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**An Exploratory Study of the Impact of Language on the Transition and Success of
Students in Their First College Year**

by

Kathryn B. Wilhite

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Science

in the
First-Year Studies Program
Faculty of First-Year and Transition Studies

Accepted by:

Stephanie M. Foote, Ph.D., Chair
James Davis, Ph.D., Committee Member
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Kennesaw State University
Spring 2017

DEDICATION

To my husband Joel.

For all the places we've been, things we've done, and all that is yet to be.

I could not excel without your support.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have been fortunate to have been supported and advised by incredible mentors in the field, as well as my own personal dream team. It is impossible to thank everyone but there are many I must acknowledge at this important benchmark in my education.

First, the visionary behind the Master of Science in First-Year Studies and my committee chair, Dr. Stephanie Foote, whose direction, guidance, and mentorship have motivated and inspired me. Numerous emails, several lengthy and invigorating conversations, and the constant reminder that I can succeed by providing me with “Hustle” gear, fueled my momentum on this journey. Additionally I would like to express my appreciation to Dr. James Davis and Dr. Jennifer Keup, whose wisdom, perspective, and expertise were practical and purposeful. I consider myself incredibly fortunate to have been guided in this process by a committee full of practitioners so well experienced in the field who are also each so very kind. I am grateful for each of you and your enthusiasm for my research.

In looking at the trajectory of my education and career it is impossible for me not to consider mentors from my undergraduate career at Humboldt State University, Vicky Paul-Bryant, Romi Hitchcock-Tinseth, and Greg Young who supported me as a student leader and expert communicator; Steve Ladwig and Scott Haag who believed I could and I would. I would also like to thank all my peers from my undergraduate career at Humboldt State University who were part of my journey in higher education.

It is imperative that I thank my student leaders past and present, from both Humboldt State University and Kennesaw State University, for the impact they have had on the direction of my work: thank you for fostering who I have become. You are the reason I live what I love.

At Kennesaw State University I am incredibly grateful to the First-Year and Transition Studies faculty and the leadership of University College for their dedication to this degree program. To my fellow students in the Master of Science in First-Year Studies courses, and particularly members of my cohort, who have become incredible sources of support from whom I have learned so very much: Adrienne Harmer, Maggie Murphy, Michael Gabriele, Michelle Eaton, Emily Smith, Amanda Woodford, and most especially, Michael Robinson, my partner in crime and constant support--thank you all. As a working professional at Kennesaw State University I also extend my gratitude to my colleagues who have leant advice, support, and grace. In particular I am so grateful to my supervisor Sharon Brownlow for her compassion, Dr. Michael Sanseviro for his encouragement, and Donald Coleman for his enthusiasm.

Finally, thank you to my own personal dream team. To Sandy Nichols and Kevin Farley, for standing beside me with unencumbered laughter and valuable perspective--you're my twin pillars. To Alex Fonseca for having my back and raising the bar--you push me strive for excellence. To Sarah Pennisi, Emilie Themens, Annie Sandusky, Tami Provost, Cindy Hori, Carolyn Yawn, Laura Green, and Darcy Farrington-Ryan for your ongoing friendship and encouragement. To Marty Beidler for loving and believing in me always. To my mom, my biggest fan and favorite editor, for being so invested in this work. To my dad, my confidant and role model, for teaching me to ask good questions. To my dog Barley who kept me company as I wrote and reminded me to take time to play. And to my husband Joel for keeping me accountable, keeping me fed, designing makeshift desks, and most of all for believing I could do this. I am so proud of our journey. I could not have done this without you and I will always be thankful for your kindness, your calmness, your encouragement, and your love during this process and always.

ABSTRACT

In a time where colleges and universities are taking strides to consider their communication strategies with incoming students there appears to be a lack of attention on the language within communication pieces and what messages that language conveys to students. This study sought to examine this language through inductive analysis of four research questions which explored what the communication pieces are, what relationship they build, the discourse language present, and the strategies of empowerment language within the communication pieces distributed to all incoming first-year students at a large, public comprehensive four-year university in the Southeastern United States. Research on college adjustment, student success, and making meaning was considered before explaining the creation of a rubric created to conduct analysis for this study using perspectives from Foucault (1972) and Weimer (2013). Results exposed the necessity of language balance, as well as the influence the communication process can have on a transactional relationship, the importance of word choice, opportunities to use language that can motivate choice and participation, and an emerging theme about the importance of a communication experience. Additional findings were related to the importance of mode and revisions to the rubric developed for this study which may serve as a model to develop and evaluate communication pieces. Implications for future research involve deeper exploration of the impact of language and understanding how language can influence other collegiate transitions. Implications for practice involve increased collaboration across departments toward communication experiences and bolstering language balance through intentionality and appropriate word choice for incoming first-year students.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Summary

The institutional environment, new to first-year students, has been shown to impact and influence the successful transition of students into the institution (Strange & Banning, 2013; Astin, 1991). A factor in defining the environment as well as expressing the cultural norms and expectations of that institutional environment is the communication that supports first-year students' transition. Therefore, institutions are beginning to look at how they communicate with students. In a recent article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Supiano, (2016) describes how several colleges and universities have begun to audit the frequency and mode of their communications with incoming students. While audits to understand the success of modalities and preferred frequency are critical for institutions, the language used in these communications and the implications of that language in the transition of first-year students is just as significant. Existing research does not provide a collective understanding of the language, namely the word choice, message design, and establishment of a discourse based relationship, as it relates to the significance of communication employed during first-year students' progression through the admissions, orientation, enrollment, and transition process. Furthermore, there is no known instrument that can be employed to evaluate and analyze language as it relates to a first-year student's transition.

For the recipient of institutional communications, an incoming first-year student, various communication pieces fit together to create a contiguous communication experience that conveys to the student vital cultural information about the institution, including institutional expectations; additionally, messaging informs students of their role in the institutional environment and

becomes a part of the students' collegiate environment (Barefoot, 2005; Schilling & Schilling, 2005; Hossler & Anderson, 2005). It is for these reasons that it is essential to collect and analyze examples of first-year communication to explore the meaning and messages in the language communication pieces shared with incoming students during their transition into the institutional environment.

Statement of the Problem

Functional areas within an institution often divide the work of communicating with incoming students; different departments and divisions take charge of various responsibilities for specialized areas of the college environment (Hossler & Anderson, 2005). The organizational structure of an institution varies, meaning that while best practices have emerged across the field for modes of communication, the field has not addressed the importance of the language institutions use (Hossler & Anderson, 2005; Junco 2005). Furthermore, addressing this problem remains a challenge because the field does not have a tool or a model to guide the evaluation of language within the distinctive context of the communication experience a first-year student encounters as they prepare for enrollment.

While it would be difficult to conjecture how messages make each student feel, it is possible to examine a cycle of communication to focus on the language used within the communication documents and to apply frameworks of language, student empowerment, and college student adjustment to determine if a rubric can be developed and employed as a universally usable instrument for auditing and crafting the conversations institutions are having with their students in transition.

Purpose of the Study

Placing importance on communication theory, college student adjustment theory, first-year studies, and philosophies of language and student empowerment, this research intends to critically analyze the communication documents, from an institution selected for its national reputation for its first-year programs and support, to understand better the language and the empowerment messages the words convey within the context of first-year transitions. Through the examination of the communications mailed, emailed, linked, and directed to first-year students admitted for the fall 2016 semester at a large, public, comprehensive four-year university in the Southeastern United States, this research seeks to introduce a conversation about meaning, messages, and language into the field and understand opportunities for further examination. Communication documents will be measured on the criteria of inclusive, empowering, and appropriate language choice and messaging for first-year students.

The implications will provide standards for recognizing the meaning in institutional messages for students and the recommendations will provide any higher education practitioners, but specifically those working with students in transition to the institution, with greater comprehension of how to craft messages for students in ways that encourage discourse aimed at student success. Examples will assist faculty and staff in the development of empowering messages and strategies to build relationships with students before they matriculate. The development of a language evaluation rubric from this study provides those who communicate with first-year students with a mechanism for reviewing other communication artifacts for first-year students and students in transition.

Research Questions

With these stated goals in mind this research asks the following questions:

1. What are the communication pieces, what do they say, who is responsible for creating and delivering the message, and on what time line?
2. Is the institution creating a relationship via the communications they send to first-year students?
3. Is the institution using language to include first-year students in discourse?
4. Is the institution communicating with first-year students in ways that empower them to be successful?

These questions were explored by looking specifically at how appropriate the language used in the communication artifacts is for the first-year student audience and whether language demonstrates clear intentions, accessible meaning, and balance. The timing of the communication and invitation for reciprocation will also be considered. The communications will be evaluated by how well they explain the intended communication experience and how much responsibility, including guidance on decision making, is expressed to students within the language.

Overview

This study will begin by examining the research that informs an understanding of who first-year students are and theory related to their adjustment to college as well as background information about communicating with them, communication theory, and first-year studies literature on student success. Further, the work of Michel Foucault (1972) and Maryellen Weimer (2013) is used to find common ground in the space between language and student empowerment. Next, the methodology will explain the veracity of utilizing a qualitative inductive analysis to explore language use in first-year student communication. The creation of the rubric, the instrument used to conduct the analysis, will be explored. Validation of the rubric,

which combines Foucault's (1972) and Weimer's (2013) perspectives on balancing power, encouraging engagement, and defining space for reciprocal communication, will be examined. This is followed by an analysis of the results from the documents collected: communication artifacts distributed during the 2016 first-year student transition cycle, a time defined as acceptance through matriculation, which were provided to all incoming first-year students. Finally, the study will provide an exploration of the implications, recommendations for both practice and future research, and a discussion of messages of empowerment within higher education.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Incoming first-year students face a deluge of communication from their intended institution from the time that they have been officially accepted through to their first day of attendance (Jorgenson, 2014). These early communications may come from admissions, orientation and/or transition support offices, college financing and billing offices like the bursars office or financial aid, on campus housing, first-year experience offices or first-year studies departments, enrollment management, academic departments, and potentially many more, during the period between admittance and attendance (Hossler & Anderson, 2005). The modes of communication vary and may come in the form of emails or letters, directions to websites, videos or other digital resources, phone calls, social media, online forums or chats, and more (Jorgensen, 2014). While some institutions have tackled the arduous task of examining the frequency and overload of this information (Supiano, 2016), there has been little attention paid to the much more granular language level: specifically, what are we saying to incoming first-year students? Meaning is made through the symbolic language utilized and the dynamics of empowerment and opportunities for learning are uniquely manipulated by word choice and the messages those words convey. Thus it is necessary to conduct a thorough examination of the language utilized in transition communication with first-year students. This type of in depth examination requires an understanding of who today's first-year college students are, foundational knowledge of the best theories related to language, the best practices for student success, a lens through which to understand the adjustment process, and development of a framework for judging the language in first-year communication.

Areas of Examination

This review of literature will first explore what is known about today's first-year college students and their adjustment to the collegiate environment. More specifically, it will examine what is known about how institutions communicate with them, what their communication preferences may be, and best practices for supporting students during the early college transition, including a section with specific emphasis on how institutions can support adjustment to college. Following this section is an exploration of foundational communication theories that describe the importance of language. The field of communication has established frameworks that guide understanding about how individuals are impacted and influenced by what is said to them, and for the purposes of this study, the contributions explored will underscore why words matter, how meaning is made, and the role of symbols. Then, a review of work from the field of First-Year Studies will be considered focusing on those works that have examined the impact of messaging and communication related to institutional influence on student success within the collegiate environment. Whether the communication is nonverbal or verbal and related to connectivity or engagement in-and-out of-the classroom, important lessons from the field can be considered to frame the conversation on communication and intentionality during the transition to an institution. Finally, this review will conclude with in depth examinations of Foucault's (1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and Weimer's (2013) *Learner Centered Teaching* to consider how their philosophies and recommendations can combine to create a lens for this study. Foucault's work considers how language can be used to distribute and Weimer's text provides ideas for balancing power in the classroom to empower learning. A thorough review of both of their perspectives will illuminate the correlation between language and student empowerment.

Astin's I-E-O Model as a Lens

Astin's (1991) I-E-O model for student adjustment clarifies the importance of institutional environment's relationship to a student as they receive the messages that begin to define that specific environment for a student in transition. The model, which has three parts (Appendix A), considers the relationship between student, environment, and outcome. "Outcomes...refers to the 'talents' we are trying to develop in our educational program; *inputs* refer to those personal qualities the student brings initially...*environment* refers to the student's actual experiences during the educational program" (Astin, 1991, p. 18). A student's experience is greatly impacted by the choices they make about which classes to take, where to live, and what activities to engage in; those environments are often explained during transitional communication experiences (Astin, 1991; Hossler & Anderson, 2005).

In consideration of the notion that student input and institutional environment play a role in a student's adjustment and success, it is necessary to understand the basic function of language in communication, as it is a part of both input and environment. Language can influence students in two ways: the message delivered to students, representing Astin's (1991) environmental factor, and the characteristics that an individual brings to the process of making meaning of the message, representing Astin's (1991) input factor. The discourse the student feels they are having with the institution begins to contextualize the environment for them before they even arrive. Each student's environment will look different because their environment is, in some ways, self-produced (Astin, 1991). Much like the perceptions of their experience that represent the notion of an intermediate outcome, the messaging and the meaning making process as a student is preparing to interact with the environment may be indicative of an intermediate environment (Astin, 1991).

The self-production of the environment within the framework of communication is represented in the context a student brings to the meaning making process. Therefore, it is critical to understand all that we can about both communication and the field of first-year studies so that we can “explore...possible effects, while maintaining...a recognition of the inherent ambiguities” (Astin, 1991, p. 84). Astin’s (1991) model provides a lens through which to consider college student adjustment as it is related to the constructed environment.

Inputs: Who Are First-Year College Students?

Identifying specifically which characteristics define a first-year college student is not only a moving target, but also a constantly evolving landscape (Crissman Ishler, 2005). Crissman Ishler (2005) explains that the age of college students, the race and ethnicity of students, how and where students attend college, students who report disabilities, sexual orientation, students studying abroad, and students who are the first in their families to attend college are demographic features that are in constant flux. It’s important to note that colleges and universities are enrolling higher numbers of students who don’t meet the traditional assumption of college-aged student, more racially and ethnically diverse student bodies, more first-generation students, more students who report mental health conditions, greater diversity in academic preparation, and more students studying in online environments than ever before (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Ramirez, Aragon, Suchard, & Rios-Aguilar 2016; Myers & Hatch, 2016; Crissman Ishler, 2005). Incoming first-year students today self-report great academic drive (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Ramirez, Aragon, Suchard, & Rios-Aguilar 2016).

One of the most significant changes among fifty years of data about incoming first-year students is the way that access has changed. College affordability related to availability of aid, regional public institutions that allow students to live with family while they attend college, and

the option of two-year institutions have all aided in the accessibility of post-secondary study (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Ramirez, Aragon, Suchard, & Rios-Aguilar 2016; Myers & Hatch, 2016). That access plays a role in changing the demographics but also in changing the aspirations students have when entering college. More individuals attaining an associate's or bachelor's degree means that additional aspirations for further degree attainment, or the ways a student plans to be involved with opportunities like internships or study abroad, are more prevalent in current first-year students (Myers & Hatch, 2016). Ultimately, today's incoming students are more keenly aware of the investment they are making and are therefore more motivated and more judicious with their time and money (Levine & Dean, 2012).

This incredible diversity and the intentions of current students' approaches to the collegiate environment mean that assumptions cannot be made about the contextual reference points students have to make meaning of a collegiate lexicon. The input factors are so diverse that the self-produced environments students may begin to develop during the transition process might be unique to each individual (Crissman Ishler, 2005; Astin, 1991).

Multigenerational behaviors. Considerations of today's college students, their interactions with institutions, and the input a student might bring to the process of making meaning, requires an understanding of the generations that are currently attending college. "We tend to think of college students in generational stereotypes...in each of these generational images, the accent is on the trends of the period and the commonalities among young people" (Levine, 1989, p. 15). Levine (1989) indicates that as characterizations are drawn about generations of students, the focus of the institution molds to meet the needs of the student population. Contemporarily colleges and universities are still serving students who are part of the Millennial Generation, individuals born between 1982 and 2002 and Generation X, individuals

born between 1961 and 1981 (Levine & Dean, 2012; Bonner, 2011; Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007). It is most appropriate however to consider contemporary traditionally aged students attending today and in the coming years as “Cuspers”, those on the cusp of their generation and the next (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

Millennial students are often characterized by their comfort with technology, their multicultural demographics, their close connection to their peers which is often facilitated by technology, parents involvement, and a “me” mentality (Levine & Dean, 2012; Bonner, 2011). But they are also characterized by their abilities and social causes: innovation, motivation, perseverance, social justice, and work ethic; as a connected generation that has had a number of expectations placed upon them, as well as bearing witness to events like school shootings, September 11th, and reality television, they are also often described as the most burdened generation in history (Bonner, 2011). Generation Z, born beginning in the mid-2000’s, has yet to enter college and therefore has not been studied in the context of the collegiate environment, but observations thus far have included the following characterizations: sheltered by protective parents and other family members with whom they have strong relationships, strong emphases on academic achievement and social development, and the influence of global events they have witnessed while growing up (Howe, 2014; Levine & Dean, 2012). Generation Z has developed during times of financial uncertainty at home and abroad, and watched as nations collectively handle disease and unrest; they have also been exposed to more people, ideas, and opportunities that are different than their own through increased access to technology and an increasingly multicultural experience during their formative years, making them cautious, pragmatic, open-minded, and inclusive on balance (Dean & Levine, 2012). While conclusions are still being drawn about how this generation will interact with collegiate environments what is known is that

as digital natives they prefer to create their own content, they value experiences, they dislike online networking and blogs, and they are comfortable exploring collegiate websites and online viewbooks (Wallop, 2015; Ashburn, 2007).

Colleges and universities can begin to understand this generation's behaviors now by examining what traditionally aged college students' wants and needs are in the present. "Because Cuspers stand in the gap between the two sides, they become naturals at mediating, translating, and mentoring" (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p. 41). In a 2015 article for the *Boston Globe*, the anecdotes shared on campus tours demonstrated what influences a student's decision to attend one institution or another. Generation Z students and their families reasons for deciding to attend a school included the quality of food, the connection to popular culture, the look and feel of the campus, and the proximity to home (Teitell, 2015). Generation Z students may not yet be on campus as students but they are beginning to visit; in subsequent years Generation Z students will be "Cuspers" themselves and will likely exhibit some of the behaviors that are present in the final wave of Millennial Generation college students (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002).

Communicating with today's college students. It is important to consider how institutions communicate with incoming first-year students because an environment is created through messaging; the institution is creating an environment with the messages it sends, but students are also beginning to form their self-produced, intermediate environment. The initial task of communicating with prospective students typically lies with admissions departments. As students transition after an acceptance decision, admissions may still play a role in communicating information alongside orientation programs, first-year experience and programming offices, housing, financial offices, and others (Hossler & Anderson, 2005).

It is still incumbent on admissions professionals to provide timely and accurate information about the institutions they represent. Recruitment literature, Web sites, and admissions presentations, however, not only help prospective students make sound choices, but also help them get ready for their college experience if these materials provide information not only about the academic programs and social life on campus, but also about academic expectations...and what it takes to be a successful student...

Orientation programs can be the last part of the recruitment process and the first among many formal retention initiatives...prospective students who reported having more information about the colleges they were considering were more likely to be satisfied.

(Hossler & Anderson, 2005, p.72-73)

Communicating with first-year students during their transition occurs across a dynamic landscape of modalities; technology plays an adapting role particularly due to the nature of the continued evolution of students' technological familiarity and preferences. First-year students today have had greater access to and comfort with computers, the internet, messaging, smart phones, and other technologies compared to any population preceding them in higher education; but not all students have had the same access to technologies as their peers (Junco, 2005).

Technology can be an important tool for helping students learn about their new institution and the communication norms of the environment, particularly when leveraged by orientation programming and in classroom settings like first-year seminars or learning communities, but Junco (2005) cautions practitioners not to make assumptions about user's experience with technology and to take time to explain how it will be used and what are the expectations for participation. Junco's (2014) research on social media impacts on student development suggests that it is necessary to explore the variety of communication modes available to institutions as

they communicate with students. Junco (2014) asserts that colleges and universities should embrace existing social media, as what is popular now will likely maintain popularity for the foreseeable future, but institutions should remain prepared for emerging technologies. Cabellon (2016) suggests attempting to communicate with students utilizing all available technology and that practitioners should acknowledge their own biases and familiarity with technology to have open conversations about best practices.

During a Higher Ed Live virtual conversation on June 5, 2014, first and second-year college students discussed communication preferences alongside a senior and an alumnus from four different institutions. Takeaways from their conversation included a sense that their institutions' tended to over-communicate, specifically via email (Jorgenson, 2014). These students also expressed a desire for information to be consolidated via email and on websites, suggested using many modes, indicated they prefer texting during emergency situations only, admitted that messages often get lost within large institutional contexts, and their preference for messages to include humor (Jorgenson, 2014).

As students transition to college, digital technology can play a significant role in the adjustment process (Sarigiani, Trumbell, & Camarena, 2013). The availability of technology means students can be in constant contact with family members and old friends during their first semester while simultaneously being engaged via technology with their new environment, whether by getting to know roommates well before move-in day or learning about clubs and activities (Sarigiani, Trumbell, & Camarena, 2013; Stephenson-Abetz & Holman, 2012). Social Media has also been found to be valuable in the transition for specific populations, such as students of color at Predominantly White Institutions, in building peer-to-peer connections and

identifying resources before arrival on campus, as well as serving as a space to increase faculty and student interaction (Wortham, 2013; Jenkins, Lyons, Bridgestock, & Carr, 2012).

The landscape of modalities of messaging result in a communication experience for incoming students that begins to aid their adjustment as they start to understand the environment and their role within it. Modes of communication during the transition into one's first-year can include items that are mailed, including letters, postcards, brochures, invitations, handbooks, and other physical marketing materials. They also include technological methods used to deliver emails, text messages, website content, videos, trainings, and access to online student record sites or portals (Jorgenson, 2014; Hossler & Anderson, 2005). When combined, these communication events tell a story to students about the institution that aids in the development of students' expectations about their experience at the institutions to which they have been admitted.

Robinson and Glanzer (2016) identified two designations of students related to their expectations about their collegiate experience, "holistics" and "instrumentalists". Holistics significantly outnumber instrumentalists, 76 percent of students in their study were given this designation. Characteristics of these students include expectations that their institution will play an active role in guiding and shaping their development of purpose and meaning (Robinson & Glanzer, 2016). One of the common themes that emerged among the students was the role the institution played during their transition process in setting expectations within the context of the institutional environment (Robinson & Glazer, 2016). No matter the modality of the communication, research about expectations illuminates how important the messages delivered during this timeframe can be to shaping a student's understanding of, and relationship to, an institution.

Environment: College Adjustment

A number of factors determine how well a first-year student will transition to their chosen institution (Astin, 1991). One consideration is a disconnection between students' pre-college expectations, academic, social, and personal, and their first-year experiences (Smith & Wertleib, 2005; Schilling & Schilling, 2005). Research suggests colleges and universities that work to better align expectations and experiences, through experiences like first-year seminars, can directly address the gap and help students adjust to the ecology of the institutional environment more efficiently (Robinson & Glanzer, 2016; Strange & Banning 2011; Smith & Wertleib, 2005; Schilling and Schilling 2005; Baker, McNeil, & Siryk, 1985). "Institutional policies, procedures, and...practices often send conflicting messages...it is rare for students to receive consistent messages...conversations can be used to clarify...Orientation and admissions and recruitment programs that are rooted in such clarified goals are likely to be much more successful" (Schilling & Schilling, 2005, pp. 119-120). How well an institution meets students' expectations in the classroom, in providing opportunities for social connectivity, in helping students define their purpose and grow as individuals, and in guiding students' perspectives of the world and their role in it matters; met expectations result in students who feel deeply allied with their institution and view the experiences they have in-and-out-of-the classroom as a larger tapestry of interconnected experiences (Robinson & Glanzer, 2016).

Communication has been found to impact student success through Strange and Banning's examination of the campus environment. Strange and Banning (2011) explain four core components that are present and influential within human environments: physical condition, design, and layout; collective characteristics of the people who inhabit them; organizational structures related to their purposes and goals; and collective perceptions or social constructions of the context and culture of the setting.

How well a student adjusts to college may also be influenced by demographic factors, academic preparation, the experiences designed for students in transition at individual institutions, self-esteem and identity synthesis, mental and emotional health and methods of coping, social support and connection, familial support, and attitude (Credé & Niehorster, 2011; Azmitia, Syed, & Radmacher, 2013; Pritchard, Wilson, & Yamnitz, 2007). Due to the overwhelming number of factors, it has been found that students' adjustment to college is multidimensional; a student may adjust well in one area and not adjust at all in another aspect of the college transition (Credé & Niehorster, 2011). Additionally, Credé and Niehorster (2011) found that the most significant impacts to adjustment to college involve conscientiousness, self-efficacy, internal locus of control, and self-esteem. In a study examining orientation programs and adjustment to college, the most significant correlation was to locus of control, students who attended orientation scored higher in areas related to decreased anxiety and knowing how to seek the help from resources when needed (Martin & Dixon, 1994). Orientation programs' designs differ from institution to institution but ultimately orientation programs attempt to aide in the adjustment process for both students and their families by offering access to information about the institution, both formal and informal which can help students feel more in control of the transition (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005). Therefore, it is critical that the messages during these critical transitions explicitly identify where the locus of control lies during the collegiate decision making process and what kind of involvement is required of students.

Another important area to consider is the role first-year experience programs, and specifically, first-year seminars can play in extending delivery of the voluminous content provided to students entering college into the classroom (Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013; Hunter & Linder, 2005). Some seminar courses are specifically designed to represent an

extension of orientation and the goals of orientation programming, while others are more focused on helping students to develop academic skills and understand academic expectations (Greenfield, Keup, & Gardner, 2013). By any design, first-year seminars are an additional space for institutions to communicate with students and support their adjustment over an academic term to sustain a prolonged impact on student success.

Finally, it is becoming increasingly apparent that feeling connected to an institution is an influential factor. Strayhorn's (2012) research on sense of belonging explains that finding acceptance at an institution can drive the decisions first-year students make during their transition, like where to live or what communities to join. These decisions are made based on the information that is presented to students as they transition into the institution. Of great importance in this body of work is the requirement that sense of belonging be relational and reciprocal (Strayhorn, 2012). These findings indicate that it is not simply the information institutions provide to students that matters but also how that information makes them feel about their propensity to succeed and their value to the institution.

Communication Theory Review

The following is a brief introduction to the function of language as it relates to messaging and the process of making meaning, within the context of understanding the student input factor as well as the environmental factor, specifically as communication. An emphasis is placed on language and words to consider how students may be interpreting what is said to them and also what the theoretical foundations of communication tell us about language and its function.

In the seminal work, *The Rhetoric*, Aristotle's (1954) treatise on language and the arts, the importance of word choice is introduced into communication theory. In Book III, Aristotle (1954) champions the importance of word choice. A great deal of attention is paid to examining

what one says and how one says it asserting that one must consider word choice in relation to the speaker and also to the audience (Aristotle, 1954). “The arts of language cannot help having a small but real importance, whatever it is we have to expound to others: the way in which a thing is said does affect its intelligibility” (Aristotle, 1954, p. 166).

Simply put, Aristotle asks for mindful word choice and to consider the audience and intent when selecting words; he asserts that selecting ambitious language is too highly prized and that orators should refocus on the content of the message, stating that clarity is of the utmost importance (Aristotle, 1954). “Clearness is secured by using the words (nouns and verbs alike) that are current and ordinary” (Aristotle, 1954, p. 167). Contemporarily we can extrapolate from this ancient work that the use of words that are not familiar or common has the potential to alienate audiences. The takeaway being that the more authentic a communication, the more impactful it will be. This is critical in considering if institutional communications demonstrate an understanding of their audience and represent the institution in an authentic way to incoming students.

In Book III Chapter 6, Aristotle (1954) layers into the authenticity of the communication the necessity for language to express “emotion and character” (p. 178). He explains that genuine nature and language that is true to character helps to keep the word choices appropriate. Aristotle’s (1954) intense examination of word choice, statement structure, and the intention behind them are valuable in consideration of what we say to first-year students as they consume more information and messaging than any generation of people have before.

Ogden and Richards text *The Meaning of Meaning* advances the critical notion that the combination of communicator, message, and recipient matters. Their development of a model to illustrate the relationship of processing meaning is useful in crafting communications meant to

be understood in specific ways by specific individuals or audiences. Ogden and Richards (1989) present a triangle with definitions at each point, which demonstrates the relationship between symbols, referents, and references (Appendix B).

The authors posit that the core of understanding meaning lies within the symbol, suggesting that as symbol-users humans make meaning related to their understanding of contexts (Ogden & Richards, 1989). The authors ask, “do we define things or words?” (Ogden & Richards, 1989, p. 110) and explain that when we define words we use other words to express that definition, or “symbol substitution” and that the way definitions are grammatically written makes them appear to be about things. They assert that definitions are ad hoc, applicable and relevant only within a “restricted field or ‘universe of discourse’” (Ogden & Richards, 1989, p. 111). Finally, they suggest that the connotation of a definition is dependent on the context and whether its definition is changeable and therefore extensive.

This deconstruction of how individuals arrive at the meaning of language illustrates how critical word choice and language are and how challenging mass communication can be because deciding how many people will interpret referents is complicated. Of particular relevance to the examination of communication pieces that disseminate information to students transitioning into their first year of college, is the notion that the context helps to define meaning; first-year students are only beginning to understand and experience the context of higher education and each specific institution while receiving transition communication pieces.

Burke’s collection of essays *Language as Symbolic Action* (1966) takes the consideration of meaning and extends it to the effects of words on humans as they process the meaning of meaning. His concept of “terministic screens” recognizes that there are two approaches to

language, one which sees language as definition and one which sees language as act; terministic screens direct the attention according to Burke (1966).

The assertion is that our language has not only intention but attention and that the words we choose identify the direction (Burke, 1966). Burke (1966) instructs us to be aware of and use terministic screens to direct attention and be cognizant of terms. “All terminologies must implicitly or explicitly embody choices between the principles of continuity and the principle of discontinuity” (Burke, 1966, p. 50). When considering communications targeted at first-year students, terministic screens help clarify not just intention but attention, particularly when that communication is intended to result in more than making meaning, but also intends to result in directed actions, like signing up for orientation or enrolling in a first-year seminar.

Burke (1966) also says that processing symbols is a specifically human action; humans use, misuse, create, and define self through the continued use of symbols. Therefore, symbols and screens not only define what is being communicated to an individual but also how that individual in turn defines their relationship to those symbols within the context of their experiences in their own universe.

These three foundational communication theories reflect many theories about the relationship to language and the impact words can have on identity, behavior, and outcomes. Furthermore, these foundational philosophies help to structure the examination of the language used with first-year students during their transition and also formally define how Astin’s (1991) environmental and input factors function in the setting of this study. As students self-produce their new environments, their own lived experiences and processes of meaning making will be their tools to engage in the production of their collegiate environment.

First-Year Studies Review

The language an institution chooses informs the environmental factor of Astin's (1991) model, and the input a student brings to the discourse informs the context, but there are so many potential factors students can bring to the conversation that it is valuable to consider some common themes of first-year student interactions with institutions and systems of meaning found across the first-year and students-in-transition literature.

As previously mentioned, Strange and Banning (2011) present concepts related to understanding how the institution communicates both using language and nonverbally. "The physical aspect of any campus place offers many possibilities for human response... The symbolic view of campus place environments suggests that it can potentially convey all of these messages, depending of course on the meaning people ascribe to them" (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 15). Symbolic messages can be a form of nonverbal communication telling humans who interact with the environment the type of behavior that is expected or anticipated, by presenting material artifacts that communicate culture, by the "behavioral traces" other humans have left as indicators of the way to interact with the environment, and attributes that demonstrate the priorities of an environment (Strange & Banning, 2001). Additionally, evidence exists to indicate that place is critical to connection by way of developing comfort and belonging within the public space. Strange and Banning (2001) assert that these conscious or unconscious decisions by institutions send messages to students whether they intend them to or not and that those messages not only help students to develop sense of place but also are critical to whether an institution is serving its mission (2001). "Environments exert their influence on students' expectations, attitudes, and behaviors through the mediated and subjective perceptions or collective social constructions" (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 115).

Strange and Banning (2001) also present a Hierarchy of Environmental Design that aligns with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs; the Hierarchy of Environmental Design places inclusion and safety at the bottom as the foundation, engagement in the mid-section, and community at the top of the pyramid (Strange & Banning, 2001). Sense of belonging and sense of place are demonstrated to be of critical importance for student connectivity to their environment and how, where, when, and the ways they engage, are directly related to what the environment communicates with them. These concepts demonstrate the importance of messages of belonging and connection that should exist in the communications first-year students receive throughout their communication experience.

In 2005, as a continuation of work done for the Policy Center on the First Year of College and the Foundations of Excellence in the First College Year project, eight researchers conducted thirteen case studies on institutions – four-year, two-year, public and private – who were identified as institutions of excellence in the First-Year, to uncover best practices for institutions wishing their first-year programming and services to excel. “Of the campuses that achieve first-year excellence a common characteristic is clarity of institutional identity and mission and a concomitant respect for students” (Barefoot, Gardner, Cutright, Morris, Schroeder, Schwartz, Siegel, & Swing, 2005, p. 386). The researchers assert that by clearly communicating institutional vision early on in the relationship with new students, faculty, and staff, there is a permeating effect which results in the campus community sharing values of respect across the diverse population of the institutions' students (Barefoot et al., 2005). Specifically, institutions in the study do a variety of things to demonstrate clarity. One institution provides students with a comprehensive “look book” that helps communicate campus culture; another offers robust support from staff and faculty during move-in and orientation.

These examples and others share a common characteristic: the ability to clearly communicate institutional values and help set first-year students' expectations about their relationship with the institution.

Another set of researchers, motivated by the findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), set on the task of looking at twenty institutions whose results from NSSE inspired further research to, once again, identify common best practices of supporting first-year student success. Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) schools are similarly found to be mission driven with the two most common characteristics being “(1) clearly articulated educational purposes and aspirations, and (2) a coherent, relatively well understood philosophy that guides ‘how we do things here’” (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005, p. 25). Clarity emerges again as a theme in how institutions can support student success. Another finding of the study is that DEEP colleges and universities are committed to defining “clear pathways to success” and a core component of these pathways is “many informal processes and mechanisms to communicate to new students, faculty, and staff what is valued and how things are done” (Kuh et al., 2005, p. 113). Examples from the study include seminar courses, living/learning communities for new students, outdoor adventure programming, setting expectations for graduates, and pre-enrollment materials that describe core university experiences including the articulation of the institutions' cultural norms (Kuh, et al., 2005). This study elaborates the importance first-year students place on an institution's ability to adequately communicate expectations and culture, and the consistent themes of communication among institutions who excel at designing supportive first-year environments demonstrates the effectiveness of clearly communicated values, norms, and processes.

A final communication event to consider is that of the interaction between faculty and students, an event that likely occurs after a student begins their coursework, but the value of which has been observed to lend itself to student success so frequently that it merits examination for the communication lessons that exist within those interactions (Kuh, et al., 2005; Barefoot, et al., 2005). Kinzie (2014) observes that faculty-student interactions build students' self-efficacy as a learner and advance cognitive and intellectual development. "Further, student-faculty interaction is also important because it encourages students to devote greater effort to other educationally purposeful activities" (Kinzie, 2014, p. 17). Another impactful aspect of communication noted by Kinzie (2014) is that of communicating expectations, which requires that faculty be focused on talent development for the sake of academic, social, personal, and career-related growth. Kinzie (2014) asserts that communicating expectations is best when it is clear, underscores the most important messages, and provides opportunities for reciprocal dialogue (2014). These lessons, building self-efficacy for students as learners, striving to develop student development, encouraging interest in educationally purposeful activities, communicating expectations, focusing on talent development, underscoring the most important messages, and allowing for dialogue, can be considered and applied to the interactions between a student and the institution they plan to attend during their transition communication experience.

The crux of this exploration is the understanding that the interactions a student has during their transition represents a constant process of meaning making for students. While it is important to reflect on the potential meaning they may make based on the contexts they own to define symbols for themselves, there are also proven strategies from across the field of first-year studies that can be utilized or re-positioned usefully when designing a communication experience for incoming first-year students.

Building a Framework-Foucault & Weimer: An Examination of the Balance of Power in Communication and First-Year Studies

There does not exist in the literature, a specific model or tool to use when examining language in higher education. In noting the necessity to design such a model for the purpose of this study, the researcher identified two philosophies, one on empowerment in language and one on student empowerment in the classroom, that pair well to provide a new lens with which to examine language in higher education and specifically in communicating with first-year students, while continuing to consider Astin's (1991) model as a basis for understanding of the intended outcomes of communication with incoming students. The following section explores these two philosophies to provide a review of their work and an understanding of their perspectives, as these were the most influential perspectives on the way language is reviewed within this research.

Foucault's (1972) body of work is expansive and complex but the philosophies from *Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The Discourse on Language* are valuable selections to review in the context of language choice and its effect on the receiver. Related to the previous exploration of language and meaning, Foucault (1972) asserts that statements of discourse may mean different things depending on context and that discourse guides human behavior depending on the connotation (Danaher, Schirato, & Webb, 2000). "For Foucault, one of the most significant forces shaping our experiences is language... We not only use language to explain our ideas and feelings to others, we use it to explain things to ourselves" (Danaher, Schirato, & Webb, 2000, p. 31).

Foucault (1972) also examines context, placing emphasis on the notion that the field the communication exists in and the authority of the communicator are influential in interpreting

meaning, and of great importance, prescribes a dynamic of power. “The relationships between people and their experiences, and the grounds they occupy, comprise various social and cultural fields...each field lays down rules and procedures, assigns roles and positions, regulates behaviours...and produces hierarchies” (Danaher, Schirato, & Webb, 2000, p. 32). Therefore, the quality of discourse is reliant on a number of factors including the context, the intent, the authority, the delivery, the audience, and the effect (Danaher, Schirato, & Webb, 2000; Foucault, 1972).

In his lecture, *The Discourse on Language*, Foucault (1972) simplifies his thoughts to explore the consequences of language and the necessity of empowering discourse. “Supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers” (p. 216). Regardless of structural or procedural outcomes, it is the meaning that has the most impact “the highest truth no longer resided in what discourse *was*, nor what it *did*, it lay in what was *said*” (Foucault, 1972, p. 218). By considering how language is utilized to exclude individuals, Foucault (1972) insists communicators examine their practice stating that “the will to truth, like the other systems of exclusion, relies on institutional support: it is both reinforced and accompanied by whole strata of practices such as pedagogy” (p. 219). The message of Foucault’s philosophy is that the communicator should understand language, and the system in which they are responsible for communicating, well enough to be able to identify ways in which the combination of language, roles, and structure can distribute power. If development of self-efficacy, communication of expectations, and the foundation of a relationship for interaction between institution and incoming student are the outcomes desired, which might generally be

synthesized into a statement of student empowerment, then the language related to the system should extensively observed.

Complementing Foucault's considerations on language and power are the concepts presented by Weimer in *Learner-Centered Teaching* (2013), which explores the balance of power in the classroom as well as the function of content and other concepts intended to help teachers encourage deeper learning and student ownership in the classroom. Weimer (2013) states, "Well-designed learning experiences have four characteristics, ... motivate student involvement and participation... get students doing the authentic and legitimate work of the discipline... take students from their current knowledge skill level to a new place of competence... develop content knowledge and learning skill" (p. 77).

Weimer explores the roles of students and faculty with a consideration of where the power in classrooms lies emphasizing "our authority as teachers is so taken for granted that most of us are no longer aware of the extent to which we direct student learning" (Weimer, 2013, p. 89). Weimer (2013) suggests that this does not need to be the case and provides strategies for balancing the power in the classroom. Regardless of the countless decisions teachers make in designing and facilitating a course, ultimately the only person who can decide if a student learns is that individual student and exerting control over the situation does not appropriately motivate a student to truly learn (Weimer, 2013). Instead Weimer (2013) suggests that the power in a classroom be a shared commodity:

Power sharing creates a more positive and constructive classroom environment. There is a stronger sense of community—a greater sense that the class belongs to everybody... when they are entrusted with some decision making and feel a sense of

control, there is less disruptive behavior...Power sharing redefines the teacher-student relationship, making it less adversarial. (p. 97)

Strategies for balancing power suggested by Weimer (2013) include allowing students to create the participation policy for a course, selecting which assignments they will complete from a list of options, allowing for some content to be learned through modes that the learner selects, and helping to select readings. Weimer (2013) further examines how to support students by considering the function of content. Weimer (2013) asserts that content coverage is not necessarily conducive to deep learning. “The question we should be asking but never do is, ‘How much is enough?’...what if our introductions of students to our fields were characterized by the features of a good introduction of one person to another?” (Weimer, 2013, p. 119). The focus should be on exposing students to the availability of content and teaching them how to manage which aspects of that content they will explore in greater detail (Weimer, 2013). The amount of knowledge now available is so astronomical that students are better served with introductions to information, an understanding of how to source credible information, and encouragement to explore more of what is interesting or relevant to them (Weimer, 2013). Weimer (2013) suggests that it is critically important for teachers to help students develop a foundational knowledge base and skills to facilitate their ongoing learning, rather than to deluge students with all the available information and all the information the instructor believes is important. Suggestions for helping students to develop learning skills include:

Think Developmentally...begin a developmental trajectory from where students are...and where they next need to move...**Target Skill Development**...What skills do your students most need to do well...Those two or three skills are what they should be working on...**Routinely Engage Students in Short Skill-Development Activities**...part

of what makes short activities still worth doing is that regularly addressing learning skills issues creates expectations... **Take Advantage of Those Ready-to-Learn**

Moments...asking questions that encourage students to confront and respond to what they are doing... **Use Supplementary Materials to Support Learning Skill**

Development. (Weimer, 2013, p. 128-131)

Weimer (2013) concludes these thoughts on the function of content by asserting that this is not a suggestion for content-free courses but instead putting the focus on the student as a co-creator of the content, instead of the practice of content spread; the position posits that by focusing on the student and developing their skills as a learner they will self-select the best content and delivery modes and take on the task of managing the information for themselves. The benefit of Weimer's strategies is the placement of ownership, the opportunities to foster self-motivated learning, and the position of empowerment.

These two philosophies from vastly different perspectives and times have struck on some similar takeaways that can be useful to dissect and explore the language of first-year transitional communication pieces. Both Foucault and Weimer ask us to consider the function of our delivery of information and explore if it is best suited to our audience and the outcomes we aspire to. Furthermore, both Foucault and Weimer ask us to examine how power is being utilized and why; they both challenge us to reconsider the distribution of power. And ultimately both Foucault and Weimer advocate for a better design, one that is a two-way dialogue or interaction across a living or lived communication experience with the communicators involved.

Both perspectives, alongside Astin's (1991) model, were utilized in this study, blended together, to consider the execution of an intentional, connected, appropriate, thoughtful, successful, and empowering communication experience for first-year students who have been

accepted to an institution and are in the process of transitioning into their matriculation. Recognition was paid to the intended outcome, empowerment, and the role of the student and their input, as well as the institution and the environment they were defining. The aforementioned philosophies were combined by the researcher into one tool that was useful in the evaluation of communication documents.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Introduction

The importance of the transition to college, and the role communication from the institution plays in supporting the transition experience, requires a review of the language employed in communications with first-year students. The absence of existing literature or tools to evaluate word choice and language meaning underscores the need for this study, which focuses on one institution's communication with incoming first-year students. The outcomes of the study will help develop a foundational understanding of the role of language and communication with new students. This study will examine what was being said to first-year students and what messages of empowerment the language conveyed at a large, public, four-year University in the Southeast during the fall 2016.

The study and its qualitative approach were guided by four research questions:

1. What are the communication pieces, what do they say, who is responsible for creating and delivering the message, and on what time line?
2. Is the institution creating a relationship via the communications they send to first-year students?
3. Is the institution using language to include first-year students in discourse?
4. Is the institution communicating with first-year students in ways that empower them to be successful?

Qualitative Research Approach

A qualitative approach to research is ideal for understanding meaning and improving practice (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). An inductive qualitative method was selected for this

study to help build knowledge of the function of language in first-year communications because it defines a pathway to present emergent findings and to build a framework for understanding an aspect of higher education communication that has not previously been explored (Creswell, 2014; Foss, 2004). The qualitative approach allows for the researcher to operate as the instrument, reviewing several pieces of data, and utilizing inductive data analysis to build a perspective from the bottom up (Creswell, 2014; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). In particular, the ability to analyze documents as a case study to reveal intentions of meaning and aspects of culture is practiced and valuable because of “the influence of discourse theory developed in literature” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 57) and the opportunity to understand operational philosophies and culture from this research.

The field of Communication utilizes rhetorical criticisms as a mechanism for analyzing symbol usage in artifacts which are coded and interpreted for an exploration of emergent themes (Foss, 2004). For the purposes of this study artifacts are in the form of official documents provided from various departments who communicate with incoming first-year students at Kennesaw State University. Official documents include written communications, videos, brochures or pamphlets, and invitations (Creswell, 2014; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

In this study, official university produced emails, videos, a call script, and web resources provided to all first-year students accepted for the fall 2016 semester were analyzed from the time of a student’s admission decision to the time of matriculation. These artifacts were curated and administered from many departments. The isolation of the specific population during a designated timeline and at one institution qualifies this research as a case study (Merriam & Simpson, 2000).

Validity in the findings is presented through rich descriptive analysis that includes illumination of findings that are discrepant with common themes, understanding of the researcher's role, and the review of the data with the thesis committee members (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Simpson, 2000).

Study Design

During the fall of 2016, all the offices and departments with any potential direct communication with incoming students at Kennesaw State University were contacted via email, and asked to share copies of any qualifying documents, including videos, directions to websites, emails, brochures or pamphlets, and phone call scripts used in communication with all admitted first-year students. Qualifying documents were defined as: all communication material from the department that were provided to all incoming first-year students for the fall 2016 semester within the time frame from their acceptance through the first day of school, August 15, 2016. A total of six departments responded with data including email messages, videos, documents confirming the completion of action steps, a phone call script, websites, and a handbook. The researcher isolated the data that constituted the communications that all first-year students would receive regardless of academic major, on-or-off campus living choice, financial situation, and other factors that might not apply to all students.

Once collected and sorted to ensure the documents were within the scope of the study, the researcher evaluated each communication piece with the rubric created for this study (Appendix C). Additionally, documents were reviewed for thematic phenomenon, such as frequency of some words or divergence of word, phrase, or messaging choices across the documents. Specific notes about the performance were recorded for each artifact. Rankings recorded on a chart helped to identify common themes and divergent outliers. Each document, regardless of medium,

was reviewed specifically and only for the language therein. Documents that contained additional elements, like audio or visual, were reduced simply to the words.

Site: Kennesaw State University. Kennesaw State University is a large, public, comprehensive university in the southeastern United States (Kennesaw State University, n.d.). According to enrollment data for fall 2016, 35,000 undergraduate and graduate students were enrolled at the university which offers more than 100 degree programs (Kennesaw State University, n.d.). In the fall 2016, 5,182 first-time, first-year students were enrolled in their first semester of classes at Kennesaw State University (University System of Georgia, Board of Regents, 2017).

The institution has been recognized for its excellence in first-year experiences by *U.S World and News Report*. Kennesaw State University is home to the first and only master's program in First-Year Studies and offers incoming first-year students with a required orientation experience, voluntary extended orientation, required first-year seminars, and a variety of themed seminars and learning communities to choose from within the department of First-Year and Transition Studies housed in University College. "First-year seminars and programs dedicated to fostering success in the first-year have a rich history at KSU, beginning with the development of the first-year seminar in 1983...KSU has demonstrated an ardent focus on student success while proving through innovative practices and forethought, to be a leader in the discipline of First-Year Studies" (Kennesaw State University MSFYS, 2017, p. 6). Additional voluntary opportunities for first-year students in fall 2016 included a summer bridge program, a structured learning community for students excelling academically in high school, on-campus housing, and peer mentorship.

Kennesaw State University's admissions cycle for the fall 2016 term was a rolling cycle, meaning that the application for admission was open early in fall 2015 and remained open through to May 2016. According to Sam Mahra, the Director of Student Recruitment, the term reviewed in this study had no application deadline and no enrollment deposit was required (personal communication, January 13, 2017). Students admitted after an event like orientation had concluded were offered alternate opportunities for advising and registration. For the purposes of this study, communications are analyzed and placed on a timeline that simulates the ideal trajectory of a student from application to attendance and assumes an ideal application date and acceptance date to have received all communications intended for an incoming first-year student in the fall of 2016.

The role of the researcher. In qualitative research, the researcher acts as an instrument, evaluating data through a lens that is inseparable from their existing beliefs, experiences, and assumptions (Creswell, 2014; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). These aspects of inductive analysis that require interpretation through the researcher's unique lens require the acknowledgement of researcher bias (Creswell, 2014; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

The researcher acknowledged that her positionality as a student in the Master of Science in First-Year Studies program at Kennesaw State University, and a full time staff member in the division of Student Affairs, working in the department of Parent and Family Programs, influences perspective and interpretation of the data. The researcher works closely with the departments who craft and disseminate communication to incoming first-year students and therefore possesses understanding of the transition process from acceptance to attendance. The researcher is not involved in the creation or distribution of communication to incoming first-year

students but professional proximity to the work influenced the researcher's belief that language in these documents warrants examination.

The researcher also acknowledges that this positionality aided in data collection because relationships existed which assisted in the solicitation and collection of data. These experiences provide the researcher with motivation for the research but also allow the researcher a specialized position in relationship to the study. While not a practitioner specifically doing the work being analyzed, the researcher has enough knowledge of the process and comfort with the intent to thoroughly review the communication experience. This positionality affords the research an appropriate proximity to clearly understand the documents but be detached enough to conduct a thorough critical review. The researcher minimized bias by collapsing all documents into one contiguous communication experience to look at the overall landscape of language as well as rich descriptions and validation from the thesis committee. An additional measure used to minimize bias is the usage of the rubric as a common means for evaluating each document.

Rubric for Evaluating Language

A rubric was developed to analyze the primary documents collected in this study. This rubric acts as both a tool to assist in analyzing the data and also a theoretical lens to lend a specific perspective to the research (Foss, 2004; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The rubric was designed specifically for this study by the researcher as no existing research or model was present in the literature to identify the empowerment and meaning making dynamics present in communications with first-year students during their transition, specifically about language. Utilizing theoretical and philosophical tenants of the works of Foucault (1972) and Weimer (2013), the researcher crafted a rubric to measure language usage (Appendix C). Each area for

evaluation relates back to Foucault's work on language and power, Weimer's strategies for empowerment in the classroom and learning, or both (Weimer, 2013; Foucault, 1972).

Validation of the rubric was a priority of the study. The rubric addresses ten categories of language on a five point scale including excellent, satisfactory, neutral, unsatisfactory, and poor. Word choice is examined through Foucault's (1972) assertions that language be appropriate for the audience, asking for consideration that the language in documents is student centered. The second category explores communication intent through a clear descriptive efficacy in the way language is structured (Foucault, 1972). The next two categories involve language choice and whether it is accessible, developed, and united as well as evaluating whether or not the language is restrictive (Weimer, 2013; Foucault, 1972). Next, language balance asks whether the message conveys not only what language is and does, but also what it says (Foucault, 1972). Timing and invitations for continued discourse are collapsed into a category that analyzes how well the communication addresses the relative timing within the communication experience as well as how invitational the language is to continue discourse (Weimer, 2013; Foucault, 1972). The communication experience itself is also a category available to weigh how well the intentional design of a communication experience is expressed (Weimer, 2013). The next category, explores how well the document offers an opportunity for ownership over the experience through choices and the provision of supplemental resources, preferably those which employ technology (Weimer, 2013). This is followed by an inspection of participation language, which reviews whether recipients are presented with action items related to their decision making process and how well the language articulates the instructions and the trust the institution has in the students' abilities to make sound decisions (Weimer, 2013). The final category analyzes how well the

language delivers a message of encouragement and desire to have further engagement with the student.

This rubric requires synthesis of the communication artifact down to only the language, allowing for no consideration of audio or visual elements. The simplification down to just the words and how they are formed into statements affords the researcher an intensive lens to identify language performance. The most practical use of the rubric was to analyze each document and code the performance onto a chart as well as onto the rubric to see the whole picture of the document's performance and how that performance either aligns or is disparate from the other documents in the communication experience.

Data Collection Method

Data was requested and received from the departments at Kennesaw State University responsible for communicating with all first-year students entering in fall 2016, and communicating with those students along a timeline defined by the researcher beginning with acceptance to the institution and continuing through the first day of classes, August 15, 2016. Acceptance decisions during this enrollment cycle occurred as early as October 2015 and as late as May 2016. From the data received the researcher identified 18 documents (Table 1) to review for this study and chose to exclude some documents due either to relevancy (e.g. Documents received and excluded from analysis included: an invitation to a baseball game for an admitted students game day provided by Admissions), scope (e.g. Residence Life website and handbook provided by Residence Life; some of the Orientation embedded videos provided by Orientation), or manageability (e.g. a letter from the Dean of the College for Science and Mathematics to incoming students provided by Admissions).

Table 1

Inventory of data received and analyzed¹

<u>Department</u>	<u>Document</u>	<u>Mode</u>
Admissions	Letter of acceptance	Mailed letter
Admissions	Congratulations on acceptance	Email
Admissions	Invitation to visit campus	Email
Admissions	Peer acceptance call	Phone call
Financial Aid (sent by Admissions)	Financial Aid options	Email
Housing (sent by Admissions)	Housing leasing open	Email
Orientation (sent by Admissions)	Register for Orientation	Email
Orientation	Orientation sign up confirmation	Auto-populated text within student account
Orientation (sent by Admissions)	Orientation checklist	Email
Orientation	What does it mean to be an Owl	Video embedded in student account
Orientation	Get help-student support and services	Video embedded in student account
Orientation	Campus culture	Video embedded in student account
Academic Advising (within Orientation video modules)	Academic advising and registration	Video embedded in student account
Orientation	What to expect in the classroom	Video embedded in student account
Orientation	Core success (general education overview)	Video embedded in student account
Orientation	Beyond Ignition orientation	Video embedded in student account
First-Year and Transition Studies	Essential things to know and do before attending Ignition orientation	Email
Bursar	Early Payment Deadline	Email

The documents analyzed in this study came from six departments: Admissions, Financial Aid, Housing/Residence Life, Orientation, First-Year and Transition Studies, and the Bursar's Office and were communication pieces that were provided to all incoming first-year students. The 18 documents were specifically selected for their relevance to the transition experience and because they were provided to all students, not those belonging to any special populations or with additional levels of involvement at the institution beyond intention to enroll for the first-year in the fall semester. The researcher's decision was based in the belief that in establishing a

¹Exclusions were deemed appropriate by the researcher either because they were not shared with/applicable to all first-year students in the identified Admissions cycle or because the volume of data required the researcher to narrow focus on the most critical documents related to the transition and to first-year studies literature related to student success

foundational understanding of language's role in these kind of communications it is required to begin with those documents that reach all of the population to best assess usability of the rubric which, if found to be credible, could be applied to review additional documents in the future.

Additional documents collected by the researcher included the residence life website and Handbook, but there was no evidence that these documents were distributed to all incoming first-year students. Admissions provided an invitation to all admitted students to visit campus for a baseball game which was excluded for relevancy and manageability, and a letter from the Dean of the College of Science and Mathematics managed by their office and distributed to students who have declared one of the college's majors; considering that other college's did not provide or do not have similar documents, this document was excluded.

There are 32 total pre-orientation videos in the digital content experience modules collected from Orientation, but only some populate for all first-year students. Prior to watching these videos, institutional bio-demo data, along with data from a survey students take, results in the creation of a student profile, which populates the videos that are relevant for the individual student. For example, if the student indicated that they are a military veteran then a Veteran's Services video would auto-populate for them but would not be presented to a student who identifies as never having served in the military. Some videos populate for all incoming first-year students and the researcher selected seven of them, once again for their relevancy and manageability. The researcher transcribed the seven videos made available to all first-year students and included in the study.

As established by both Foucault (1972) and Weimer (2013), timing matters in discourse. Therefore, a timeline of the communication pieces for the fall 2016 document distribution was collected by the researcher (Table 2). Due to the nature of Kennesaw State University's rolling

admission cycle analyzed in this study, communication distributions from Admissions were based on the applicant date. The acceptance communication plan was automatically triggered in the communication relationship management system when an admissions decision was made within the Banner student record system (S. Mahra, personal communication, January 13, 2017).

The admissions staff, using the communication relationship management system, was also responsible for sending some of the other department's communications. The emails to alert students to the availability of orientation sign up and housing leasing were ad hoc sends within the communication relationship management system. Admissions also managed the orientation checklist email which was sent to students two days prior to their chosen orientation session (S. Mahra, personal communication, January 13, 2017).

Upon registration for orientation, which is called Ignition at Kennesaw State University, students received an orientation registration confirmation for their chosen session of attendance. Additionally, once registered, the pre-orientation video modules became available. Both of these communications took place within their student record account. Orientation session registration opened in February 2016. There was no deadline to register for orientation, but as sessions were projected to fill to capacity students were encouraged to make a selection as early as possible (D. Coleman, personal communication, January 10, 2017).

The department of First-Year and Transition Studies sent an ad hoc email to incoming first-year students who were coded as admitted and registered for orientation to clarify topics including the first-year enrollment requirement, which mandates that first-year students enroll in either a first-year seminar or learning community, the role of academic advising, and the necessity of placement testing. The Bursar's Office sent an email to all students reminding them

of the payment deadline for the term's tuition at the end of July, a few days ahead of the tuition payment deadline.

Table 2

Communication timeline

<u>Document</u>	<u>Department responsible for delivery</u>	<u>When it was executed for the fall 2016 enrollment cycle</u>
Letter of acceptance	Admissions	Five days after admissions decision
Congratulations on acceptance	Admissions	Five days after admissions decision
Financial Aid options	Admissions	Ten days after admissions decision
Peer acceptance call	Admissions	Fourteen days after admissions decision
Invitation to visit campus	Admissions	Twenty days after admissions decision
Housing leasing open	Admissions	Ad Hoc
Register for Orientation	Admissions	Ad Hoc
Orientation sign up confirmation	Orientation	Populated upon registration for orientation
Orientation checklist	Admissions	Two days prior to orientation attendance
What does it mean to be an Owl	Orientation	Populated upon registration for orientation
Get help-student support and services	Orientation	Populated upon registration for orientation
Campus culture	Orientation	Populated upon registration for orientation
Academic advising and registration	Orientation	Populated upon registration for orientation
What to expect in the classroom	Orientation	Populated upon registration for orientation
Core success (general education overview)	Orientation	Populated upon registration for orientation
Beyond Ignition orientation	Orientation	Populated upon registration for orientation
Essential things to know and do before attending Ignition orientation	First-Year and Transition Studies	Ad Hoc
Early Payment Deadline	Bursar	July 29, 2016

Data Analysis

The data analysis was conducted in two parts. First, the researcher reviewed each document against the rubric to identify language qualifying in each category as excellent, satisfactory, neutral, unsatisfactory, or poor. The researcher read the text of each document three times before beginning to code each document's language based on word choice, phrasing, presentation of choices and action steps, and relationships to timing, discourse, and the communication experience as a whole. Once the document was coded for the rubric's categories the researcher assigned a ranking based on the document's overall performance in each category.

These rankings were recorded on a chart containing all the documents in the study to consider the scope of the contiguous communication experience from the student perspective.

In the second phase, the researcher reviewed the documents for the frequency of specific words or phrases, and in some cases combined the count for words which have the same meaning and deliver a similar message. The researcher tallied word frequency across all the documents for fifty words, word groups, or phrases. Words expressing similar meaning like success and achieve were counted together as a word group. Words containing the same root word were counted together, “prepare, prepared, preparing” for example. And some phrases such as “feel free” were included for the relevance to messaging.

While eighteen documents were collected and determined by the researcher as relevant for the scope of the study, in the analysis phase the orientation checklist email was reviewed as two separate documents. This email included a reference to placement testing information listed at the end of the orientation specific information, which was definitively denoted as supplementary but encouraged information, so the placement testing information was analyzed separately as its own document, resulting in nineteen total documents analyzed.

The data were reviewed as one contiguous communication experience. While the documents analyzed are part of internal communication plans and managed at some times in isolation by one department or another, for an incoming first-year student these communications are one continuous communication experience. Incoming students are not aware of the nuances of the many communication processes and the intentions of various departments but rather, they receive a holistic communication experience from an institution. The data analysis attempts to establish the big picture perspective of the student as related to the communication experience, which is one continuing dialogue of transition.

Establishing trustworthiness. Validity of the data and findings of this qualitative study are established in three ways, valid data, reliable methods, and transferability. Confirming this credibility of the study is critical in qualitative research to assert usability and trustworthiness of the presented findings (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). The researcher minimized concerns about data validity by providing rich and detailed descriptions of the phenomenon existing in the documents (Creswell, 2014; Foss 2004; Merriam & Simpson, 2000). The methodology reliability was protected via thorough document audits, explanations of collection methods, presentation of document functionality, document coding, detailed descriptions of the documents, and justifications about how themes were concluded throughout the analysis (Creswell, 2014; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Transferability was established in this study through the verification of, and suggested improvements for, the rubric to evaluate language (Foss, 2004).

Limitations. Four known limitations exist in this study. First, the exclusion of some documents demonstrates a limitation because the communication experience might be altered significantly with the inclusion of one or more of the excluded documents for a student. For example, the communication experience could be changed for a student defined as an adult learner who watches the video which populates only for students of a specific age range about opportunities for supporting adult learners at the institution. The messages of culture and the meaning students then attribute to these messages could change dramatically upon access to additional, population-specific documents.

Second, the documents analyzed in this research are intended to be consumed by the incoming student, therefore the researcher analyzed each document through the lens of its performance within that intent. However, students have a variety of individuals influencing them during their college transition process including parents, other family members, high school

counselors, and peers (Martinez & Cervera, 2012; Perez & McDonough, 2008). The interpretation of messaging and meaning has the potential to be misconstrued or misinterpreted when it is initially consumed by someone other than the intended party. Additionally, individual conversations a student has with a member of the institutional community, including staff, faculty, current students, alumni, or others, cannot be accounted for in this study.

Next, the study cannot assume the input variables of Astin's (1991) model; meaning the researcher cannot understand how each student's experiences, background, and perspective will influence the meaning they bring to the messages. Similarly, this study does not explore the outcomes as related to Astin's model (1991). Therefore, this research can only verify the principles of the existence or nonexistence of messages of empowerment and the accessibility of language to help individuals make meaning of the message.

Finally, researcher bias is a required consideration in the limitations (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). While steps were taken to minimize researcher bias, it is potentially existent, warrants acknowledgement, and warrants further research on this topic as is suggested in Chapter Five.

Summary

A qualitative approach was used to examine the language used in communication documents distributed to incoming first-year students at Kennesaw State University in fall 2016 from their acceptance through their matriculation. Inductive analysis through the collection and coding of documents provided to the researcher from those departments responsible for the creation and distribution of first-year transition communication documents resulted in the demonstration of a timeline identifying a communication experience for students. That communication experience was analyzed for word choice and frequency, meaning, and

empowering language against a rubric specifically designed for this study. A discussion on the establishment of validity in the study and limitations concluded the explanation of the research approach. The following chapter will present the findings of this research.

Chapter Four

Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was two-fold. The first purpose was to identify themes and trends in the language usage among communications intended for first-year students transitioning into the selected institution. This purpose was intended to both analyze the specific communication for its messages of empowerment and also introduce the topic of language during first-year transitions into the existing research in the field. Secondly, the study validated a rubric that can be used to evaluate and measure empowerment, discourse, and language in institutional communications with incoming students (Weimer, 2013; Foucault, 1972).

The data analysis involving word and message frequency leant additional insight into the study and underscores the importance of collaboration from those who communicate with incoming first-year students. In this chapter the results of the analysis will be explained providing evidence related to the four research questions and the five themes that emerged from the study. Additional findings related to the mode of communication and the validation of the rubric will also be explored.

Results

The overall rankings of the performance for Kennesaw State University's communications documents analyzed in this study were most consistently in the satisfactory tier, followed by excellent and then neutral, with only a few rankings in either the unsatisfactory or poor tier (Table 3). Of the 50 words, messages, and phrases counted, 29 are presented in the results (Table 4) for their frequency and relevance to the themes.

Table 3

Data analysis for performance against rubric

<u>Evaluation of Language</u>	<u>Excellent</u>	<u>Satisfactory</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Unsatisfactory</u>	<u>Poor</u>
Audience appropriate language	5	9	5	0	0
Communication intent is clear	8	10	1	0	0
Language choice	3	13	2	1	0
Language choice	3	12	1	2	1
Language balance	10	6	2	0	1
Timing and discourse	2	11	4	2	0
Communication experience	5	6	8	0	0
Language provides choice	9	5	4	1	0
Language invokes participation	5	11	3	0	0
Language provides motivation	3	8	8	0	0
Totals	53	91	38	6	2

Table 4

Frequency of words, messages, and phrases²

<u>Word/Phrase</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Orientation (or branded name Ignition)	60
Registration/Register/Enroll	32
Advisor/Advising	31
Assist(ance)/Advice/Help/Support	21
Read/Review/Discover/Explore/Familiarize	18
Complete/Completed/Completing	17
Campus	14
Learning Community	14
First-Year Seminar	13
Success/Succeed/Achieve	13
Academic(s)/Academically	11
Community (excluding when used as “Learning Community”)	11
Financial Aid	11
First-Year Student (or First-Year when clearly referencing academic standing as opposed to a measure of time; excluding when used as “First-Year Seminar”)	11
Option(s)/Choice(s)/Choose	11
Prepare(d)/Preparing/Ready	11
Owl Express	10
Connect/Connected/Connecting	9
Opportunity/Opportunities	9

² Additional words/phrases/messages counted did not appear frequently enough to be included in the table but may be discussed when relevant in the analysis.

Process	9
Requirement(s)/Required	9
Transition	9
Education/Educational	8
Tasks/Steps/Checklist	7
Housing/Residence Life	6
Information	6
Resources	6
KSU Email	5
Freshman	2

Kennesaw State University performed best in “language balance” by finding ways to not only tell a student what a word or term means and does but also by demonstrating the applicability of that term, within the context of the communication, to the student. The institution also performed well in “language provides choice,” because in most documents students were presented with options, or, at minimum, they were presented with links to more information that led to additional choices. On balance, “communication intent is clear,” existed in the documents and either informed students about or asked for participation with an office or process related to the student’s transition. “Audience appropriate language” was less consistent but performed in the top three tiers overall; attempts to provide too much information often led to language that was inappropriate for the audience based on their lack of context for the meaning of language detailing processes. Weimer (2013) suggests broad introductions to information rather than comprehensive explanations of material, what is referred to as content spread. The analysis in this study demonstrated a correlation to that suggestion that aligns with audience appropriate language. In the documents, when a topic was covered in elaborate detail, this content spread began to introduce advanced language into the discourse that was less student-focused and more process based.

In categories like “timing and discourse” and “language invokes participation”, satisfactory performance was related to an inability to articulate the timing of the discourse,

invitations and opportunities for future discourse, or what participation would look like. The difference in rankings between excellent and satisfactory for the category of “timing and discourse” were related to instances in which one document extended an understanding of a quantifiable time that the recipient would next receive communication, or an explanation of when the next discourse would specifically occur, versus a request that the recipient call with any additional questions. Likewise, the category of “invoking participation” was differentiated among the documents by those that specifically directed students to take an action versus those documents that indicated that more information was available and provided opportunities for further participation but did not explicitly instruct engagement with supplemental information.

“Language choice” ranked frequently in satisfactory for both of its categories due to some documents’ inappropriate language choice for the population as related to the definition of the meaning of terms, the inclusivity, or the lack of consistency in what a defined term meant. While many documents performed well by keeping the student at the center of the language, challenges in language choices among the documents were results of language formations or word choices that were not accessible for recipients without contextual meaning. Inconsistent definitions for example, like whether to call the population first-year students or freshman, raised some concerns about meaning making and defining relationships with the institution for incoming students.

“Communication experience” and “language providing motivation” were consistently neutral. The communication experience as one contiguous experience from start to finish was tenuous at best, but some documents intended to create a smaller experience within the communications cultivated within a defined functional area. Namely the Admissions documents did explain what content a student could expect next from Admissions; Orientation presented

incoming students with a pre-orientation video series that was itself an identifiable and defined communication experience, moving students from one communication piece to the next with intentionality. Overall though, most documents were isolated and did not acknowledge the nature of a communication experience or reference other communication documents students had or would receive. Format, delivery, and terminology were inconsistent across documents from different functional areas of the institution.

Generally, “motivation” to begin engaging with the transition experience was not addressed as a goal or an actionable step in the documents, but most provided links or lists of opportunities to engage further. Some of the documents that did perform well in incentivizing motivation were those that were also student focused in language and design, like the pre-orientation videos. Also, those that used compelling facts such as “Research shows” phrases to define the potential positive outcomes of a successful transition experience performed better in the category of “motivation.”

The few rankings in unsatisfactory and poor come from documents whose “intent” appears to be to present all the content related to a very specific experience in one dedicated space for the student (Weimer, 2013). This means technical language exists, choice does not, supplemental information is not extended, these documents ignore their own timing in relation to the other documents, and the language expresses a belief that the student is not entrusted with their own process (Weimer, 2013; Foucault, 1972; Burke, 1966). Fortunately, there are only a few instances of this phenomenon within the data and evidence of more effective “language choice” is present in other documents as positive samples. Exploring the data for examples of the language will assist in developing recommendations for areas of improvement.

Themes

Four themes and one emerging theme presented through this study. 1. **Language Balance** is found through articulation of the meaning of the terms as related to the student; 2. Ignoring timing and refusing further discourse builds **process over relationship**; 3. **Word choice matters** within each document and influences the interpretation of other documents; 4. Emerging theme **communication experience matters**; 5. **When choice includes participation and motivation** the opportunity exists for empowerment to thrive.

Each of the four research questions are addressed by one or more of the themes. Specifically themes one through four answer the first research question, *what are the communication pieces, what do they say, who is responsible for creating and delivering the message, and on what time line?* The second research question, *is the institution creating a relationship via the communications they send to first-year students*, is answered by themes two through five. The third research question, *is the institution using language meant to include first-year students in discourse*, is acknowledged by themes three and five. Finally, themes one, two, four, and five address the fourth research question, *is the institution communicating with first-year students in ways that empower them to be successful?*

Theme One: Language balance

“Language balance,” managing what the words themselves mean, how they function in this specific environment, and what message of empowerment they deliver, was one of the areas observed to be well executed by the institution in this study. The documents reviewed in this study performed well in the ability to present terms specific to the environment in ways that demonstrate the contextual meaning and most importantly define the intended relationship through that meaning for the student. For example, throughout the communication experience, words and phrases about student success correlate to the dictionary definition of success, but are

also contextually defined by the documents relating to how student success functions at Kennesaw State University, and the strategies and support mechanisms for support available to each student. This provides the incoming student with an understanding of what success is, what it does, and specifically, what it says about the environment of student success at the institution and the individual student's role in that success (Astin, 1991; Foucault, 1972).

Specific examples of effectiveness in this were demonstrated by the Financial Aid options email which used phrases like, "Please make sure you check your KSU Student Email [embedded link to the email login page] often, our official means of communicating with you." This sentence explains the definition of "KSU Student email" by linking to it, explicitly identifies the function as the official mode of discourse, and emphasizes the intent for the student to remain informed.

Another example of excellent language balance came from the email distributed by First-Year and Transition Studies, describing first-year seminars. Sentences like, "First-year seminars...are limited to 25 students, which provides an opportunity for meaningful interactions with your instructor and peers." This defines the phrase that is potentially new to an incoming first-year student, first-year seminar, within the environment. They highlight the function of the experience by utilizing words such as "limited," and "interactions." And the sentence conveys the intent for students to build relationships within the academic environment (Astin, 1991; Foucault, 1972).

One example of satisfactory performance came from the campus visit invitation email, which stated, "Research shows that visiting campus is one of the most important action items in the admissions process" which was followed by, "Consider this an open invitation to experience all the best kept secrets we have to offer to our Future Owls." This statement helps a student

know that a campus tour is a way to learn things they don't yet know about the institution; and it is clear what the term does, it introduces them to campus, but this statement doesn't identify for an incoming student what exactly a campus tour is. Relying on the assumption that a student knows what a campus tour is weakens the balance and therefore the empowerment (Foucault, 1972).

One example achieving a poor rank in "language balance" was the testing information embedded in the orientation email. This text explained every element of the testing process from start to finish, but did not define complex terms in relationship to the student to help them understand what the term is, does, and says. For instance, the explanation of the placement test provided was, "We have several options of math courses now that work at different rates, and we want to properly advise our students to take the math class that best matches their background and abilities." This explains the placement test's relationship to the institution, not the relationship it has with the student. Furthermore, it does not tell the student what the test is, how it will function for them as they take it or how they will use their score in the future, nor does it express a message that relates to their mathematical aspirations. This example attempts to place the relationship on the student by discussing background and abilities, but that statement is directly linked to the institution's success in deciding how to advise the student, which fails to truly speak to the student's relationship with the mathematical courses. What this statement says is that the test's purpose is to help the institution place a student in a math class.

This theme illustrates the need to go beyond a specific definition of a term but instead to think about explaining terms, especially those new to individuals who are attending college for the first time, in three ways. First, a definition of the term within the context of a student's relationship with the institution, followed by an understanding of the way that term will perform

for the student. To convey what the term says is to relate the term back to the student and what impact it will have on them as they make choices and live the experiences of the transition; in other words, it helps them understand their role in relationship to the term. For instance, for “language balance” to occur within directions for students to sign up for orientation sessions, the language would need to explain that orientation programming is designed to familiarize the student with campus, and will do that specifically by providing opportunities to see campus, interact with peers and advisors, and register for classes. Finally, the language would need to help the student understand that the steps they take at orientation are methods which have proven successful in preparing students for the beginning of the term by providing space for face to face interactions and equipping students with a course schedule.

One of the best examples from the data is the email from First-Year and Transition Studies shared in this section because it tells a student that there are unique academic experiences they must participate in; participation will be an activity believed by the institution to be beneficial to academic success. The impact of that academic experience is an emphasis for students to form connections with peers and instructors within the academic setting. Chapter Five will present ways the institution can improve statements with skewed balance and ways to address any statements that lack balance entirely.

Theme Two: Process Over Relationship

The theme, ignoring timing and refusal of discourse builds process rather than relationship, is most closely related to the rubric categories of “timing and discourse,” “communication intent is clear,” and “communication experience.” Building a relationship requires acknowledgement of the other participants in the dialogue. By referencing the recipient’s place in the process, what they have already done and can expect next, providing

genuine invitations to discuss topics further, illustrating that the intent of the communication piece is on student needs, and linking the communication pieces together in an intentional communication experience, recipients can gain empowerment by identification as a partner in the discourse. When these strategies are ignored or subdued, the message of the language is that incoming students are recipients of massive amounts of information related to institutional processes, a system individuals are cycled through rather than an ongoing dialogue with individuals who matter in a relationship between an institution and a first-year student.

The majority of the documents failed to demonstrate any acknowledgement of the timing relative to the greater “communication experience” and transition process. In most cases, the documents did not explicitly recognize any prior or forthcoming documents, from their own communication plan or from other departments and offices on campus, but instead some made reference to upcoming events or decisions that are managed by their own office. A timeline is therefore evident but not explicitly stated. Some of the emails treated the document as a standalone information dump to the student, which was not related connectively with the overall communication experience and often times delivered a message that discouraged further discussion.

One of the documents that did acknowledge the ongoing nature of a months-long transition to college was the Admissions acceptance phone call script which encouraged the caller to preview what would happen next by stating, “Please keep an eye out for any emails or mailings you may receive outlining the next steps you’d need to take to become a student” followed by an inventory of examples of the topics of the forthcoming communication documents. By highlighting the expected mode of communication and the acknowledgement that the communication is not over, this document allows the student to understand that there is a

trajectory of communication that will occur, therefore, it performs better than most of the documents analyzed.

By not acknowledging the timing of a document within the timeline of the transition to college or within the institutional communication experience, the language inherently fails to consider the student's relationship to the document (Weimer, 2013; Foucault, 1972). The documents that ignored what other tasks students may be completing for other departments, what they should expect next, and how each document of communication is connected to the ones that had preceded it as well as those that would follow, cannot succeed in this category. Messages conveyed in isolated communication pieces to incoming students are of a transactional nature, to specifically complete a specific checklist item or to comply with a single department's requirements. The documents as one whole communication experience represent an inundation of information to incoming students of things to do and content to consume which may be confusing to students because there is no connectivity; content is not presented as it relates to what they already know and what they will learn in the future increasing the potential for frustration.

The communication pieces analyzed in this study performed better in the second portion of the "timing and discourse" category, the invitation for further discourse with an interest in taking advantage of the opportunity for interaction. The previously highlighted call script is a useful example because the mode itself lends to two-way communication assuming the student answers the phone. Other examples of the invitation for further discourse existed within the documents. For instance, in the "Academic Advising and Registration" pre-orientation video the speaker stated, "When in doubt, schedule an appointment with your advisor, they're here to help you navigate." One email document asked "Please do not reply to this message as it is

unmonitored,” but offered a phone number for further questions. Two of the documents did not acknowledge any need for continued communication. Most of the documents however did end with a sentiment similar to, “please call us with any questions” and provided a phone number or referenced a frequently asked questions web page. The Housing Leasing email also provided directions to a live chat feature on their website. The feature that the invitations lacked across the documents was an expression of enthusiasm for an opportunity to have additional interactions. In general the documents could all perform better by being clear that the end of the document is not the end of the dialogue.

It is important to note that this category proved to be difficult to assign ranks to documents because some documents did perform better in the invitation for further discourse than they did in acknowledging the timing. While in both Foucault (1972) and Weimer’s (2013) frameworks these two notions of timing related to the continued discourse matter together, they are challenging to weigh as one category when analyzing an entire document intended for incoming first-year students. Some documents conveyed what appeared to be a genuine interest in future communication while ignoring timing. An interest in communicating further existed in the campus visit invitation email through an opportunity to visit campus on a guided tour and meet with an Admissions Counselor, but there was not an explicit acknowledgement that these in-person events may not occur immediately after the receipt date of the email and it was not addressed at what time a student should consider this opportunity; in such cases it would be helpful to direct students to avenues of reciprocating the discourse in the meantime and what is considered the best available time frame for the event. This example demonstrates the challenge of the rubric design by combining “timing and discourse” because the language in this email was clearly invitational achieving a ranking of excellent, but the absence of an acknowledgement of

timing was neutral, making it challenging to assign a ranking. This area of concern will be addressed in Chapter Five related to recommendations for the rubric.

“Communication intent is clear” was consistently high performing, but the intent found was often one of content spread and information dump, as opposed to continuing a dialogue or motivating students. Particularly in the email documents, there was a large amount of content delivered either in the email or through the provision of many links. Clear intent is important but the category raises the question of whether it is enough to have intent be clear or if that intent should be ranked as it relates to intent that is student focused. The intent found throughout many of the documents was meant to explain the many details in the process of enrollment. There are however, examples where the descriptive efficacy was on the student. In the “Beyond Ignition” pre-orientation video the speaker, in asking the student to complete some checklist items and consume more content, said, “We know this can be a challenge, you have a lot going on, but doing so will ensure that you’re prepared for a smooth transition to KSU. We are so excited you’ve chosen KSU as the place to invest your time, your education, and your future.” In this example, a successful transition and a purposeful investment for the student, is the intent, not the institutional process.

“Communication experience” revealed a complete disconnect between the documents. Any rankings of excellent on the rubric came from departments who have built an exclusive, isolated communication experience within their functional department area. For example, the Financial Aid email did this, as it shared multiple resources with students, including videos, and categorized topics, referencing the various opportunities for more information related to those topics.

The pre-orientation videos are part of their own communication experience and referenced the rest of the experience by populating additional videos that were relevant to the one playing for further information about the topic. Another strategy of this communication experience was to link to the information referenced in the video, below the video player. In some of the videos speakers even delivered messages in the text that asked the student to click to the information in the link below the video player, and to let the student know that more information would be available in another video or when they attended their orientation session. The result is a tightly connected experience that involves the student by relating the document to the rest of the documents, and also to the opportunities for further communication.

The concern however, is that there was no contiguous communication experience from start to finish, only isolated experiences with single departments. Admissions and Orientation both made reference to the other departments a student might need to communicate with during their transition, but the firm connection to when or how the student would have that communication and what that communication would look like was not explicit for the recipient. Both departments provided good context and links to more information, but where the overall experience failed was in helping the student understand the big picture. First-year students are unlikely to recognize that each department is responsible for a specific part of their process; they are more likely to see the experience as one long, disjointed interaction with the institution due to the lack of connectivity between the various content and checklist items they are required to understand and complete.

The theme then emerges from this data that instead of building an ongoing relationship with the incoming first-year student through dialogue consisting of multiple, connected, and intentionally timed communication pieces, they receive communication pieces about isolated

transactional processes. That process as communicated by the language, in most of the documents, appears to be related to an institutional department delivering content and requesting a student to act on that content without consideration of their actions and interactions with any other department.

Determining the causality for this disconnected communication experience was not within the scope of this study, nor was it evident in the data, but the appearance is that one communicator is not aware of what the other communicators alongside them in the experience are saying to students. This observation will be addressed in Chapter Five in considering the implications and recommendations.

The takeaway of this theme indicates that without acknowledging timing, inviting discourse, awareness of intent, and consideration of the other communication pieces received by students, the communication defines the relationship between student and institution as a system of one-off transactions, which appears to be a missed opportunity to begin to define the relationship intended relationship with incoming first-year students (Weimer, 2013; Foucault, 1972).

Theme Three: Word Choice Matters

Word choice is significant both within the document as a standalone communication piece, but also overall within the communication experience. Not only does word choice impact and influence the message of a document, the differences or similarities in word choice can impact how disjointed or connected the “communication experience” appears (Foucault, 1972). The two phenomena of this theme are both explored in this section.

Word choice matters: In the document. The documents reviewed in this study mostly performed satisfactorily related to word choice because some words were utilized without

defining terms that have specific meaning within the context of higher education or a specific institution, while others were well clarified. Often words or phrases that have a specific meaning within the institution of higher education were present, but were not defined within the context of the environment specifically. Words like orientation, community, connect, transition, and advise, have specific meanings that, while related to and derived from their dictionary definition, are better understood and more robust within the context of an institution of higher education; this is a context that an incoming first-year student may not have as a reference to make the meaning the document intends for them (Ogden & Richards, 1989; Foucault, 1972; Burke, 1966).

Additionally, words that do specifically correlate to their dictionary definition, like success, learning, and education, still need to be contextualized as they relate to this specific campus environment to help incoming students learn their roles and expectations within this new environment (Strange & Banning, 2011; Astin, 1991; Ogden & Richards, 1989; Foucault, 1972; Burke, 1966). The First-Year and Transition Studies email presented in theme one performed well in the exploration of the word choice within individual documents because it explicitly defined what phrases like first-year seminars and learning communities mean. Without these explanations, the words are not as accessible as they could be.

Additionally, some words and phrases throughout the documents are not as developed as they could be, often because disparate pieces of information have been combined into one statement (Foucault, 1972). An example of the lack of development existed in the letter of acceptance. In one two-sentence paragraph students were encouraged to engage academically with faculty, then to explore global learning, and concluded by providing directions for students with disability assistance needs. The language of these three topics is divided, connected only by an initial statement “As you become a part of KSU’s academic community.” The result is that

none of the topics in this are developed enough to deliver their contextual meaning to the student. Additionally, the three topics, which may be connected from the perspective of someone who works in the institutional environment, are disconnected for someone new to the environment. The disconnection means the message is not accessible and therefore not inclusive, which delivers an implicit message of hierarchy and power in terms of understanding the environment (Astin, 1991; Foucault, 1972).

The documents are mostly satisfactory when considering whether the word choices are restricted. Most of the language was approachable and inclusive of the recipient, but in some documents this performance could be stronger. For instance, the pre-orientation video “Core Success” began with, “General Education at Kennesaw State is not a collection of unrelated courses but instead it’s an integrated program of study emphasizing knowledge, understanding, and proficiency in the core areas of study.” While these word choices are united and developed, they are fairly advanced concepts reflecting instructional design of higher education coursework. For someone who has yet to enroll in classes it might be difficult to understand what an “integrated program of study” or what “proficiency in the core areas of study” means; the language represents an intent to communicate with positivity, but the use of restricted language without explaining the language, results in the potential alienation of the recipient (Foucault, 1972).

It should be acknowledged that the two categories of “language choice” were often difficult to rank as two separate categories. The example above demonstrates how closely linked the concepts of developed, united, and accessible language, which represent category one, and restricted language, which represents category two, are in relationship to the overall word choice and statement formation within a document. This limitation of the rubric will be discussed in

Chapter Five within the recommendations for the rubric. These analyses impact the theme that word choice matters by demonstrating that positive intentions of providing information, synthesizing information, and even framing information in useful ways, might be overridden if the words used are either not defined in relationship to the context or the recipient does not have the preexisting lexicon for the words and phrases to connect in relatable ways.

Word choice matters: As a part of the communication experience. The second observation of this theme emerged as a result of the frequency analysis conducted on words, phrases and messages. This section of the analysis emphasized the disconnected communication experience, exposing a disagreement on appropriate word choices, definition and usage of some terms, and intent. The first example of these disconnections and disagreements appeared within the definition of the population: first-year students. When identifying the classification of students within the documents, they were referred to as freshman two times and they were referred to as first-year or first-year students eleven times. From the perspective of a student who sees one connected communication experience, there is no clear reason for the change in nomenclature as they move through the transition. Furthermore, it serves as a point of confusion for the individual in both how the institution defines their population and also how they should begin to identify.

In addition to a disagreement on how to define the population, there is a disagreement across the communication experience about what some words or phrases mean. One of the most glaring examples is that of words relating to *register*. *Registration*, *register*, *registering* or *enroll* were present thirty two times throughout all of the documents, although this was not consistently related to enrollment in courses. Most often these terms were used to refer to class registration but in some cases they were used to describe registering for an event, opportunity, or service. For

instance, Admissions invited students to register for a campus tour, Orientation reminded students to register for Ignition, and in the pre-orientation videos students were encouraged to register for activities and events related to student life. The concern this raises is based in the discourse. With registration appearing more than thirty times in the documents and mostly relating to registering for classes, if a student or staff member were to use the word registration to hold a dialogue clarifying next steps for the student, the repetition of the word defined in different ways based on contexts that are new experiences for the student could result in significant confusion. The lack of clarity leading to confusion delivers an implicit message to the student that they are low on the hierarchy and it is not a priority for them to understand how words function in the environment. These definitional observations in particular will be addressed in the recommendations section of Chapter Five.

Next, an acknowledgement of the way some programs or services were emphasized or de-emphasized is necessary. Orientation, or its branded name Ignition, appeared sixty times throughout the communication experience. A student's advisor or the activity of advising was mentioned thirty one times. Learning communities appeared fourteen times while first-year seminars appeared thirteen times. Owl Express, the name of Kennesaw State University's student registration and records system, was referenced ten times while a student's KSU email was referenced five times. Financial Aid appeared eleven times and Housing and/or Residence Life appeared six times.

Considering the influence repetition has over making meaning through frequent emphasis or de-emphasis, this communication experience is sending some messages that matter (Aristotle, 1954). The takeaway is that orientation, class registration, and advising opportunities with an academic advisor are highly important. The first-year course enrollment requirement of a

learning community or first-year seminar, as well as the Owl Express student registration and records system and Financial Aid are portrayed as relatively important. Meanwhile, a student's email and on-campus living appear to have less importance. The concern the analysis raises is that there is no evidence to demonstrate that all communicators know what the other communicators are saying. Perhaps the emphasis and de-emphasis is intentional, but if it is not intentional then it is important to note the unintentional messages the communication experience conveyed.

Words that invoke action or provide choice were common. The act of completion, whether directing students to complete something now or considering their completion of things in the future, was evident throughout the documents appearing 17 times. *Reviewing tasks, taking steps, or looking at checklists*, all things that should be completed, appeared 7 times in the communications that were analyzed. The suggestion that a student learn more by *reading, reviewing, discovering, exploring, or familiarizing* themselves with additional information was encouraged 18 times and preparing or getting ready was emphasized 11 times. A *process*, although not always the same process, was referenced 9 times and students were explicitly given *options* or *choices* 11 times. This resulted in a communication experience that had plenty of student activity built into the many moments across the communication experience. Once again, it is not evident that one communicator is aware of the other tasks assigned to students through other documents.

Words meant to imply *help, assistance, advice* or *support* occurred 21 times, conveying an environment ready to assist students. And the words *success* or *succeed* and *achieve* were present 13 times demonstrating a focus on goal attainment. These words and phrases were often

utilized in relationship to an individual or a structure of support, “your advisor is here to help,” which conveyed messages about a culture of support toward student success.

Other words or phrases communicating the environmental culture included *community*, which was present 11 times, mostly in a pre-orientation video about the campus culture. *Connection* was highlighted 9 times and *campus* 14 times indicating that this is an institution that values face to face interactions and relationships. *Opportunity* and *transition* both were present 9 times but neither was clearly defined within the context of a university environment. *Requirement* or *required* appeared 9 times as well, demonstrating some mandatory activities for students. And *resource(s)* and *information* only appeared 6 times each, in juxtaposition with the assertion that there are many avenues of support.

The frequent occurrence of these words reflecting support and success throughout the communication experience not only communicated culture, but based on the otherwise disjointed messaging of the communication experience, these appear to truly be values of Kennesaw State University’s culture. The analysis here is that if each department is communicating this message of support and success, without knowing what other departments are communicating to students, it must be a veritable aspect of the institutional climate (Strange & Banning, 2013; Astin, 1991). The takeaway being that those responsible for crafting communication pieces are attuned to and interested in communicating campus culture.

This theme illustrates how critical it is for each content creator within various departments to have a lexicon that allows them to select appropriate words and adequately form statements (Foucault, 1972). Furthermore, it is not only a benefit for each departments’ communicators to select empowering words but also for each isolated communicator to agree to a larger institutional lexicon, expertly understand the overall institutional environment, and

consider how, when, and why other communicators might be disseminating similar or disparate information (Strange & Banning, 2013; Weimer, 2013; Astin, 1991; Ogden & Richards, 1989; Foucault, 1972).

Emerging Theme Four: Communication Experience Matters

As evidenced by the analysis within previous themes, a connected, contiguous communication experience did not exist in the data. This study did not examine the input or outcomes and therefore cannot truly assert what meaning was made from the communication pieces, nor can it assert the relationship that was developed, leading to an emerging theme. The emerging fourth theme was the observation that a defined communication experience may in fact matter in building a relationship with students and also delivering a message of empowerment (Weimer, 2013). The exposure of the phenomenon was a result of the analysis conducted on the pre-orientation video experience. Looking at this isolated communication experience provides a framework for understanding what could be achieved with an intentionally designed communication experience that extends beyond departmental or divisional boundaries of the institution.

The pre-orientation videos were auto-populated for students based on their bio-demo data as well as answers provided by the student from a short survey (personal communication, D. Coleman, January 10, 2017). Out of thirty two videos, seven were included in the analysis for this study but reference to other videos within those that were analyzed was observed; the observation is that these references help the recipient understand the structure of the communication experience. The researcher was therefore able to understand the intention of the design of the pre-orientation “communication experience.” In addition to accomplishing excellence in intentionally crafting an evident and explicit communication experience, as related

to this category on the rubric, the design of the pre-orientation video experience leant itself to perform well in the other categories overall.

The pre-orientation videos, which were either scripted and narrated, cultivated through unscripted statements from students, faculty, and staff, or a combination of both, taken in isolation as a defined communication experience, included language in each video analyzed in this study that reinforced the benefit in completing their video watching experience prior to attending orientation but also reminded students that the videos would be available after orientation for continued reference during their transition. This is a crystalized acknowledgment of “timing of the discourse” (Weimer, 2013; Foucault, 1972). Speakers often referenced additional videos that could be watched for more information, links provided below the video screen to access information or department websites, and actions students could take to be set up for success. “Choices” were abundant; the videos highlighted high level information on each topic, and then provided supplementary information accessible through various technological modes.

“Participation” and “motivation” were also consistently well represented. “Choices” presented were regularly articulated as action items in which students were encouraged to make personal decisions about, and provided with explanations regarding the benefits of, engagement with the choices available. The descriptive efficacy of the videos was clearly evident, and was sharply focused on demonstrating institutional culture using language that was inclusive of incoming students. Furthermore, the language demonstrated that the recipient, an incoming student, possesses the qualities and abilities that can be successful in the environment (Weimer, 2013; Foucault, 1972).

The specific word choice and formation of statements is mostly well crafted as well. “Audience appropriate language” is evident in all seven of the videos analyzed as they were directed at the student, and remained student center consistently throughout. While some word choices and language construction were found to be slightly inaccessible and restricted, they were all developed and united in ways that qualify as either satisfactory or excellent in terms of “language choice.” “Language balance” was similarly measured within the videos to be either satisfactory or excellent, with suggested areas for improvement involving stronger articulation toward either what the language is or does, but the videos performed well in terms of what it says: you, the student, matter and you can be successful in this environment.

An example from the videos that showcases the general language choices and intent, connection to timing, discourse, communication experience, and ability to engage the recipient in active decision making from choices supplemented by research and assisting in their transition, was the “Campus Culture” pre-orientation video. This document began by sharing current students, staff, and faculty perspectives on college life at Kennesaw State University. Assertions included “KSU culture is busy, there is stuff going on all the time,” “Every day of the week there’s an event going on,” “It’s definitely a unique experience,” and, “It’s just really interesting to see all the different communities on campus come together”. The following statement, from the video’s narrator, reinforced the previous assertions and elevated the common theme of connection, stating, “Research shows that you’re more likely to have a fun, successful, and enjoyable college experience when you link arms with a group of like-minded individuals and tackle college life together...we believe strongly in a connected and engaged student culture”. The narrator highlighted a few of the ways to get involved in student organizations, groups, or clubs mentioning Greek Life, student government, outdoor adventures, and club sports before the

current students, staff, and faculty shared more perspectives on the culture. “There are so many different organizations to get involved in,” “No matter what personality you have or where you come from, it’s something for everyone,” and, “Put yourself out there,” re-affirm the sentiment to get involved. Then, the narrator concluded the video by asking, “So how can you get started today?” and then provided four optional action steps the student could take, referencing websites which were also linked below the video player, to begin to find their future communities and connections. The video concluded with, “We hope you take some time to explore all the activities, student groups, and organizations below; all with the hope of having a more connected and engaged college experience at KSU.”

The effectiveness and seamlessness of the communication experience within the pre-orientation video experience demonstrated a clear message. There were no discrepancies of terms within the seven videos analyzed. The way supplemental information was provided and referenced created reliability for the recipient’s expectations for engagement and participation. The invitations to participate were immediately actionable and explicitly related to future positive experiences. Recipients were told exactly when they would have the opportunity to ask questions, share input, and engage in discourse with the institution or a specific representative (Weimer, 2013; Foucault, 1972).

This analysis is in juxtaposition with the non-existent communication experience found across all the documents. Many of the concerns analyzed in themes two and three might be averted if the evidence and articulation of a well-designed communication experience existed. And, the lessons from the pre-orientation video communication experience demonstrate that within the communication experience, the other rubric categories seem to fall more easily into place.

This emerging theme underscores the potential value of a communication experience. The design of an intentionally seamless experience imposes acknowledgement of timing, choice, and participation and also executes consistency of definitions, student-centered language, intent, and language choice. Additionally, there is connection from one document to another that is evident among the videos, presenting the notion that the collaborative process of building a communication experience may influence the designer in selecting to the best language choices. It can be recognized through this analysis that it may be easier to perform well in the other categories of the rubric under the conditions of an intentional communication experience than when working to communicate in isolation. This analysis also exposes a potential phenomenon that alongside communication experience, mode may matter.

Theme Five: Choice Includes Participation and Motivation

Kennesaw State University's communication documents performed well in the provision of choices. Most documents referenced additional sources which were provided within the document itself for access to more information. Many documents presented choices to the first-year student recipient about a variety of topics: which financial aid options they would apply for, whether or not they would like to live on campus, which orientation they should sign up for, which learning community or first-year seminar was right for them, which of the institution's campuses to tour, and most often, which of the supplemental information provided would they choose to explore. On balance, the documents were brief highlight reels of the information with bullet points, links, and references to supplemental information, sometimes embedded within the document but most often utilizing technology, to connect to additional sources for further understanding. More often than not, that technology was represented through a link to a website. In general, the content coverage of the documents was broad (Weimer, 2013).

The documents failed however, to extend the messages about decision making to the critical point of empowerment. The categories “language invokes participation” and “language provides motivation” are critical because they not only explicitly tell the student to make a decision, they are messages that convey trust in the student’s ability to make the right decisions. It is also important to infuse some motivation into the message that inspires the student to engage with the content and choices; they need to understand the benefits of further engagement because the environment is new to them. In tandem, these three strategies unite to empower ownership over the transition experiences and the choices that a student must make during the process of transition. The presentation of choices without these may work for students who understand that initiative is required of them and why they should feel interested in expanding their knowledge of the collegiate environment and who inherently understand their own role in making decisions, but that assumption may mean that some recipients do not participate in the supplemental information, decision making process, or understand why these behaviors are important.

There are examples in the documents of both, those that provide “choice but do not follow through on “participation” and “motivation,” and those that execute the three categories in an integrated and effective way. For instance, the email sent from Admissions congratulating a student on their acceptance had a section titled “Next Steps” which read, “Now that you are a member of Owl Nation, here are some resources that will assist you on your transition into KSU.” This statement was followed by ten bullet points, the first two items in the list offered context for the supplemental information they linked to, which involved setting up an Owl Express student records account and accessing the KSU email account; both of these were explained detailing was expected of these actions and some justification for why they should do so. The next eight bullet points were hyperlinked text stating the name of another campus

department or service and linking to the relevant website. In this example, the email provided a lot of choice and even some justification for some of the actions but there was not a full explanation of what to do with the choices or that the student was entrusted in any way to perform the decision making process. The orientation checklist email provided by Orientation before students attend their session was presented in a similar format, but within each bullet point provided a quick overview of the justification for the action to assist with motivation. In this example however there was still a lack the trust in the student's decision making conveyed. To best express that trust, language needs to explicitly direct the action so that the recipient understands that they are not only being asked to act but that they are being trusted to make decisions about which content to interact with, how to interact with it, and what actions steps they will take as a result of engaging with the supplemental content.

An example that combined all three elements of the strategy was the First-Year and Transition Studies email in the section on learning communities. After they were defined, the email read, “[Learning Community] LC students tend to earn higher grades and express greater satisfaction in college. Descriptions of the Fall 2016 LC offerings are available at the learning community website [embedded link to the learning communities website]. Review the descriptions and select 2 or 3 LCs of interest to you so you are prepared to register at Ignition.” In this example, the student was presented with choices that they could access through technology to expand their knowledge. The student was specifically directed to make a choice and was given some parameters to make meaning of that choice: to select a couple of the options. Then they were trusted to make the decision based on what was interesting to them. Motivation was provided through language that justifies action, an explanation of research indicating better

performance and enjoyment in college as well as the opportunity to be more prepared to register for classes at orientation (Weimer, 2013).

Comparing the two examples side by side illustrates the phenomenon of the fifth theme: choice is good but students are equipped to be more empowered when choice is partnered with participation and motivation. Without instruction of what to do with the choices or the reason to partake in them, the student is left to self-motivate which signals to them that their relationship with the institution is to navigate the transition space alone as opposed to a guided experience alongside the institution. Presenting choices without the message of trust does not allow the student to take ownership over their transition, nor does it help the student build their confidence as they move through the process. Trust in the ability to make one's own decisions about the transition into college also helps students better understand their role in the environment. To fully gain the benefits of an environment with options and opportunities for increased understanding, these categories must work in tandem with each other and all be present in the communication (Weimer, 2013; Astin, 1991).

Additional Findings

In addition to the five themes, two additional findings were present through the analysis of the data collected in the study. First, the validity of the rubric and suggestions for improvements, and second was an observation that mode matters in performing well in some of the categories.

Validity of the rubric. The rubric proved to be a useful instrument. The rubric's effectiveness was validated through the analysis of the documents and its ability to present themes that related to the original research questions. Document analysis with the rubric was

manageable and effective and the rubric provided guidance to differentiate a ranking between the possible ranks; it was a productive measure of language and messaging.

In particular the areas of “communication intent,” “audience appropriate language,” “language balance,” “communication experience,” “provision of choice,” and “invocation of participation” and “motivation” worked well when reviewing the documents. The two “language choice” categories often blended together for the researcher and in Chapter Five’s recommendations section a suggested change to the rubric for future use will be examined. The area most inconvenient in analyzing the data was the category of “timing and discourse.” While these pair together well under both Foucault’s (1972) and Weimer’s (2013) philosophies, there were times that the researcher found that a document performed well on timing but not on discourse and vice versa. Consequently, an additional revision to the rubric will be explored in the recommendations. (Appendix D).

Mode may matter. Some of the better performers in terms of the ability to articulate a “communication experience” or to establish a relationship by acknowledging “timing and discourse,” were the documents whose medium was not the written word. These examples were the Admissions acceptance call script and Orientation’s pre-orientation videos. In these examples the mode afforded the institutional representative to have more flexibility, articulating things like expectations and extending supplemental information. Two of the emails, the Financial Aid options email and the Orientation checklist email, linked to videos. The Financial Aid videos were not reviewed in this study, but the videos linked in the Orientation checklist were the pre-orientation videos that were analyzed in this study. In general, emails linked only to websites. The ability for the phone call and video modes to perform better than their email or letter

counterparts is worthy of further understanding and will be discussed in the section on future research in Chapter Five.

Summary

The results of the inductive qualitative analysis reviewed in this chapter demonstrate the collected documents' performance against the rubric which was developed specifically for this study. Additionally, frequency of words, phrases, and messages helped to contextualize the performance of the documents alongside the rubric and the research questions, all of which were answered by the five emerging themes.

Communication pieces distributed to incoming first-year students for fall 2016 analyzed in this study explained the impact of "language balance," showing what is said to students during this communication timeline and how it can influence empowerment (Foucault, 1972). Building a relationship rather than a process based transaction requires acknowledgements of "timing," invitations for future "discourse," student focused "communication intention," and the existence of a "communication experience" (Weimer, 2013; Foucault, 1972). "Word choice" and the formation of those words into statements matters both within each document and across the entire communication experience; these word choices impact how the recipient will make meaning by defining context and creating foundational understanding of the words utilized by the institution, their relationship to the student, and the campus culture that is conveyed (Weimer, 2013; Strange & Banning, 2013; Astin, 1991; Ogden & Richards, 1989; Foucault, 1972; Burke, 1966). The creation of an intentionally designed "communication experience" is beneficial to the recipient; the student is able to establish expectations for how the institution communicates and also how they will engage in that participation (Weimer, 2013). Furthermore, the documents within a "communication experience" perform better on the rubric overall.

“Choice” presented with supplemental information for the expansion of the individual student’s knowledge base is an incredibly important way to empower students, but it is most effective when it includes “participation” and “motivation” as well (Weimer, 2013). Without entrusting actionable decisions aligned with the choices, and without expressing the benefit of making those choices as related to the transition to college, recipients are faced with an overwhelming assortment of choices and very little guidance (Weimer, 2013).

In addition to the themes that emerged, the researcher validated the rubric but also identified some challenges with its use that will be addressed in the recommendations section of Chapter Five. The observation that mode seemed to matter was also presented as an area that will be explored in more detail in the future research section of Chapter Five. The results, themes and, these findings, along with the rubric’s veracity, are important contributions to the existing research in the field on communicating with college students, and specifically in communication’s impact on first-year student success.

Chapter Five

Discussion, Recommendations, and Implications

Introduction

This study examined the language of nineteen documents distributed to all incoming first-year students entering Kennesaw State University during fall 2016 from the time of their acceptance through the first day of attendance. The study was motivated by the absence of language exploration in the literature about communication with incoming students, particularly the language usage in relationship to student empowerment. Moreover, a rubric with foundations in work exploring student empowerment in the classroom by Weimer (2013) and Foucault's (1972) exploration of language's function in assigning power was created and validated through the analysis conducted in the study.

Four research questions guided this exploratory study:

1. What are the communication pieces, what do they say, who is responsible for creating and delivering the message, and on what time line?
2. Is the institution creating a relationship via the communications they send to first-year students?
3. Is the institution using language to include first-year students in discourse?
4. Is the institution communicating with first-year students in ways that empower them to be successful?

These questions were addressed within the four themes and one emerging theme that developed through the inductive qualitative analysis of the data collected in the study: 1. Language balance is found through articulation of the meaning of the terms as related to the student; 2. Ignoring timing and refusing further discourse builds process over relationship; 3.

Word choice matters within each document and influences the interpretation of other documents; 4. The emerging theme that communication experience matters; 5. Empowerment thrives when choice includes participation and motivation.

This chapter will present a discussion of the results, as well as implications and recommendations for practice. Additionally, opportunities for future research that relate to this study and the results will be discussed.

Discussion of Results

Astin (1991) asserts that assessment of the environment is the most neglected and broadest of the tenants of the I-E-O model, “the task of assessing the college environment, then, involves the identification...of these external circumstances and events” (p. 81). Moreover, Strange and Banning (2013) direct attention to what an environment is communicating and they suggest consideration of the nonverbal implications and the way the human aggregate impacts messaging (Strange & Banning, 2013). The results from the current study illustrate the necessity for institutions to assess communications, and specifically the language which involves the words, formations, and strategies within communication, as a consideration of the way the environment is being constructed, both from the institutional perspective and as a self-produced reality for incoming students (Astin, 1991). This study’s exploration of the ways language can construct an environment for incoming students uncovers the potential phenomena of an intermediate environment.

The way the environment welcomes a first-year student’s needs has significant implications for their sense of belonging and their adjustment to college (Strayhorn, 2012; Astin, 1991). Furthermore, what the environment tells the student about the cultural climate of the institution can influence the relationship a student develops with the institution and have an

impact on student transition and success (Barefoot, et al., 2005; Kuh, et al., 2005). The strategies that empower students in the classroom lead to deeper engagement, ownership, and learning (Kinzie, 2014; Weimer, 2013). This study asserts that the strategies for empowering students in the classroom can be blended with language designed to distribute power to execute language in ways that empower incoming first-year student within the environment. Empowering first-year students before they arrive on campus via the communication pieces distributed to them, starting with their acceptance through to their matriculation, and balancing the language to define the first-year student's role in relationship to the environment, allows incoming students to make meaning of their responsibilities and participate in their transition process in ways that matter to them (Weimer, 2013; Foucault, 1972). Constructing communications using language that empowers first-year students matters as an environmental factor as was seen in the examples of language balance and specifically in the relationship an institution begins to build with new first-year students.

The study also found that the language itself matters. Today's college students are the most diverse population to have ever attended college, in terms of their racial and ethnic identities, age, gender, physical and mental health, and academic preparation (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Ramirez, Aragon, Suchard, & Rios-Aguilar 2016; Myers & Hatch, 2016; Crissman Ishler, 2005). Assumptions cannot be made about their contextual references for defining the terms of academia and college life and their lived experiences as digital natives influences how they prefer content (Jorgenson, 2014; Asburn, 2007). Therefore, the burden is on individual institutions to clarify terms and phrases in relationship to their specific institutional environment to guarantee appropriate meaning is made (Ogden & Richards, 1989; Foucault, 1972; Burke, 1966). When the institutional language defines the context and the relationship, achieving

language balance, it levels the playing field for students to all have the access to understand the environment and also how they will interact with it, which provides students with an understanding of their role within the hierarchy and therefore assigns them power in their interactions (Foucault, 1972). Intentionality becomes critical across a communication experience that might operate as isolated individual functional areas in practice, but is interpretable as one connected and contiguous communication experience for the student. The inconsistencies in word choice exposed this necessity for buy-in across a campus about the messages but also the lexicon of the environment.

The language of empowerment goes beyond defining terms and roles; strategies exist to utilize language that uniquely empowers students. Allowing first-year students to make some decisions about how they will engage with the environment offers empowerment opportunities their experience (Weimer, 2013). When first-year students are given some freedom to make selections during their transition, they may choose to own some of the responsibility in finding their fit and setting themselves up for success. The unfamiliarity with the environment though means that they need some guidance to make the best choices for themselves. This study's examination demonstrated the strength of the message when communication pieces provided students with choices that were bolstered with explicit motivation and participation.

If sense of belonging and connection with the environment will impact their transition, adjustment, and success, then they must be supported in making those decisions (Strange & Banning, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012; Astin, 1991). Weimer (2013) suggests that in the classroom, instructors provide choice but also suggests that students be provided with supplemental information to expand their knowledge about their choices, be explicitly told how to interact with that information, and be given good reason to motivate the action. As first-year students prepare

to enroll and are presented with choices including where to live, how to finance their education, when to attend orientation, which classes to choose, and how they will find community, the most empowering communications explain the choices in ways that guide the student in the decision making process and articulate the benefits of making that choice.

For first-year students who are overwhelmed with the number of communications they receive through varying modalities, these communication pieces do not each exist in isolation (Jorgenson, 2005). More fluent in using technology than previous generations of students, today's first-year students require an innovative communication experience as they enter the collegiate environment (Dean & Levine, 2012; Jorgenson, 2005; Junco, 2005). As a strategy, an intentionally designed communication experience may be effective in empowering students as they transition toward enrollment. An intentional communication experience uses a scaffolding approach to identify the experience, and consider the timing in which a student will receive and process the information; the communication experience should also consider and explore multiple modes and encourage interaction with supplemental content in robust and meaningful ways.

When well designed, these experiences may be valuable tools because they sufficiently meets students' needs while asserting expectations for the relationship the student will have with the institution (Weimer, 2013; Foucault, 1972). A communication experience can also better acknowledge a student's position in the first-year transition process related to the timing of the communication and establishes an ongoing dialogue that helps a student understand future points of contact (Weimer, 2013; Foucault, 1972). As was evidenced by the pre-orientation videos evaluated in this study, an intentional communication experience allows those creating content to influence the other communication pieces in ways that lends to consistency in word choice,

definitions, context, and intent. This study uncovered the potential value of that contiguous, demarcated communication experience in empowering students as they go through the phases of a pre-enrollment transition.

The results of this study indicated that empowerment was best reflected in language strategies that were rooted in discursive practices, encouraging discourse and clearly communicating a desire for increased interaction, which contributes to relationship building. Language that can empower first-year students is anchored in helping them clearly understand their roles and responsibilities within relationship to the institutional environment. Successful empowerment strategies are those that allow for first-year students to make choices for themselves, but use language that helps to structure those choices in meaningful ways toward meaningful outcomes. These strategies are most successful and best employed through a deliberate, well-designed, and connected communication experience that allows timing to be acknowledged, relationships to be built, and expectations for interaction and participation to be reliable and clear.

Implications

Implications for Research

This study introduced an important and unexplored phenomena by examining the empowerment language of first-year transition communication. It also opens the door for future research by providing an instrument and a theoretical and conceptual foundation for conducting that research. Future research can broaden the scope of the current study.

Specifically, documents, like those collected by the researcher for this study that were identified to be outside of the scope of this study, should be explored. Communication pieces shared only with specific populations of incoming students, or websites and other supplemental

information provided within the communication pieces analyzed in this study, can be examined for their performance on the rubric. Additionally, for this study the researcher was provided a letter from one of the academic college deans, which is disseminated by Admissions. Kennesaw State University however, has twelve other academic colleges. This raised the question about communications with incoming first-year students that are curated by the academic colleges and departments. Future research calls for the examination of ways that empowerment language can be measured in strictly academic contexts and whether all incoming students receive equitably empowering academic interactions prior to enrollment.

This study demonstrates the need for more institutions to explore the empowerment functions of language in communication pieces distributed to first-year students entering the institution to identify common themes and validate the rubric. Further validation of the rubric through future research can help to address any researcher bias present in the current study. Additionally, it would be valuable to explore the use of language and the nature of messaging for other transition students in the collegiate environment. Communication pieces for incoming transfer students or graduate students may also help to identify themes about empowerment language for all students in transition.

It is also important to conduct further research to determine the outcomes of the communication pieces. Future research should explore the language in tandem with qualitative methods to assess students' reactions to the language they encounter during the timeframe in which they transition to college. Impacts of language on various measures of student adjustment and success should be assessed to determine what is most influenced by the positivity of empowerment and how those impacts extend into the first-year transition. And considerations of

the ways other explored areas of communication, frequency and mode, interact with the specific language should be evaluated in future research to determine best practices.

Finally, the result of this study that identified that different modes may perform differently on the rubric calls for further investigation to understand how mode matters in relationship to language. Considering the research that has been conducted about mode preference there may be overlapping or disparate themes that need to be addressed for those who communicate with students. This study calls for a more intensive look at the modalities that are not written, videos, call scripts, and other spoken interactions should be researched for more understanding.

Implications for the Rubric

An important implication of this study is the validation and usefulness of the rubric, introduced through this study. The rubric's intentional pairing of language philosophy through principles of Foucault's (1972) perspectives on language and power and strategies for student empowerment in the classroom proven by Weimer (2013) make the instrument uniquely applicable to evaluating language and communication pieces in higher education. Specifically in areas where empowering students toward student success is the intent of the communication. The rubric has two useful applications moving forward: in research and in practice.

The rubric used in this study can be applied to future research that explores empowerment language in communication pieces within the field of higher education, student success, and First-Year and Transition Studies. Researchers who are looking to either analyze language or identify empowerment could find value in the instrument. The reciprocal nature of research would mean that researchers would benefit from using the instrument but the rubric would also receive further validation and potential adjustments if used in future research. Further

use of the rubric in research would illustrate best practice for its use as a research tool and in which arenas it is most applicable.

The rubric can also be used in practice to establish best practice standards for creating and evaluating first-year communication pieces. Those staff and faculty whose responsibility it is to draft, craft, and distribute communications pieces to incoming first-year students. Content creators and communicators can immediately use the rubric to explore their existing language in communication pieces past and present to understand the ways the language they use empowers student success. They can also find value in revisiting the rubric as they create new content for future communication pieces, to utilize language, strategies, and design discourse that are empowering. Additionally, the rubric can be used to plan the timing of communication pieces to establish an experience that utilizes consistency in language, builds messaging in intentional ways from one piece to the next, and considers the empowerment message over the many pieces of communication a student receives.

Those creating messages for academic interventions might find the rubric especially useful in crafting communication pieces for students on academic probation or with other identifiers indicating the need for proactive or intervening academic support. Interventions can be successful and those institutions who have considered messaging as a part of the intervention strategy have found that the attention paid to the message has helped students feel supported and connected (Tough, 2014). Institutions with existing messages of intervention for those with academic risk can find value in incorporating or strengthening the messages of empowerment in their communications by evaluating what they are currently saying to this population using the rubric.

The introduction of the rubric for these two purposes is a significant contribution. Researchers and practitioners have taken time to explore how and when institutions communicate with students, but not what they are saying (Cabellon, 2016; Jorgenson, 2015; Junco, 2005). This new conversation in the field is more accessible for future examination because of the establishment and veracity of a usable instrument. Recommendations will be presented for modifications and a modified rubric is available (Appendix D), these alterations intend to strengthen the rubric's usability in both research and practice.

Implications for Practice

The significance of a communication experience. In recognition of the interconnected experience a student can have as they absorb and process the various communication pieces, emerging theme four, communication experience matters, illuminates a need for greater collaboration. The merits of working across divisions to impact student success once students arrive on campus for programs and participation is called on for expansion to the pre-enrollment experience as this study specifically identifies the need for consistent messaging before first-year students set foot on campus. A delineated communication experience may have the potential to be more empowering for the student. The ability to control language choice, intent, and supplemental information through technology for the entire timeframe while communicating with students as they experience the communication pieces during the transition cycle is significantly increased when communication pieces fall within the bounds of a continuous experience that is purposefully designed to hand one communication piece off to the next.

Discrepancies in definitions and messages are less likely because the communication pieces exist as part of a whole, where each part matters to the summation. It is easier to acknowledge how the timing of each communication piece is related to the overall experience,

because the content creators are aware of the placement. The reliability from one piece to the next can help explain expectations of students. And the experience performs more like discourse than standalone communication pieces in isolation.

When the communication experience is executed as one off communication pieces, a transactional relationship is conveyed. Inconsistencies in defining terms and the student's role are likely ineffective at helping each student understand their relationship and motivating their participation. Without connectivity, communication pieces present an overwhelming to-do list without very much attention paid to the messages that entrust and engage students in making important decisions.

Those departments that communicate with incoming first-year students, cannot view these actions as isolated activities. No matter the intent of the communication, if the language choice does not align, the timing is inappropriate, and the communication experience is not connected, the intent can be overridden. If students feel overwhelmed by the communications they receive, it is the burden of the institution to not only evaluate frequency but also consider content (Jorgenson, 2014; Weimer, 2013).

Empowerment language matters. The scope of this study did not explore the input of students nor the outcomes of the interface between input and environment, so it is not the assertion that empowerment language results in student success. What the study does illustrate is that these communication pieces that utilize empowerment language, statement formation, and language leading to engaged decision making, are more likely to define the environment in meaningful and substantial ways. As the context is applied to the terms, the opportunity for a student to make meaning that informs a meaningful definition emerges. Through that meaning making process, the student's role and responsibilities within the environment develop. Those

communication pieces that place a priority on empowerment language do a better job at instructing informed decisions and explicitly trusting students to make them.

Through the choices students make during this timeframe, their institutional environment will become tangible. A place to live, a community to join, classes to attend, and peers to interact with. If students are not empowered to make these choices appropriately, there is potential for them to make choices that assign them to aspects of the environment that are not the right fit for their adjustment or belonging (Strange & Banning, 2013; Strayhorn, 2012; Astin, 1991). The only way to be certain that each student is given the same chance to make these important decisions in a positive manner, is to entrust them with the choices within communication pieces that all incoming first-year students receive. Messages of empowerment matter.

Recommendations

Changes to the rubric. The rubric for evaluating language utilized in first-year transition communications was developed specifically for this study and drew on the theoretical and foundational knowledge of Foucault's (1972) discursive formations and Weimer's (2013) balance of power in the classroom. The researcher observed two suggested adjustments to the instrument through the data analysis conducted for this study. The areas of "language choice" and "timing and discourse" will both be addressed for recommended changes that may make the rubric a stronger tool in practice (Appendix D).

There are two "language choice" categories on the rubric. The first examines whether the document uses language that is developed, united, and accessible and the second explores whether the document uses language that is restricted. The suggested edit from the researcher is to collapse these two categories into one that assesses whether the language is developed, accessible, united, and presented without restriction. While employing the rubric the researcher

found that so often restriction influenced accessibility and division that it would be easier to consider all of these functions of language together. Furthermore, if the language in a sentence or document was missing one of these critical elements of language choice, it would certainly weaken the message and efficacy. It is best in both practice and research to consider all the language choices as one analysis.

“Timing and discourse” are acknowledged as important for empowerment by both Foucault (1972) and Weimer (2013). The acknowledgement of timing places some emphasis on the fact that discourse is ongoing and demonstrates the understanding that there is a constant exchange occurring. Empowering discourse is left open for more dialogue in the future and is invitational, seeking to capitalize on two-way exchanges. These pair well together philosophically but in practice the researcher often found that some documents performed well on invitations for discourse and most did not acknowledge timing at all. This made it difficult to assign a rank to a document because it achieved half of the category. In the amended rubric these two categories are split into two separate categories, one measuring “timing” and the other measuring “discourse.” The new “timing” category analyzes whether timing is acknowledged and how it is acknowledged. The new “discourse” category measures how well a document extends an invitation for discourse and expresses the intent to have a dialogue. This will be useful as researchers use the rubric to analyze existing documents but also as practitioners create new content to verify that they are accomplishing both tasks.

Recommendations related to mode. Mode may matter. It is possible that the delivery method of content may allow for or hinder the opportunities content creators have to employ empowerment language. This became clear within the themes of word choice and communication experience. The modes of a phone call or video may have performed better

related to uniquely specific aspects of the form. More research and exploration is necessary to understand this phenomenon better. However, it could be a consideration for practitioners to either evaluate existing communication pieces to convert them into a mode that appears to lend itself to the use of empowerment language more naturally or to examine communication pieces that are in a mode outside written communication to repurpose the language choices in those modes into written modes.

Recommendations for practice. These recommendations are provided for any institution wishing to strengthen their communication pieces and build them into a more intentional communication experience for incoming first-year students. These suggestions are action steps to better use empowerment language in communicating with incoming first-year students before they arrive on campus and can be executed in tandem with the rubric as a guide for evaluation.

Develop a collaborative communication team responsible for creating a communication experience for incoming students. One of the strongest suggestions to emerge from this study was the need for one connected and intentionally designed communication experience that would rely on similar strategies for empowerment and present supplemental information and choices in consistent formats that would help develop students' expectations about the discourse taking place. This study highlighted the benefit of this kind of communication experience and the need for it to be collaborative across departmental and divisional lines.

The example of the pre-orientation video experience analyzed in this study demonstrated that purposeful design and consistent execution of a communication experience can lend itself to positive performance overall in all the rubric categories. It is therefore suggested that all the

communicators who create communication pieces for incoming first-year students, establish a defined team responsible for collaboration to create a communication experience that consists of integrated, intentional communication pieces that are designed to carry messages from one communication piece to the next, regardless of the office or department responsible for the preceding and following interactions. The benefits of this collaboration can help institutions to define who is responsible for communicating which aspects of the transition information, which can help to guarantee that terms are appropriately emphasized. As was evident in the pre-orientation videos, collaboration appeared to help with language choice, timing, discourse, the presentation of choices and the motivation to participate in them. The integrated design of the pre-orientation video experience allowed for messaging to remain consistent, use best strategies, and express student empowerment throughout the experience. It should be the designated role of a collaborative cross-functional institutional team assigned specifically to create and sustain a connected communication experiences for incoming first-year students.

Develop a word matrix. Similar to the necessity for a collaborative model to define a communication experience, there is a need for consistent word usage throughout communication pieces. This is necessary both to define terms and also to increase awareness of the frequency of some terms or phrases. All the communicators must be in agreement about what words like “register,” mean for instance, within their own institution’s context.

Institutions should develop a word matrix to define terms and phrases unique to the college environment and unique to the specific institution. It would be beneficial for those whose responsibility it is to define the terms on the matrix to be referenced as a resource to direct definitional questions, providing content creators support in accurately defining context if doing so on behalf of another campus department, program, or service. This word matrix could help

define the institution's lexicon and be used extensively to develop a consistent understanding of institutional messages.

Use the term “first-year student” across all communications. Institutions should not only identify and define the common terms to use them consistently and help incoming first-year students build their collegiate lexicon, but should also strive whenever possible to use the best terms in the field. The documents in this study mostly use the term “first-year students” to define the population but two documents use “freshman.” “The word *freshman* first appeared in the English language in 1550, when it was used to describe a newcomer or novice in any field...Only in the 1590's did the word come to have specific reference to first-year students” (Dwyer, 1989). More than four hundred years later, this word has been reexamined and is no longer used in Great Britain where it originated (Gardner, 1998). Instead, more accurate and appropriate terminology has been assigned in other countries and even in the United States, specifically within the community that fosters and guides best practices for the first-year of college.

In a memorandum to the University of South Carolina Provost on March 9, 1998, then Executive Director of the National Resource Center on The Freshman Experience and Students in Transition, Dr. John Gardner, advocated to change the name of the organization and its affiliated programs and publications to eliminate the word “freshman” and replace it with “first-year”. “The term ‘freshman’ has increasingly come to be regarded in our country as one that is sexist and politically incorrect...in light of the fact that women have been admitted to America's colleges and universities since 1833...[and] inappropriate given the age of many of America's first year students who are now non-traditional” (Gardner, 1998). The name change occurred and in a personal conversation with Dr. Gardner, he reflected on the backlash to the action from some

in academia, but asserted that he never considered changing it back. “*Freshman* was anachronistic, disrespectful, and inaccurate. Students at the time were not ‘fresh’ and they were not all ‘men’” (J. Gardner, personal conversation, January 27, 2017).

Considering the diversity of today’s first-year college students, the accepted and reputed term “first-year” is preferred to guarantee inclusivity (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Ramirez, Aragon, Suchard, & Rios-Aguilar 2016; Myers & Hatch, 2016; Crissman Ishler, 2005). Any and all language used in these types of communications must be inclusive to achieve the accessibility features of empowerment language. Empowerment cannot be achieved if language used implies any type of exclusion based on gender or other aspects of individual identity. When considering the categories on the rubric related to accessibility and freedom from restriction, inclusion is a vital indicator of these features of language choice (Foucault, 1972).

Extend choices with language that motivates participation. Institutions should be strategic in their language and find ways to extend choice into a call to action that frames the choice in a way that provides guidance and demonstrates trust. Choices should be presented using motivational language that might help a student understand why action matters. Communication pieces need to explicitly state what the choices are, what should be done with them, and why it is beneficial. Empowerment language performed best when it was a three-pronged strategy that consisted of these three aspects of the rubric.

When institutions consider how they present choices to students, they must also consider how overwhelming the range of choices may be to an incoming student, and with this in mind, it is important to provide some kind of clarity into what successful choices look like. Then, the language requires additional motivation that indicates the benefit of action. For example, institutions should choose to state, “Research shows that participating in these activities

increases GPA and progress to graduation” versus “Research shows that this is an important action.” When providing motivation, the crystalized focus should be on the things that have palpable benefits. The most important message through all of these tenants, is to demonstrate through language that the student is entrusted with taking ownership over their choices.

Strengthen choices by introducing supplemental sources using innovative technology.

The documents in this study did a good job providing choice and opportunities for recipients to further their own knowledge by providing many links to additional websites. While this is excellent, empowerment is best accomplished when coupled with participation and motivation. Institutions should explore innovative technological integration approaches to develop the communication experience and also create more impact with the features of the supplemental resources particularly considering the technological acumen of today’s students (Weimer, 2013; Dean & Levin, 2012). The better designed the supplemental resources are, the more flexibility they can lend practitioners in finding ways for them to support empowerment. The provision of many links in an email versus the narrator of a video explaining which videos are also relevant and directing to links embedded on the page creates a more interactive communication experience that feels more like a conversation and can better inspire engagement.

Build a relationship through the communication. Institutions should not wait until the student is on campus to begin building a relationship between the institution and the student. Interactions that take place through communication pieces during the transition into college should help set expectations for students that are reflective of the relationship they will have with the institution in the future. Timing should be acknowledged as it relates to the ongoing discourse and the positionality of the communication piece within the communication experience. Invitations to have two-way exchanges should be explicit; not just extending

availability for questions but encouraging interaction. There should be the incorporation of language that says, “We welcome a conversation on this topic” versus a message that says, “Call us with questions.” To develop language of empowerment, communicators must demonstrate in the message that a genuine interest in a dialogue with students exists. If the intent appears to be on the delivery of a lot of information, or if the message delivers a terminal communication statement, the language becomes transactional. Empowerment language must leave a door open for future discourse, whether by explicitly inviting more conversation or indicating exactly when a student will have the opportunity for interaction. Phrases like, “There are opportunities for engagement” are more empowering when they state, “You will have an opportunity to discuss this information in great detail at your appointment which will include opportunities to engage with us, tell us your goals, and discuss the ways we can support your success.” Discourse is empowering when roles are clear and invitations allow students the right and responsibility to actively continue their dialogue with the institution.

Prioritize language balance. Institutions must value the ability to define a term for the recipient, underscore the contextual references, and relate the term back to the student as an indicator of the student’s role. This skill is the foundation for student empowerment communication. It should be acknowledged and given attention in each step of the communication development process.

Communication pieces containing the language required to help build incoming students institutional lexicon are student-focused and more likely to select appropriate language because the intent clearly remains on helping incoming first-year students understand the collegiate environment, contextualize their future experiences, and understand how they will interact with the environment. Institutions can best keep this value at the center of communication pieces by

using the rubric as they develop those communications. Conversations about what is new for first-year students, what is distinctive to the collegiate vocabulary, and what words or phrases are unique to the institution can also help guide colleges and universities in maintaining the balance.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated the need to examine what colleges and universities say to college students. In addition to the how and the when of communication pieces, the what of communication pieces is also important. Language constructed to empower students requires selection of language that is appropriate and inclusive, and balanced to provide context and meaning; language that empowers students expresses a desire to have discourse through an experience, interactions, and decision making processes with intentions of successful transitions. A new instrument for measuring empowerment language in communication pieces was developed, validated, and presented for use in practice and research.

Four research questions which sought to better understand the relationship of language to the first-year transition and college going process guided an exploration of first-year students, who they are, what they need, and strategies for communication. Intensive inductive analysis of nineteen communication pieces from Kennesaw State University's fall 2016 first-year student communications revealed answers to the questions that resulted in five themes.

Empowerment language for students is best achieved when terms and phrases consider the student in relationship to the context; and when the communication piece is identified in relationship to students' place in the transition process as a point in discourse, not a one-off transactional content delivery mechanism. The language used sends messages, implied or explicit, about who the student is in relationship to the institution and also about how the institution does or does not agree on certain actions, processes, and most importantly, meanings.

Intentionally designed and skillfully integrated communication experiences help students with expectations and also provide institutions with a controlled environment to facilitate a decision-making process ripe with choices, parameters, and motivation. Practice and future research can both be influenced by the conclusions of empowerment language and can use the rubric to continue to move the topic of language in higher education forward.

Incoming first-year students to colleges and universities are likely to remain a changing demographical population for the foreseeable future, constantly redefining the modes of communication they prefer and the frequency with which they prefer to interact. Proven foundations of meaning in language, student adjustment, and empowered learning in the classroom however are well established, long lasting, and malleable to the evolving landscape of first-year communication. Therefore, this study's emphasis on combining existing pathways to student success is critical. Prioritizing what is said to incoming first-year students can ground communication pieces in a focus on language that supports their success, through empowerment, across changing platforms. Placing value on the meaning of institutional messages, which faculty and staff can transfer to various arenas as needed, places an emphasis on student success through empowerment within institutional environments.

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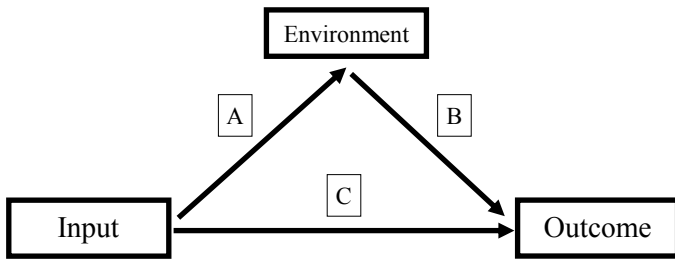
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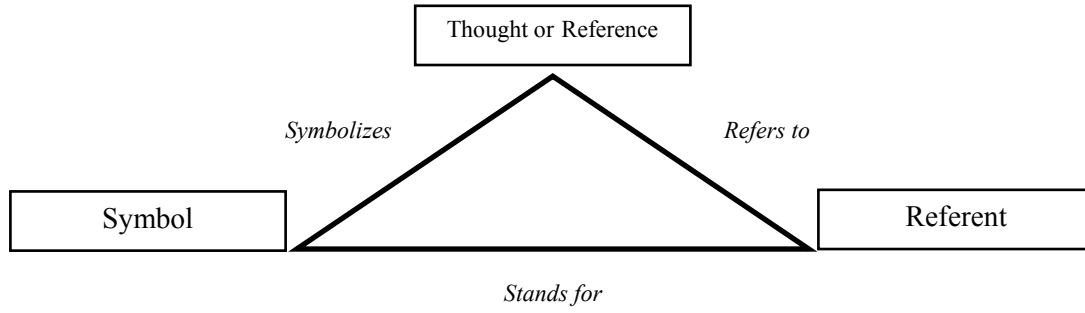
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Appendix A
Astin's I-E-O Model



Appendix B
Ogden and Richards Reference Model



Appendix C

Wilhite's Rubric for Evaluating Language Utilized in First-Year Transition Communications

Evaluations of Language	Excellent	Satisfactory	Neutral	Unsatisfactory	Poor
Audience appropriate language	Language used is student-centered (Foucault)	Language used is mostly student-centered	It is unclear who the audience is	Language used is rarely student-centered	Language used is never student-centered
Communication intent is clear	Descriptive efficacy is evident in the formation of statements, concepts, and choices (Foucault)	Descriptive efficacy is evident in the formation of some statements, concepts, and choices	Evidence of descriptive efficacy is unclear	Descriptive efficacy is implied but not clearly evident	Descriptive efficacy is not present in the communication
Language choice	Information is presented using developed, united, and accessible language (Foucault)	Information is presented using some developed, united, and accessible language	Information is presented using language that is neither developed or incomplete, united or divided, and accessible or exclusive	Information is presented using some language that is incomplete, divided, or exclusive	Information is presented using language that is incomplete, divided, or exclusive
Language choice	Language used and information presented are not restricted (Foucault & Weimer)	Some language used and information presented are not restricted	Language and information presented are ambiguous	Language and information presented are mostly restricted	Language and information presented are restricted
Language balance	Balance exists in the language between what it is, what it does, and what it says (Foucault)	Balance exists in the language between what it says and either what it does OR what it is	Language has elements of what it is and/or what it does	Language focus is mostly on what it says, with limited exploration of what it is or what it does	Language focus is entirely on what it says
Timing and discourse	Acknowledgement of timing of statements is evident as part of an ongoing exchange that does not constitute a terminal stage of discourse; language used invites discourse, seeks to take advantage of interaction, and remains within the	Timing of statements is either evident or implied and language used leaves continuation of discourse unknown; language does not explicitly seek to invite further discourse or encourage	Timing is not clearly acknowledged and continuation of discourse is unknown; language neither invites nor discourages further discourse.	Timing is ignored and continuation of discourse is either not acknowledged or discouraged; terminal language is utilized and further interaction is not invited.	Language is not discursive, no intent for discourse or interaction is involved. Timing of statements is unrelated to any ongoing communication or timeline

	dimension of discourse (Foucault & Weimer)	further interaction but is open to further interaction			
Communication experience	Intentional design of a communication experience is evident and explicit (Weimer)	Intentional design of a communication experience is evident but not explicit	It is unclear whether a communication experience has been designed	Evidence and statement of a communication experience are lacking	Design of communication appears to be thoughtless and poorly constructed
Language provides choice	Information is designed to be broad with opportunities for individuals to choose from supplementary material for increased knowledge; technology is employed to assist with knowledge access (Weimer)	Information is fairly broad but occasionally specific and detailed; supplementary information is provided and technology is employed for some access	Some information is broad and some is specific and detailed; supplementary information OR access to supplementary information are either unclear or inaccessible	Information covers mostly specific and detailed topics; no supplementary information is provided OR that information does not effectively employ technology	All potentially pertinent information is specifically covered in full detail with no supplementary information because it is all provided at the forefront
Language invokes participation	Recipients are presented with choices that lead to active participation in decisions; recipients are instructed to make decisions and are explicitly entrusted with those decisions (Weimer)	Recipients are presented with choices that lead to active participation in decisions but it is unclear that they are required to make those decisions and/or entrusted to do so	Recipients are presented with choices and it is unclear where those choices lead and that responsibility and trust are present	Recipients are presented with vastly limited choices and not informed of the responsibility or trust they are given in these choices	Recipients are provided with no choices; all steps are mandated
Language provides motivation	Communication encourages and engages recipients with opportunities to develop college transition skills (Weimer)	Communication encourages recipients to develop college transition skills	Communication neither encourages or discourages recipients to develop college transition skills	Communication discourages recipients from developing their own college transition skills	Communication discourages recipients from developing their own college transition skills and undermines ones connection to their own transition

Appendix D
Wilhite's Revised Rubric for Evaluating Language

Evaluations of Language	Excellent	Satisfactory	Neutral	Unsatisfactory	Poor
Audience appropriate language	Language used is student-centered (Foucault)	Language used is mostly student-centered	It is unclear who the audience is	Language used is rarely student-centered	Language used is never student-centered
Communication intent is clear	Descriptive efficacy is evident in the formation of statements, concepts, and choices (Foucault)	Descriptive efficacy is evident in the formation of some statements, concepts, and choices	Evidence of descriptive efficacy is unclear	Descriptive efficacy is implied but not clearly evident	Descriptive efficacy is not present in the communication
Language choice	Information is presented using language that is developed, united, accessible, and presented without restriction (Foucault)	Information is presented using some developed, united, accessible, and unrestricted language	Information is presented using language that is neither developed or incomplete, united or divided, accessible or exclusive, restricted or unrestricted	Information is presented using some language that is incomplete, divided, exclusive, or restricted	Information is presented using language that is incomplete, divided, exclusive, and restricted
Language balance	Balance exists in the language between what it is, what it does, and what it says (Foucault)	Balance exists in the language between what it says and either what it does OR what it is	Language has elements of what it is and/or what it does	Language focus is mostly on what it says, with limited exploration of what it is or what it does	Language focus is entirely on what it says
Timing	Acknowledgement of timing of statements is evident as part of an ongoing exchange that does not constitute a terminal stage of discourse (Foucault & Weimer)	Timing of statements is either evident or implied and language used leaves continuation of discourse unknown	Timing is not clearly acknowledged and continuation of discourse is unknown	Timing is ignored and continuation of discourse is either not acknowledged or discouraged; terminal	Timing of statements is unrelated to any ongoing communication or timeline
Discourse	Language used invites discourse, seeks to take advantage of interaction, and remains within the dimension of discourse	Language does not explicitly seek to invite further discourse or encourage further interaction but	Language neither invites nor discourages further discourse	Language is utilized and further interaction is not invited	Language is not discursive, no intent for discourse or interaction is involved

	(Foucault & Weimer)	is open to further interaction			
Communication experience	Intentional design of a communication experience is evident and explicit (Weimer)	Intentional design of a communication experience is evident but not explicit	It is unclear whether a communication experience has been designed	Evidence and statement of a communication experience are lacking	Design of communication appears to be thoughtless and poorly constructed
Language provides choice	Information is designed to be broad with opportunities for individuals to choose from supplementary material for increased knowledge; technology is employed to assist with knowledge access (Weimer)	Information is fairly broad but occasionally specific and detailed; supplementary information is provided and technology is employed for some access	Some information is broad and some is specific and detailed; supplementary information OR access to supplementary information are either unclear or inaccessible	Information covers mostly specific and detailed topics; no supplementary information is provided OR that information does not effectively employ technology	All potentially pertinent information is specifically covered in full detail with no supplementary information because it is all provided at the forefront
Language invokes participation	Recipients are presented with choices that lead to active participation in decisions; recipients are instructed to make decisions and are explicitly entrusted with those decisions (Weimer)	Recipients are presented with choices that lead to active participation in decisions but it is unclear that they are required to make those decisions and/or entrusted to do so	Recipients are presented with choices and it is unclear where those choices lead and that responsibility and trust are present	Recipients are presented with vastly limited choices and not informed of the responsibility or trust they are given in these choices	Recipients are provided with no choices; all steps are mandated
Language provides motivation	Communication encourages and engages recipients with opportunities to develop college transition skills (Weimer)	Communication encourages recipients to develop college transition skills	Communication neither encourages or discourages recipients to develop college transition skills	Communication discourages recipients from developing their own college transition skills	Communication discourages recipients from developing their own college transition skills and undermines ones connection to their own transition