that group. I want to graduate with my group. I don’t want to get left behind.” I followed up with, “So it actually did make you think about keeping up with your

peers?” The student responded affirmatively. Another subject, however, expressed a different reaction to the message as described below:

**Researcher:** So you liked the tee shirt, but the message doesn't seem to matter?

**Nina:** I think about it in the back of my head. If someone were to ask me when I would graduate I would probably say 2012, class of 2012. But I don't look at the tee shirt and think, “I need to hurry up...I need to be done.”

**Researcher:** So no tee shirt pressure?

**Nina:** No.

### *Class identity.*

As mentioned above, “*Class of...*” tee shirts are designed to instill a sense of identity among students in the same graduating class. I asked some of the participants if they felt like they had a class identity with other students. A male student said, “Like we just said, you don't know who is in which class unless you see the person wear the “*Class of...*” tee shirt. So, I don't feel too tied to the class identity, and it doesn't mean a whole lot to me.” Similarly, another male student said, “There are thousands of people in our class. I don't think there is an identity.” In response to this comment, a female student remarked, “I think [identity] is more what dorm or living situation you lived in.” Another female participant responded, “If someone asked me what class I was in I wouldn't say ‘I'm graduating in 2011’ – I would say I'm a sophomore.”

In addition, most students who talked specifically about class identity felt like it applied more to high school than college. A female student put it this way: “In high school I was the Class of 2009, but that is not how it is here [in college].” A male participant echoed this sentiment, “How am I supposed to identify with someone who's in the same class? [KU] is just too big. It's hard to identify with everybody. You're going to identify with your major or your

group of friends...something else closer to you than your class.” Another male student responded to this comment, “[Class identity] is a nice idea. I think it could work at a smaller university, but not at a university the size of KU.”

### **New student orientation.**

The vast majority of students reported that they attended New Student Orientation, but they did not recall any messages about graduating in four years. One female subject recalled that during a presentation about the cost of college, the speaker used examples of four-year plans. She remarked, “So I think they send the message that [graduating in four years] is expected.” One female student said she remembered staff from the School of Social Welfare talking to students about earning a bachelor’s degree in four years and using one’s fifth year to earn a master’s degree. A student in pre-pharmacy said he remembered people talking to him about a pharmacy degree taking six years to complete. Two subjects attended orientation sessions for international students. Neither subject recalled anything about graduating in four years.

### **Academic advisors.**

The subject of academic advisors came up early in many of the focus groups as students talked about how they knew they were on the right track to graduate. Along with course lists and ARTS forms, students talked about appointments with advisors who helped them select classes and map out graduation plans. So as a focus group session progressed, it was not surprising that some students remembered an academic advisor talking to them about graduating in four years. Several students commented that their academic advisors told them they were “on the right track to graduate in four [years].” A male participant said of his business advisor, “I always got from him that it is just expected [to graduate in] four years. And when I first walked in there he said exactly what I need to do [to graduate in four years].” While many students expressed

dissatisfaction with their freshman advising experience, students seemed to report more positive experiences with advisors in their particular major and/or school. Some students talked about their advising appointments as being focused on the next semester instead of a long-range plan. For example, a male participant commented that his advising experience was, “more like a semester thing, not like a long plan.” A female student put it this way, “[My advising appointment] was just by semester – just what I should take next semester. But now that I know what I am taking [majoring in], I have a four year plan.”

### **Traditions night.**

During the week that classes begin in August each year, the University of Kansas presents “Traditions Night” in the KU Memorial Football Stadium. During this event, students, staff, faculty and community members are instructed in and participate in several KU campus traditions such as “Waving the Wheat,” singing the Alma Mater, learning the “Rock Chalk Chant” and joining the marching band (*New Student Orientation Guide*, 2008, p. 20). Some of the participants recalled attending Traditions Night, but none of the subjects remembered hearing anything about graduating in four years. A few of the students remembered that Bill Self (the KU men’s basketball coach) spoke and one student remembered that KU’s Chancellor spoke. Other students recalled seeing the cheerleaders, hearing KU’s alma mater and doing a “hand-clapping” practice/exercise.

### **Student convocation.**

Student Convocation is an event during the week that classes begin in August (Hawk Week). During this formal program, students, faculty and staff come together to mark the official beginning of the academic year (*New Student Orientation Guide*, 2008). During each focus group, students were asked if they attended this event and if they remembered anything

about it. Only a handful of students reported attending this program, and only one student recalled a message about graduating in four years. The female student said, “I felt like they hit a lot on [my four-year class], the Class of 2013.”

### **Tuition compact.**

All first-time freshmen at KU participate in KU’s Four-Year Tuition Compact. This tuition program provides a four-year fixed tuition rate (either resident or non-resident) designed to protect students from sudden spikes in tuition and help them more accurately estimate and budget for college expenses. In addition, four-year schedules of course fees and required campus fees will also be set so that all major college costs are known in advance (*New Student Orientation Guide*, 2008). While the tuition compact was not specifically designed as a graduate-in-four messaging effort, it became a useful tool to communicate to students the financial benefits of graduating on time. The tuition compact was a student led effort to help students and their families better plan for college expenses during a time when tuition was rising significantly (M. Roney, personal communication, April 29, 2009).

When I asked the students about KU’s tuition compact, the vast majority of students knew something about it, but most students did not recognize the official name “tuition compact.” While most students could not explain the policy correctly, they did, however, understand the message that their tuition would increase if they did not graduate in four years. As one male student put it, “Graduate before the tuition goes up.” In response to discussions about the tuition compact, a female student said, “I remember my parents thought [it] was really cool to be done in four. They expect me to graduate in four...they don’t want [tuition] to go up while I am here.” Several students expressed the opinion that the tuition compact was unfair to students who were in five-year programs and those who choose to double or triple major. But

for the most part, students said they understood that the cost of education would continue to rise, and it seemed fair to raise tuition for students who stayed more than four years. For instance, one female subject said, “It’s good for the university to make money if we are going to be here longer than they want us to.” Overall, most students remembered the tuition compact and felt it was an incentive to graduate in four years.

Throughout the focus group sessions, students acknowledged the financial sacrifices their parents were making to put them through college. During the tuition compact discussion, one female student said, “It is commonly known that the cost of college is going up with each and every year. So, out of respect for my parents, because of how much they are paying for college, I feel like I owe it to them to graduate in four years.” A male student put it this way, “I think anyone going to school should try to treat it like their job...I try to never forget that somebody is paying for me to be able to go here.”

The section above discussed student responses to specific actions and events during which KU staff sent intentional messages about graduating in four years. These included: “Class of....” tee shirts, new student orientation sessions, academic advising sessions, Traditions Night, Student Convocation and KU’s four-year tuition compact. While nearly all of the student participants remembered receiving the tee shirts, only a few of them made the connection between the message on the tee shirt and a four-year class identity. On the other hand, most of the participants recognized that the four-year tuition compact was a strategy to encourage timely graduation. While not a part of my original set of questions for the focus groups, study participant told stories about the KU campanile and its relationship to graduation. These stories are described in the following section.

### **Campanile myth.**

One of the traditions at the University of Kansas involves the campanile. Every commencement ceremony in May begins with graduating students walking through the campanile and down the hill into Memorial Stadium. During the second focus group session a female student brought up a myth about graduating and the campanile during a discussion of “*Class of.....*” tee shirts. The discussion went as follows:

**Alice:** I am afraid to walk underneath the campanile.

**Researcher:** Oh, so were you all told don’t walk under there till you graduate?

**Group:** Yeah!

**Bianca:** No.

**Carole:** It’s bad luck to walk underneath the campanile.

**Danika:** Don’t do it!

**Bianca:** Wait, which one?

**Group:** The big tower...

**Estelle:** Where they play the big bells...

**Bianca:** Oh, ok.

**Danika:** Don’t walk under it!

**Researcher:** Tell me the message again...

**Alice:** If you walk under it, you won’t graduate in four years.

**Researcher:** So [the myth] really says four years?

**Group:** Yea.

**Estelle:** Really, I thought it just meant that you were going to drop out....

**Danika:** No, it’s really four years. I had a teacher tell me it’s true. The teacher had a student that did it and they ended up missing a credit.

**Carole:** We went on our tour, and they told us about the campanile. They had like three different stories of students that didn't graduate on time because they walked under the campanile.

**Danika:** It was literally like they were missing a credit or something, but yeah, it still counted so...

**Alice:** My friend walked under it, and she dropped out after a semester.

**Bianca:** Oh my gosh!

**Alice:** I think she just really didn't care. I don't think it had to do with luck.

**Bianca:** Oh my friend is from the Philippines. He walked through the campanile and he is getting sent back...

**Danika:** Oh that's not funny!

Since the research participant said she had heard the campanile myth during a campus tour, I contacted Chris Woolery, who is in charge of training and supervising the student ambassadors who give the campus tours at the University of Kansas. Chris explained:

We encourage all of our student ambassadors to provide visitors with interesting and fun stories throughout the campus tour. This enables the students to provide a more vibrant experience and hopefully encourage visitors to get the most out of the college visit. Each ambassador has his or her unique stories and experiences that they choose to highlight during the tour. (C. Woolery, personal communication, January 7, 2010)

In addition, Chris explained the campanile myth that some student ambassadors recount during a campus tour:

It is said that a student can walk into the campanile during their time as a student yet must exit the same door that was entered. This myth is in conjunction with the ceremony of graduation each year on the Lawrence campus. Each student that is a candidate for

graduation, before walking down the hill and into Memorial Stadium, first walks through the campanile. This should signify their first walk through the structure (C. Woolery, personal communication, January 7, 2010).

I had not included a question or any reference to the campanile myth in my original focus group questions. However, after the second focus group session when the campanile myth was originally discussed, I started to include the question in subsequent focus groups if it was not mentioned during the discussions.

### **Sources of Memorable Messages**

In order to answer research question 3, I asked study participants to identify the sources of memorable messages. Parents were, by far, the most common source of messages that research participants recalled. It is interesting to note, however, that not all sets of parents gave their students a consistent message about how long it should take to graduate. There were two examples of *split parents* in this study. First, a female subject recalled her dad telling her to take as long as she needed, but her mother told her, “You need to get done in four [years].” I asked the subject how she felt about this divide between her parents:

Because my dad didn’t put so much pressure [on me], I fell like if I get it done in four that’s great. But if it takes extra that is okay too. Whereas with my mom...I fell like if I deviated from [four years] I would be a failure, and I don’t want to feel like that ever.

A second student participant whose parents were also split on the time-to-degree issue described going home for a break and having a “big talk about switching my major.” She described the experience as a “big sit-down on the couch” during which her dad said he wanted her “to rush through the four years.” Her mother, however, told her she could take an extra year because “you need to do what you want to do [with your life].” The student went on to explain

that her parents both wanted her to be happy and choose her own life, but she did have two younger brothers who would be going to college soon, so she understood her dad's financial concern. Ultimately, she thought her dad was just trying to give her a little "shove" in the right direction.

After parents, siblings were the next most common source of memorable messages followed by academic advisors and grandparents. A girlfriend, a high school teacher and a presentation during KU Senior Days were each a source of one memorable message recalled during the focus groups.

When discussing KU's Graduate-in -Four messaging efforts specifically, KU's Tuition Compact seemed to be the most memorable source of messages about graduating in four years, while academic advisors were the second most common source of memorable messages. The myth of the campanile was the third most common source for a message about how long it should take to graduate. Research participants recalled the campanile myth was told to them by campus tour guides, friends and teachers. A presentation during New Student Orientation was the source of one memorable message, in which a student recalled a GPS graphic about graduating in four years.

While almost every research participant remembered the "*Class of...*" tee shirt they received during New Student Orientation, most students did not make the connection between their graduating class year and the "graduate in four" message university staff were trying to send. Similarly, two research participants recalled, "They hit on the Class of 2013" during Traditions Night, and only one student remembered hearing about the Class of 2013 during Student Convocation.

### **Context of Memorable Messages**

Research question 4 asks, “What is the context in which the messages were received?” Since the most common source of memorable messages were parents, it is not surprising that most of the communication about how long it should take to graduate occurred at home while parents and students were discussing issues about academic progress or educational choices. For example, a female participant whose parents had differing opinions about how long she should be in college remembered she had gone home and “had a big talk about switching my major, a sit-down on the couch.” Other participants remembered specific messages from their parents during a particular winter break, during a graduation party and the summer before one student came to college. A female participant described how her father talked to her about college finances and if she was on track to graduate every fall when he came to campus for Parents’ Weekend. Another student described a phone conversation with his parents on the very day he participated in the focus group. He was talking to his parents about his upcoming enrollment, and his stepdad told him that his college GPA was more important than graduating in four years, so if he needed to take fewer credit hours each semester that was acceptable.

For messages from sources other than parents, notable contexts included a pre-college meeting during high school, a freshman advising appointment and a presentation during a KU Senior Days program. Many students discussed conversations or advice they had received from academic advisors. While most of these students could not describe the context in detail, advisors were a common source of messages regarding time-to-degree.

When participants were asked specifically about KU’s Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts, almost every student remembered receiving their *Class of...* tee shirt at the end of New Student Orientation. As described in the previous section above, however, most students did not realize the message on the tee shirt was designed to encourage them to graduate in four years. In

sum, the tee shirt and the context were memorable, but the intended message was not received by most of the research participants. In addition, very few students could recall a message about time-to-degree during New Student Orientation sessions. However, many students had heard of KU's Tuition Compact which was discussed during New Student Orientation sessions. It is unclear from this research how students learned about the tuition compact if they did not recall the topic discussed during orientation sessions.

Like KU's Tuition Compact, the campanile myth was a memorable message for many of the research participants. The first student to talk about the myth told us she heard about it during a campus tour she took when she was a senior in high school. Other participants described how they had heard the myth while talking to friends on campus, teachers and their roommates. In sum, the context of the campanile myth seems to be campus tours and casual conversations among students and teachers.

### **Impact of Memorable Messages**

For some research participants, the messages they received about how long it should take to graduate had an impact on their behavior (research question 5). This section will present data about the impact on behavior by message type. *Do it in four* messages will be discussed first, followed by *Take your time* messages.

#### **Do it in four messages.**

Many of the participants who recalled hearing "*Do it in four*" messages explained that these messages motivated them to work harder on their academic pursuits. For example, two participants said that knowing their parents would only pay for four years of college motivated them to work on getting good grades by doing more homework and attending classes. A male participant continued, "So you don't have to retake any [classes], nothing holding you back." A

female student said, “It motivates me to work hard, get good grades and double check everything to make sure I’m on track [to graduate on time].” Another participant explained that she had to focus on getting good grades too because she had to apply to nursing school after only two years at KU. One female student talked openly about how pressure from her parents to graduate in four caused her stress:

It impacted my discipline [level] a lot, [and] it added stress to me. I knew I could [graduate in four years] but it was pushing me to get it done. In order to pass classes you have to work hard. I’m a hard worker, but I guess that extra kick [from my parents] told me ‘to get this stuff done!’ It makes [my stomach] tight just thinking about [the stress] of it all.

Another female participant explained that messages about how long it should take to graduate caused her stress as well. This participant had parents who were split on how long it should take their daughter to graduate. The student said, “...my dad was more lax about it; he did not put so much pressure [on me]. Whereas with my mom, I felt if I deviated from four years, I would be a failure, and I don’t want to feel like that, ever.”

*Do it in four* messages not only motivated students to work on earning good grades, but also to earn credit prior to attending KU. As an example, a female participant told us about her brother who encouraged her “to start taking classes at the community college to get ahead.” She explained that her high school teachers helped her choose classes that would transfer to KU. The student explained, “I took the advice and came in with credits. It’s always good to try and get ahead, even if it’s just a few hours.” Many participants told us that they had earned credits during high school and this helped them graduate sooner.

Another female student told us that since her parents expected her to graduate in four years and help to pay for her own college expenses, this message motivated her to get a job as quickly as she could to start earning money. As she reflected on her experiences, she said, “I think the grown-up pressure of stressing out about money hit me a little quicker than I thought it would .”

Not every *Do it in four* message, however, made an impact on a student’s behavior. One female student remembered a presentation during KU Senior Days about graduating in four years. I asked her what impact this message had on her. She said, “[The presentation] seemed very money-driven. My parents never made it [time-to-degree] an issue or talked to me about it. [My parents] support me and encourage me in my learning experience by supporting me financially, but otherwise, it is my decision [how long to stay in college].” Similarly, a male student remembered hearing “graduate in four years” messages during New Student Orientation sessions and “Class of 2011” messages at Traditions Night. This student, however, told us that these messages did not impact his behavior because it was always a personal goal of his to earn his bachelor’s degree in four years anyway.

In regard to KU’s Graduate-in-Four Messaging efforts, the Four-Year Tuition Compact seemed to have the strongest impact on students, followed by messages from academic advisors and the “*Class of...*” tee shirts. Nearly every research participant had heard of KU’s Four-Year Tuition Compact, and many of the students said it was an incentive to graduate in four years. Many students said the compact was particularly important to their parents. This was not a surprise since the participants were traditional college students and parents were the primary financial support for many of them. The high cost of college attendance was a common

motivator for students to graduate in four years, so messages about the Tuition Compact were important to the participants.

One particular female participant remembered hearing about the 4year tuition compact during a KU Senior Days presentation. I asked her if that message had an impact on her behavior, and she said, “I really didn’t know what I wanted to be when I first came here, but that message forced me to try different things...actually take opportunities. I was like jumping out there and trying to get done...” She explained that she decided to participate in an internship programs the summer after her freshman year and this helped her decided to become an elementary school teacher.

Next, messages from academic advisors in a student’s school or major academic department impacted participants as well. For the most part, academic advisors helped student by outlining the sequence of courses in a student’s major field of study by using either an ARTS form or a specialized course list on paper. In addition, advisors often informed students how many credit hours to take each semester in order to graduate on time. On the other hand, may research participants expressed dissatisfaction with general advisors from the University Advising Center. Several students complained that they had to meet with different advisors each time they visited the center, and they felt like these advisors did not care about them personally. Participants also complained about the quality of the group advising they received during orientation. Many students described how much advising improved when they moved on to an advisor in their academic department.

After KU’s Four-Year Tuition Compact and academic advisors, the “*Class of...*” tee shirts seemed to have the most impact on students. Nearly all of the research participants

remembered receiving the tee shirts, but the shirts primarily helped students identify other freshmen on campus rather than the intended message of “You should graduate in four years.”

While not a part of the Graduate-in-Four Messaging efforts, the *campanile myth* was a surprise to us when it emerged during the focus groups. Like the Four-Year Tuition Compact almost every participant had heard the myth about KU’s campanile. Many students laughed when they talked about the myth as if they were embarrassed to reveal that they actually placed some credence in the story. Many students explained that they did not really believe the myth was true, but they resisted walking through the campanile - “just in case.” While most of the participants knew the myth and refused to walk through the campanile before commencement, they did not indicate any other impacts on their behavior.

#### **Take your time messages.**

Research participants were better able to explain the impact of *Do it in four* messages than *Take your time* messages. For the most part, however, students described that *Take your time* messages helped them feel less pressured and less stressed about how many classes to take each semester. A male participant put it this way, “It just means that I don’t have to feel pressured to take 15 hours if I don’t think I can handle it...I should just focus on getting a good grade in a class.”

One *Take your time* message, however, actually motivated a student to start looking for his major early so he could graduate in four years. This participant recalled a high school teacher telling him, “You should finish in five years because once you get to college you aren’t going to know what to do, so it will take you a while to find your calling.” This student said, “I just started looking for a major after that, and I actually didn’t decide to do five [years], I did four [years].”

## Summary

Chapter Four began with a description of KU's Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts with data collected from interviews I conducted with five KU administrators who have been involved with the efforts over the years. Then, I presented the findings from the eleven focus groups I conducted with KU undergraduates. In an attempt to facilitate the beginning of the discussions, I asked study participants to think about how important graduating in four years was to them. Most of the students in this study felt it should take four years to earn a bachelor's degree, but five years was acceptable as well. In fact, students use the term "super senior" to refer to themselves or others who take five years to graduate, and the study participants said this was not a negative label. Six years, however, was perceived as too long to be an undergraduate. Most students said that it was important to try and graduate in four years for *personal reasons*, *financial reasons* and *workforce needs*. For those students who felt it was *not* important to graduate in four years, protecting one's GPA was the most common reason offered.

Next, I examined the content of the memorable messages that students recalled. Approximately half of the student participants recalled messages about how long it should take to graduate. Of these students, half of them recalled messages that encouraged them to "Do it in four" while the other half of the students described "Take your time" messages. The "Do it in four" messages fell into two main categories: *family expectations* and *institutional expectations*. The vast majority of these "Do it in four" messages were in the family expectations category; only two students recalled messages from institutional sources. The "Take your time" messages fell into four broad categories I labeled *Don't waste your time*, *Find your calling*, *College is fun* and *Siblings set the standard*. The findings also indicated that the *sources* of memorable messages were predominately parents.

Since only a few students recalled messages from KU's Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts I named specific events and programs that KU sponsored in order to spark their memories. The results indicated that KU's Tuition Compact and the campanile myth were the most memorable messages about graduating in four years. While almost every research participant remembered the "*Class of...*" tee shirt they received after New Student Orientation, most students did not make the connection between their four-year graduating class year and the "you should graduate in four" message university staff were trying to send.

Finally, the findings indicated that messages from parents had the most effect on students' behavior. As far as institutional messages, the Four-Year Tuition Compact and the campanile myth had the most impact on students' behavior. The next and final chapter a discussion of the study findings and implications of the results.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Summary of Findings**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the memorable messages that undergraduates at the University of Kansas recalled about how long it should take to graduate with a bachelor's degree and how these messages affected their behavior. The research questions that guided this study included: 1) What was the content of messages that students recalled regarding how long it should take to earn a bachelor's degree? 2) Who/what was the source of these memorable messages? 3) What was the context in which these messages were received? 4) What messages did students recall from KU's Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts? 5) What was the impact of these memorable messages on students' behavior?

The data were collected during eleven separate focus group sessions with undergraduate students who were enrolled in Communication Studies 130 at the University of Kansas. These focus groups were conducted during the fall 2009 and spring 2010 semesters. Each focus group discussion was recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The data from the transcripts were analyzed and results were described in Chapter Four. The study findings are discussed further in the current chapter. First, the content, sources and contexts of memorable messages will be discussed, followed by an examination of the messages students recalled from KU's Graduate in Four Messaging efforts. Then the chapter continues with a discussion of the study limitations, the implications of the research and finally, suggestions for future research on this topic.

#### **Message Content, Sources and Contexts**

Most students in this focus group research study who were enrolled in four-year degree programs stated that they intended to graduate in four years. This finding was consistent with

research by Hoe and Richlin-Klonsky (2002) who found that 80% of UCLA freshmen expected to graduate within four years. In addition, the vast majority of students thought it was important to try and earn a bachelor's degree in four years, but taking five years was perfectly acceptable as well. Most participants, however, felt that six years was too long to spend working on a bachelor's degree. Many of the students felt that they should not be "looked down on" if it took five years. Students explained that there were many legitimate reasons why it could take longer than four years, especially depending on one's major and financial situation. The fact that students may extend college past four years due to financial reasons is also supported in the literature. For example, Volkwein (1995) found that taking longer to graduate was significantly associated with financial need, protecting a high grade point average and registering for fewer than 15 credit hours in multiple semesters. In addition, Campbell (2003) found that finances were a motivating factor to finish a degree as quickly as possible before their college funds or personal savings ran out.

For many students, earning their degree in four years was important for *financial reasons*, *personal reasons* or to fulfill *workforce needs*. Subjects were very aware of how expensive a college education was for their families. They talked about working hard to make sure that they earned their degrees as soon as possible because the cost of education was going to keep rising, and many students had younger sibling in their family who were headed to college as well.

Additionally, many students expressed *personal reasons* why graduating in four years was important to them. These reasons included: personal goals, immigration rules, desire to attend graduate or medical school and independence from their parents. Many students described how graduating in a timely manner was a personal goal, and therefore, the university's

efforts did not have an impact on their behavior. This finding is similar to that of Noxel and Katunich (1998) who found that the greatest percentage of four-year graduates interviewed (20%) reported that their personal motivation and goal setting were the most important factors that helped them obtain a degree.

On the other hand, some students felt that it was *not* necessarily important to graduate in four years. The most common reason expressed was the importance of maintaining a good GPA. In other words, a higher GPA is more important than graduating in four years, so it is acceptable to slow down and take fewer hours each semester to maintain a higher GPA. Protecting one's GPA was also found by Volkwein (1995) and Hoe and Richlin-Klonsky (2002) as a reason why students took longer to graduate. Some students also expressed the importance of finding the right career over rushing through in four years.

Research questions 1 and question 2 focused on the *content* and *source* of messages that students recalled about how long it should take to earn a bachelor's degree. Message content fell into two basic categories: *Do it in four* and *Take your time*. First, the vast majority of *Do it in four* messages came from students' parents and other family members such as older siblings. Student participants described how their parents would only pay for the first four years of college, so they needed to study hard and focus on academics. While several students could not recall specific messages, they said their parents had told them "their whole life" that they should graduate in four years. Similarly, students said that since their older siblings had graduated in four years, this was the implied family standard for them as well.

The second type of *Do it in four* messages were *institutional expectations*. Only two research participants, however, recalled messages from university staff. One student recalled a graduate-in-four message during a KU Senior Days presentation and the other student recalled

such a message from her academic advisor. It is clear from this research study that students recalled graduate-in-four messages from their parents and older siblings much more frequently than messages from university staff.

The second type of memorable message that emerged during this research was *Take your time*. Approximately the same number of students who recalled *Do it in four* messages could remember *Take your time* messages. Take your time messages fell into four broad groupings based upon their content: *Don't waste your time*, *Find your calling*, *College is fun* and *Siblings set the family standard*. Once again, parents and siblings were the sources of almost all of these messages. The content of these messages revealed that parents wanted their children to enjoy college, but at the same time, their children needed to focus on academics. These parents felt that taking longer than four years to earn a degree was worth the time and expense as long as their children enjoyed their experience and found the right career. Like messages in the *Do it in four* category, older siblings set the family standards for students in the *Take your time* group. Several research participants explained that the only reason they were able to stay in college longer was because an older sibling took more than four years. The data from this research clearly indicate that older siblings set the standard for family expectations of time-to-degree as well.

Research question three focused on the *context* in which memorable messages were received. Only a handful of study participants could recall the exact context in which the memorable message was received. When students recalled messages from their parents, it was during conversations about preparing for college (e.g. during a student's high school graduation party), about poor academic performance at college (e.g. a "sit down" on the couch in the family living room), about upcoming enrollment (e.g. a phone conversation about how many hours in

which to enroll) and about financing college (e.g. a conversation with parents during Parents' Weekend at KU). Parents were the most common source of memorable messages, but the context of the messages clearly varied. There does not seem to be a consistent, specific context in which messages about how long it should take to graduate occur. Conversations on the topic of time-to-degree seem to occur in a variety of contexts.

### **KU's Graduate-in-Four Messaging Efforts**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, only two research participants recalled graduate-in-four messages from university staff without being promoted: one message during a KU Senior Days presentation and one from an academic advisor. Research question four focuses on discovering what messages students recalled from KU's Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts, so as a prompt, I asked students in every focus group if they remembered any messages from the messaging efforts. Almost every research participant attended KU's New Student Orientation program during the summer preceding their first semester at KU, but few students remembered hearing anything about graduating in four years. Very few study participants reported attending Traditions Night or Student Convocation, and only one student recalled a graduate-in-four message during Convocation.

On the other hand, almost every student remembered receiving a "Class of..." tee shirt. Most of the discussion about the tee shirts, however, focused on the size and style of the shirt, not the intended message on the shirt. After some probing, several research participants recognized the intended message on the tee shirts, but most students said it was a "subconscious message." As the topic of class identity emerged during the focus groups, the majority of students thought KU was too large to have true class identities, and this seemed more appropriate

for high school. Many of the students said they identified more with other students in their living groups and academic majors than with the thousands of students in their graduating class.

The purpose of giving students a “Class of…” tee shirt was to try and communicate a message to students that they belong to a distinct graduating class, and that class should/will graduate four years hence. Based upon the data from these focus groups, however, study participants did not receive the intended message from the tee shirts. Using memorable message literature as a guide, the intended message on the tee shirt falls short of several important memorable message principles outlined by Knapp, Stohl and Reardon (1981). For instance, the message on the tee shirts is not an explicit rule or guideline to follow, is not action-oriented and is not an injunction that prescribes rules of conduct for solving a personal problem. Additionally, the tee shirt message does not follow any of the principles for sticky messages outlined by Heath and Heath (2007). For example, the “Class of…” message is not particularly concrete or emotional nor is it a compelling story.

While study participants did not remember hearing messages about graduating in four years during New Student Orientation programs, Student Convocation or KU Traditions Night, they did, however, remember hearing about KU’s Four-Year Tuition Compact. The tuition compact is discussed during New Student Orientation, but study participants may have forgotten where they heard about the compact, or perhaps they learned about the compact from another source. At any rate, the data from this study indicate that messages about KU’s Four-Year Tuition Compact certainly communicate to students that they should graduate in four years. While many of the research participants were unsure of the exact details of the tuition compact, most students said this was definitely an incentive to graduate on time. Ultimately, messages regarding KU’s Four-Year Tuition Compact were by far, the most memorable messages that

study participants recalled from KU's messaging efforts. The researchers Heath and Heath (2007) would surely agree that the message "graduate before your tuition goes up" seems to be the most "sticky" message of the messaging efforts. Heath and Heath found that sticky messages tended to be *concrete* and/or *emotional*. Concrete ideas must be explained in terms of human actions, and the message "graduate before your tuition goes up" is clearly an injunction to take action. This message can also be described as emotional, as well. Many students expressed concern over the cost of a college education and the fear of tuition rising too high to afford, may have also contributed to the "stickiness" of the message.

While the Four-Year Tuition Compact seems to communicate the clearest message about graduating in four years, this study indicates that academic advisors are also a source of some time-to-degree messages. When study participants talked about meeting with advisors from the University Advising Center, they said the conversations focused on selecting classes for the next semester, not on four-year plans. Once students moved to academic advisors in their departments, however, several students talked about how these advisors discussed "four-year plans" and/or provided lists of classes they needed to complete for their degree programs. These class lists were in paper form, not electronic or interactive in any way. One student said he converted his required class list to an electronic spreadsheet of his own creation.

In sum, the time-to-degree message from the 4year Tuition Compact was the most memorable message from KU's Graduate-in-Four Messaging efforts, followed by discussions about four-year plans with advisors in students' academic departments. Many study participants explained that the 4year Tuition Compact was definitely an incentive for them to graduate in four years, and it was a "big motivator" for them to study hard and do well in college. For the most part, students perceived the tuition compact as a fair and positive program that their parents liked

as well. Graduate-in-four messages from New Student Orientation sessions, Traditions Night, Student Convocation and University Advising Center advisors did not seem to have any impact on student behavior. I do not think, however, that university staff and faculty should stop talking about graduating in four years at these venues. It seems appropriate to set expectations for students when appropriate, and perhaps eventually, graduating in four years will become a tradition and/or part of the academic culture at the University of Kansas. In fact, changing the culture was specifically mentioned in the 2010 *Retention and Timely Graduation Task Force Report* recommendation section: “Establish university-wide leadership to assume responsibility for promoting awareness of the challenges associated with retention and timely graduation across the campus and to bring about the necessary cultural shift at KU” (p. 2). The data from this study merely suggest that more students received messages about graduating in four years from discussions, presentations or information about KU’s Four-Year Tuition Compact than from any other source in the messaging efforts. The next section focuses on another popular memorable message – the campanile myth.

### **Campanile Myth**

It is clear from the data that messages about KU’s Four-Year Tuition Compact had more impact on study participants than any other aspect of KU’s Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts. It is ironic that the Four-Year Tuition Compact was not created as an intentional component of the efforts. Rather, it was created as a tool to help students and their families better plan for financing college (M. Roney, personal communication, April 29, 2009). Another unintentional message about graduating in four years arose during the focus groups – the campanile myth. The story about KU’s campanile was not part of KU’s Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts, but it is clearly a “sticky” message that most of the study participants remembered. Students often

confessed they did not *really believe* that walking through the campanile would cause them to have to extend their time-to-degree, but most students said they would not take the chance. In terms of memorable message literature, the KU campanile myth meets many of the criteria set forth by Heath and Heath (2007). For instance, the campanile myth is a story or “urban legend” which are considered naturally “sticky” messages. The campanile myth is also simple, concrete and has emotional elements that may appeal to a student’s fear of having to drop out of school or not achieve his/her goals. And finally, the myth often has credibility; study participants recalled hearing the story from KU tour guides, older siblings, upperclassmen and friends who personally knew fellow students who walked through the campanile and suffered the consequences. One version of the story, for example, included a roommate who actually got deported soon after walking through the campanile.

### **Impact on Student Behavior**

Research question five focused on the impact of memorable messages on student behavior. The findings support the notion that *Do it in four* messages from parents are a source of motivation for students to work hard in school, try to make good grades, get a part-time job and even earn credit prior to entering college. *Take your time* messages seemed to impact students by relieving stress associated with taking more credit hours per semester or graduating in a certain amount of time. It is not clear from the data, however, how these messages actually *impacted* behavior.

The high cost of college attendance was a common motivator for students to try to graduate in four years, so perhaps this helps explain why the vast majority of students remembered KU’s tuition compact. Many students said the tuition compact was very important to their parents and it was an incentive to try and graduate in four years. The impact of the

tuition compact will be clearer by fall 2011 when the first tuition cohort will expire, and students who have not yet graduated will be charged higher tuition rates.

The data reveal that the only component of KU's Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts that may have an effect on student behavior is the tuition compact. The other components of the efforts did not appear to have much impact on the students in this study.

### **Study Limitations**

As with all research, this study had certain limitations that need to be reviewed. First, there were limitations regarding the subject pool. The participants in this study were enrolled in Communication Studies 130, which is a freshman level course. While efforts were made to recruit juniors and seniors, the majority of study participants were freshman and sophomores. In addition, juniors and seniors who wait longer to take freshman level courses may possess some unknown characteristic, attitude or life experience that may have an impact on the results of this study. While most undergraduates at the University of Kansas are required to take Communication Studies 130, students are allowed to test out of this course. Therefore, students who successfully tested out of this course were not in the subject pool. Additionally, the participants in this study were, by design, traditional undergraduates only; they were between the ages of 18 and 22, enrolled full-time, not married, had no children and were not transfer students. Therefore, the viewpoints of less traditional students were not represented in this research. The vast majority of research participants in this study were domestic students, so the perceptions and experiences of international students were not well represented.

Other limitations pertain to the reliability and internal validity of the study. For example, this qualitative research study was conducted at the University of Kansas, a large, public, Research I University in the midwestern United States. Therefore, the findings may not

generalize to other higher education institutions. In addition, since the data were collected during focus groups and the subjects remained anonymous, I was not able to ask participants to read transcriptions of their comments to check for reliability. This limitation, however, was mitigated by recording and transcribing all focus group session verbatim and double-checking the accuracy of student responses with the written transcripts and recordings.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Perhaps messages about graduating in four years get lost in the other information and activities during New Student Orientation, Traditions Night and Student Convocation. While I do not recommend university faculty and staff stop talking about graduating in four years at these public events, the data from this study indicate that graduate-in-four messages sent during these events are rarely remembered by students, at least on a conscious level. I recommend KU staff use the findings from this research and the principles in memorable message literature to develop an intentional messaging campaign to communicate graduation expectations to students. Any messaging campaign should also be documented and routinely assessed to determine its effectiveness.

A strategic messaging campaign should not only communicate university expectations for time-to-degree, but it could also address student attitudes toward time-to-degree. For example, the findings in this study reveal that while most of the students think it is important to graduate in four years, graduating in five years is perfectly acceptable. Students think being a “super senior” is fine. University staff and faculty, therefore, should seek ways to help students change their attitude. In addition to changing attitudes, university staff could work to remove barriers to graduation, incentivize timely graduation and/or create stricter policies that attempt to control student’s behavior. For example, students could receive tuition rebates if they graduated early or

receive special recognition at commencement if they graduate on time. The university could also reduce the number of hours required for a bachelor's degree, thus reducing a barrier to graduation. On the other hand, the university could adopt stricter policies that restrict the number of classes students can drop during their undergraduate careers, restrict the amount of time students have to withdraw from classes or increase financial penalties for dropping classes. Strategies utilized by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (1996) could be used as a guide for developing specific strategies for the University of Kansas. Whatever methods are chosen, the efforts need to be intentional, based upon research and assessed for their effectiveness.

When planning new strategies to increase time-to-degree, the KU campanile myth should be capitalized upon and/or expanded. The current research findings indicate that this "urban legend" is particularly "sticky" for KU students. Perhaps staff and students who conduct campus tours could incorporate this story into all of their tours and/or presentations. Or, the myth could be incorporated into strategies that reward timely graduation or attempt to change the KU culture. Images of students walking through the campanile could be used more widely to continuously remind students about their graduation goals.

While the vast majority of study participants remembered the "Class of..." tee shirts, they did not receive the intended message. Since the students truly liked the tee shirts, I would suggest a slightly different purpose and distribution program. For example, "Class of..." tee shirts could be sent to new students at home as recognition of their official admission to KU. Study participants said class identity was more applicable in a high school setting, so the tee shirts might be more appropriate for students to wear during their senior year of high school. Additionally, students talked about receiving many tee shirts during their first weeks at KU, so

sending the shirts to student before they come to KU would place more focus on the message of the tee shirt. A card or letter could accompany the tee shirt congratulating students on their admission and encouraging them to graduate in four years. This way, the tee shirt message would be clearer to our students since the study data found that students did not receive the intended message of the shirts. In addition, none of the international students in the study received a tee shirt. In the spirit of inclusion, I would recommend that new international students also receive these “Class of...” tee shirts.

As mentioned above, *class identity* does not seem to resonate with students in this study, especially as it is promoted with the “Class of...” tee shirts. If class identity is going to continue to be incorporated in future messages, further research needs to be conducted to determine the most effective way to promote such identity among college students.

Another major finding from this study indicates that strategies for increasing time-to-degree should include parents. Since the vast majority of messages that students recalled were from parents, it is clear that parents heavily influence their students’ choices and behavior. KU staff currently publish a parent newsletter and support a parent organization. Using the results of this study as a guide, KU staff should make intentional efforts to explain to parents the influence they have with their students and encourage parents to set four-year graduation expectations when appropriate. Additionally, special attention should be given to parents of first-generation college students. These parents would have no experience with college themselves, and they may not be able to adequately advise their students on the best strategies for degree completion.

The study findings also clearly support using the Four-Year Tuition Compact as an incentive for timely graduation. I recommend that KU staff use the compact to encourage progress toward degree. For example, KU staff could send targeted communication to students

as they earn 30, 60 and 90 credit hours. As students reach these milestones, the communication could include reminders about when the students' tuition compact expires and ways to progress more quickly if necessary (e.g. enrolling in summer school or on-line courses). In addition, similar messages could be sent to parents asking them to encourage their students to progress as quickly as possible before tuition rises.

Finally, the study findings indicate that students do not have an electronic method for tracking their progress toward degree. Therefore, I recommend that the university invest in an electronic degree planning tool that would engage students and assist them in planning their entire academic career. The degree planning tool should be offered to students as early as possible, perhaps once they are admitted to the university. The planning tool must be easily understood and accessible to students, parents and academic and faculty advisors.

### **Future Research**

As stated in the *Study Limitations* above, the research participants in this study were traditional undergraduates enrolled in Communication Studies 130 at the University of Kansas. Further research on less traditional students (such as transfer students, part-time students, older students, married students, students with children, international students, etc.) would likely reveal different experiences and perceptions about how long it should take to earn a bachelor's degree. In addition, students at the University of Kansas are predominantly white, and research with a more racially and/or ethnically diverse student population would likely reveal different results. Future research could also take into consideration other student characteristics such as socioeconomic status, disability, gender, athletic participation, academic preparedness, grade point average, parental education level and source of financial support.

Using the qualitative data from this study, KU staff could create a questionnaire to survey 4-year graduating seniors concerning their strategies for graduating on time and what messages and/or behaviors helped them achieve this goal. Conversely, data on extenders (students who take more than four years to graduate) could be collected to determine reasons and/or barriers to graduation. Additionally, we could study the characteristics of both students who graduate in four years and extenders in order to develop a predictive model for time-to-degree for KU students. Using a predictive model would help KU staff identify students at risk for extending their time-to-degree.

In addition, since parents were the most common source of memorable messages, it would be informative to study parents' perceptions about time-to-degree. Some possible research questions could include: What messages are parents trying to send to their students about how long it should take to graduate? Is the Four-Year Tuition Compact an incentive to parents? How can KU partner with parents to encourage timely graduation?

Additionally, as the first cohort in the tuition compact reaches its fourth and final year, it will be informative to determine if the tuition compact had an impact on the graduation rate. Students in the tuition cohort could be studied to determine what, if any, impact the compact had on their efforts to graduate in four years.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

During the course of this research, the University of Kansas hired a new chancellor and a new provost. Both of these high-level administrators have made timely graduation a priority, so the results of this study will hopefully inform university administrators and faculty as they chart a course for future improvements. The University of Kansas is not alone in its efforts to improve time-to-degree for students. The current literature reflects a national trend that is more focused

on improving institutional efficiency, effectiveness and accountability. Improved institutional outcomes have become increasingly important to state governments, governing boards and universities in light of more difficult budgetary and economic times.

The current study will hopefully inform staff and faculty at the University of Kansas by showing that students do not seem to be impacted by most components of KU's Graduate-in-Four messaging efforts. However, these findings indicate that parents have a strong influence on their students, and that KU's campanile myth may be a creative and memorable avenue for creating a stronger messaging effort that will result in more positive results.

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## Appendix A

### Summary of responses to questionnaire

<b>Gender</b>						
Male	Female				<b>Total</b>	
20	40				60	
<b>Age</b>						
18	19	20	21	22		
17	21	10	9	3		
<b>Class</b>						
Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior			
20	24	9	7			
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>						
African-American/Black	Asian American	Hispanic	Native American	White	Asian	
4	2	1	0	52	1	
<b>1<sup>st</sup> to go to College?</b>						
Yes	No					
4	56					
<b>Do You Expect to graduate within four years of coming to KU?</b>						
Yes	No					
42	18					
<b>Have you attended the following:</b>						
New Student Orientation						
Yes	No					
59	1					
Student Convocation						
Yes	No					
22	38					
KU Traditions Night						
Yes	No					
31	29					

## Appendix B

### Participant Consent Form

The Department of Educational Policy and Leadership Studies at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

We are conducting this study to investigate the memorable messages that undergraduates at the University of Kansas receive about how long it should take to graduate with a bachelor's degree and how these messages affect student behavior. This will entail your participation in a focus group and completion of a short questionnaire. The focus group and questionnaire are expected to take approximately 45 minutes to complete. The content of the questions raised in the group or in the questionnaire should cause no more discomfort than you would experience in your everyday life. Although participation may not benefit you directly, we believe that the information obtained from this study will help us gain a better understanding of student opinions and behavior. Your participation is strictly voluntary. Your name will not be associated in any way with the research findings.

The session will be audio-recorded, and participating represents your consent for us to use your words, although not to associate you with any particular statement. Focus group recordings will be stored in a locked cabinet in the principle investigator's campus office and will be available only to the study investigators.

If you would like additional information concerning this study before or after it is completed, please feel free to contact me by phone or email.

Your participation in this focus group and completion of the demographic questionnaire indicate your willingness to participate in this project and that you are at least eighteen years old. If you have any additional questions about your rights as a research participant, you may call (785) 864-7429 or write the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas, 66045-7563, email ([mdenning@ku.edu](mailto:mdenning@ku.edu) and/or [jbutin@ku.edu](mailto:jbutin@ku.edu)).

Sincerely,

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HSCL #18277

Appendix C

Demographic Questions for Focus Group Participants

1. Gender (circle one)
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  
2. Age \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. Class Status (circle one)
  - a. Freshman
  - b. Sophomore
  - c. Junior
  - d. Senior
  
4. Race/Ethnicity (circle all that apply)
  - a. African-American/ Black
  - b. Asian American
  - c. Hispanic
  - d. Native American
  - e. White
  
5. Are you the first person in your family to go to college? (circle one)
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
6. Do you expect to graduate within four years of coming to KU? (circle one)
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
7. Have you attended the following
  - a. New Student Orientation      Yes \_\_\_\_\_      No \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Student Convocation      Yes \_\_\_\_\_      No \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. KU Traditions Night      Yes \_\_\_\_\_      No \_\_\_\_\_