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Robert W. Aaron is a Ph.D. candidate in higher education and student affairs at Indiana University Bloomington, where he is a project associate with the National Survey of Student Engagement. Prior to attending IU, he worked as director of first-year student services at Virginia Commonwealth University. Aaron earned his M. A. in higher education and student affairs from The Ohio State University (1996) and his B. A. in music from the University of Rochester (1993).

Facebook and College Students' Development of Mature Relationships

Katie Dickman, Emily Dutton, Corin Gioia, Laurie Oberhausen, & Becky Ravensberg

On college campuses across the country, students are spending hours of their time on the social networking website, Facebook. This study employed a qualitative approach to understand if Facebook affects social development among undergraduate students at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB). Using a focus group of seven students, researchers gathered information regarding Facebook in relation to mature interpersonal relationships as stated in Chickering's fourth vector of Identity Development.

Today's college students are being "poked" and solicited by their friends, peers, and sometimes strangers – online. This is happening on a social networking website, www.facebook.com (Facebook). Poking is a way of greeting others online. Facebook is organized much like traditional school facebooks – small books with information for students about their class-mates, including photos and interests (Metz, 2004).

Facebook was created in February 2004 by two students at Harvard University, Mark Zuckerberg and Eduardo Saverin, who wanted to create a website that would connect students on the Harvard campus (Feeney, 2005). Today, the site has more than 3.8 million registered college users from 1,531 different North American colleges (Facebook). Facebook is viewed over 100,000 times a day at Indiana University (Facebook). Not even two years old, it has become an obsession among college students (Vanscoy, 2005; Rice, 2005).

They use it to send messages to friends, reconnect with people they met outside the classroom, and search for fellow students with particular characteristics. These personal traits range from political affiliation to involvement in student organizations. It has become a crucial aspect of some students' lives and their social interactions.

Erikson (1950) stated that the period between the ages of 18 to 22 is a critical time for people to develop the ability to create strong interpersonal relationships. Therefore, this study utilized participants who are traditional aged college students. The purpose was to understand if Facebook affects social development among undergraduate students at Indiana University Bloomington. Specifically, the authors framed the study using the fourth vector of Chickering's Theory of Identity Development, known as Develop-ing Mature Interpersonal Relationships (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The fourth vector pertains to the development of lasting, intimate relationships as

well as a tolerance and appreciation of differences. Using a focus group, the researchers developed questions which probed students about their types of relationships, with whom these relationships exist, and if Facebook relationships are similar to or different from other relationships.

Literature Review

Due to its recent creation, research on Facebook is limited. Therefore, the authors use existing research regarding online communication, online communities, and student development theory about mature relationships. This research directly relates to the purpose of the study: to find out if undergraduate student communication via Facebook has an effect on their social development during college.

Online Communication

Research indicates that virtually all college seniors have used the Internet during their college careers (Finn, 2004). The Internet affords students many benefits including academic and social outlets. However, research regarding the effect of online communication among college students has yielded mixed results. Harris (2000) argued that increased time online is negatively correlated to the amount of time spent in face-to-face interaction. With Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), nonverbal cues are nonexistent which lead to misinterpretation and misunderstandings (Vicario, Henninger, Austin, & Chambliss, 2002). It has also been suggested that online environments, such as e-mail, instant messaging, and chat rooms, promote a "false sense of intimacy and misunderstanding of intentions" (Finn, p. 470).

Conversely, research exists that supports the idea that CMC is no less personal or effective than face-to-face communication. The Social Identity and Deindividuation theory suggests that CMC participants use social categories, the presence of social norms, and photographs to develop impressions of others when traditional non-verbal cues are missing (Tidwell & Rather, 2002). The lack of traditional nonverbal cues in CMC allows online communicators to proactively self-disclose information and participate in more intimate exchanges than one normally would in face-to-face communication (Tidwell & Rather). Online interaction increases the efficiency of relaying information and creates a broader forum in which people may express themselves (Vicario et al., 2002).

Online Communities

The issue of online communities in the context of higher education is being explored by researchers (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Such communities differ from traditional social networks in several ways. Palloff and Pratt

noted that "community is no longer a place-based concept" (p. 21) as a result of the information age. The advent of the Internet has torn down the once inevitable restrictions of time and place that framed communities. Another unique characteristic of an online community is the notion that it is primarily text-based (Johnson, 2001). This allows individuals to act differently than they do in the context of a traditional face-to-face interaction. Johnson noted that it has a particular impact on introverted students who may be reluctant to participate in a traditional setting, but are advantaged by the faceless format of the online community. Research about online communities is significantly limited because its primary focus in higher education is on the electronic classroom as opposed to social exchanges enabled by Facebook. Wellman and Gulia (1997) also noted that researchers often treat online communities as if they exist in a vacuum rather than looking at how online interactions fit into the rest of a student's life. Facebook falls into this category because few students limit their social interactions exclusively to online environments.

Student Development Theory

The study is framed using the fourth vector of Chickering's Theory of Identity Development, Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The Theory of Identity Development consists of seven vectors created by Chickering that are used as conceptual lenses to understand student development, specifically identity development. Practitioners can use the seven vectors to understand developmental patterns and assist students in an individual and appropriate approach specific to each student. The Theory of Identity Development is a tool that can be used to guide students toward establishing an identity, managing emotions, and developing relationships (Chickering & Reisser).

According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), in order to advance the development of one's identity, one must develop mature interpersonal relationships. The two main tasks associated with this process are having a tolerance and appreciation of differences and a capacity for intimacy. Both tasks involve "the ability to accept individuals for who they are, to respect differences, and to appreciate commonalities" (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 39).

Chickering and Reisser (1993) suggested that students' separation from those who are different from them is neither possible nor desirable. The developing student will reach a level of maturity in which more emphasis is placed on "the common good" than on any feelings of superiority (Chickering & Reisser, p. 160). A fully developed student will not only accept and respect the differences among individuals, but will be interested in exploring those differences further and value them.

In addition, Chickering emphasized the need for students to develop a capacity for intimacy (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Sustaining intimacy involves self-awareness, spontaneity, self-confidence, support, and communication. Because intimacy is the central development task for 18-22 year olds (Erikson, 1950), this is an important area of development for traditionally aged college students. At this age, students may have already developed some interpersonal skills, but they have not had the opportunity to create or understand the kind of lasting relationship that enhances personal growth and can be sustained for a lifetime (Chickering & Reisser). Prior to attending college the majority of students have only interacted within a homogenous environment. Therefore, students will enter this vector without a true appreciation of differences or an understanding of their own biases. At the beginning of this stage, students are more inclined to adhere to stereotypes and are concerned with being socially accepted (Chickering & Reisser; Weathersby, 1981).

According to Chickering, students developing their capacity for intimacy learn to balance their time alone, with friends, and with a partner. Their relationships are reciprocated and have a high level of trust, openness, and stability. Students developing a capacity for intimacy will take the initiative to make new friends that "nourish and enrich all aspects of the self" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 172). Developed students will maintain and honor existing relationships while continuing to work on areas of personal development.

Methods

The researchers used a one-hour focus group of registered Facebook members to gather personal usage information. Participants gave the researchers permission to use their online profile information in the study. Users present information about themselves and their associations with others in their Facebook profiles. This information can be viewed by all Facebook users at the institution.

The researchers analyzed the content of the conversation from the focus group session. This interview structure was flexible and allowed direct contact between the researchers and the participants. This flexibility allowed participants to talk about topics relevant to them, their use of Facebook, and their thoughts regarding online relationships. The qualitative methods afforded the researchers the best opportunity to get at the core of the students' feelings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2002; Patton, 1990).

Participants

The convenience sample consisted of seven undergraduate students at Indiana University Bloomington (IUB). The following were requirements for student participation: students had to be registered Facebook users on or before the first day of fall semester classes, enrolled as full-time undergraduate students at IUB, and between the ages of 18-23. Because this study focused on the areas of intimacy and appreciation of differences, it was logical to choose an age group where intimacy is the central developmental task (Erikson, 1950). In addition, the researchers looked for the impact of Facebook on a traditional aged IUB student as they are the most likely users.

Each researcher contacted several students and requested the names of candidates meeting the designated qualifications. After narrowing candidates to a smaller sample, diverse in age, gender, race, and involvement as reflected in their Facebook profile, the researchers contacted them via email. The email contained the specifics of the study and asked for their participation. This convenience sample technique produced a purposive group of subjects recommended by undergraduate students with whom the researchers were currently acquainted. Sampling procedures similar to snowball sampling are useful when specific characteristics are necessary in the participants (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003). Basing the procedure on snowball sampling aided in obtaining a convenience sample of individuals (Creswell, 2005). Each participant was informed of the purpose of the research and gave written consent to participate in the study.

The focus group contained:
- Adam, a male sophomore and member of a fraternity who reports logging onto Facebook two times per day on average, has over 250 Facebook friends at IUB, and friends located at over 50 other institutions

- Kim, a female senior who lives off campus and reports checking her Facebook profile between three and five times per day

- Max, a male senior who lives off campus and reports logging onto Facebook once per day, and has over 40 Facebook friends at IUB

- Lola, a female senior who lives off campus and says she logs onto Facebook twice per day, has over 230 Facebook friends at IUB, and is a member of over 15 Facebook groups

- Lyndsay, a female junior who lives off campus and reports checking her Facebook account once per day, has close to 100 Facebook friends at IUB, and is a member of over 15 Facebook groups

· Kelly, a female junior who is a member of a sorority and reports logging onto Facebook approximately once per day (but used to be much more active), has 33 pictures uploaded of herself and friends, and over 280 Facebook friends located at IUB

· Brandon, a male junior who lives off campus and who averages logging onto Facebook 10 times per day, has over 260 Facebook friends at IUB, and friends located at over 40 other institutions

Each student reported possessing either a computer or a laptop, with one participant possessing both. Creation dates of their Facebook profiles ranged from September to November of 2004; thus participants had roughly equal time and experience utilizing their accounts. When responding to the question, "Why did you register with Facebook?" more than half the students mentioned a personal invitation to join from a friend in order to reconnect with old acquaintances and meet new people.

Data Analysis

The focus group was audio taped for accuracy and transcribed for analysis. In analyzing the data, researchers looked for themes relating to students' development of mature interpersonal relationships. The researchers followed a technique described by Fraenkel and Wallen (2003) where the researchers become familiar with the information collected and allow the categories to emerge. A commonly used technique of coding is "emergence and interrogation of theory from data" (Richards and Richards, 1994, p. 168). For this study, the researchers employed the "emergence and interrogation of theory from data" method because it is aimed at generating concepts related to a specific theory or framework (Gough & Scott, 2000, p. 341).

Results

After careful analysis of the data, the researchers discovered seven themes relating to a student's development of mature interpersonal relationships. The researchers labeled each theme based on language taken from the focus group dialogue. Using the themes outlined below, the researchers were able to evaluate if Facebook has affected college students' development of mature relationships in accordance with Chickering's Theory of Identity Development.

Facebook Friend = Superficial Friend

A common theme that emerged from the discussion among all participants was that many of the relationships on Facebook are superficial. Even

the students who identified ways in which Facebook helped create more significant relationships acknowledged that many were superficial. One of the main features of the website allows users to ask others to be a "friend." If the person accepts, both people will be listed on one another's Facebook homepage as friends. Facebook has not changed the meaning of the word friend; rather it created the new term "Facebook friend." The implicit definition of this new term further emphasizes the fact that many relationships on Facebook lack depth. All of the participants acknowledged that there was a distinct difference between the two terms. Lyndsay said, "Facebook friend is…synonymous with artificial or…superficial friend." For some, the goal was to accumulate as many Facebook friends as possible. Lyndsay's Facebook profile lists several groups she joined that promote the idea of superficial friendships. Joining groups is another way that Facebook users meet each other due to a common interest or theme. Several of Lyndsay's groups have titles associated with being in a group "just because." For example, Lyndsay is a member of a group dedicated to students, all of whom have the same first name.

One participant noted that the acquisition of Facebook friends can lead to a popularity contest. The number of friends the participants in the focus group had on their homepages ranged from 41-284. They were quick to note that these numbers were not reflective of the number of actual face-to-face relationships they had. Kim estimated that about 70% of her 41 friends on Facebook were people she actually knew. This is indicative of the groups that she joined (four compared to Lyndsay's 25), in all of which she is an active member. In contrast, Lyndsay said that only about 10% of her 97 Facebook friends were people with whom she had face-to-face relationships. The nature of these superficial Facebook friendships can range from people in their classes with whom they have only had cursory contact to people they have never seen in person.

Facebook Crushes

The capability to generate Facebook friendships with strangers has implications for the formation of new romantic relationships. While Facebook is not designed to function solely as a dating service, the formation of new romantic relationships was a theme that emerged from the focus group. Students' profile pages allow them to list if they are in a romantic relationship and qualify whether it is a dating, open, or marriage relationship. For students who are not in a relationship, they have the option of listing the type of relationship in which they are interested. In addition, most students post pictures of themselves and list their likes and dislikes on their profiles. These features make Facebook an innovative new environment for the formation of new romantic relationships. In order to start this type of relationship, students

reported using a feature on Facebook called "poking." The feature, with apparent sexual overtones in the name, allows a user to send a uniform message to another user alerting them that they have been poked. A poke often implies romantic attraction. Though not solely reserved for romantic interests, participants reported it as the most acceptable way to let an acquaintance or even a stranger know that the interest is there. The recipient of the poke can reciprocate interest by poking back. When asked about meeting and connecting romantically on Facebook, Max described the process his roommate uses when interested in a woman. "He goes through the tried and true method of poke, poke back, message, meet, Internet chat, meet, and then…if you just call 'em right away, it's like 'Who are you?' 'Well, I saw your profile on Facebook and I think you're attractive and we should have coffee.' You can't do that." Though none of the participants in the focus group were currently in a relationship that started on Facebook, the group expressed that it was an acceptable mechanism for starting such a relationship.

Will You Be My Facebook Friend?

Some participants reported using Facebook to start new, non-romantic relationships. Though this practice was not as widely discussed as the use of the site to initiate romantic relationships, some students found it to be a beneficial way to meet new people. Brandon has a business that specializes in party promotion, mixing songs, and performing DJ services. He expressed that Facebook was an integral part of his business. He advertises parties and services on his profile page, which lists the name and address of the business. Facebook has helped him expand his business ventures to other colleges and universities. He commented, "I'll always have a free place to stay when I go and visit." Others also expressed that Facebook could be an important networking tool. There is a feature on the site that allows students to list their classes and view other students who have listed the same course. Several students expressed that the site made it easier to introduce oneself to a classmate in person by alluding to the fact that they were already Facebook friends.

Facebook: Offline Face-to-Face Interactions

Another emerging category from the focus group stemmed from face-to-face discussions about Facebook. Participants talked about looking through Facebook with their close friends and roommates. Kelly and a friend checked the profile of someone who interested her friend romantically. They used the information found in the profile to concoct a plan to talk to him and attract his interest. They spent time together on Facebook and talked extensively about the information they found there. This helped develop the

women's friendship and gave Kelly's roommate the possibility for an intimate relationship, all due to information learned on Facebook.

Max and his roommate also look through Facebook together. Max relayed a story about how his roommate looked through all his girlfriend's Facebook friends. He saw one of her friends, a male, at a party. They had never met, but he approached him and said that he knew him – from Facebook.

Participants also discussed how their profiles could affect how others perceived them. According to Kelly, she has talked with students about how employers search profiles to learn more about potential employees. "They'll plug in your name and see what comes up…they're going to check out everything that they can," she said.

Enhancing Relationships

Another theme that materialized from the focus group was how Facebook enhanced previously established relationships. In cases where this occurs, it is happening through face-to-face conversations that stem from an experience related to the website. For example, both Lola and Lyndsay mentioned discussing when their friends initially joined Facebook and how much they talked about it face-to-face. Lola said, "One of my roommates was already in it, and she was like 'Oh, you have to do this!'" She went on to explain how they shared their profiles and sat together at the computer to search for people on Facebook.

Interactions on Facebook itself are also being used by students to enhance established relationships. Students can say "hi" to each other by poking or sending a Facebook message. Each member of Facebook also has a "wall" at the bottom of their profile. Any Facebook user can write a message on another user's wall. That message can be seen by anyone who views that particular profile. Lola explained, "My friends try and be really silly and write little things like messages on my wall." In this way, students are communicating and enhancing already established relationships.

Tolerance and Appreciation of Differences on Facebook

Another emerging theme is the lack of tolerance and appreciation of differences. The participants responded slowly when asked questions pertaining to their interaction with people who are different from them in real versus Facebook relationships. Overall, the participants seemed to have a difficult time articulating how they characterized people as "different" as evidenced by Lola. Lola, who is on an athletic team, commented, "most people who are involved in different activities would be different than I am because they would want to be involved in those things for different reasons. I guess that doesn't determine the person, like they're not radically different

people than I am."

Students seemed to define differences based on morals, interests, and involvement in organizations rather than race, culture, or sexual orientation. Although the students said they did not notice differences in race, their Facebook friends seemed to match their own identities. For instance, 95% of Kelly's friends are white and a majority of them are female.

When asked specifically about how race, culture, and sexual orientation play into their classification of differences, participants agreed that it had a limited role. Brandon stated, "It don't matter if you're White, Black, Orange, Yellow, you know short, tall, it really don't matter, that's how I interact with all my friends."

Lyndsay commented, "I don't think race or sexual orientation or class matter to me. Umm, it's not something I look for in interactions with people, 'like, oh he's really gay' or stuff like that." Participants claimed that they do not acknowledge and see differences, so there seems to be little appreciation for those differences.

A reemerging topic by the focus group was that of "accepting" people as friends on Facebook. Since the user must make a decision based on limited information, he or she must make a judgment based on that knowledge. Lyndsay explained her uneasiness about sharing her political views via her profile. "I didn't want to be judged (because) I would consider myself more liberal...I am also Christian and I know that a lot of Christians would be mean and I just think that that's not fair and I just don't even want that [Christian] to be written on there." However, her profile has a list under the column titled "interests" and "Living for Christ" is the first interest listed. This contradicted her stated desire not to be judged by the average Facebook user based upon her political and religious affiliations. Based on this information and other comments in discussion, the research team perceived not only a lack of appreciation of differences, but also limited tolerance for diverse views.

Rekindling Relationships

One reason participants use Facebook is to reconnect with old friends. Lyndsay stated, "I'm actually even friends with people that I hated in high school...they like Facebook buddied me and I was like 'we will rekindle our friendship.'" However, it seems that often, these rekindled friendships seem to take on the same superficial status as other Facebook relationships. Kelly comments "it's...weird because we accept each Facebook friend but we message a few times and...that's it we don't even want to reconnect." All of the participants agreed, although they may have a rekindled Facebook relationship, it does not necessitate going to the next level of "real friend" status.

Discussion

The seven themes that emerged from the focus group discussion directly related to Chickering's fourth vector of the Theory of Identity Development. At its core, the vector focuses on "the ability to accept individuals for who they are, to appreciate and respect differences, and to empathize" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p.146). This includes developing tolerance in an intercultural and interpersonal setting and appreciation of differences, as well as a capacity for intimacy. In this regard, Facebook has created a reason for students to interact with each other in person, and perhaps enhance their capacity for intimacy. Because many students are involved with Facebook and know what it is and how it functions, it has become a tool for social interaction that transcends its original purpose to build online friendships and make new acquaintances.

Due to experiences with relationships contributing significantly to the development of a healthy sense of self for the student (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998), the researchers observed students using Facebook as a tool in the process of becoming more mature in their relationships. As the participants discussed their need for Facebook and what initially motivated them to join, such as networking or ways to start conversation, participants stated they felt more attached to Facebook. Over time, participants viewed their profile less often and talked about "wasting time" on Facebook as opposed to the relationship building tool the researchers hypothesized. For example, Kelly stated, "I think I'm weaning off Facebook...this is so pointless, like if I really care about these people I should just call them, you know?" In this instance, the researchers determined that Facebook has not necessarily helped Kelly in her development towards intimacy.

In contrast, other members of the focus group viewed Facebook as a means to demonstrate personal growth and maturity. Adam, the youngest member of the group, mentioned maturing in his use of Facebook. "Everything on my profile is true...but I changed it just the other day....like under 'favorite books' used to be Playboy....all the guys had Playboy...I'm more mature than that, so I put down like three or four books that I actually like reading."

One area the researchers hoped to clarify was the relationship between the tolerance and appreciation of differences between "real friends" and "Facebook friends." There was limited discussion on this topic throughout the focus group session, despite being asked about it twice. When asked how they would classify a student who was different from them Kelly responded, "I would say people are different from me if they have different morals." Echoing those sentiments, Lola said that people involved in different

activities than she was would not be like her.

When the participants were asked about diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation they appeared immediately uncomfortable. Brandon, who self-identified as Black, was the first to respond to this probe. He said, "To me a different person is somebody who I don't speak to on a regular basis." While Lyndsay said "I don't think I have a lot of people that ask me to be friends who are very diverse." When participants spoke about friends on Facebook or "real friends" their response to this question reflected where they were in their development.

Some of the data collected during the focus group suggested that student use of Facebook may be relevant to the next vector in Chickering's (1993) theory, Establishing Identity. The fifth vector encompasses the period when students develop a sense of self and a level of comfort with others. One aspect of this vector is "clarification of self-concept through roles and lifestyles" (p. 181). In the focus group, this was evidenced by students joining groups that portrayed a part of their identity. In the fifth vector, another one of the components for establishing an identity is "interaction with diverse individuals and ideas" (p. 207). As detailed in the previous paragraph, the data from the focus group did not demonstrate an appreciation of differences in others. Further research would be beneficial to determine whether use of Facebook hinders this aspect of student development.

Limitations and Recommendations

There were several limitations to this study. Because of the specific methodology used, the researchers encourage all readers to be cautious in generalizing the findings to other students of the university, as well as to all college students. However, specific themes emerged from the research that might aid in understanding undergraduate student experiences with Facebook.

Participant characteristics should also be taken into consideration as a limitation. The focus group was a fairly accurate representation of the university population regarding gender, race, age, and religious affiliation. However, the seven participants may have had specific biases of which the researchers were not aware. Additionally, the dynamics of the group may have had an effect on the type and amount of research obtained.

In addition to participant bias, it is also important to consider potential researcher bias. All researchers were of the same gender, race, and age demographic, and had foundational knowledge in student development theory which may have unintentionally influenced the analysis of the data. Although all researchers were registered Facebook users, most would consider their

Facebook usage to be minimal, and therefore may have influenced their interpretation. The researchers did find an advantage in being registered with Facebook in order to understand and directly view the contents and the profiles of the seven participants. The researchers were not able to attain first-year students to participate in their study. First-years may have been able to provide additional insight into the Facebook community that was not otherwise expressed in the focus group. Chickering and Reisser (1993) also acknowledged a limitation within their own theory. They noted it may be skewed as the vectors were developed on the basis of work done primarily with White males.

Recommendations for future studies would encourage the use of multiple focus groups over an extended period of time in which one-on-one interviews are conducted with each participant. This would not only increase the number of total participants allowing for a larger source of information, but personal interviews would help to eliminate limitations that occur due to the focus group dynamic.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to use Chickering's Theory of Identity Development to determine if Facebook affects students' social development at IUB. The researchers used the fourth vector of the Theory of Identity Development, Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships, as a framework to assess the development of relationships that are lasting and intimate, and that tolerate and appreciate differences (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

The focus group data suggests little correlation between the use of Facebook and student development in Chickering's fourth vector. The themes that emerged suggest that the relationships developed through Facebook were neither lasting nor intimate. Students in the focus group failed to offer substantial evidence to suggest that Facebook helped in the appreciation of differences in others. More research will be beneficial in helping student affairs professionals further understand the impact of Facebook on students. The immediate recommendation from this study is for practitioners to engage students in dialogue to facilitate their understanding of the significance of Facebook and other online communities.

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Katie Dickman earned a B.S. in Business Administration from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2003. While at Indiana University, she worked with Residential Programs and Services as a graduate supervisor and as a program advisor for the Indiana Memorial Union Board. She completed her M.S. in Higher Education in 2006.

Emily Dutton graduated from Indiana University with a bachelor's degree in Human Development and Family Studies in 2000 and a master's degree in Higher Education and Student Affairs in 2006. She worked as a career advisor in the IU Education Careers office.

Corin Gioia graduated from the HESA program in 2006. She worked as a graduate supervisor for Residential Programs and Services in Teter Residence Center. Corin received her bachelor's degree in Psychology from the University of Maryland in 2002.

Laurie Oberhausen graduated from Texas Christian University in 2003 with a B.S. in Elementary Education. She served as the Greek Affairs graduate assistant at DePauw University and graduated from the HESA program in 2006.

Rebecca Ravensberg received a B.S. in Journalism and her secondary education certification from Indiana University in 2000. She graduated from the HESA program in 2006. Rebecca worked in the Student Activities Office as the graduate assistant for Student Organizations and Leadership.