2015

Experiential Learning & Engagement: The Role of Professional Development and Engagement in the Graduate Assistant Experience

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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT:
THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND ENGAGEMENT
IN THE GRADUATE ASSISTANT EXPERIENCE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Education, Leadership, Research, & Counseling

by
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December 2015

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

This study explores the lived experiences of graduate assistants pursuing a master's degree in higher education. Graduate assistants now comprise approximately 12% of all postgraduate students in higher education. Thus, this qualitative study seeks to understand graduate assistants' experiences and support them in honing the quality of their interactions and communication with supervisors (faculty and staff). With dual roles of student and employee, graduate assistants face various challenges and also encounter unique opportunities while pursuing their academic and professional journeys. The field of higher education administration has demonstrated an interest in understanding the experience of entry-level professionals. While there is literature (Dickerson et al., 2011; Kuk, Cobb, & Forrest, 2007; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Waple, 2006) that discusses the master's student experience, those works mainly focus on graduate students' academic coursework and accompanying experiences. Thus, there is a need to better understand graduate assistants' professional experiences and how those experiences shape their personal and professional lives. This explorative study utilizes a modified grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). Approximately ten participants were interviewed and/or participated in a focus group. Data from the focus groups and individual interviews was triangulated with theoretical sampling techniques and memo writing. The intent of this study is to understand the professional lived experiences of graduate assistants and to use the findings to inform their understanding of how to make the most of their professional role. Five themes emerged from the graduate assistant data: (1) the challenge in navigating the blurred lines of student and professional, (2) their desire to have an interpersonal relationship with their supervisor, (3) their appreciation for autonomy, (4) their difficult transitions, and (5) their ability to connect the dots from their experience.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

Graduate education dates back to the mid 1600's with students studying an additional one to three years for the prestigious opportunity to teach (Borchert, 1994; Conrad, Duren, & Millar, 1993). Over the past 700 years, graduate education in the United States evolved to include over 800 programs including business, education, liberal arts, social sciences, and hard sciences (Bochert, 1994). With almost three million graduate students enrolled in American higher education institutions, and an estimated 22% of them working in various graduate student employment roles, it is beneficial to understand the graduate assistant experience (NCES, 2012). Specifically, this study focuses on graduate students who are pursuing Master's degrees which provide an opportunity to further enhance one's skillset, or specialize in a certain area. As Borchert (1994) stated, "many employers are choosing to hire graduates of master's programs, or they assist current employees in getting a master's degree while they are working by providing release time, tuition support, or cooperative in-house degree programs" (p. 11).

The lived experiences of graduate students are fairly well documented in literature, but primarily highlight the content of coursework and the importance of advising (Bloom, Cuevas, Hall, & Evans, 2007; Herdlein, 2004; Herdlein, Kline, Boquard, & Haddad, 2010; Hyman, 1988; Kuk et al., 2007; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001; Waple, 2006). Such research sheds light on the benefits and challenges of graduate study. It also serves as a starting point for this research study, which seeks to gain insight on the lived experiences of graduate assistants. Specifically, this study seeks to explore the knowledge acquisition of graduate assistants (GA) studying higher education. For example, how do their assistantship experiences shape their professional lives, if at all? How do graduate assistants learn and what are they learning about the professional field of higher education?

Graduate assistants are first and foremost students seeking to advance their education and contribute to a field of study. Balancing the roles of graduate student and graduate assistant can be extremely challenging (Anderson & Berdie, 1976; Brown-Wright, Dubick, & Newman, 1997; Feezel & Myers, 1997; Flora, 2007; Payne, Cummings, & Greunke, 2015). Graduate assistants experience stressors that are unique to their position, such as work overload and interpersonal conflict (Mazzola, Walker, Shockley, & Spector, 2011), lack of support services (Stagg & Kimmins, 2014), role conflict (Feezel & Myers, 1997; Payne et al., 2015; White & Nonnamaker, 2011), and faculty/advisor relationships (Brown-Wright et al., 1997; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001; Wong, Selke, & Thomas, 1995). The lived experiences of graduate students and graduate assistants across disciplines provides a plethora of potential research topics.

While it is important to research graduate students as a whole, there is a need to focus on specific types of assistantship within different academic disciplines. Thus, this study seeks to understand the experiences of higher education administration graduate students, at the master's level, who serve as graduate assistants for various student affairs units. It is important to understand the terminology commonly associated with graduate students who assume an assistantship. Teaching assistants will also be referenced throughout the literature review and represent graduate students who work with a faculty member and take on tasks such as instruction and grading. Most graduate teaching assistants are the primary course instructor while also prepare course materials, grade assignments, and are responsible for leading laboratory sessions (Tulane & Beckert, 2011; Weidert et al. 2012). Research assistants represent graduate students who work with a faculty member on a specific research project. For this paper, graduate assistants represent graduate students working in the student affairs division who work with advising, programming, student conduct, advising, etc.

Literature focusing on graduate students lacks a holistic picture, limiting its focus on skills gained or advisor relationships (Bloom et al., 2007; Herdlein et al., 2010; Hyman, 1988; Conrad, Duren, & Haworth, 1998; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001). Undergraduate research pertaining to engagement is plentiful, but the focus on post baccalaureate research is exceedingly scarce (Bair, Haworth, & Sandfort, 2004; Conrad et al., 1998; Guentzel & Nesheim, 2006; Payne et al., 2015; White & Nonnamaker, 2011). Conrad et al. (1998) explained the significance of graduate education:

> By providing students with the kinds of learning experiences, professional development experiences, and leadership experiences that enhance their ability and willingness to become leaders in their profession and in society, master's programs have become bridges between our colleges and universities and the larger society, thereby benefiting not only individuals but society as well. (p. 76)

Graduate education plays a vital role for students to further their academic understanding through studying a specific discipline. However, institutions of higher learning also have an obligation to provide professional development opportunities to students as well. Graduate assistantships provide the ideal platform for students to link theory to practice, and thus prepares students for entry-level positions.

Statement of the Problem

Graduate education enrollment continues to diversify and increase across the United States (Council of Graduate School & Educational Testing, 2010; O'Brien, 1992). Due to the monetary and professional development opportunities graduate assistantships provide, more students are exploring the assistantship route to complete graduate programs (Payne et al., 2015). Despite the growth in the popularity of assistantships, there is a lack of research exploring the graduate assistant experience (Payne et al., 2015). Attention to the graduate assistant experience may produce new ways of thinking about engaging these students. Payne et al. (2015) explained

that engaging employees "can greatly enhance job performance and can build a climate of professional learning and improvement" (p. 125).

In order to provide a learning intentional environment for graduate assistants, or any employee, it is key to first assess their needs and current experiences. "Feedback from graduate assistants is also essential for improving programs, research agendas, and classroom instruction" (Payne et al., 2015, p. 104). Thus, this study seeks to uncover graduate assistants' needs and experiences. The current literature discusses the academic coursework relevant to the field of higher education (Herdlein et al., 2010; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Waple, 2006), yet it neglects to understand how learning occurs through an assistantship. Without exploring this topic, higher education practitioners and scholars are disregarding the impact this experience has on preparing graduates for entry-level positions.

Experiential learning is critical to higher education in order to connect academia to practical application (Clyde, Floyd, & Walker, 2004). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory (ELT) is most relevant here as it acknowledged that experience provides the foundation for learning to occur. In order to improve and enhance the experience of graduate assistants within administrative units, we must hear their current experiences and understand how learning occurs through their role. Kolb (1084) argued, "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). Graduate assistants have the unique opportunity to obtain hands-on experience in the field in which they are currently studying through their master's program. When used in conjunction to what students were learning the classroom, ELT expanded the learning that took place in a doctoral program (Hall-Hertel & Volchok, 2015). Experiential learning theory connects personal experiences, work, and education (Kolb, 1984).

This research will provide foundational information regarding students' learning experiences through their GA positions and how their assistantship provides professional and personal development. This study will assist graduate assistants to better understand expectations of their role, which will result in giving them the ability to have meaningful dialogue with faculty or staff members to modify responsibilities if needed. This study will also assist faculty in understanding what students experience outside of the classroom, bridging coursework and lived experience. Supervisors of graduate assistants will also benefit from this study. They will gain insight into the experiences of their graduate students and will have the capability to modify and tailor existing practices to better accommodate graduate assistant needs.

Brief History of Graduate Education in the United States

Over the past century, graduate education has evolved immensely in the United States. It has a strong German influence, and that legacy of original research continues to be at the pinnacle of graduate education. Throughout history, events such as WWI, WWII, and Russia's launch of Sputnik, influenced postgraduate education. Throughout the last decade, enrollments have continued to increase and student bodies have become increasingly diverse (Council of Graduate Schools & Educational Training, 2010). It is important to understand the context of graduate education throughout history to comprehend its current state and its impact on the future of higher education.

1890 to 1914

Germany was certainly the country with the largest influence on American postgraduate education (Geiger, 1997; Grigg, 1965). Many American professors were graduates of European institutions, primarily from Germany; in hopes their American students would study abroad to recruit additional foreign students back to the states. The German education structure focused

primarily upon research and academic freedom, and this dynamic continues to challenge the American system of education (Geiger, 1997; Grigg, 1965). In 1900, the Association of American Universities (AAU) formed and remains influential in postgraduate education today. Specifically, the goal of AAU was to assist in standardizing graduate school, as well as ensuring purpose and quality (Conrad et al., 1993). However, standardizing graduate education never fully evolved due to the inconsistencies of programs and institutions (Conrad et al., 1993). During this time, faculty struggled to maintain the status quo of German professors with high research production due to the lack of financial resources and immense amount of time spent teaching undergraduate students who were characterized as unmotivated (Geiger, 1997). Geiger (1997) explained that German institutions were much more selective, and during this period most American institutions utilized relatively open admission policies, which in turn negatively affected research production. In response to this challenge, certain professors were employed solely for instruction allowing others the ability to conduct research (Geiger, 1997). We see this trend continue today with varying roles and titles as assistant professor, professor of practice, adjunct, etc. As time progressed, student enrollment continued to grow across the country and research also expanded with nicer facilities, new subjects available, and specialization of disciplines (Grigg, 1965; Geiger, 1997). Whereas master's degrees were primarily liberal arts and sciences degrees, new programs were available in agriculture, art, business, city planning, engineering, forestry, music, pharmacy, public health, and social work (Conrad et al., 1993).

1915 to 1950

Graduate programs continued to grow in the United States. In the 1920's, the number of PhD graduates tripled (Geiger, 1997). State institutions and private schools were no longer similar in enrollment numbers. Geiger (1997) explained that state institutions capitalized on

larger enrollments and graduate fellows to assist with instruction while private schools remained selective and relied on tuition and alumni giving for financial assistance. Thelin (2004) proclaimed that enrollments increased due to the mass expansion of higher education throughout the 1940's, and this specifically expanded enrollments at state universities (Geiger, 1997). In 1940, there were about 106,000 postgraduate students, about 7% of all higher education enrollments, and by 1950 there were about 237,200 postgraduate students in the United States (Thelin, 2004). With more students enrolling in college, there was a strong demand for more faculty holding a PhD to instruct undergraduate students (Thelin, 2004, p. 280). Between 1940 and 1950, PhD output doubled (Geiger, 1997), and as more students continued their educational journey past a master's degree, private industry became an important stakeholder for university research. "For the first time American universities could look to a regular, recurrent source of support for the direct expenses of conducting organized research" (Geiger, 1997, p. 22).

1950 to 1980

Post WWII undergraduate and postgraduate enrollments rapidly increased, and one of the most prominent contributing factors were veterans taking advantage of the GI Bill (Geiger, 1997; Grigg, 1965; Thelin, 2004), which provides veterans financial assistance to attend college after their service (Toby, 2010). Conrad et al. (1993) also credit promotion policy for teachers, which increased the demand for master's degrees and specialized training for business and government employees, thus increasing the number of teaching and research assistants to ensure academic reputations remained sustainable. The Second World War also affected the federal government's investments which in-turn affected higher education research; specifically, the government increased war-time investments like agriculture research, military services, atomic energy commission, and public health services. The space race also impacted the future of higher

education. Russia's launch of Sputnik created a massive push for better scientific research (Geiger, 1997; Grigg, 1965). Throughout the 60's there was a trend of "professionalization" amongst master's students, less students studied the liberal arts, and instead focused on business and professional disciplines (Conrad et al., 1993). Throughout the 60's, faculty further indulged in research and had more access to funding (Geiger, 1997). However, this flourishing trend somewhat came to a halt in the 70's, when in 1973, graduate enrollment ceased to grow for the first time in history.

1980 to Present

Throughout the 80's, federal contributions to higher education research shrunk, and the goal of basic research was replaced by programmatic research, pointedly military research and technology (Geiger, 1997). Previously, men were the majority in postgraduate programs but in 1986, women reached parity with men in master's degree enrollment, and in 1991, women were the majority (O'Brien, 1992). By the 90's, an estimated 1.3 million students were enrolled in graduate programs across the country and about 80% of all graduate students were working toward a master's degree (O'Brien, 1992). Nerad, June, and Miller (1997) described challenges facing postgraduate education going into the 21st century: the dispute of over or under production of PhDs, the long-time table for PhD completion, decreasing financial support from state and federal governments, quality of PhD programs, ethical considerations with research, faculty-student relationships, lack of pedagogical training for teaching assistants, and more postdoctoral appointments.

Although there are challenges facing postgraduate education in America, the United States manages to produce the majority of PhD degrees around the world (Council of Graduate Schools & Educational Testing, 2010). Postgraduate education is successful due to the

"availability of world-renowned faculty, along with state-of-the-art research facilities, libraries, laboratories, and specialized equipment that provides students with one-of-a-kind opportunities to study and work in education settings that stimulate their intellectual development" (Council of Graduate Schools & Educational Testing, 2010, p. 2). Conrad et al. (1993) describe the trend of graduate education:

> In reviewing the growth of graduate education in the United States, one major trend is clearly discernible. Graduate education as initially conceived had its goal the training of advanced students as research scholars in an academic environment which stressed the search for and transmission of knowledge within a community of scholars. (p.20)

In addition to the enrollment growth of undergraduate study, postgraduate programs in a variety of new disciplines continue to diversify across the country. Now, more than 21 million students are enrolled in U.S. colleges (NCES, 2012). While there are about 7,000 institutions educating all of these students, the varied resources across individual campuses challenge administrators to identify ways to address growing needs at a time when state and federal funding are declining (Mason & Learned, 2006; Varlotta & Jones, 2010). To accommodate the varying needs that are the result of increasing student enrollment, higher education administrators work to identify more efficient ways of providing curricula and co-curricular options for students. One way higher education administrators work to address the increasing demand for classes and student services is by utilizing graduate students in the form of assistantships.

The Rising and Roles of Graduate Assistantships

Similar to the 1900s when instructional faculty were hired to teach, allowing research faculty to conduct scholarly work, campuses now employ master's and doctoral students on a part-time basis to teach classes, advise students, operate programs, manage residence halls, supervise laboratories, conduct research projects, and more. Graduate assistantships are typically research based, teaching based, or service based. Faculty feel pressure to produce research and

publications, and graduate assistants help to leverage faculty's responsibilities of instruction and advising. However, as student services grow on campuses, graduate assistants are utilized in a variety of departments under the student affairs umbrella as well, and this is especially common with master's students studying student affairs (White & Nonnamaker, 2011). White and Nonnamaker (2011) shared it was around 1950 that teaching assistants increased dramatically to accommodate the growing number of undergraduate students. As graduate programs also increased post WWII, apprenticeship graduate assistants became more common (White & Nonnamaker, 2011). White and Nonnamaker (2011) stated:

> GA position plays an important role in the graduate students' social and academic integration" and service based assistantships "are often closely aligned with students' professional goals and provide valuable service to the college or university, but are not officially located within or supervised by the academic program. (p. 45).

To ensure postgraduate students have rich experiences that prepare them to make meaningful contributions, research must be conducted to better understand how learning occurs through an assistantship, as well as studying how students engage through assistantships.

Graduate assistantships allow graduate students the opportunity to obtain concrete professional experience, while completing coursework toward their master's degree. The master's degree provides specialization within a discipline or scholarly training. "Graduate education goes beyond just providing students with advanced knowledge and skills – it also further develops critical thinking skills and produces innovators" (Council of Graduate Schools & Educational Testing, 2010, p. 1). This elevated level of knowledge and advanced skill set is required now more than ever (Council of Graduate Schools & Educational Testing, 2012). Certain positions, especially those in higher education administration, require an advanced degree. Moreover, people seek graduate education in hopes of distinguishing themselves from other applicants (Borchert, 1994), as well as receiving higher salaries (Council of Graduate

Schools & Educational Testing, 2012). Thus, enrollment in postgraduate education will likely continue to increase as markets remain competitive, and qualifications for student affairs positions mandate a master's degree.

For those pursuing a graduate degree, a graduate assistantship provides financial compensation and professional work experience. "University assistantships, either teaching, research, or other university work, may provide an opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills learned in a graduate program" (Council of Graduate Education & Educational Testing, 2012, p. 20). Titles may vary by the institution, and even individual academic fields. For example, some campuses may use a collection of the following terms: graduate assistants, teaching assistants, assistant instructors, interns, laboratory technicians, laboratory assistants, and research assistants. For the purposes of this study, the term graduate assistant is defined as a full-time graduate student who works part-time (20 hours) on campus in a student affairs division. This term will be used instead of other terms because it relates to graduate students working within a student affairs department compared to working as a teaching assistant or research assistant.

Theoretical Framework: Experiential Learning

Although grounded theory methodologies are traditionally an inductive process in which the researcher neglects to use a theoretical framework, the constructivist modification allows for enhanced flexibility per the researcher's interest (Charmaz, 2006; Mitchell, 2014). Mitchell (2014) recently utilized a theoretical framework for a grounded theory study and found the framework enhanced the research process. Theoretical frameworks organize research. Green (2014) clarified that theoretical frameworks are intertwined throughout a study from creating questions, developing a design, and through the report. The guiding research questions for this study centers around the following: How do assistantship experiences shape professional lives?

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How do graduate assistants learn and what are they learning about? For this particular study, multiple frameworks were considered such as: Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory, Knowles's (1984) adult learning theory, and Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory. After reviewing each framework and focusing my attention on the guiding research questions and purpose of the study, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory (ELT) was selected as the best-suited theoretical framework. In the next section, I provide an overview of each framework considered, while also providing an in-depth rationale of Kolb's ELT.

Considered Theoretical Frameworks

Theoretical frameworks assist in organizing research from the beginning phases through writing the analysis (Green, 2014). It is essential that this study's theoretical framework compliments and enhances the purpose of this research - discovering the lived experiences of graduate assistants and understanding how learning occurs via an assistantship. Three additional frameworks were considered: Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory, Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development, and Knowles's (1984) adult learning theory.

Schlossberg's Transition Theory

Traditionally, Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory aids in understanding the transitional experiences of adults that may provide growth and development. Schlossberg's (1984) model studies the affect transitions have on adults through understanding the transition, the transition process, coping with the transition, the situation, self, support, and strategies. Fischer and Zigmond (1998) described the transition into graduate school as immensely different than transitions for undergraduate students; specifically, graduate students must create knowledge compared to consuming it from faculty. Gansemer-Topf, Ross, and Johnson (2006)

affirmed that the transition into graduate school elicits high-stress amongst many students. Although embarking on a new educational journey is certainly a transition, the focus of this study is to better understand how learning occurs through an assistantship. Schlossberg's framework may be more adequate to study the transition into a graduate program or transitioning back to school after working full-time. Further, this framework would benefit the exploration of transitions from graduate student to entry-level employee.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development

Schlossberg's (1984) transition theory lacked a focus on the learning process, therefore, Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development was also considered for this study. This theory focuses upon two issues – the relationship between learning and development and the specific features of this relationship. This framework is emphasized in the field of higher education, specifically when referencing the academic setting (Gredler, 2012; Harland, 2003; Wass & Golding, 2014). Vygotsky (1978) argued, learning should relate to the student's current developmental level but, "attention [has] been directed to the fact that we cannot limit ourselves merely to determining developmental levels if we wish to discover the actual relations of the developmental process to learning" (p. 84). The educator must work to establish two developmental levels: actual developmental level and zone of proximal development. The actual developmental level illustrates the current developmental cycles of the student, while the zone of proximal development represents development prospectively (Vygotsky, 1978). Hence, the zone of proximal development represents the student's potential that is established through the student's ability when working under guidance (Vygotsky, 1978). Therefore, "the developmental process lags behind the learning process; this sequence then results in zones of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90). Due to the exploratory nature of this study, and the lack

of existing research demonstrating that those working with graduate assistants identify as educators, this framework alone would not adequately frame the study.

Knowles's Adult Learning Theory

Although Vygotsky's (1978) framework does not meet the needs for this study, Knowles (1984) Adult Learning Theory models how adults learn, and since graduate assistants are considered non-traditional students this framework is relevant when exploring their experiences. Knowles (1984) argued that adult learning should center around a process-design instead of a content design, which is traditionally used in formal educational settings. Adult learners bring different learning styles and life experiences, and these may challenge educators while simultaneously providing an opportunity to enhance the learning process (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). Knowles (1984) described four characteristics for adult learners: self-directed, obtain extensive life experiences, ready to learn, and task motivated. It is important that adult learners understand why new information and learning strategies are relevant to their future (Knowles, 1984). Adult learners demand different educational approaches that pull from their experiences and create a clear link to future practice. This theory is not commonly used to frame research studying student affairs. Although adult learning theory emphasizes the importance of experience, this study seeks to explore how graduate assistants learn through their position, and Kolb's ELT is best suited to answer the proposed research questions.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory

David Kolb was an advisor at MIT and became discouraged when students were frustrated and uncertain with their declared major and career path (Alsandor, 2005). He stated that "a major function of education is to shape students' attitudes and orientations toward learning – to instill positive attitudes toward learning and a thirst for knowledge, and to develop

effective learning skills" (Kolb, 1984, p. 85). Kolb created an approach to better connect students' learning styles to certain disciplines (Alsandor, 2005; Kolb, 1984). Kolb (1984) explains:

> Experiential learning theory (ELT) offers a fundamentally different view of the learning process from that of the behavioral theories of learning based on an empirical epistemology or the more implicit theories of learning that underlie traditional educational methods, methods that for the most part are based on a rational, idealist epistemology (p. 20).

ELT is a contextual theory that draws on the works of Piaget (1970), Dewey (1938), and Lewin (1951), where experience is vital to the learning process (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2005; Kolb, 1984). Kolb (1984) stated, "experiential learning theory is a holistic integrative perspective on learning that combines experience, perception, cognition, and behavior" (p. 21). Experiential learning is spiral-like where students can learn upon experience over and over again (Hall-Hertel & Volchok, 2015). Graduate assistants possess the opportunity to obtain real-life experience and begin the process of linking theory to practice. In Kolb's (1984) writing, he linked ELT to higher education to assist in connecting personal experiences, work, and education. For this study, experiential learning theory is the strongest theoretical framework due its core ideal that experience is the foundation for learning to occur.

Major Propositions

Experiential learning is described through six major propositions (Kolb, 1984), which help to define this theory and give shape to an often abstract idea – learning. The first proposition states, learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). ELT differs from behaviorist or idealist theories in which ideas are fixed (Kolb, 1984). Instead, ELT sees ideas as fluid and ever changing because experiences are consistently reshaping views (Kolb, 1984). This concept aims to "stimulate inquiry and skill in the process"

(Kolb, 1984, p. 27) of learning instead of focusing on outcomes, which may completely neglect the learning process altogether. Kolb and Kolb (2005) noted, "to improve learning in higher education, the primary focus should be on engaging students in a process that best enhances their learning – a process that includes feedback on the effectiveness of their learning efforts" (p. 194). The graduate assistantship provides an ideal platform for students to apply theory and receive meaningful feedback.

The second proposition explains that learning is a continuous process grounded in experience (Kolb, 1984), which is also recognized as all learning is relearning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). This proposition concentrates on the student's background and experiences, which directly affects how students perceive and relate to new information. According to this proposition, educators should not only relay new information and ideas, but also build upon and modify the current ideas students' hold. "If the education process begins by bringing out the learner's beliefs and theories, examining and testing them, and then integrating the new, more refined ideas into the person's belief systems, the learning process will be facilitated" (Kolb, 1984, p. 28). This individualized approach to build upon students' beliefs will assist the learning process by meeting students where they are and relating new information to their experiences and familiarities.

Third, the process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of adaptation to the world (Kolb, 1984). The prominent influencers of ELT stressed that learning results from "conflicts between opposing ways of dealing with the world" (Kolb, 1984, p. 29). Kolb (1984) stated, "new knowledge, skills, or attitudes are achieved through confrontation among four modes of experiential learning" (p. 30). The four learning abilities are: concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization

(AC), and active experimentation (AE) (See Figure 1). ELT challenges the learner to change

their mode from concrete experience to abstract conceptualization and from active

experimentation to reflective observer (Kolb, 1984). "Learning requires abilities that are polar

opposites, and the learner, as a result, must continually choose which set of learning abilities he

or she will bring to bear in any specific situation" (Kolb, 1984, p. 30). To enrich the learning

process, educators and staff working with graduate assistants should challenge graduate students

to use abilities they are not primarily comfortable with.
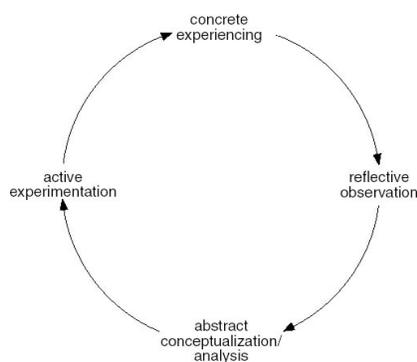
Figure 1. Kolb's (1984) Learning Process and Four Learning Abilities

The fourth proposition explains that learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the

world. Learning "involves the integrated functioning of the total organism – thinking, feeling,

perceiving, and behaving" (Kolb, 1984, p. 31). ELT takes all of these functions into

consideration to purposefully share information in a meaningful way based on the student's

background. Further, Kolb's ELT (1984) stressed the importance of learning as a lifelong

process, and this proposition demonstrates the importance of information shared in the classroom

should also relate to work and other life activities outside of an academic setting. Learning

should not exclusively exist in the classroom setting; in fact, various student development

theories demonstrate that opportunities outside of the classroom enhance the learning process

(Astin, 1984; Kuh, 1999; Tinto, 1993).

The fifth proposition states that learning involves transactions between the person and the environment (Kolb, 1984). The term *experience* in ELT holds two meanings, one subjective and the other objective (Kolb, 1984). The subjective meaning exists as a personal interpretation, while the objective meaning is environmental and tends to be more concrete. "These two forms of experience interpenetrate and interrelate in very complex ways" (Kolb, 1984, p. 35). Kolb (1984) explained that the person and the environment are both changed after an interaction. "Learning in this sense is an active, self-directed process that can be applied not only in the group setting but in everyday life" (Kolb, 1984, p. 36).

The last proposition explains that learning is the process of creating knowledge. "Knowledge is the result of the transaction between social knowledge and personal knowledge" (Kolb, 1984, p. 36). Kolb and Kolb (2005) further described ELT as a social constructivist approach, where learning is recreated through lived experiences. "To understand knowledge, we must understand the psychology of the learning process, and to understand learning, we must understand epistemology – the origins, nature, methods, and limits of knowledge" (Kolb, 1984, p. 37). Learning is a process, and this theory embraces a holistic approach where understanding the process is prioritized instead of concentrating exclusively on outcomes. These propositions comprise the different sectors that define experiential learning theory.

Orientations

Experiential Learning Theory follows two continuums. One continuum focuses on how experience is grasped, which is referred to as concrete experience (CE) or abstract conceptualization (AC). Kolb (1984) explained that CE learners tend to focus on feeling more than thinking. "The person with this orientation values relating to people and being involved in real situations, and has an open-minded approach to life" (Kolb, 1984, p. 68). AC learners focus

on logic and concepts (Kolb, 1984). These learners typically exhibit strong systematic planning abilities and use quantitative measures (Kolb, 1984). The other continuum focuses on how experience is transformed; reflective observation (RO) learners prefer watching while active experimentation (AE) learners prefer doing (Kolb, 1984; Loo, 2004). Learners who prefer RO orientations focus "on understanding the meaning of ideas and situations by carefully observing and impartially describing them" (Kolb, 1984, p. 68). RO learners value understanding situations from different perspectives. The AE orientation enjoys taking part in action based activities compared to observing (Kolb, 1984). These learners favor completing tasks, and "they also value having an influence on the environment around them and like to see results" (Kolb, 1984, p. 69). Although each orientation appears vastly different, ELT encourages learners to transform their learning orientation outside of their comfort zone.

The idealized learning process takes place when the learner goes through each mode (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Loo, 2004). "Experiential learning is a process of constructing knowledge that involves a creative tension among the four learning modes that is responsive to contextual demands" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 194). Loo (2004) presented that the learning cycle begins with concrete experience and reflection based on the observation, and these reflections are integrated to form new concepts which affect one's worldview and future experiences. Kolb (1984) created four different learning styles based upon the learner's preference for each mode.

Learning Styles

Kolb's (1984) ELT exhibits four learning styles: accommodative, convergent, assimilation, and divergent. "In using the analytic heuristic of a two-dimensional-learning-style map, it is proposed that a major source of pattern and coherence in individual styles of learning is the underlying structure of the learning process" (Kolb, 1984, p. 76). These learning styles work

in combination of how learning is grasped and how learning is transformed, as previously discussed through the four orientations.

Each learning style acts in combination with the continuums. The accommodating learning style has dominant modes concrete experience (CE) and active experimentation (AE). Kolb (1984) noted that "the greatest strength of this orientation lies in doing things, in carrying out plans and tasks and getting involved in new experiences" (p. 78). These learners tend to rely on others for information rather than their own analytic thinking; they also tend to make decisions based on their intuition rather than a logical process (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). The converging learning style favors learning abilities AE and abstract conceptualization (AC). These learners are strong in practically applying ideas (Kolb, 1984). Kolb and Kolb (2005) further explained, "they have the ability to solve problems and make decisions based on finding solutions to questions or problems" (p. 197). Accountants, engineers, and medical doctors are traditionally convergent learners (Kolb, 1984).

The assimilating learning style has dominant learning abilities AC and reflective observation (RO). This learner focuses on ideas and comparing abstract ideas. "People with this learning style are best at understanding a wide range of information and putting it into concise, logical form" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 196). Economists, mathematicians, and sociologist are a few of the disciplines that lean toward the assimilating learning style.

The diverging learning style has CE and RO as dominant learning abilities. Divergent learners are strong imaginative thinkers and see situations from multiple points of view (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). "They are interested in people, have broad cultural interests, and tend to specialize in the arts" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 196). Kolb (1984) explains divergent learners typically study history, psychology, and political science.

Years later, these four learning styles (accommodative, assimilation, convergent, and divergent) expanded to consist of nine different learning styles. The new learning styles include: northerner, easterner, southerner, westerner, and balancing learning style (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). These respectively emphasize the learning ability of CO, RO, AC, and AE while balancing the two orientations on the continuum, and the balancing learning style integrates all four orientations. Kolb and Kolb (2005) suggested that the northerner's strengths lie in "deep involvement while being comfortable in the outer world of action and the inner world of reflection" (p. 197). The easterner is typically strong in thought and reflection but has trouble applying this into action (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). The southerner is not commonly in touch with their feelings but is comfortable when applying analytical concepts (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Kolb and Kolb (2005) explained the westerner has learning strengths "that are informed both by conceptual analysis and intuitive experience" (p. 197). The balancing learning style incorporates the four original learning styles: AC, CE, AE, and RO. These learners "are more adaptively flexible learners" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 198). The nine learning styles respond to a common criticism of ELT, "the tendency to treat the four learning styles as four categorical entities rather than continuous positions on the dimensions of AC-CD and AE-RO" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 198).

As an extension of learning styles, learning space is described as "transactions between the person and the environment" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 199). ELT's learning space is based upon the work of John Dewey (1938), Kurt Lewin (1951), Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979), and Vygotsky (1978). "The ELT learning space concept emphasizes that learning is not one universal process but a map of learning territories, a frame of reference within which many different ways of learning can flourish and interrelate. It is a holistic framework that orients the

many different ways of learning to one another" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 200). Clyde, Floyd, and Walker (2004) described the importance of experiential learning in higher education – both inside and outside of the classroom. "Experiential education provides important linkage that could open doors for many student affairs practitioners who want to make a difference and collaborate with academic colleagues in the delivery of meaningful student learning programming" (Clyde et al., 2004, p. 102).

In addition to the previously discussed propositions and learning styles, Kolb (1984) stated, "Learning is thus the process whereby development occurs" (p. 132). Kolb (1984) argued against the dichotomy of learning and development and sees "learning and development as transactions between the person and environment" (p. 133). Hence, a person experiences three stages of development: acquisition, specialization, and integration. Transitioning between stages is not a uniform process; learners may advance in certain aspects of their lives while remaining stagnant in others (Kolb, 1984).

The first stage, acquisition, typically extends from birth through the adolescent years. Acquisition is further broken down into four sub stages: birth until two, two to six, seven to eleven, and twelve to fifteen (Kolb, 1984). Development in this stage "is marked by the gradual emergence of internalized structures that allow the child to gain a sense of self that is separate and distinct from the surrounding environment" (Kolb, 1984, p. 142). Stage two, specialization, goes through formal education or early adulthood. People in this stage begin making major decisions that impact their life – including where to attend school and what to study. It is through this education they begin to master, or specialize in, a subject or trade, and this foments a sense of individuality. Through specialization, one's self-worth depends on quality of work and recognition received. The third and final stage is integration. Integration evolves through

midcareer and later life and brings security and achievement (Kolb, 1984). Through this stage, people tend to become more cognizant of their learning styles. "Development through these stages is characterized by increasing complexity and relativism in adapting to the world and by increased integration of the dialectic conflicts between AC and CE and AE and RO" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 195). This study focuses on the experiences of graduate assistants who are traditionally in the second stage of specialization, where learners identify themselves through their work and desire for recognition.

ELT in Higher Education

ELT is used in a variety of contexts in higher education. The accommodating learning style commonly describes student affairs administrators/practitioners (Alsandor, 2005; Forney, 1994; Garland, 1985). Forney (1994) conducted a study to better understand the characteristics of student affairs master's students, and her findings demonstrate the model learning style amongst the participants was that of the accommodator. "The high representation of students classified as accommodators points to a need for program faculty to emphasize the link between the academic and experiential aspects of the field" (Forney, 1994, p. 342). The argument should also be made that staff working with graduate assistants should connect work to their academic courses and background. Accommodators value action based activities, and graduate assistantships parallel the opportunity to link theory from the classroom to practice in a work environment. Garland's (1985) description of administrators' characteristics working within a continuously changing higher education environment also complemented the accommodating learner.

Clyde, Floyd, and Walker (2004) agreed, "experiential education provides important linkage that could open doors for many student affairs practitioners who want to make a

difference and collaborate with academic colleagues in the delivery of meaningful student learning programming" (p. 102). Further, ELT is successful when implementing orientation, student counseling services, career development, staff development (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010), programming in student affairs (Lea & Leibowitz, 1986), leadership development (Guthrie & Jones, 2012), and integrity development (Saunders & Butts, 2011). Hall-Hertel and Volchok (2015) used Kolb's experiential learning as a foundational piece to their approach working with doctoral level students, specifically to expand what students are learning in the classroom. Gimbel and Cole (2009) also applied a hands-on learning approach with graduate research assistants partnering with faculty to conduct research throughout their master's program with successful results. Kolb (1984) stressed that experience is the foundation for learning to occur; therefore, experiential learning theory provides the most adequate framework to explore the graduate assistant experience of master's students studying higher education.

Theoretical Framework Summary

Graduate assistants balance dual roles of employee and student, and ideally both components should complement and challenge one another. The graduate assistant experience manifests Kolb's (1984) model of concrete experience in which students reflect, form abstract concepts and generalizations, and test implications in new situations. Kolb (1984) insisted that "learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (38). This is significant because GAs obtain hands-on experience while simultaneously completing coursework toward their Master's degree. Experiential learning encompasses six propositions that frame the ideal graduate assistantship in which learning is enriched through their position. This framework parallels the goal of assistantships – to enhance the learning

process. Thus, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory provided the strongest theoretical

framework to explore the graduate assistant experience.

Concluding Thoughts

Graduate education enrollment continues to gain momentum and significance in the

United States. Borchert (1994) presented the importance of graduate education in America:

> Master's education in the United States today is a substantial, dynamic, and important part of graduate education, which through its responsiveness to societal needs for advanced education plays a continuing and prominent role in the training of the American professional workforce. (p. 1).

The Council of Graduate Schools and Educational Testing (2010) affirmed that "now is the time

to address and understand the value of graduate education" (p. 1). In fact, there are a variety of

reasons postgraduate enrollment is increasing. The job market continues to grow more

competitive, and a master's or PhD may open more doors for employment or advancement

within a company. Those who obtain a graduate degree make more money through their lifetime

and have lower unemployment rates than those with a bachelor's degree (The Council of

Graduate Schools & Educational Testing, 2012). And, as long as undergraduate programs

continue to increase, teaching/research assistants will be hired to help with instruction and

grading, and administrative GAs will be hired to assist with recruitment, advising, and

programming. Kolb's ELT model provides the framework for this study due to its strong focus

on experience as the basis for fostering learning. Through this exploration of graduate assistant

experiences, the researcher seeks to understand how learning occurs in these unique positions.

Research must be conducted to ensure that the graduate assistant experience provides the

necessary foundation to be prepared to work in student affairs after graduation.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on student engagement in higher education primarily focuses on the undergraduate student experience. This is understandable given the almost 18 million undergraduates in the United States (NCES, 2012). Their needs, issues, and experiences are important for educators, administrators, practitioners, and policymakers as they inform policy and practice. However, in addition to understanding undergraduate students, it is equally important for these same professionals to educate themselves on the graduate student experience. Administrators and faculty make the false assumption that graduate assistants do not need individualized attention or services (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006). Findings indicate that graduate students indeed need programs and mentoring to assist with their development and achievement (Conrad et al. 1998; Forney & Davis, 2002; Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006). As a result, this research study focuses on the lived experiences of graduate assistants.

The decision to conduct original research on this topic is the result of the researcher's experiences as a graduate assistant during master's and doctoral study. The researcher experienced both positive and negative learning experiences as a graduate assistant. The positive experiences led to enhanced personal and professional development as a student affairs practitioner. However, the poor experiences did not provide an opportunity for learning to occur. As the number of graduate assistants continues to increase across the country, and within student affairs, more research needs to be conducted to support their development, which ultimately benefits the entire field (Conrad et al., 1998). The majority of research pertaining to graduate assistants in higher education examines the skills students gained while enrolled in their program of study, or their transition into full-time work (Hyman 1988; Janosik, Carpenter, Creamer, 2006; McGovern & Tinsley, 1976; Richmond & Sherman, 1991). Comparatively, there is

minimal research available that studies the experiences of these graduate assistants, or explores engagement within their position. The research discussed in this review will begin with pertinent research concerning student employment on campus, which does technically encompass graduate assistants (Flora, 2007), but the literature predominately focuses on undergraduate student employees. The history and growing demand for graduate assistants in the field will also be discussed. From here, the research that explores graduate assistant experiences will unfold and primarily focus on advising and mentoring. The majority of research pertaining to the experiences of graduate students in higher education focuses on the skills gained throughout their program, or skills necessary for entry-level professionals. Thus, a broad overview of these studies will be explained.

Engagement

Engagement may be considered a "buzz word" in higher education, but engagement continues to be a focal point of research for over 70 years (Zepke, 2014). Theorists like Astin (1984), Tinto (1993), and Kuh (1999) have made profound contributions to the importance of engagement to student success. As Malcolm and Thomas (2011) noted, "student engagement refers to the active involvement of students with peers, institutional staff, and the institution, and is necessary for students to be successful learners and graduates" (p. 2). Engagement literature influences institutional practices to increase student learning (Pontius & Harper, 2006). For graduate assistants, engagement is also pivotal to retention and success, but there is limited research available focusing specifically on graduate assistants or graduate students (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006; Pontius & Harper, 2006).

Guentzel and Nesheim (2006) posited six needs for graduate students: safe space, specific services geared to reach graduate/professional students, interaction across disciplines,

community building, academic and student affairs partnerships, and assessment of graduate

student needs, satisfaction, and outcomes. Gansemer-Topf et al. (2006) further explained:

> Because many graduate students are focused within their specific departments and not in the larger university, student affairs professionals can be the most effective if they work in conjunction with graduate offices and academic units. Nevertheless, their knowledge of student development and expertise in connecting theory to practice is also necessary as departments work toward improving educational experiences of their graduate and professional students. (p. 28).

The graduate student experience is unique, and administrators and faculty must recognize this to

enhance engagement and learning. Goretsky and Patel (2015) implemented a graduate student

engagement office to specifically connect with graduate students on campus. The center focuses

on advocacy, social interactions, professional development, centralizing information, and

leadership enhancement (Goretsky & Patel, 2015). Graduate students benefit from specific

student services aimed to enhance engagement that undergraduate students commonly receive.

Graduate assistants working within a division of student affairs take on multiple roles as student,

researcher, and employee. Working on campus provides a strong link to engage graduate

students with student affairs, but the mindset of the staff and institution must evolve to

understand that graduate students also deserve institutionalized support structures.

Student Employment

Research pertaining to undergraduate students is considerably large, and student

engagement is one of the topics that attracts a vast amount of attention. One of the primary ways

in which students engage in their institution is through campus involvement (Astin, 1984; Kuh

1999). There are infinite advantages that result from student involvement within their institution

from employment, organizations, leadership roles, community service, and the like (Astin, 1984;

Brown & Minor, 1985; Kuh, 1999). Working on campus provides specific opportunities for

students to gain experiences that will directly relate to future job positions (Muldoon, 2009;

Ward & Yates, 2012) and offers a vast amount of incentives for students – far beyond the minimal paycheck. Athas, Oaks, and Kennedy-Phillips (2013) claimed that "employment within student affairs divisions offers environments in which students can apply the knowledge they have gained, as well as acquire new information, skills, and competencies, helping them to build solid foundations for their futures" (p. 56). It is important for professionals to know how to engage student employees in order to provide the best work experience, while also benefiting their department.

Athas et al. (2013) found that students working in a student affairs division recognized their employment to be instrumental to their skill development in multiple ways. They also found duration of employment, rank, sense of community, civic engagement, and cultural awareness were strong predictors of development (Athas et al., 2013). Muldoon (2009) conducted a study focusing on graduate students' attributes resulting from part-time work and found that students not only developed work-related skills, like decision-making and communication skills, but also developed personally by further understanding patience and empathy. Ward and Yates (2012) agreed it is vital for students to build their resume and obtain experiences that will appeal to future employers while in college. Working on campus allows students numerous opportunities to develop their communication, time management, customer service, and management skills. The staff working with student employees should acknowledge the opportunity for personal and professional development and incorporate that within their leadership style.

Higher education professionals have a responsibility to work with student employees to foster their personal and academic success, inside and outside of their position (Perozzi, Rainey, & Wahlquist, 2003). Hunter and Comey (1991) suggested identity development continuously evolves throughout a college student's tenure. Although student affairs professionals may

acknowledge the importance of personal and professional development with undergraduate students, their work with graduate assistants should also be purposeful.

Mentoring Relationships

The term mentor evolves from Greek methodology and is often referred to as teacher, role model, counselor, or trainer (Corbett & Paquette, 2011). Mentorship influences research and guides practice in higher education. One of the unique components that graduate assistants in student affairs encounter is working with undergraduate students and engaging them as a mentor, while simultaneously completing coursework and being mentored by faculty or staff. Corbett and Paquette (2011) defined a mentor as "one who nurtures a professional colleague and guides them through the expectations of the institution of which they are a part" (p. 286). In the work place, a mentor can assist new professionals to better understand the institutional norms. Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, and McKee (1978) found that mentorship was the most important relationship of young adulthood. Mentor relationships provide support to young adults in new positions.

Johnson (2007) noted that "good developmental relationships (mentorships) promote socialization, learning, career advancement, psychological adjustment, and preparation for leadership" (p. 4). Mentored individuals report higher levels of job satisfaction, higher incomes, and stronger commitment to their respective field than those who were not mentored (Johnson, 2007). In an academic setting, 95% of medical and graduate students reported mentoring as vital to their personal and career success (Aagaard & Hauer, 2003; Johnson, 2002). Further, many teaching and research assistants feel they have received inadequate mentoring which hinders the graduate student's ability to work effectively with undergraduate students (Corbett & Paquette, 2011). Mentoring provides numerous benefits to the protégé, including improved academic

performance, networking, professional development, career advice, and reduced stress (Baker & Griffin, 2010; Corbett & Paquette, 2011; Sherman, 2009). Most research pertaining to mentor relationships for graduate students identifies the adviser as the mentor (Baker & Griffin, 2010; Corbett & Paquette, 2011; Schwartz & Holloway, 2014; Sherman, 2009).

Mentor Relationships in an Academic Setting

The relationship between advisors and graduate students is the most important factor in graduate student success (Bloom, et al., 2007; Boyle & Boice, 1998; Selke & Wong, 1993; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001). Schwartz and Holloway (2014) recently found that the majority of meaningful interactions that graduate students experience with a mentor revolve around academic work. Faculty should build a personal relationship with graduate students to transition from an advising role to a mentoring role, which increases engagement, retention, and learning.

An advising framework by Selke and Wong (1993) represents graduate student needs today. Selke and Wong (1993) created a mentoring-empowered model for advising graduate students that centers around a nurturing environment. Selke and Wong (1993) discussed five functions that are necessary for a graduate advisor: reliable source of information, departmental socializer, occupational socializer, role model, and advocate. They claimed that these functions are "grounded in an atmosphere of trust, openness, and mutual willingness to grow by including the elements of nurturing, befriending, and encouraging" (Selke & Wong, 1993, p. 25). This framework relates to the previously discussed engagement theories in which connecting with faculty and staff increases the student's connection to the institution, and therefore, students are more likely to persist and graduate. This approach of working with graduate students is a common theme found in studies conducted over the last five years.

Schwartz and Holloway (2014) sought to understand the meaningful interactions that masters and doctoral students had with faculty. They stressed that "students in this study were energized by their professor's enthusiasm and attention and also experienced increased self-worth or self-esteem" (p. 49). This study also found that mentors should utilize an individualized approach with students. Schwartz and Holloway (2014) recommended mentors initiate opportunities for meaningful conversation with students and create engaged presence with students. Schwartz & Holloway (2014) clarified, "the concept of engaged presence emphasizes that the quality of the time that we spend with students is more important than the quantity of time" (p. 52). Mentors should build a caring relationship, which is demonstrated through individualized expression. Enthusiasm is also essential to engage graduate students. Schwartz and Holloway (2014) noted, "as we express enthusiasm for students and their ideas, we not only bring energy to the moment, but we also convey a sense of intellectual mattering and thus help students see themselves as emerging scholar-practitioners" (p. 53).

Johnson's (2007) work presents similar recommendations to Schwartz and Hollow's (2014) for mentoring graduate students. Johnson (2007) affirmed that faculty should support graduate students in multiple contexts, not exclusively focusing on academic coursework. This includes supporting students on a personal and professional level, while keeping the power dynamic of the relationship neutral. Graduate students prefer working with faculty who do not exude a strong hierarchy in their relationship (Gregg, 1972; Johnson, 2007). Gregg (1972) also found that students respond with higher levels of satisfaction with mentors who exemplify a collegial relationship. It is beneficial if the mentor invests in the student's career post-graduation (Johnson, 2007). Graduate students require intense support throughout their academic journey, and it is through building strong mentor relationships that they are able to excel.

Sherman (2009) also discussed the importance of mentoring graduate students through developing professional skills, enhancing confidence and professional identity, scholarly productivity, networking, dissertation progress, and satisfaction with program. These levels of support will assist graduate students in navigating their career aspirations. Sherman (2009) further declared "if properly developed, the mentoring process can contribute significantly to the dynamic development of a profession" (p. 91). Taking the time to work with students on their career aspirations will ultimately have a positive influence on the field of higher education.

Baker and Griffin (2010) also supported an encouraging relationship for faculty and students. They challenged faculty to transform their role from an advisor to a developer of student success. Essentially, they described three relationship tiers: advisor, mentor, and developer. The advisor exclusively shares academic knowledge concerning courses, rules, policies, and degrees, whereas the mentor exhibits increased interaction, personal care, and commitment (Baker & Griffin, 2010). The "developer engages in knowledge development, information sharing, and support as students set and achieve goals" (Baker & Griffin, 2010, p. 5). The developer further engages with students to identify goals and obtain the skill set to achieve said goals (Baker & Griffin, 2010). This philosophy of working with students is premised on a supportive and nurturing relationship.

Corbett and Paquette (2011) sought to understand how mentorship was perceived by graduate assistants and faculty. There were no significant differences in perceptions; however, the authors reiterate, "Many TAs and GAs are enthusiastic and appreciative of the opportunities and benefits afforded to them through the mentoring process" (Corbett & Paquette, 2011, p. 291). Corbett and Paquette (2011) also asserted that communication is a critical factor in mentoring relationships.

Mentoring provides graduate students various levels of support from academic guidance to professional development. Formal mentoring programs have also demonstrated success for students (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011; Hu & Ma, 2010; O'Brien, Llamas, & Stevens, 2012; Smith, 2008; Yaffe, Bender, & Sechrest, 2012). Specifically, mentoring programs with graduate students as the mentors display positive outcomes (Kiersma et al., 2012). Further, when working with minority graduate students - mentoring programs prove extremely beneficial (Spivey-Mooring & Apprey, 2014). Mentoring programs are especially valuable when faculty members are not equipped with the time, energy, or skills to appropriately support students in a mentoring role.

Faculty frequently face various barriers that prevent effective mentoring from taking place; for example, there may be a lack of training, increased stress throughout the tenure process, or a lack of reward or incentive (Baker & Griffin, 2010; Sherman, 2009). As a result, it may be difficult for faculty to devote the necessary time and energy to mentor graduate students. It is due to these added pressures that all higher education staff should take a personal interest in graduate student success. Newly appointed faculty also benefit from mentoring relationships with more experienced faculty (Baker & Griffin, 2010; Corbett & Paquette, 2011; Johnson, 2007; Kiersma et al., 2012; Sherman, 2009). New faculty often experience a transition themselves and mentor graduate students while also being mentored by seasoned faculty within their unit. Due to the variety of tasks and challenges faculty face, it is important to have departmental support structures in place to ensure that graduate mentor and advising needs are met.

Formal Mentoring Programs

Mentoring often falls upon the faculty member working with graduate students who are a research or teaching assistant. Faculty loads continue to build with instruction, research, and advising responsibilities therefore formal peer mentoring programs may alleviate the pressure while providing students with the necessary services. Peer mentoring programs show continued success (Hall & Jaugietis, 2011; Hu & Ma, 2010; O'Brien et al., 2012; Smith, 2008; Yaffe et al., 2012). Peer mentoring programs improve retention, persistence, student satisfaction, and encourage a sense of belonging (O'Brien et al., 2012). Two recent studies with successful peer mentoring programs will be discussed in more detail. Purdue's program involves graduate students as the mentors and Virginia's model focuses on minority graduate students.

Purdue University implemented a mentoring program with graduate pharmacy students mentoring undergraduate pharmacy students around research interests (Kiersma et al., 2012). Findings demonstrate that both parties found the program beneficial and would recommend it to peers. Mentees felt the program positively influenced their interest in research and increased networking opportunities while mentors found the program to improve mentoring skills, positively influenced their interest in mentoring additional students, and assisted mentees to make informed decisions (Kiersma et al., 2012). This mentor program enabled engagement from both parties and although the participants were pharmacy students, the argument could be made that this relationship is transferable to mentor relationships in a variety of fields.

The University of Virginia implemented a mentoring institute to enhance the quality of mentoring for minority graduate students. Spivey-Mooring and Apprey (2014) agreed that mentoring relationships contribute to student success and are especially important when working with minority graduate students. "Faculty mentoring is an essential resource and factor that can

significantly impact the attrition rates of diverse graduate students at PWIs" (Spivey-Mooring & Apprey, 2014, p. 395). Specifically, diversity-focused mentoring will provide necessary support for minority students that may need to overcome poor academic advising or lack of guidance from faculty (Spivey-Mooring & Apprey, 2014). The University of Virginia's Mentoring Institute conducted a program evaluation and found the Mentoring Institute contributed to academic success for graduate students through support and encouragement. Faculty members involved with the program also discussed the meaningful relationships they built with mentees and the desire to continue those relationships beyond the parameters of the program. Socialization, professional development, and networking were all themes that emerged from the study.

Mentoring in Student Affairs

Faculty often serve in the mentor capacity for graduate students, but student affairs practitioners also have the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with students, and support them throughout their journey. For graduate assistants working closely with staff and administrators within a department, mentor relationships may exist. Kuk et al. (2007) proclaimed that supervisors of graduate assistants commonly serve as mentors throughout graduate programs. Graduate assistants also work closely with undergraduate students in which they may undertake the mentor role. For the unique position of graduate assistants, there is little research that describes the importance of mentor relationships with supervisors or staff. Thus, the researcher chose to include an overview of mentor research focusing on entry-level professionals, which is also pertinent to the graduate assistant experience.

Mentoring for Entry-Level Student Affairs Positions

Just as undergraduate students develop from mentoring, new professionals in student affairs also benefit from mentoring. Building a relationship with an experienced administrator, especially for new professionals, can heavily influence behavior and character (Bolton, 2005; Cooper & Miller, 1998; Jones & Segawa, 2004). According to Cooper and Miller (1998), "many mature and committed professionals believe that it is important to provide special support on a continuing basis to those with less professional experience and maturity" (Cooper & Miller, 1998, p. 56). Participants from Cooper and Miller's (1998) study described mentors as empathetic, passionate, encouraging, empowering, knowledgeable, and visionary. Although this study did not use graduate assistants as participants, there is a clear link that graduate assistants, as aspiring administrators, would also benefit from the mentorship of administrators they work closely with.

Cilente, Henning, Jackson, Kennedy, and Sloan (2006) conducted a study to understand the professional development needs of new practitioners in student affairs and also researched the best delivery methods for these competencies. Their findings indicated that new professionals feel that adequate support, understanding job expectations, fostering student learning, moving up in the field, and multicultural competencies are important professional development skills. One of the preferred methods for obtaining these competencies was establishing a relationship with a mentor. However, new professionals often feel it is their own responsibility to seek out a mentor. A mentor may assist new professionals, or a graduate assistant, in navigating the culture of the institution or division while also providing personal support through professional development opportunities.

Kuk et al. (2007) agreed that mentoring is an essential tool to ease the transition from graduate student to new professional for entry-level staff. They found significant differences in the perceptions of entry-level competencies between faculty, mid-level managers, and chief officers. Therefore, mentoring may be crucial to assist new professionals in navigating the culture of their institution, as well as understanding the desired competencies needed for their position. Renn and Hodges (2007) also found that mentoring was an important relationship for new professionals in student affairs, and mentors should assist new professionals to navigate the institution and provide professional development opportunities. These findings are consistent with the works of Tull (2006) and Janosik, Creamer, Hirt, Winston, and Saunders (2003). Renn and Hodges (2007) argued that new professionals come from diverse backgrounds and educational levels, and that mentors can play a critical role in easing the transition to a full-time practitioner. Graduate assistants possess qualities that resemble new professionals in the field, but they also work closely with undergraduate students in which they embody the mentor role.

Mentoring Undergraduate Students

There is a vast amount of research exploring mentorship for undergraduate students; however, it is difficult to synthesize the data due to the lack of consistency in theory, methods, and definition of mentor (Gershenfeld, 2014; Jacobi, 1991; Nora & Crisp, 2007). Nora and Crisp (2007) constructed a framework that categorized mentor literature into four domains. Crisp and Cruz (2009) conducted a critical review of mentoring literature from 1990 to 2007 and validated Nora and Crisp's (2007) four domains; more recently, Gershenfeld (2014) composed a meta review of undergraduate mentoring literature and confirmed that Nora and Crisp's (2007) framework and domains are still representative of the literature base. Due to these findings

(Crisp & Cruz, 2007; Gershenfeld, 2014), Nora and Crisp's (2007) four domains will provide the framework of mentoring needs for this study.

The first domain that summarizes mentorship for undergraduate students is psychological or emotional support. This encompasses listening, providing moral support, identifying problems and providing encouragement (Nora & Crisp, 2007). Next, Nora and Crisp (2007) shared that mentors provide support for goal setting and choosing a career path. This encompasses acknowledging the protégé's strengths and weaknesses and creating goals accordingly (Nora & Crisp, 2007). The third domain centers around academic subject knowledge support aimed at advancing a student's knowledge (Nora & Crisp, 2007). Nora and Crisp (2007) described the fourth domain as a role model in which the mentee learns from the mentor's previous experiences. These domains represent the major contexts in which mentors serve undergraduate students, and possibly provide insight into the relationships that graduate assistants have with the undergraduate students they work with.

Campus professionals are well suited to work with undergraduate students through their search for meaning and purpose (Healy, Lancaster, Liddell, & Stewart, 2012; Winston & Hirt, 2003). It is important for student affairs professionals to build personal relationships with students to enrich their collegiate experience and personal development (Blake, 2007; Winston & Hirt, 2003). Healy et al. (2012) created a framework to enrich moral mentoring in student affairs, in which both parties must be willing to engage in uncomfortable dialogue (Healy et al, 2012). There is a strong demand for individualized attention when advising and mentoring students based on their backgrounds and needs (Benishek, Bieschke, Park, & Slattery, 2004; Bernal, Aleman, & Garavito, 2009; Calda & Bankston, 1998; Eamon, 2008; Jones & Goble, 2012; Stuber, 2011; Torres & Hernandez, 2009). The mentor relationship provides a support structure

that complements development in student affairs. Although these studies did not include graduate assistants as mentors, this literature is relevant to understand the expectation of mentorship for the undergraduate students that they work with. Specifically, to understand how graduate assistants in student affairs may or may not mentor the undergraduate students that they work with. Tareef (2013) explained that students mentored by those who are closer in age may view information as "more relevant than counsel offered by someone from a different generation" (p. 707). Further, this demonstrates the need for additional exploration of how graduate assistants perceive their role as a mentor with undergraduate students.

Dual Mentorship

From the previously discussed mentoring programs and relationships, it is apparent that mentoring enhances student development and success throughout a graduate program. Evans, Perry, Kras, Gale, and Campbell (2009) explored supervising and mentoring undergraduate students from a graduate teaching assistant's perspective. They found graduate students developed a series of skills as a result of effective mentorship, including: the creation of a supervision/mentorship philosophy, functioning as a midlevel manager between students and faculty, transitioning into a supervisor role, building teams of undergraduate teaching assistants, training and data management, running effecting meetings, appreciating positive praise, experiencing accountability, and having difficult conversations (Evans et al., 2009). While the transition into this role is overwhelming, it assists in the teaching assistant's professional development (Evans et al, 2009).

Sherman (2009) argued that the mentoring relationship has significant benefits for the faculty mentor, such as job satisfaction, creative collaborations, and a sense of generosity. There are also extrinsic awards faculty may receive, like increased research productivity, networking,

and professional recognition (Sherman, 2009). Further, strong mentoring can bring benefits to the organization, enhance the mentor's image, build a positive environment, and increase talent (Cooper & Miller, 1998; Johnson, 2007). Ghosh and Reio (2013) found faculty serving as mentors were more satisfied and committed to their position than those who were not, and also had better job performance and career success. Law et al. (2014) explained there must be clear role expectations for both parties involved, and the institution must lay appropriate groundwork for successful mentoring relationships to exist. Mentor relationships benefit the mentor as well as the protégé; therefore, graduate assistants as mentors will further develop in their understanding of student affairs, which ultimately assists in connecting theory to practice.

Although studies have not explored the experience of those who are mentored by faculty or staff while simultaneously mentoring undergraduate students, the previously discussed literature can assist in shaping our understanding that mentoring relationships are multifaceted and benefit both parties. The previously discussed literature suggests that graduate students who are mentored receive benefits that contribute to their academic and professional development. This most likely has a positive influence on their mentor relationships with undergraduate students, from which they also receive intrinsic benefits. Graduate student relationships with mentors positively influence relationships with those they are mentoring. The lack of existing literature focusing on graduate assistants who are mentoring while mentored demonstrates the importance and value of this study.

Summary

Mentor relationships continue to benefit undergraduate students, graduate students, and entry-level professionals in student affairs. Graduate assistants take on the dual role of student and practitioner. Mentors help engage students and provide the necessary support to work

through academic challenges and enhance professional development. The literature about faculty mentors, entry-level professional mentors, and undergraduate mentor expectations further confirms the need for this study because it is evident there is no existing literature or theory that addresses the experiences or needs of graduate assistants. Jones and Segawa (2004) emphasized the importance of all stakeholders, graduate students, faculty, and managers, participating in a dialogue to enhance the preparation of graduate students in student affairs. The graduate assistant experience must be explored to understand how their position shapes personal and professional lives.

History of Graduate Assistants

Student employment provides numerous benefits for the students as well as the institution and department in which they work. Graduate assistantships also enhance productivity for a department, while simultaneously providing professional experience for the student. Just as undergraduate enrollment increases across the nation, graduate enrollment is also on the rise and increasingly diverse; this directly relates to the influx of graduate assistants on campuses (White & Nonnamaker, 2011). Graduate assistants are full time graduate students who typically work part time for the institution, receive a tuition waiver, and a stipend (Flora, 2007; White & Nonnamaker, 2011). Brown-Wright et al. (1997) stressed, "one of the major purposes of graduate education is to develop research and other professional skills among graduate students and to assist them in becoming socialized into the academic culture" (p. 410). Graduate assistants also aid in the crisis of budget cuts (Keppler, 2010). When budgets are strained and positions are eliminated, graduate assistants are often hired to take on some of that work load. Most commonly, this is demonstrated with large freshman seminar courses with teaching or research assistants.

Just before the 18th century, Harvard University employed the first graduate assistants, known as teaching fellows (Geiger, 1997). Geiger (1997) noted that "it provided support for graduate students, while further relieving scholarly faculty of the much-resented burden of teaching introductory courses" (p. 19). Between 1949 and 1950, postsecondary enrollment increased to almost half a million and graduate assistants were utilized to meet the high demand for instructors (Lucas, 2006). Thelin (2004) explained that teaching assistants are used to accommodate the growing number of undergraduate students while simultaneously receiving funding and valuable professional experience. This is highly significant for fields like the humanities where grant money is extremely competitive (Thelin, 2004). McGovern and Tinsley (1976) explain that "the graduate assistant work-training experience is usually seen as an opportunity for greater specialization and more intensive professional development" (p. 132). As the number of graduate assistants continues to increase on campuses (certainly in student affairs), it is essential to better understand their educational experiences, while simultaneously benefiting the entire field with more experienced and prepared entry-level professionals. Due to the unique nature and young position of student affairs as a disciplinary field, there is little research focused on the specific experience as a graduate assistants working within a student affairs division. As such, the experiences of teaching and research assistants are important to study to help shape our general understanding of the assistantship experiences.

Experiences of Graduate Assistants

Graduate assistants have the unique opportunity to obtain relevant work experience while simultaneously completing course work. As Hunter and Comey (1991) pointed out, "the graduate school experience is critical in the socialization of new professionals in many fields because it aids in the acquisition of the knowledge, norms, and competencies necessary for success and

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advancement" (p. 11). In order to provide the most beneficial experience to prepare student affairs professionals, graduate assistants must engage with their position. Engagement is key for the GA to get the most from their experience. Although the literature is comparatively scarce in comparison to undergraduate experiences, research has been conducted regarding graduate assistants in a teaching or research assistant role and should be considered when preparing for future research concerning graduate assistants in student affairs.

Graduate assistants have dynamic roles across institutions and disciplines. With decreased funding to higher education, institutions are continuously working to keep tuition affordable while also providing the best education for students. In order to offset budget adjustments, class sizes are increasing, less full-time faculty are hired, and specialty courses are often eliminated (Gardner & Jones, 2011; Weidert, Wendorf, Gurung, & Filz, 2012). Graduate teaching assistants alleviate faculty workload and in return receive a stipend and tuition waver. Assistantships provide benefits to the graduate students and the institution. Weidert et al. (2012) explain that graduate teaching assistants obtain teaching experience, work with faculty on research projects, and increase interaction with students. Faculty also benefit with a smaller workload, and therefore can prioritize time and energy on research and publishing (Weidert et al., 2012). However, many graduate teaching assistants find themselves abruptly thrown into this role with minimal training (Dunn-Haley & Zanzucchi, 2012; Gardner & Jones, 2011; Green, 2010).

A dated study by Anderson and Berdie (1976) may still be pertinent to graduate assistants today; they found teaching and research assistants had little knowledge of departmental concerns which directly affected them, and formalized policies based upon placement and position. However, all groups that participated in the study (college deans, department chairs, faculty,

administrators, graduate assistants, and undergraduate students) believed that: GAs (graduate assistants) make valuable contributions to the university, GA positions should not be eliminated, and the importance of GAs is not overemphasized (Anderson & Berdie, 1976). Brown-Wright et al. (1997) studied the expectations of teaching/research assistants and the faculty they work with. Their findings also demonstrate inconsistencies when understanding expectations for assistantship responsibilities. Feezel and Myers (1997) further reinforce the unclear expectations for teaching assistants and found confusion among teaching assistants when asked about their role as instructor and as a student. Flora (2007) agreed that the varied roles of graduate assistants challenges the research process and perhaps is one of the explanations as to why limited research is available. Richmond and Sherman (1991) and Waple (2006) confirmed that graduate programs also vary in their focus from theoretical understandings, to a counseling focus, and practical applications.

A common theme among graduate teaching assistant literature is a focus on the importance of training (Chadha, 2013; Dunn-Haley & Zanzucchi, 2012; Gardner & Jones, 2011; Green, 2010; Linenberger et al., 2014; Park & Ramos, 2002; Tulane & Beckert, 2011; Weidert et al., 2012). Chadha stressed (2013) that "appropriate and rigorous training that equips the [graduate teaching assistants] with the necessary skills set has become essential," (p. 206) but even if training is provided, there is seldom follow up evaluations. Park and Ramos (2002) explained that formal training or induction programs may exhaust additional resources for the department but these are worth the investment to create a culture of inclusion for graduate students and also to equip graduate assistants with necessary pedagogical skills. They found that "from the GTA's perspective, the lack of a formal induction program leads to insufficient and inadequate briefing and preparation for their teaching assignments, which in turn creates

confusion over the role" (Park & Ramos, 2002, p. 49). Chadha (2013) described a successful training program for graduate teaching assistants that focuses on practical applications instead of solely focusing on theoretical frameworks. Gunn (2007) agreed that pedagogical training is often overlooked with the assumption that graduate teaching assistants already exhibit strong teaching practices. Training must go beyond a simplistic overview and penetrate deeper into pedagogical underpinnings to prepare graduate teaching assistants for their role as an instructor (Chadha, 2013; Gardner & Jones, 2011; Gunn, 2007).

Tulane and Beckert (2011) studied the perceived utility and knowledge of graduate teaching assistants from the perspectives of instructors, graduate teaching students, and undergraduate students. They noted that "overall, instructors felt teaching assistants were more knowledgeable than teaching assistants reported" (Tulane & Beckert, 2011, p. 52). However, instructors did not feel that teaching assistants were utilized to the same extent as graduate student respondents felt that they were utilized. This raises an interesting point – if instructors feel TAs are knowledgeable, why are they not utilized? Tulane and Beckert (2011) argued it is vital for TAs to receive clear expectations of their duties and faculty should appropriately delegate meaningful tasks to prepare graduate teaching assistants for life after graduation.

Bieber and Worley (2006) sought to understand graduate teaching assistants' conceptualizations of faculty life using a qualitative approach through interviews. They found that graduate students aspired to become faculty as the result of a personal relationship with a faculty member opposed to the "intellectual aspects of their discipline" (Bieber & Worley, 2006, p. 1016). Another finding was that graduate students hold the perception that faculty primarily teach and mentor. Graduate students also described the life of faculty members as flexible and having personal autonomy. Additionally, Bieber and Worley (2006) suggested that graduate

students had minimal formal conversations with faculty to understand life as a faculty member, but instead they relied on their observations. These themes demonstrate the inaccurate perceptions many graduate students hold of faculty life (Bieber & Worley, 2006). Thus, those working with graduate students must work to break down misconceptions and properly train graduate students for a career in academia.

Mazzola et al. (2011) conducted a mixed methods study exploring the stressors and strains that graduate assistants experience. In their quantitative analysis, they found that the stressor means for the graduate assistants was comparatively low to adult samples, but this may also be the result of graduate assistants not considering their experiences as stressors. The qualitative aspect of the study identified two stressors: work overload and interpersonal conflict. This is similar to Schlemper's (2011) qualitative study which found that graduate students struggle with time management balancing professional workload and their personal lives.

Specifically within the workplace, graduate assistants consistently interact with multiple parties including advisors, teachers, supervisors, fellow graduate students, and undergraduate students. Gardner and Jones (2011) agreed that "one of the most significant challenges is defining their role within the academic department that requires finding a niche in multiple communities: graduate student, academic and professional, scientist, and instructor" (p. 32). Dunn-Haley and Zanzucchi (2012) also found that graduate students struggle with understanding boundaries within their assistantship roles, particularly with the simultaneous role of instructor and student. Undergraduate students often feel more comfortable seeking advice from the teaching assistant compared to the professor, who they rarely interact with. The teaching assistant is also building a professional identity through research and increased scholarly activity with faculty and peers. Appropriate training and an open dialogue with teaching assistants may

alleviate anxiety and contribute to building a professional identity (Dunn-Haley & Zanzucchi, 2012). Faculty should work to create professional development opportunities for graduate assistants. These programs should be intensive, ongoing, connect to practice, pedagogical training, and build working relationships (Gardner & Jones, 2011). Assistantship expectations may be blurred by the multiple roles these students take on and the lack of training provided; therefore, support systems must be put into place to assist graduate students through their tenure.

Forney and Davis (2002) found that graduate students appreciate support through collaborative efforts to discuss future commitments, reflect upon experiences, work through troubling issues, and stay proactive with concerns. For their study, a variety of transition sessions were utilized to gather and develop graduate students throughout their master's program. Transitions for undergraduate students take an immense amount of time and effort for universities (ie. orientation, FYE), and based on the findings from Forney and Davis's (2002), perhaps focusing on the transition for postgraduate students should also be considered. Schlemper (2011) also described the importance of support for graduate student success, specifically building peer relationships and working closely with faculty. Linenberger et al. (2014) found that learning communities for teaching assistants' pedagogical development positively influenced students' interdisciplinary nature and created a sense of community. Many graduate teaching assistants have little pedagogical training and minimal guidance. The learning community helped to bridge that gap by creating a space where pedagogical insights could be shared as well as opportunities for peers to collaborate on developing instructional strategies and finding solutions to mutual challenges. Stracke and Kumar (2014) conducted an exploratory opinion survey from universities in New Zealand, Australia, and Malaysia concerning peer support groups for graduate students. Their findings illustrate that peer support enhances

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communication, critical thinking, self-motivation, research organization, and teamwork (Strake & Kumar, 2014). Peer support groups "offer a complementary, learner-centered opportunity to improve and enhance graduate attribute outcomes of universities" (Strake & Kumar, 2014, p. 12). Goretsky and Patel (2015) confirmed these findings; their implementation of a graduate student engagement office was successful for graduate students' advocacy, social interactions, professional development, information gathering, and leadership skills. These studies demonstrate that graduate students benefit from support infrastructures provided by the university.

Purposeful interventions are essential to supporting students, even graduate students. Payne et al. (2015) stressed the importance of hearing from the graduate students themselves to guide support structure implementation. Payne et al.'s (2015) study focused on dissent of graduate assistants using a qualitative approach of teaching and research assistants across a variety of departments on campus. Findings demonstrate most dissent centered around autonomy, work processes, and university procedures. Relationships and openness within the department were key to GAs feeling comfortable to bring any dissent forward. And lastly, GAs identified as a professional and as a student based on their perceived job responsibility.

Conrad et al. (1998) interviewed nearly 800 administrators, employers, students, and alumni from 47 masters programs in 11 different fields of study. Their goal was to better understand the experience of master's students since the graduate student voice is consistently neglected in literature (Conrad, et al., 1998). They shared, "in broad strokes, interviewees characterized their master's degree experiences as highly beneficial as learning experiences, as professional development experiences, and as leadership experiences" (Conrad, et al., 1998, p. 66). The authors observed that when students were active partners in a collaborative learning

environment, there were positive student outcomes – these type of opportunities and experiences may be most prevalent in graduate students and therefore more research must be conducted to better understand the graduate student experience outside of the classroom.

Liddell, Wilson, Pasquesi, Hirschy, and Boyle (2014) also studied the experiences of graduate assistants, but specifically looked at their socialization in graduate school. Participants were entry-level professionals who reflected on their experiences using a quantitative instrument designed for this study. Findings demonstrate that "the graduate assistant and other out-of-class experiences were reported as very powerful for new professionals" (Liddell et al., 2014, p. 81). More specifically, "we found out-of-class experiential opportunities in graduate preparation programs to be more influential than in-class experiences when it came to students' understanding of institutional culture and politics, expanding professional networks, and understanding professional expectations" (Liddell et al., 2014, p. 81). The experiential learning component assists in the socialization for new professionals because GAs are able to observe politics firsthand (Liddell et al., 2014). This demonstrates the need for further study to understand what happens through their out-of-class experience that makes it meaningful.

Bloom et al. (2007) conducted a study to explore another deficiency concerning graduate students – academic advising. The findings confirmed earlier works that the relationship between advisors and graduate students is the most important factor in graduate student success (Bloom, et al., 2007; Boyle & Boice, 1998; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001; Selke & Wong, 1993). Five effective characteristics for graduate advising emerged from the qualitative data: demonstrated care for students, accessibility, role models in professional and personal matters, individual guidance, and proactive integration into profession (Bloom et al., 2007). Bloom et al. (2007) found that "the result of unequal attention to the advising of these populations has translated to a

lack of coverage of the needs of graduate students, who are more mature, focused, and academic than their undergraduate counterparts" (p. 28).

Yakaboski and Dinise-Halter (2015) developed a student affairs course that was co-taught by a faculty member and a full-time student affairs professional. This facilitated a conversation to bridge the real life work of student affairs and academic readings and coursework. Further, two meetings a year with supervisors of graduate assistants were held to begin a dialogue about what was indeed happening inside the classroom and to ensure the coursework was relevant to the out-of-classroom experience. This co-teaching experience provided a deeper learning about the foundations of student affairs (Yakaboski & Dinise-Haler, 2015).

Research on graduate assistants in student affairs is exceedingly scarce, but research focusing on graduate teaching assistants is pertinent to the conversation. Their experiences demonstrate the lack of training which leads to confusion and role conflict for the teaching assistant GTA. Additional support structures were also extremely beneficial for graduate students.

Entry-Level Expectations/Competencies in Student Affairs

Graduate student experiences are certainly relevant to their transitions into entry-level work. The majority of existing literature focusing on developing student affairs professionals concerns entry-level competencies and perceptions of new employees. However, if graduate programs are included within the studies, only the relevance of the academic coursework is examined. Graduate assistantships are rarely included or explored as an opportunity to prepare students for entry-level positions in student affairs when, in fact, assistantships may provide the sole opportunity for students to link theory to practice.

Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) completed a qualitative study to discover how first time, full-time student affairs professionals experience their first year in the profession. Four themes emerged: creating a professional identity, navigating a cultural adjustment, maintaining a learning orientation, and seeking sage advice. The graduate assistant experience could certainly serve as the link to incorporate these themes into the graduate school experience, and as a result, better prepare entry-level professionals.

Waple (2006) also studied competencies necessary for entry-level student affairs work. His study looked at the degree to which 28 skills were attained in graduate course work, and also the degree to which these skills were used in first professional positions. There were four skills that were frequently used on the job but had low levels of attainment in graduate school: supervision of staff, strategic planning, budget and fiscal management, and use of microcomputers (Waple, 2006). Research methods, history of higher education, and history of student affairs were attained at a high degree in graduate school, but rarely used once in the professional setting (Waple, 2006).

The 30-year foundational meta-analysis by Lovell and Kosten (2000) studied the skills, knowledge, and personal traits needed for success as an administrator in student affairs and found "there are skills, knowledge bases, and personal traits such as administration, management, and human facilitation skills; knowledge of student development theory and functional area responsibilities; and traits of personal integrity and cooperation required for one to be successful" (p. 569). Herdlein's (2004) quantitative study of chief student affairs officers regarding relevance of graduate preparation programs found that participants were comfortable with new professional abilities in "counseling, student development theory, leadership, technology, understanding human differences, and overall knowledge of higher education" (p.

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67), and areas for improvement were legal knowledge, strategic planning, finance and budgeting, campus politics, assessment and research, and proficient writing skills.

Buckard, Cole, Ott, and Stoflet (2005) wanted to build consensus among mid-level managers and senior level administrators regarding entry-level student affairs responsibilities and skills. They found two competency areas as particularly important: personal qualities and human relation skills. Buckard et al. (2005) posited that personal qualities included "flexibility, interpersonal relations, time management, managing multiple tasks, oral and written communication, problem-solving abilities, critical thinking, creativity, assertiveness, and analytical abilities" (p. 5), while human relations skills were defined as "collaboration, teamwork/building, counseling, multicultural competency, training students/staff, presentation and group facilitation skills, advising, conflict resolution/mediation, supervision, crisis intervention, and consultation abilities" (p. 5). They also found administrative and management competencies, research, and technology to be important for entry-level professionals.

Cuyjet, Longwell-Grice, and Molina (2009) also conducted a study to understand entry-level competencies learned from graduate school by comparing the views of new professionals and supervisors. The new professionals felt the most prepared in areas of student development, while they felt the least prepared with grant writing, budgeting, financial management, and supervising. When new professionals reflected on areas of most importance for preparation programs, they believed that ethics and standards of practice, working with diverse populations, and knowledge of how the college experience can enhance student development were the most relevant. The recent graduates felt that grant writing, publication, and knowledge of the history of the field were the least important for preparation programs to focus on. The study also sought to understand how supervisors felt about preparation quality. Cuyjet et al. (2009) found that

supervisors felt new professionals received the highest training in the areas of: student

development, how college experiences can enhance student development, and working with

diverse populations. Budgeting and financial management, grant writing, and writing for

publication were the areas in which supervisors felt new graduates were the least prepared.

Supervisors believed the most important areas for programs to focus on were ethics and

standards of practice and working in diverse populations, while the least important were grant

writing and writing for publication. Findings demonstrated that most "supervisors and recent

graduates were in agreement with what competencies are important for recent graduates to have"

and "there was general agreement between supervisors and recent graduates regarding the level

of preparation the recent graduates received from their graduate preparation programs" (Cuyjet et

al., 2009, p. 110).

Kuk et al. (2007) conducted a study to better understand the needs of professional

practice, while also seeking to assist managers in the field by developing strategies for mentoring

new staff. Their findings were similar to Hyman's (1988) study which also acknowledged

competencies important for entry level staff and found significant differences in the perceptions

between faculty and staff managing new professionals. Due to these differences, perhaps faculty

need to reassess the competencies that are given priority. Kuk et al. (2007) also suggested that

faculty "explore to what extent and how they are integrating the experiential practicum and

intern experiences with the knowledge based curriculum" (p. 680). Herdlein et al. (2010) also

investigated faculty perceptions of learning outcomes in higher education master's programs.

They found that faculty perceived the most important knowledge and skills to be consistent with

most core curricula – historical foundations, ethics, cultural environments, development theory,

counseling, administration, assessment, communication skills, and professionalism. Student

development theory, diversity and multiculturalism, student affairs administration, history, assessment and research, and counseling were considered the most important classes by faculty. Faculty also perceived communication skills, counseling, and evaluation/assessment as the most important skills for entry-level professionals working in higher education. The authors describe the continuous dilemma of unifying the stated knowledge, coursework, and skills into a cohesive program without neglecting the fluid and ever-changing field of higher education (Herdlein et al., 2010).

In 2011, Dickerson et al. compared senior student affairs officers and student affairs faculty expectations for entry-level professional competencies. There were no significant differences found for 49 of the 51 competencies, which contrasts with Kuk et al. (2007) as well as Hyman's (1988) studies. Dickerson et al. (2011) argued for a comprehensive set of professional competencies in the field and further exploration of how to teach and assess disposition competencies. Janosik et al.'s (2006) work discussed the need for professional associations to create a model of professional development that provides specific guidelines for student affairs professionals. Poock (2013) also called for stronger professional development for graduate students, deliberately focusing on communication, leadership, teaching and instruction, professional adaptability, and self-awareness. Graduate assistantships provide the ideal platform to begin linking theory to practice. These experiences may enhance learning and development and in turn graduates will be prepared for the challenges of entry-level positions.

Experiential Learning in Higher Education

Entry-level competencies for higher education professionals provide an explicit understanding of what students learn through their master's program and how they apply that knowledge in a professional setting. However, most of the studies previously discussed do not

include assistantships as a variable in the learning process. Kolb's (1984) model for experiential learning sees experience as the foundation for learning to occur. Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) has been applied to higher education in undergraduate contexts. ELT applies to a variety of contexts in higher education, from the academic setting, student affairs, and supervision techniques. Healey and Jenkins (2000) found the implementation of ELT brought success to students in a geography class. Hyoung, McCullouch, and Luh-Maan (2008) also used ELT in an engineering education course and impacted a variety of students while Baasanjav (2013) utilized ELT techniques to reach students in an online course. Applying ELT in an academic setting assists in challenging and supporting students with varied learning styles (Evans et al., 2010). ELT encourages instructors to vary teaching style and also challenges students to learn in ways they are not primarily comfortable with.

ELT's usefulness in higher education extends beyond the classroom and into student affairs. Evans et al. (2010) stated, "Kolb's theory has been used as a foundation for interventions in orientation, academic advising, counseling, career development, and self-exploration, as well as staff development" (p. 146). It is beneficial for students, instructors, advisors, mentors, and supervisors to understand their own strengths and weaknesses before they approach coursework, leadership positions, involvement in organizations, or begin work as an employee. Specifically when working with student employees, it is essential for supervisors to address a variety of learning styles while providing necessary experiences to enhance student learning and development. ELT is also effective with staff training (Evans et al., 2010). As Evans et al. (2010) contended, "providing work environments that both challenge and support a diverse group of individuals is important for attracting and retaining a diverse staff" (p. 148).

Beyond student employment, ELT provides support for student affairs in the development and implementation of programming (Lea & Leibowitz, 1986). ELT "offers something more substantial and enduring. It offers the foundation for an approach to education and learning as a lifelong process…The experiential learning model pursues a framework for examining and strengthening the critical linkages among education, work, and personal development" (Kolb, 1984, pp. 3-4). ELT's goal to instill lifelong learning and development of critical thinking also aligns with the Council Advancement Standards (CAS, 2009) that guide work in student affairs.

Practitioners in student affairs continuously encourage student involvement, and one of the primary advantages to involvement is leadership development. Guthrie and Jones (2012) utilized ELT in their framework for enhancing leadership education. Essentially, utilizing leadership experiences with reflective learning "create[s] the necessary tension needed to encourage growth-producing encounters that add to an individual students' total life experience" (Guthrie & Jones, 2012, p. 62). Using ELT as the foundation for leadership development produced positive results for the students as well as the practitioners. ELT is used across all contexts in higher education from the academic arena to student involvement, and ELT provides the platform for student growth and development. ELT has yet to be used to explore learning through a graduate assistantship, lending this particular study to utilize qualitative methods to collect and analyze data.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

As detailed in the previous chapter, research centered on the experiences, engagement, and professional development of graduate assistants is limited. Therefore, this study seeks to explore the graduate assistant experience and seeks to better understand how learning occurs through their position. Johnson and Christensen (2014) proclaimed that basic research revolves around fundamental knowledge of humans or natural processes, while applied research centers around practical questions. Due to the nature of this study, it is considered applied research, where the findings will enhance the learning experience for graduate assistants. There are three general data collection approaches to research methodology: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Here, the researcher will discuss each one to understand which method is best suited to answer the research questions. Creswell (2005, 2009) explained that research questions guide which methodology is appropriate.

Quantitative Research

Quantitative research "primarily follows the confirmatory scientific method" (Johnson & Christensen, 2014, p. 33). Creswell (2009) further described that quantitative methods are used "for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables. These variables, in turn, can be measured, typically on instruments, so that numbered data can be analyzed using statistical procedures" (p. 4). Quantitative methods are used to answer research questions that seek to describe trends or explain relationships between variables (Creswell, 2005). Creswell (2005) shares that quantitative research questions are specific and narrow, and the findings are measurable. Quantitative methods also have specific data collection techniques.

Data collection consists of collecting data with preset questions using an instrument. Surveys and experiments that ask close-ended questions, use numeric data, and have pre-

determined approaches are commonly used strategies (Creswell, 2005, 2009). Creswell (2009) provided an example, "Survey research provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population" (p. 12). Experimental research seeks to understand if a treatment affects an outcome (Creswell, 2009). Data analysis centers around statistical analysis, which describes trends or the relationship amongst variables (Creswell, 2005, 2009). The reporting of results is structured with an objective position to create an unbiased report (Creswell, 2005, 2009). Quantitative research is a positivist approach that aims to yield generalizable results (Charmaz, 2006).

Quantitative methods are best suited for narrow research topics in which an instrument may be utilized to describe the relationship between variables. A major criticism of quantitative research is the lack of descriptive richness (Trafimow, 2014). The limitations of these methods include internal and external validity threats. Internal validity consists of the researcher's ability to accurately analyze and understand the data (Creswell, 2009). External validity threats "arise when experimenters draw incorrect inferences from the sample data to other persons, other settings, and past or future situations" (Creswell, 2009, p. 162).

Qualitative Research

Qualitative methods are often perceived as opposite of quantitative methods, but Creswell (2005) recommended looking at these data collection approaches on a continuum because they also share similarities. However, the purpose of research is different for qualitative research questions. Instead of narrow and specific, qualitative purposes are general and broad, they "seek to understand participants' experiences" (Creswell, 2005, p. 47). Creswell (2009) described the major characteristics of qualitative research: the research takes place in the participant's natural setting, the researcher is the key instrument, multiple sources of data are collected, inductive data

analysis, participants' meanings, emergent design, use a theoretical lens, interpretive, and a holistic account. These descriptors provide an overview of qualitative research.

The purpose of qualitative research is typically broad and general. There are five predominant research methods: phenomenology, ethnography, narrative, case study, and grounded theory (Creswell, 2005, 2009; Johnson & Christensen, 2014). In qualitative research, data collection consists of observations, interviews, focus groups, document analysis, and audiovisual materials (Creswell, 2009). Data analysis is an ongoing and reflective process where the researcher codes data. According to Creswell (2009), "coding is the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information" (p. 186). The researcher then utilizes these codes to address a theoretical perspective and interpret meaning (Creswell, 2009). These findings are reported in a less structured format than quantitative methods.

Qualitative methods also have limitations. The researcher is the key instrument in data collection; therefore, personal bias is heavily intertwined throughout the research process. Participants in interviews and focus groups may hold back information because the researcher is present or they may not properly express their feelings to the researcher, and findings are not generalizable to larger populations (Creswell, 2009). Trafimow (2014) argued that qualitative research is often criticized because it does not "address the issue of finding chance" (p. 15) through statistical procedures.

Mixed Methods Research

Mixed methods research fuses both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Johnson & Christensen (2014) asserted that "the exact mixture that is considered appropriate will depend on the research questions and the situational and practical issues facing a researcher" (p. 33).

Combining the two paradigms helps to enhance the strengths of each while minimizing the weaknesses of the other (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

Creswell (2009) described four different aspects that must be considered when conducting a mixed methods study – timing, weighting, mixing, and theorizing. The timing revolves around the data collection, either sequential or concurrent. Weighting describes the priority given to one paradigm over the other. Creswell (2009) explained that mixing clarifies how the data sets will be connected, integrated, or embedded. And the theory is the perspective which guides the design (Creswell, 2009).

Consistent with quantitative and qualitative methodologies, data collection and analysis depends on the research questions. Data collection and sampling techniques from either paradigm should compliment the research question. According to Creswell (2009), "analysis occurs both within the quantitative and the qualitative approach and often between the two approaches" (p. 218). Traditionally, the data analysis consists of transformation, exploring outliers, examining multiple levels, or creating matrices that combine findings from both paradigms (Creswell, 2009). A mixed methods approach strengthens research by minimizing the limitations that only one paradigm would provide, but there are also limitations to consider. Mixed method studies typically take more time to conduct and clarifying the validity may be difficult (Creswell, 2009).

Exploring the Graduate Assistant Experience

This study seeks to explore the graduate assistant experience, and to better understand how learning occurs through their position. In reviewing relevant research and working to identify the best approach to this study, it was determined a qualitative research design is the most effective methodology. Creswell (2009) shared, "those who engage in this form of inquiry

support a way of looking at research that honors an inductive style, a focus on individual

meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation" (p. 4). The paradigm

framing this qualitative study is social constructivism because the researcher believes in the

value of students' stories to construct the themes that will emerge. Social constructivism

"assumes a relativist epistemology, sees knowledge as socially produced, acknowledges multiple

standpoints of both the research participants and the grounded theorist, and takes a reflexive

stance toward our actions, situations, and participants in the field setting" (Charmaz, 2009, p.

129). Given the topic and importance of better understanding the lived experiences of graduate

assistants, the researcher plans to conduct focus groups and individual interviews.

Creswell (2009, 2013) suggested that studies seeking to explore new phenomena are best

situated in qualitative approaches. Whitt (1991) described the usefulness of qualitative research

in higher education when looking to understand complex processes about students where

quantitative measures may not be sufficient. Qualitative methods "enable the researcher to

discover, understand, and describe everyday, as well as unique, events, processes, activities, and

behaviors, in depth, as they occur, and from the perspectives of the persons involved" (Whitt,

1991, p. 409). For this particular study, the researcher will explore the graduate assistant

experience using an inductive approach, which allows the participants' stories to guide the

emerging theory.

Grounded Theory

Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined grounded theory as "one that is inductively derived

from the study of the phenomenon it represents…Data collection, analysis, and theory stand in

reciprocal relationship with each other" (p. 23). They pointed out that:

> Grounded theory is a good design to use when a theory is not available to explain or
> understand a process. Also, theories may be present, but they are incomplete because they

do not address potentially valuable variables or categories of interest to the researcher (p. 88).

Grounded theory methodology was developed in 1967, and is arguably the most used qualitative approach (Morse, 2009). Grounded theory developed from studying the illness experience, but is now used in a variety of fields including business, education, nursing, and cultural studies. More recently, grounded theory was used to explore a variety of new topics in higher education. Blackwell & Pinder (2014) used grounded theory to understand how minority students overcame barriers as first generation students. LaPan, Hodge, Peroff, and Henderson (2013) used grounded theory to explore the experiences of female administrators in recreation settings, and Mock and Love (2012) used grounded theory to frame their study of incorporating students with intellectual disabilities into postsecondary education. Consistent with other qualitative methods, grounded theory does not follow a standardized approach and continues to evolve over the years (Charmaz, 2009; Corbin, 2009; Morse, 2009). The theory's founders, Barney Glaser and Ansem Strauss, collaborated on a research project which eventually led to the evolution of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1976; Morse, 2009). Glaser has a background in sociology but later studied descriptive statistics throughout graduate work, and he holds strong convictions that grounded theory is a formalized process. Glaser's interpretation of grounded theory has evolved very little over the years. Presumably, it is through the strict and formalized steps that Glaser and Strauss began to differentiate their ideals concerning grounded theory.

Strauss later partnered with Corbin to write another text focusing on grounded theory methodology that essentially evolved into a less structured approach, and they continued to advance grounded theory with additional publications. Corbin (2009) explained, "the method remains rooted in pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, with its emphasis on structure and process" (p. 37). Grounded theory remains focused on the participants' experiences, that is,

contextualized by their individual perspective (gender, time, place, cultural, political, religious, and professional backgrounds) (Corbin, 2009). When analyzing data, Corbin (2009) utilized a less structured approach than Glaser recommended. "I use all the procedures, but they remain in the background rather than looming in the foreground" (Corbin, 2009, p. 42). Theoretical sampling and memo-ing remains a core ideal of grounded theory. Corbin (2009) summarized her reflections of grounded theory:

> This approach to qualitative research analysis encourages researchers to enter the investigation with an open mind, ready to hear what participants are saying, and advocates letting the questions that emerge from analysis guide the next steps in data collection and analysis. (p. 51).

Grounded theory embraces an inductive approach in which participant voices guide research. Charmaz (2006) also believed in rejecting a systematic method to collecting data through a social constructivist lens.

Charmaz continued to adapt grounded theory with a social constructivist point of view and saw "grounded theory not as a unitary method but as a useful nodal point around which researchers discuss contemporary debates in qualitative inquiry – and I believe, by extension, the production on knowledge and scientific theorizing" (Charmaz, 2009, p. 128). Charmaz (2009) further described the emphasis of her social constructivist lens through two ideals. First, she holds a reflexive stance toward data analysis; and second, she embraces the idea that it is important not only to understand participants' actions as socially constructed, but to understand that the researcher's positionality is also socially influenced. Charmaz (2009) described the fundamental assumptions of grounded theory: multiple realities, mutual construction of data through interaction, research constructs categories, and observer's background influences views. Constructivist grounded theory should take the researcher deep into the phenomenon to provide an intimate understanding of the properties and relationships of the studied life (Charmaz, 2009).

According to Charmaz (2006), "grounded theory methods can provide a route to see beyond the obvious and a path to reach imaginative interpretations" (p. 181).

Research Design

Qualitative data collection techniques range from document review, observation, focus groups, and interviews. For this particular study, the researcher conducted semi-structured focus groups and interviews to obtain rich sources of data. Rubin and Rubin (2012) clarified that semi-structured interviews revolve around a topic with pre-set questions but provide the researcher flexibility for follow up questions. Grounded theory methods specifically highlight the use of interviews and focus groups to collect data in order to allow participant experiences and stories to guide data collection (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Focus Groups

Focus groups were utilized to create conversation amongst participants. Creswell (2013) explained, focus groups are beneficial to research "when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information, when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other, when time to collect information is limited, and when individuals interviewed one-on-one may be hesitant to provide information" (p. 164). Whitt (1991) confirmed that "focus groups are especially useful for obtaining in-depth information about attitudes, values, and beliefs that may not be apparent in individual interviews or in observations" (p. 411). Two focus groups were conducted; the first had four participants and the second had three participants. Focus groups lasted between 50 minutes and one hour.

Krueger and Casey's (2009) guide for focus groups within applied research provided the framework for conducting focus groups. Questions evoked conversation amongst participants to bring forth meaningful contributions regarding participant experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Introductory questions created a comfortable environment for participants and introduce the topic of discussion, and then transition questions helped to shift toward the key questions that "drive the study" (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 40). Probes and follow up questions were used more frequently throughout the key questions to ensure clarity and a full understanding. The focus group concluded with ending questions, which bring closure to the discussion and allow the participants an opportunity to reflect on the topic (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Within a focus group, participants may feel uneasy sharing with the group and others may dominate the conversation (Creswell, 2013). The researcher reviewed expectations at the beginning of each focus group to explain the flow of conversation amongst participants.

Individual Interviews

Interviews were utilized to gather in-depth information from participants (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher used Rubin and Rubin's (2012) response interviewing model that "emphasizes flexibility of design and expects the interviewer to change questions in response to what he or she is learning" (p. 7). Rubin and Rubin (2012) recommended asking main questions, follow up questions, and then probes. Main questions ensured that the research question would be answered (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The follow up questions provided rich data that detailed an accurate portrayal of participant experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Probes provided the signal for participants to clarify a story or provide details (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Rubin and Rubin (2012) recommend starting the interview with easy questions that allow participants to feel comfortable before moving to the most difficult questions. The research questions for this study did not elicit stressful or emotional responses, but the researcher began with easier introduction questions to encourage a comfortable environment.

Summary

Interviews and focus groups both have limitations. Through interviews and focus groups, participants may feel uncomfortable and hold back honest answers with the researcher present; however, the researcher followed IRB ethical considerations and worked to provide a caring and nurturing environment so that participants were comfortable throughout data collection. Focus groups and interviews afforded the researcher flexibility to ask follow up questions and probes to obtain the rich data necessary to understand their experiences.

<div align="center">

Data Collection

</div>

Data collection took place at a large research-intensive university in the Southern region of the United States. Participants were second year master students studying higher education that also held a graduate assistantship on campus in the division of student affairs. This site was chosen due to the size of the student affairs division and volume of graduate assistants studying higher education working within the division. Interviews and focus groups were utilized to collect data. All participants provided a signature demonstrating their informed consent acknowledging participation is voluntary and participants could leave at any point in time without penalty (See Appendix A). Participants completed a survey to provide demographic/basic information for the researcher (See Appendix B). The researcher used Qualtrics as the platform to input the survey data. Qualtrics is an online survey tool in which the participants completed the survey online prior to the interview. The researcher analyzed the qualitative data using Charmaz's (2006) modification of grounded theory. Charmaz (2006) provided a less structured approach to grounded theory that allows themes to develop while the researcher continuously evaluates and asks questions concerning the emerging theory. Necessary

means for validity and reliability were carried out to ensure an honest representation of participant stories.

Study Site

Data collection took place on campus in meeting rooms to allot easy access for participants. Participants are also familiar with campus so they felt comfortable while sharing their experiences. The meeting rooms were reserved in advance and provided a disruptive free environment. The questions asked were not sensitive in nature nor did they provoke emotional reactions from participants necessitating counselors present, but all participants were notified through their informed consent that participation is entirely voluntary and could be terminated at any point in time without penalty.

Participant Selection

Ten participants were purposefully sampled through theoretical sampling techniques. "Theoretical sampling is based on the need to collect more data to examine categories and their relationships and to assure that representativeness in the category exists" (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986, p. 9). The researcher recruited participants from a large research-intensive institution in the south. For interviews and focus groups, participants were second year master students in the higher education program (n=20). The researcher specifically chose second year students to allot ample time for students to experience their graduate assistantship and provide rich information. Through the focus group environment and open conversation, participants provided rich data regarding their experiences as a graduate assistant. Participants were invited to participate through the email list serve of the Higher Education Student Organization (see Appendix C). This list serve was the best means to contact participants because information from the department is commonly distributed through this email. All participants were second year

graduate students studying higher education that currently hold a graduate assistantship on campus. Please reference Table 1 below to identify participant contributions to data collection.

Table 1

Participant Contributions

Pseudonym	Participation	Area of Work
Missy	Interview and Focus Group	First Year Experience
Theo	Interview and Focus Group	First Year Experience
Kolby	Focus Group	Residential Life
Ben	Focus Group	Dean of Students
Daisy	Focus Group	Residential Life
Steve	Focus Group	Residential Life
Jeremiah	Interview	Dean of Students
Bailey	Interview	Residential Life
Sally	Interview and Focus Group	Campus Recreation
Jacob	Interview	Dean of Students

Data Collection

The researcher used an interview protocol (Appendix D) and focus group protocol (Appendix E) with standard procedures, questions, and paper for memo-ing. Participants completed the short survey before meeting with the researcher and then reviewed the informed consent in person. Interviews and focus groups were recorded for transcription. Memo-ing is an essential process in grounded theory. "Memos are the written capsules of the analysis and serve to store the ideas generated about the data…Memo writing and sorting point out areas for further

clarification, refinement, and verification, and lead to further data collection" (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986, p. 8). Saldana (2013) further argued that memos may bring clarity when themes seem to cluster or differentiate. The researcher took notes throughout the interviews and focus groups and also completed a write up immediately after each data collection. The write up summary included general thoughts, surprises, and additional questions.

Since the researcher has also experienced life as a graduate assistant, both emic and etic approaches were incorporated. Creswell (2013) asserted that emic approaches represent the views of participants, and etic reveals the view of the researcher. To remain consistent with the social constructivist lens of grounded theory, it is not possible for the researcher to completely divorce prior experiences, values, and beliefs from the research process. Therefore, all biases were acknowledged and etic coding influenced the data. These terms are also used to reference coding. "An etic code is one developed from the literature or prior research, while an emic code arises from the data and is often built from a participant's own words" (President & Fellows Harvard University, 2008). Prior literature pertaining to the experiences of graduate assistants will naturally affect the researcher's lens and knowledge base, which will therefore influence interview and focus group questions. However, new themes that develop emerged from emic codes and the participants' voices.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was a continuous process. Data was collected, analyzed, and collected again until data was saturated. The researcher typed memos and written summaries from interviews and focus groups. Strauss and Corbin (1990) expressed the importance of listening to the recordings throughout the data collection process for a full analysis. The researcher listened

to each recording to obtain a deeper understanding of the data and also listened to each recording again with the transcription to ensure transcription accuracy.

Once transcriptions were available, the researcher began the coding process. "Coding means naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43). The coding process is fluid and "the lines between each type of coding are artificial" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 58). When working to formulate theory, coding "shapes an analytic frame from which you build the analysis" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 45).

The researcher utilized Charmaz's (2006) coding process to analyze the data. Initial and in vivo coding are recognized as the first coding cycle while the later stages of focused, axial, and theoretical coding are considered second cycle procedures (Saldana, 2013). Throughout initial coding, the researcher stayed very close to the data to create simple, precise, and short codes (Charmaz, 2006). To effectively carry out the initial coding process, Charmaz (2006) recommended utilizing word-by-word coding, line-by-line coding, or incident to incident coding strategies. These strategies help the researcher to ensure the codes appropriately reflect participant voices and are relevant to the data (Charmaz, 2006). After initial coding was complete, in vivo coding was conducted. Charmaz (2006) noted that "In vivo codes help us to preserve participants' meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself" (p. 55). Particular attention should be paid to the language used by participants during this analytic and comparative process (Charmaz, 2006; Saldana, 2013). In vivo coding was instrumental to the researcher for theme development, specifically interpersonal relationships with supervisors and blurred lines of the graduate assistantship. As Charmaz (2006) pointed out, "we look for their implicit meanings and attend to how they construct and act upon meanings" (p. 55).

Next, focused coding was used to "develop categories without distracted attention at this time to their properties and dimensions" (Saldana, 2013, p. 213). Charmaz (2006) suggested that these codes are "more directed, selective, and conceptual" (p. 57) and the researcher referenced the most common or significant codes from earlier processes to sift through the data. Axial coding was then used to provide specific properties to a category (Charmaz, 2006; Saldana, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Axial codes were helpful in elucidating emerging ideas (Charmaz, 2006). Following axial coding, "theoretical coding is a sophisticated level of coding that follows the codes you have selected during focused coding" (Charmaz, 2006). This coding process begins to link different codes and determines possible relationships between them (Charmaz, 2006).

Validity and Reliability

The researcher worked to ensure data collection and analysis was valid and reliable. According to Creswell (2009), "qualitative reliability indicates that the researcher's approach is consistent across different researchers and different projects" (p. 190). Charmaz's (2006) modification of grounded theory through data collection and analysis assisted in establishing reliability for the study. Reliability procedures were conducted through Rubin and Rubin's (2012) interactive interviewing model, ensuring transcriptions were accurate, constant comparing of codes with memos, and cross-checking codes with current research (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2009) noted that "qualitative validity means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures" (p. 190). Validity procedures were carried out through multiple sources of data (interviews, focus groups, and memos), listening to recorded interviews and focus groups, member checking, use of participant quotes, and acknowledging researcher bias (Creswell, 2013).

Study Limitations

Although the researcher worked to limit and acknowledge all biases, study limitations are inevitable. There is a lack of longitudinal data; data collection lasted three months. The sample size was limited to one large research-intensive institution in the south, whereas gathering data from multiple types of institutions may provide a more holistic picture of the graduate assistant experience. Current graduate students were the only participants in the study; obtaining data from supervisors, faculty, alumni and/or other constituents who work with graduate students may also provide a rich source of data. Participants were purposefully sampled which may reflect researcher bias as well.

Researcher Bias

As with all research studies, the potential for researcher bias exists. Whitt (1991) argued that personal bias is particularly present when the researcher is the instrument; the researcher is naturally influenced by their values, beliefs, and paradigm. Drisko (1997) contended that "qualitative researchers seek to limit bias through self-awareness; therefore, they should report any potential biases and note what content areas might be influenced." Whitt (1991) described four ethical criteria to consider when conducting qualitative research: confidentiality, honesty, responsibility, and fair return.

Thus, the researcher recognized this challenge and worked to minimize bias in the research study. There are specific ways to conduct a study that can reduce the likelihood research bias will impact findings. The researcher respected all participants by protecting their anonymity throughout data collection, analysis, and publishing (Whitt, 1991). The researcher remained open and honest with participants pertaining to the purpose of the research; participants were considered partners in the research process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Whitt, 1991). The researcher

also has a responsibility to consider ethical considerations when speaking with participants and how sharing their lived experiences may influence them. Going through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) provides assurance that all data collection procedures are ethical and protect participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Whitt, 1991).

Summary

This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of graduate assistants studying higher education. The lack of literature on the graduate student experience potentially hinders the learning and development of students, faculty, and the field of student affairs. This research will attempt to bring understanding to the vague idea of engagement and the learning that occurs within an assistantship.

Qualitative measures were utilized to collect data. Rooted within grounded theory, interviews and focus groups provided the platform for theory development through participants' stories and experiences. This study will assist to fill the large gap currently in the literature to explore the graduate assistant experience to benefit not only graduate students, but the entire field of higher education – because when graduate assistants are engaged in their role, they will be prepared new professionals.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Interviews and focus groups provided rich information through participant stories. The researcher conducted six interviews and two focus groups, with ten total participants. Questions evolved throughout data collection to expand upon developing themes. The coding process followed traditional grounded theory methods starting with initial, in vivo, focused, axial, to theoretical coding procedures. Five themes developed and will be discussed below. It is also important to note that themes are multifaceted and compliment one another. This research demonstrates the importance of exploring the GA experience, and these themes provide ideas to how practitioners and faculty can enhance the overall learning experience.

Blurred Lines

GAs find it challenging to navigate the blurred lines of graduate student and professional. Due to this unique position, GAs often questioned what it meant to be a graduate assistant within their department. Participants shared strong feelings based on the reaction they received after sharing their own ideas, opinions, or feelings – there were feelings of disappointment if their voice was not respected within their working units or by their leading supervisors. This often led the GAs to choose to remain silent and refrain from sharing their feelings/opinions. However, GAs felt extremely valued if their ideas were welcomed and respected by full-time staff. GAs also found themselves constantly jumping between categories of 'student' to 'professional' based on the convenience of the situation at hand. GAs found navigating that inconsistency difficult. Further, understanding the hierarchy of the department and where GAs belonged was also a challenge. These circumstances contributed to GAs' confusion in understanding their role as a GA.

Participants shared that they often question what it means to be a GA. Ben, who works in the Dean of Students Office, explains, "my role as advisor/student leader gets blended so much I have to pick up their slack." He becomes frustrated when student leaders expect him to finish their duties instead of looking at him as an advisor or mentor for help and information when they need assistance. Ben recognizes this as a challenge, and he wants to provide his student leaders with autonomy but feels that often left him with extra work. He explains that accountability would be a goal for their organization for the upcoming semester.

Kolby, who works in residential life, states his confusion comes from his lack of authority, "I don't really have that authority, so it just becomes weird. [Students] kind of looking at you, so what's your purpose?...I think when students ask 'what do you do?' I think that's the most depressing question ever." Kolby connects his lack of authority with a lack of respect from the students he works with. Theo, a GA in First Year Experience, questions, "What differentiates a GA from a student leader?" Theo also becomes frustrated by the lack of authority in his role and therefore wonders how he differs from the student leaders that he works with. However, Jeremiah, who works in the Dean of Students Office, confidently understands his position, which he defines as a paraprofessional. "But when I got here I realized that I am a paraprofessional is what I call it…The work I do is paraprofessional." He later stated, "So I guess learning to understand that I have a different level of expectation now. Where others expect more of me now. So that's one of the biggest things that I've learned here. And then, most of all, being responsible." Jeremiah feels guided through his journey as a GA and as a result does not question his purpose or role, but understands the responsibility he has obtained and feels comfortable in his position. Understanding purpose as a GA was a challenge in navigating the assistantship experience, but GAs also struggled to have their voice respected by full-time staff.

Participants explained the strong emotions associated with the reaction their opinions and ideas received. Many became frustrated at the lack of respect or change their ideas influenced, but GAs felt extremely valued when their opinion was respected by supervisors and other full-time personnel. Missy, who work in First Year Experience, explains her experience, "I've said things several times…I don't know if its being taken seriously, or maybe its we've done this for over ten years, its fine, this is the way we do it…It highlights some negative parts about my GAship." She further explains, "I've talked to my supervisor about it, and she's like oh those are super good ideas, but like nothing…like we're listening but we're not really listening to what you're saying." Missy's annoyance comes from her sharing ideas but not seeing any action taken by her supervisor to implement changes. Further, when GAs feel that their voice does not matter, participants shared they would rather be silent and withhold their opinion. For example, Missy states:

> Its just, the challenge of not being able to speak and say what I want to say, cause I don't think that I have…As a GA you can only say so much, and I don't care what boss you work for, you can only say so much…I don't really have a say-so in what goes on in my GAship.

Missy feels complacent in her role and limited in her voice to share her opinion. Theo states, "I'm no longer invested cause I know that's all I do and really have no impact. So why should I be investing more into this organization and assistantship?" This lack of appreciation for GA input leads to GAs' resisting to contribute their point of view at all. Daisy shares her experience in Residential Life:

> I think my mentality is, like, choosing your battles. I often ask myself if I'm really bothered about something. And especially at this point, I've only got three months. So, do you really want to fight this? And so a lot of the time I'll just defer to that and when I ask myself is it worth it? It's usually no, and I just keep carrying on because I know there's only so much you can do.

Since Daisy does not have consistent encouragement to share her feelings, she often neglects the effort to share her opinion. Missy explains her rationale when contemplating speaking up:

> Is it really going to change anything? So now I've just made people upset but for what, because as a GA, do we really have that much say-so in what goes on? If someone made me feel like I did, then maybe I'd feel comfortable saying so, but I don't.

Missy also states, "My voice isn't going to change anything, because I've said things several times, my voice isn't going to change anything." In certain spaces, Sally also walks a tight line when deciding to share her opinion. "I understand my place as a GA. I've seen it happen in my department, where when GAs speak up there's a lot of backlash, and for me its like I'd rather put my head down and do my work." Participants explain their desire to stay silent as a result of their opinion not being appreciated in the past or for fear of backlash. The assistantship role is obscure and therefore boundaries of confidence in the GAs' voices are difficult to navigate, and this demonstrates that GAs feel more comfortable or willing to share in certain spaces than in others.

Although participants explained they felt their voice was often not respected or heard, this was not the case for all participants. When GAs felt their voices were heard, they felt extremely valued and connected to their unit. Steve feels valued within his division of residential life. Steve explains:

> I feel like a professional at the table…When we have all our staff meetings, post grads and grads alike look to me for my role...As I became more confident, my supervisor just kind of stepped more back which was good for me and good for him because he has a whole ton on his plate already.

Steve feels valued because he is not only present but accepted by other graduate students and professionals, and feels like they look to him to share information. Further, they value the information he is providing. Daisy has a similar experience. She says:

> I have a lot of faith in my role because we had some staff issues in terms of like our perspectives on how that staff member was performing and I think my perspective was

valued. So, they still decided to do whatever they wanted to in regard to what their
opinion was, but I think mine was heard and it was valued.

Daisy's experiences demonstrate that she felt valued when her feedback was requested and

listened to, even if it was not the direction her supervisor went, she still felt valued that her

opinion was invited and taken into consideration.

The participants also explained the struggle of understanding the hierarchy of their

department and navigating where their role as a GA was. They often found this to be situational.

Jacob states, "The major limitations of being a GA…You're not in the *know all* the time." Missy

also found it aggravating when asked to leave the room during meetings, "People still ask me to

leave the room, and its frustrating, I've been a professional before, and you're asking me to like

leave the meeting…while you guys finish your con[versation], that's so frustrating. I'm like, ok,

I'm a child now?" Theo also feels discouraged when he is not privy to certain information when

GAs must have separate meetings than professional staff members. For Sally, in University

Recreation, it is situational. She feels respected in some spaces but feels less comfortable in

others. Sally shares:

> I feel as though when I am with all of the staff, we have monthly all staff meetings, I feel
> like a student and I feel like they view me as a child. They're just like oh, all the
> professionals, except for the GAs, and all the professionals, except the GAs, as to where
> in my unit, I'm definitely more clear as a professional and I'm somebody who is able to
> lead the students.

This complements the overarching theme that GA lives are extremely blurred and situational. In

certain spaces, Sally feels confident and relevant, and in other spaces she feels less than and that

she should remain silent. Daisy has a similar circumstance and explains:

> I think within my community I am seen as a professional and I'm treated as such. I do
> think that there are some instances in terms of the committees that we're assigned to
> which sometimes I feel I'm a student leader because I'll vocalize a thought, but I don't
> think its really received in a, like professionals of this, versus like, oh its just a grad.

Bailey also feels like a professional within her department of Residential Life, but more like a student in a larger group. She says, "Especially when certain information is not necessarily communicated to us or when I'm in a setting and people are addressing the room, but they're only addressing the professionals but it impacts us as well." Learning to understand the culture of their department and other environments in which they work contribute to their challenge of understanding their position as a GA.

The challenge of navigating their role as student and professional becomes increasingly complicated by the inconsistent circumstances in which they work. They are often looked at as students when it is convenient for their department and later considered a professional in other situations. For example, Sally says:

> Because one day they want you to be a student when it comes to making decisions and having a voice. But the next, you're supposed to be held to a standard of a professional when it comes to 'oh, don't hang out with your students outside of work.' And its like, who are we really supposed to hang out with? Am I student or am I a professional?

Bailey echoes this thought in an interview, "You have the expectations of a professional, but they treat you like you're a student. So, you want me to perform as if I'm a professional, but I get the benefits of a student." Bailey's work load often resembled a full-time professional, but she was often discouraged when treated as a student in meetings. In a focus group, Ben explains that his stance is situational:

> Even when asking for days off, like spring break, we're students, we're supposed to have the week off. *We* have to ask for those days. Or, for example, we have to dress, that we have to dress professional, like business casual…but just something like that they hold us for certain standards like professional but other standards they're like 'You're a student.' So its kind of make sure, its mixed messages.

Participants in the group agreed that they also experienced this. Missy shared, "When it comes to me being an adult, needing someone that is paid by the university, a professional, to do something with the students, that's when I'm like the professional." Participants found it difficult

to understand when they are considered a student compared to a professional and felt it was based on the convenience of the department instead of what was in the best interest, or consistent, for the GA. Ben believes, "If we're going to be treated as professionals, you have to treat us like, in every aspect." The inconsistency makes it more difficult for GAs to understand their role.

The GA experience is vague and certainly appears situational based on the environment, program, and personnel the GAs work closely with, but it is challenging to navigate the blurred lines of graduate student and a professional within their unit. When GAs share ideas and are listened to, they feel valued. Feelings of disappointment and disengagement arise when GAs feel their opinions are not heard or respected. GAs desire the empowerment and encouragement from supervisors to share their feelings, and even further to see their opinions make an impact on their unit. These experiences of blurred lines from student and professional are also discussed in the current literature concerning research and teaching assistants.

Implications

Research on the graduate assistant experience working within an administrative unit, like student affairs, is almost unchartered territory. The minimal literature on research and teaching assistants speaks to the theme of blurred lines in understanding GAs' dual role of student and employee. Due to the lack of formal training, many GAs are unclear on their expectations and boundaries (Gardner & Jones, 2011; Park & Ramos, 2002; Payne et al., 2015; Schlemper, 2011; Tulane & Beckert, 2011; Weidert et al., 2012). Park and Ramos (2002) posited that TAs often lacked an introduction to the department's procedures and practices, therefore, TA's felt unprepared for their role teaching in the classroom. The current literature demonstrates that many TA's and RA's struggle to balance the multiple roles of student, researcher, and instructor.

Gardner and Jones (2011) confirmed that one of the most challenging aspects of the assistantship experience is finding their niche in the multiple communities in which they live. Developing a professional identity is a key goal for GAs and it is difficult to balance the many roles a GA takes on: student, researcher, instructor, and advising (Dunn-Haley & Zanzucchi, 2012; Schlemper, 2011). Through meaningful training, GAs are better able to navigate boundaries (Dunn-Haley & Zanzucchi, 2012). Liddell et al. (2014) also explained the socialization process that takes place throughout a master's program - "In the student affairs field, the socialization process takes place in four contexts of practice, including the personal, institutional, extra-institutional, and professional contexts" (Liddell et al., 2014, p. 70). Graduate programs should assist in the socialization process that students encounter – which will therefore assist in entry level employee preparedness in the field, and establish concrete boundaries for their current role.

The difficulty of navigating the blurred line of being a student and employee echo Payne et al.'s (2015) study about graduate assistants' dissent and the "complexities of the dual role as student and employee and the complicated nature supervising and mentoring graduate assistants" (p.104). It may be difficult for GAs to voice their opinions or raise an issue due to their dual role; further, this vagueness can affect their communication with supervisors and colleagues (Payne et al., 2015). Payne et al. (2015) described:

> Collegial relationships and perceived level of job responsibility marked participants' classification of themselves as more of an employee than a student, whereas being treated as having a lower status or identifying as a learner were the key considerations graduate assistants mentioned when they perceived themselves primarily as students (p. 111).

This reiterates what participants shared in my study - that depending on the environment, GAs feel more like a professional than a student. Supervisors and those working with GAs should empower them, embrace their feedback and encourage them to share their opinions. Payne et al.

(2015) also found that GAs "felt little power to change the circumstances" (p. 114), which is a disservice to all parties involved. GA feedback allows opportunities to enhance the department, builds their confidence, and enriches communication skills.

These findings demonstrate the need for clear and consistent communication between GAs and their supervisors. GAs should be aware of their work expectations, and should be informed as to why certain information is withheld from them. It is understandable that GAs will not be privy to all meetings, but an honest dialogue between the supervisor and GA should take place to explain why certain information is not provided to everyone. Supervisors, administrators, and faculty should take ownership of the GAs' experiences to create meaningful opportunities for development. This includes empowering them through asking for their opinions and understanding why they came to certain conclusions. Likewise, the supervisor should share his/her opinion and explain the rational behind departmental decision-making.

Interpersonal Supervisor Relationships

Throughout data collection, participants continued to reference their desire to have a strong, interpersonal relationship with their supervisor. Participants who did have a comfortable relationship with their supervisor appreciated the consistent feedback and ability to freely ask questions. However, participants who did not have a strong relationship with their supervisor struggled with direction throughout their experience. Participants described their desire to have personal and professional support from their supervisor with open and consistent communication.

Theo and Kolby both reflected that although they did not come into this experience seeking a strong interpersonal relationship with their supervisors, they now understand how important that relationship is to their overall engagement within their position. Theo explains:

So going into this I kept wanting more of a relationship from my supervisor which surprised me because I've never, that's never been something that I've sought out. And that would be something in terms of that kind of support. Because, to me, that really effects how I do my work – feeling a connection with my supervisor, it makes me want to do my work. Even something I don't like. Because I have a good relationship with my supervisor I want to make her happy and I want this to work. But in doing something that I don't really like, plus having a so-so relationship with my supervisor, its like this assistantship is awful. It makes me not enjoy the experience.

This showcases how important the supervisor/GA relationship is to the GA's engagement and

commitment to their position. Theo later added:

I would be devastated if I disappointed someone that I had a really good relationship with. That's what guides my work, that's why I take extra time making sure its good. Whereas now I'm like, well, let me try to do this well so she doesn't say anything to me. But a bigger motivator is not wanting to disappoint someone.

For Theo, having a personal relationship with his supervisor would motivate him to work harder

and be more invested in his role. Kolby agreed and shared:

Now I can see the value in two people having an interpersonal relationship and that really effects the supervisor role. Because when I think about my past four supervisors, the two that I had the strongest relationship with, or the two I worked the best under, and the two that I still communicate with, and the three that I don't, I don't really have an interest in actually even talking to or working with anything beyond that point. Now, I think that's really something that I see that has changed my perception of supervisors.

Participants explained how vital this relationship is to their engagement and passion for their

role. Daisy shares how her trust with her supervisor will enable a friendship post graduation:

We get along really well in terms of just working. I think we're very well suited for each other and I think in terms of a friendship, that maybe would grow after I graduate, but I definitely know that I can rely on her.

Daisy's trust in her supervisor will foster a long-lasting relationship after her graduation. Bailey

also described her positive relationship with her supervisor using the word friendship as well.

Bailey was able to conceptualize this through her description, "We had a great, it was more of a

partnership, it was a friendship, there was a personal connection, there still is. We truly did

develop a friendship. He was my confidant, I talked to him about everything." When participants

have an interpersonal relationship with their supervisor, they are more invested to go above and

beyond their job description. Further, GAs also feel valued through the personal care supervisors

demonstrate when they connect on a personal level.

Desiring a personal connection with supervisors, as exemplified by supervisors asking

and caring about events and conflict going on in the GAs' lives outside of the office, is a theme

that emerged through participant stories. Missy explains:

> She is one of the most supportive people I've ever met I my entire life. Anything that I'm
> going through weather it be personally or professionally I can talk to her and she will
> give me so much guidance on both sides of the fence. She never tries to push me to do
> anything, whatever her opinion, she might not have an opinion about it, but she never lets
> me know that.

Participants agreed that feeling personally supported was important to their experience. Jacob

said, "You know you're working with somebody who really cares about you not [just as] an

employee, but as an individual, as a person. That's what I really like, they genuinely care. We

genuinely care about each other in that office." Jacob was invested in his work environment

because of the care his coworkers demonstrated. Sally also explained that when her supervisor

took the time to get to know her personally, their relationship grew stronger. Sally shares that

through conversations and learning more about each other, her supervisor's trust grew. Sally

explains:

> He started to trust me more and we started to have more open conversations and he
> learned a lot about my life and I learned a lot about his. And just understanding where we
> come from has helped. But I have a very good relationship with him and I trust him a lot.

For Sally and other participants, GAs appreciated when supervisors took the time to get to know

them on a personal level. Personal support helped participants feel comfortable in their position

and comfortable to initiate important conversations. Trust is also important to Bailey:

> He served as a mentor and sounding board also. He has experience already, so he had
> gone through similar experiences and since we connected on a personal level we built a

sense of trust and I think he helped me a lot and learn about myself and being in a role as a paraprofessional.

Participants also explained how much they appreciated when supervisors were empathetic with their academic course load. GAs are often overwhelmed with coursework, and they appreciated when supervisors recognized that they were stressed, and when supervisors were flexible with their schedules if the GA needed additional time to work on an assignment

Demonstrating personal care for GAs was important for their engagement within their role and feeling comfortable at work, but GAs also desired professional support from their supervisors. Jacob appreciated sitting in on a meeting and listening to his supervisor share new and innovative ideas for his office to connect with other areas of campus. In an interview he shared, "I was just listening to her ideas in a meeting she was having with somebody else, [I was like] Man! These are really creative ideas, how do you form these types of ideas? I want to be like that." Jacob felt appreciative to sit in on the meeting, but he also learned through the experience by observing his supervisor in that setting. Jacob's supervisor recognized a unique learning opportunity to include Jacob in a professional environment, which positively influenced his experience. Steve appreciated his supervisor taking the time to mentor and develop him, "He's really great at setting up opportunities…like he's stepping back more and more, in a good way." Steve's supervisor also supported him through his shortcomings, He explains:

I've made the wrong decision before and he's gone to bat for me on that. The director was like why did we do this like this? He's like, we made this decision, we're sticking to it, you know – he didn't throw me under the bus or anything, so it's been a great relationship.

Steve's supervisor stood up for him – demonstrating the supervisor's faith in Steve's decision making. This experience not only validated Steve's purpose, but also contributed to the type of leader he wants to be in the future. Daisy said, "She is really helping me learn stuff." GAs

appreciated supervisors acknowledging this hands-on experience as an opportunity to develop professionally. A supervisor's intentionality in providing GAs with real-life professional experiences equips them with the skill set they need as a new professional. Supervisors have a unique role in working with GAs; the findings from this research illustrate the GAs' desire to build a personal and professional relationship with their supervisors, and this is possible through clear and consistent communication.

GAs appreciate the opportunity to regularly talk and 'check-in' with their supervisors. Further, they want to feel comfortable to dialogue with their supervisors. Jacob came into this experience with low self-confidence in his abilities, inside and outside of the classroom. Through his experience, his confidence has increased and he explained, "It's that type of atmosphere they've created so we have that mutual respect for each other to share ideas." The open communication and encouragement from Jacob's supervisors has increased his self-confidence to voice his opinions. Jeremiah also feels comfortable with his supervisor and explains, "I am able to go to my supervisor and ask her different questions without feeling uncomfortable." Ben shared:

> My supervisor, he's very adamant on having one-on-ones and making sure that we're on the same page. So not necessarily if I need anything but just so we're on the same page even if I don't have anything, just updating him what I have done. Even if its not anything new as long as he hears it to make sure we're on the same page…I do appreciate that.

Ben appreciates the consistency of his check-ins with his supervisor, even though there may not be anything pressing to share. This also translates into GAs feeling that their supervisors value them and are willing to take the time to meet with them. Daisy also appreciates the opportunity to engage in conversation with her supervisor. She said, "We make decisions. We talk about the decision, and then we move it forward. Its never like I made this decision so we're just gonna go

with it." Theo does not feel as comfortable talking with his supervisor and he explains how that

creates a difficult working environment for him. He explains:

> Sometimes I go to work and she's in such a great mood and I'll say, 'Hey!' and she'll be
> fine. And then sometimes I'll go in and I'll pass her and I'll say, 'Hey!' and she won't
> even look up. She'll say hey but keep walking. So it's like I never know. It's very rocky
> and very inconsistent and so it's hard to figure out what's going on. And I always feel
> like I should tiptoe and make sure I say the right things so that she's not upset with
> anything that I do; or if she's in a bad mood.

Perhaps if there were regular meetings to 'check-in,' Theo would not feel as confused because

there would be frequent and consistent dialogue. This would also create more opportunities to

build a personal and/or professional connection – which would assist Theo in his engagement

and uncomfortable demeanor at work. Theo later shared, "I think people miss out on the

relationship orient piece that its kind of important to have that – or at least some comfort ability

with the person you're working with." Theo and his supervisor did have two conversations that

stood out to him. He explains, "But it stood out to me because for the first time I felt like she was

listening to my voice." Theo appreciated having an honest dialogue with his supervisor and felt

discouraged that more of those conversations did not happen regularly. Bailey also feels that

increased communication can be extremely beneficial. "Avoiding topics of discussion, you won't

get anywhere as a division, as a department, if you're avoiding like having those conversations

that you really need to have." Bailey identifies communication as a very important feature for the

department to move forward and would appreciate the opportunity to have more dialogue with

colleagues. GAs also expressed their need for honest feedback through these meetings. Sally

explains:

> So at the end of the year I had a conversation with all my supervisors and I was like, I'm
> trying to turn over this new leaf and I'm trying to get you guys to respond to me, the
> things I'm doing. And I said what do you need from me? And [my supervisor] said, 'You
> always tell us that you're here for us and that you care and it doesn't always feel like that.
> You don't always show that. You're going to talk, you need to walk the walk.' And that

really resonated with me and it still does. Like every day I think about it. Am I doing what I need to do for my students and am I being there and not only telling them but actually do it for them?

Sally graciously accepted the criticism and used it to change her approach at work. This shows that GAs do not only want positive feedback, but they appreciate constructive criticism to develop and become better student affairs practitioners. Raw conversations are not always easy to have, but GAs shared that they valued honest feedback so that they can grow as professionals. Ben agrees and said:

I feel more comfortable talking to my boss just because I'm honest and open with him. If its what I'm struggling with, with what I think I'm good at and I just want him to be critical and I just feel like we are open with that.

Ben appreciates the honesty he shares with his supervisor. Kolby explains:

I classify great supervisors are people who are my mentors, who are my references, who I ask questions daily. When I feel like I would walk across the hallway and ask these same questions but I really shoot a text or emails to other people.

Kolby does not feel comfortable to have open and honest dialogue with his current supervisor, so he relies on mentors he has previously worked with. Although keeping in touch with previous employers and mentors is a positive attribute, the ability to obtain a new mentor or build a positive relationship with his current supervisor was not realized.

GAs desire a strong interpersonal relationship with their supervisors. Participants explained they not only wanted a personal connection, but professional guidance, and the opportunity to have frequent and consistent communication with their supervisors. This theme demonstrates the importance of supervisory relationships for GAs in student affairs. It is helpful to reference leadership research that has been conducted pertaining specifically to student affairs in order to make connections as well as expand our understanding when it comes to supervising GAs.

Implications

The supervision of GAs is not fully developed in the literature base, and from this study, it certainly warrants additional exploration. It was extremely beneficial to meet with current GAs to better understand their desired supervisory style. Student affairs professionals purposefully supervise student leaders in alignment with learning objectives and goals but the same tactfulness is not always given to GAs. This study demonstrates how important it is for GAs to have a relationship with supervisors and clear communication for their own development and engagement. When this type of leadership was exhibited, GAs were more engaged and developed personally and professionally. This theme complements Forney and Davis's (2002) work explaining that graduate assistants benefit from a supportive environment to discuss future goals, reflect on experiences, and have consistent communication to discuss issues or concerns. Johnson (2007) confirmed that teaching assistants desired to have personal and professional support form the faculty they work with. Again, further research needs to be conducted to identify variables that contribute to a meaningful relationship. The desired attributes that participants described in a supervisor reflect study findings that focus on entry-level professionals and also resembles synergistic leadership.

The theme of the importance of interpersonal relationships is consistent with what entry-level professionals also desire from their supervisors. Specifically, entry-level professionals want to build a personal relationship with a more experienced administrator (Bolton, 2005; Cooper & Miller, 1998; Jones & Segawa, 2004). New professionals in student affairs also desire a mentor to provide support in their new role (Cilente et al., 2006; Kuk et al. 2007; Ran & Hodges, 2007; Tull, 2006). Participants in my study shared their desire for an interpersonal relationship with their supervisor, a supervisor who demonstrates personal care for their lives, professional

support, open communication, and honest feedback. Participants also used the word mentor as a descriptor when they described their relationship with their supervisors. This echoes what previous studies have found regarding the expectations for entry-level professionals and their supervisor relationships.

Many of the descriptors in this theme may also be attributed to a leadership style in and of itself. Armino and Creamer (2001) described synergistic leadership as inclusive of "discussion of exemplary performance, discussion of long-term goals, discussion of inadequate performance, frequent informal performance appraisals, and discussion of personal attitudes" (p. 36). Liddell et al. (2014) also clarified synergistic supervision as an approach with "open communication, feedback, and identification of future aspirations" (p. 72). For new professionals in student affairs, synergistic supervision has a positive correlation to job satisfaction (Liddell et al., 2014), and findings from this study also demonstrate GAs' desire for synergistic supervision. Armino and Creamer (2001) conducted a study to better understand quality supervision in student affairs; their findings demonstrate employees desire on-going relationships, accountability, and feedback. Shupp and Armino (2012) stated, "graduate student affairs programs could promote the principles of synergistic supervision to interns and their supervisors" (p. 170-171). This study demonstrates that GAs also desire this type of relationship where they feel comfortable to develop personally and professionally. Armino and Creamer (2001) contended that "training and education of supervisors should focus upon developing and sustaining synergistic relationships" (p. 42), for all staff – including GAs.

Entry-level professionals emphasized communication as a key aspect to professional growth by "acknowledging the importance that feedback from supervisors played on their development as young student affairs professionals" (Shupp and Armino, 2012, p. 170). Weidert,

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Wendorf, Gurung, and Filz (2012) explained the importance of faculty opening communication channels with their teaching assistants, specifically focusing on outcomes and expectations, as this will engage the TA and enable confidence in their skillset. Further, Bloom et al.'s (2007) study found five major themes that were important for graduate students' advisors to possess: demonstrated care for students, accessibility, role models in professional and personal matters, individual guidance, and proactive integration into the profession. Most previous research centers around graduate assistants as teaching assistants in which the advisor was most likely their supervisor, but these qualities also represent what participants desired to have in a supervisor working within a student affairs division.

This theme also aligns with Payne et al.'s (2015) work where GAs explained "relationships with supervisors, and departmental openness emerged as key themes influencing graduate assistants' willingness to approach or avoid dissent" (p. 111). Similar to my study's findings, when GAs have open communication with their supervisor, they are much more comfortable in raising concerns. Payne et al. (2015) also found that GAs require frequent interactions with supervisors, such as weekly meetings and consistent face-to-face interaction which echoes what participants in my study shared as well. They go on to say that "graduate assistants who felt a strong sense of connection with their supervisors described the ways their supervisors took an interest in the graduate assistants' personal and school lives and spring time with them professionally and socially" (Payne et al., 2015, p. 116). This reiterates the value of supervisors' demonstration of genuine care for their GAs. Supervisors should try to connect on a personal level with their GAs, resulting in deeper personal and professional engagement.

Leadership trends in higher education have evolved from the ability to control a department to a model that favors empowerment (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin,

2006). The empowerment model addresses the needs of GAs who desire frequent feedback and a personal relationship with their supervisor. Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin (2006) claim that "leaders create empowerment by encouraging and rewarding participation, collecting and disseminating data of interest to constituents, providing forums for constituents to talk together, and promoting a campus climate of openness" (p. 140). GAs want to be active contributors in the decision-making process within their units, and this activity begins with the relationship with their supervisor.

Meaningful Responsibility

A surprising theme that emerged from participant stories was their longing for autonomy and increased responsibility within their GA role. I was expecting to hear that GAs were stressed with the amount of long hours and work expectations, but this was simply not the case. Participants did share that they rarely only work 20 hours and typically do spend longer hours at work and participating in programs but they were frustrated with the type of work they did and desired increased responsibility. Further, participants genuinely felt valued when greater autonomy was given to them.

Participants explained that many of their job descriptions were thick with advising, programming, and autonomy but their actual experience did not accurately reflect this description. Theo explains his frustration with lack of meaningful tasks he carries out:

> I think in the position I do not feel very significant because my strengths aren't being utilized and so the students don't see me as a credible source or authority because she has such a big role within the program and in the advising structure. So the students go to my advisors - any questions they have, and even though I feel like the GA should kind of have that in my assistantship because of that lack of autonomy, I don't know if it's a trust thing.

Theo expressed his desire to have a more hands-on role with the student group his unit works with. Missy also feels frustrated at her lack of freedom to advise a student group, "And that's

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something I didn't realize that it was going to be like, and that's been a major disappointment."

Later she explained her desire to apply coursework to her assistantship:

> I just realize so much and I've learned so much from the classes that I've taken and, I don't know if its helped me as a graduate assistant because I haven't gotten actually to put it actually into practice, I wish that I could a little more.

Missy also shared, "I almost wish I was stressed out about how much GA work I had to do." Although this quote may be extreme, it demonstrates her desire to want to take on tasks and progress her experience. GAs understand the opportunity they have to obtain experience, and they want to take full advantage of their time in graduate school. Sally expressed an area she wants to develop:

> I don't think many of us have real book experience. So just helping us understand. I know how the money goes to where it goes and how students pay, but a real understanding of budget and so just getting real responsibility. Teach me how to budget, teach me how to. What is your strategic plan? How can I develop a strategic plan that applies in my functional area?

Sally recognizes skill sets she is lacking and wants the challenge of getting exposed to budgeting and strategic planning. Supervisors can and should take advantage of these opportunities to assist their own department in being more strategic and budget conscious. Not only are these tasks frequently considered as additional tasks that practitioners do not have time to deal with, this would assist in preparing new professionals in areas they often lack experience with.

When participants were given increased responsibility and autonomy, this was not taken as a burden or an annoyance; instead GAs felt valued and welcomed the opportunity. Bailey says, "I don't want to be micromanaged." Bailey is in a new role where the full time professional recently left the institution; therefore, her responsibilities have increased dramatically. At times she is overwhelmed, but recognizes how prepared she will be for a full-time position and

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appreciates the opportunity. Sally explains how she feels when more responsibility is given to her:

> He trusts us. He gives us tasks. He gives us a lot of autonomy. And I appreciate him so much for that because I don't think I would be able to grow as much as I have. You know, I have to hold myself responsible for the things that I do. And when I'm a professional nobody's going to be watching over my shoulder every single day.

She understands this opportunity will serve to prepare her for an entry-level position, and is thankful for the responsibility, as this will likely facilitate her transition into a full-time position. Jacob was in a unique position last fall when one of his supervisors left the university for a new position, and he took on many of her duties to assist the department. Jacob explains his new responsibilities:

> So then that meant that I took on her responsibilities, making sure the programs, the programmatic aspects, making sure the database was updated, making sure that you could get in contact with professor contacts…all of those things that a professional staff member would usually do.

Jacob described this experience with enthusiasm and appreciated the opportunity to step up and exceed original expectations. He appreciated this experience to expand his skill set and help his department when they needed him. Jeremiah was also given increased responsibility during his tenure as a GA:

> So I would definitely say that this year I've been given much bigger tasks and that's doing different assessments of different programs that we offer throughout our office…So my supervisor's just kind of passing it down to me because she saw how great I did with executing other things throughout our office.

Jeremiah translates the increased tasks to mean he has been doing well within the unit. He welcomes the opportunity to do more for the department and wants to continue to increase his responsibilities. Ben said, "I actually feel like I have a lot of autonomy in my group because these students go to me as their first line of interaction…That way, students see me as an advisor, not a person that is just there." Later in the focus group Ben added:

It's actually what you're doing so we feel more valued about that. And you know, my boss given me the opportunity to full reign of our budget. So I enter in all of the stuff with that. So I'm overseeing it and if I ever need any help, I know during the day he'll check it, but he's trusting me enough that I'm keeping up with it.

Ben values the increased responsibility and understands his boss trusts him. He feels comfortable and supported by his supervisor to make decisions on his own. Steve also feels like he has autonomy in his role and said, "I've learned how to be more professional…I can make those decisions, even if its something above my level I can have that conversation with that person and say from my viewpoint, give my feedback on the situation." Ben and Steve's autonomy has given them increased confidence in their ability to make decisions and move his department forward. Participants reflected on the tasks they were assigned and the most challenging circumstances were described as helpful and beneficial to their development.

Participants often felt that their skills were not fully utilized in their assistantship based on the minimal tasks they are assigned to carry out. They expressed a desire to be more hands-on with the students they work with and explore assessment, strategic planning, and budgeting. When increased responsibility was given to them, it was appreciated and they in turn felt valued. This theme mirrors previous studies that researched the teaching and research assistant experiences and the autonomy they desire. This theme also confirms previous studies that explored the learning that takes place through a student affairs master's program – specifically, the heavy emphasis student affairs preparation programs commonly put on student development theory (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Herdlein et al., 2004)

Implications

The desire for more responsibility was a surprising theme that emerged. Participants desired autonomy and respected the responsibility that was given to them. However, this was consistent with Payne et al.'s (2015) study, which found that teaching and research assistants

wanted more autonomy and freedom in their roles. When graduate assistants were given more complex responsibilities, compared to administrative duties, they felt more like professionals than students (Payne et al., 2015). Shupp and Armino (2012) found that entry-level student affairs professionals felt underutilized throughout their internship experiences in their master's program. Herdlein et al. (2004) and Cuyjet et al. (2009) agreed that entry-level professionals were comfortable with student development theory but lacked experience with budgeting and financial management, which echoes what participants shared. It would be beneficial for GAs, supervisors, and faculty to have a conversation to connect coursework to GA opportunities. Kuk et al. (2007) and Forney (1994) recommend that faculty explore the experiential learning opportunities their graduate students have in order to connect those to the curriculum taught in the classroom.

When GAs are provided the opportunity to grow and develop through increased responsibility, they feel more valued and engaged in their role. Liddell et al. (2014) conducted a study and found:

> The graduate assistantship and other out-of-class experiences were reported as very powerful for new professionals. We found out-of-class experiential opportunities in graduate preparation programs to be more influential than in-class experiences when it came to students' understanding of institutional culture and politics, expanding professional networks, and understanding professional expectations (p. 81).

The assistantship experience assists in the development of student affairs professionals. Consistent with the accommodating learning style, "the greatest strength of this orientation lies in doing things, in carrying out plans and tasks and getting involved in new experiences" (Kolb, 1984, p. 78), which supports previous research (Alsandor, 2005; Forney, 1994; Garland, 1985) describing student affairs practitioners as accommodators. ELT has proven successful when applied to areas in student affairs (Clyde et al. 2004; Guthrie & Jones, 2012; Lea & Leibowitz,

1986) and it should certainly be taken into consideration when planning and implementing work with GAs. The tasks assigned should be meaningful, relatively autonomous and challenging.

This theme demonstrates GAs desire to work with supervisors who encompass a distributed leadership approach where "leadership is a shared influence process to which several individuals contribute" and "leadership arises from the interactions of diverse individuals which together form a group or network in which essential expertise is a dispersed quality" (Van Ameijde et al., 2009, p. 766). Allocating leadership tasks empowers employees and also creates a team-like working environment. It also provides opportunities for those who are not in formal leadership positions to contribute to the progression of the unit (Jones et al, 2014). As Jones et al. (2014) noted, "distributed leadership links individual leaders and experts in collaborative activities" (p. 614). This provides GAs with the opportunity to work with their supervisor and feel comfortable sharing their opinion. Distributed leadership approaches help to engage staff in change and decision-making. Participants from this study shared their desire to contribute to their division. They also shared how important it was for supervisors to respect their opinions and points of view, and when their voice was neglected, they withdrew and neglected to initiate change. Employing a distributed leadership style would open the door for GAs' contributions, nurturing their full potential, and would benefit the department as a result of reaping the full benefits of having a GA.

Tough Transitions

Participants reflected on the transition from their undergraduate program to their current position. Most participants were extremely involved and had previous experience in the unit in which they currently hold an assistantship. This transition was difficult for many. Participants felt that the job descriptions did not accurately portray the actual GA experience. Participants

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also had a difficult time transitioning into a new institution different than their alma matter where they had such positive experiences, but overall GAs felt grateful and acquired positive outcomes from their experience.

For students coming from different institutions, interviews and job descriptions are their primary glimpse into life as a GA. Participants relied heavily on the job description in determining their expectations of the GA role. Theo pointedly states:

> That position description is worded differently than I imagined it would actually be…In that position description, I would try to be a little bit more transparent…I think they could definitely change that because then it would illuminate, well this is what your job will really be and all the other extra things that go with it would be solvable or at least a person going into it would understand what they were getting into.

Missy had a similar experience and explains, "There was a gap between what I thought the job description said and what it actually is." Both Theo and Missy thought their position would afford them more autonomy and increased responsibility than what they received. Both participants felt that their job descriptions do not accurately describe their duties. Sally reflected on her GA interview and says:

> I just wish I would have known. I wish people would be more honest- would have been more honest in my interview. I think that would have saved, I don't regret coming here, but I think I would have had a better idea of what I was getting myself into.

Participants reflected on their desire for increased transparency on the front end to relieve false hope of experiences they did not receive.

Job descriptions did not always seem to align with GAs' actual experiences on campus, but GAs also reflected on the importance of letting go of their experience as an undergraduate student leader and transitioning to a new institution where things are done differently. Theo explains:

> I thought it would be kind of the exact same, that we would have a similar structure in terms of how we train students, the role of the GA in terms of the logistics and those

things. And the position description highlighted that as well. However, when I got here that was a very different experience.

Divorcing their alma mater's ideals and processes from their current role was a challenge. Kolby also reflected on his ability to separate his previous experiences from his new role. He explained:

> One thing that I've learned is how to unlearn what I already know. Because coming from a different system of residential life I'd be like 'Why are we doing this?' and 'Why cant our RA's do this?' and 'Why is this like this?' and I think that doesn't get you anywhere. Its kind of like that's what's been done. That's just kind of what we do here, and I'm just like well, ok.

Initially, the adjustment was difficult because of the steep learning curve involved in understanding new sets of policies, procedures, and politics. Understanding institutional culture is not easy, as revealed through participant stories, but over time, participants were eventually able to adjust and accept institutions as different.

Although GAs struggled to transition into a new position at a new school, they reflected on their experience as a whole in a positive light and realized that even difficult experiences were learning experiences. Theo portrays this through his story:

> I think for me, the most important thing I've learned from my assistantship is that every school has its own process and everyone has their own way of working. And sometimes you can be in a position that you don't really enjoy. You find that its difficult to be in that situation and you may not even like the person you're working with but there's always something to learn…I realized that I'm learning what kind of supervisor I like. If I'm ever in a role where I'm advising supervisors I'm learning what I would do differently; trying to create a positive spin to it instead of looking at it as this negative burden.

Theo understands that although his current position may not be ideal, it is still a learning experience. Theo is able to identify take-a-ways that will assist him in future positions. Missy explains that this transition has taught her she cannot control everything:

> I have learned that things are not always what it seems. Like you might go into it thinking that this is what you really really want, everything's going to be perfect! And its just not

always like that, and being ok and not letting that ruin it all for you and ruin your attitude and ruin who you [are].

Missy needed to adjust her expectations to maintain a healthy attitude inside and outside of work.

Sally began to appreciate differences in people. She said:

You don't necessarily have to agree with everything right off the bat. In this program you have to learn to disagree. We all come from different places, we have different paradigms. So just understanding where we come from and just being patient…trying to take something from each conversation.

Although working with different people in a new place was originally a challenge, Sally was able to appreciate those differences and see new perspectives as a learning opportunity. Participants struggled with the transition into their position, but were able to acknowledge growth through the transition.

Participants shared how challenging their transition was from an undergraduate student leader to a GA at a new institution. They placed heavy emphasis on the job description and interview process and shared their need for more transparency throughout the process. The new institutions and departments possessed different policies, procedures, and politics than those of the GAs' previous institutions, and they often questioned why things were done a certain way. However, throughout their experiences, they developed an appreciation for the challenges they faced and identified them as learning opportunities. Previous studies explored the transition that graduate students experience, and as a result training has been found to be extremely important. Other support systems specifically for graduate students have also been found to be helpful to ease the transition for these students.

Implications

The transition to graduate school, and the transition into the assistantship role, is heavily represented in the literature base (Gardner & Jones, 2011; Park & Ramos, 2002; Tulane &

Beckert, 2011; Weidert, Wendorf, Gurung, & Filz, 2012). Forney and Davis (2002) found that

support systems to assist graduate students through their transition were extremely helpful. This

finding demonstrates the strong need for effective training to ease the transition into an

assistantship (Gardner & Jones, 2011; Park & Ramos, 2002; Tulane & Beckert, 2011; Weidert,

Wendorf, Gurung, & Filz, 2012). Renn and Jessup-Anger (2008) also found that new

professionals in student affairs must adjust to navigating a new environment.

Programming that is purposefully geared to assist in easing the transition into life as a

graduate assistant can be extremely beneficial (Forney & Davis, 2002). It appears administrators

and supervisors assume graduate students do not need the same services that are provided for

undergraduate students, but graduate students would benefit from specific programming to meet

their needs and ease their transition and retention (Linenberger et al., 2014; Strake & Kumar,

2014, Goretsky & Patel, 2015). Research centering on graduate students and graduate assistants

must continue to evolve so that programming can adequately meet their unique needs.

Park and Ramos (2002) argued that training may exhaust financial and personal

resources, but they are well spent when dedicated to train and prepare graduate teaching

assistants. They assert, "most successful teachers benefited a great deal from training, in both the

conceptual and the practical dimensions of effective teaching and learning" (Park & Ramos,

2002, p. 49-50). Gardner and Jones (2011) and Weidert et al. (2012) agreed that training is

essential to ease the transition for new teaching assistants. Weidert et al. (2012) noted that "given

the lack of training some participants received, it may be helpful for TAs to have a clear

understanding of expectations, knowledge of ethical guidelines (such as confidentiality), and

strategies for dealing with difficult students" (p. 101). Further Weidert et al. (2012) confirmed

the importance of feedback, both positive and negative, to assist in the teaching assistant's development.

Connections and Links

Throughout interviews and focus groups, students reflected on their experience as a GA, working in the division of student affairs and their time as a student. Specifically, they discussed their ability to connect coursework to their practical application of working with students, and furthermore, they better understood themselves as people and professionals. Throughout their time as a GA, participants explained that this experience provided the platform for their own personal and professional development. Participants commonly referred to the course on *Student Development Theory* as applicable to their work, and courses such as *Assessment* and *College Students in the U.S.* as influential in shaping their approaches to their GA role. The GA experience, along with coursework, assisted in their ability to appreciate differences in others. Students also became more self-aware of their own approach, strengths, and weaknesses through their role. Students understood their unique role as powerful and understood their ability to implement a positive change in the students they worked with.

The GA experience allows graduate students the opportunity to work with undergraduate students and apply what they are learning in the classroom. The classroom and GA experience should indeed partner and assist in their cognitive development and understanding of student affairs. Many participants explained that courses were relevant to their work with students, and that the intentionality of the professor was beneficial to their understanding. Bailey shares:

> I think using a theoretical approach in some of my interactions with students, especially some of the issues I have with students – whether it's roommate conflicts or when parents want to get involved in situations. And its not like I'm mentally citing that theory in my head, its just like I remember the basis of what this theory is. So this is kind of how I can apply that into this situation, just being aware of student identities.

Bailey understands how theory complements her work with students, and while not a linear roadmap, it guides practice and shapes understandings. Missy explains how theory assisted her when working with conflict in the organization she co-advised:

> I had to take a step back and think about student development theory and how conflict and how everyone's dealing with conflict differently…the conversation needed to be had, so making them have those difficult conversations when they don't want to have them, pushing them beyond what they think they're ready for.

Because of student development theory, Missy felt comfortable with conflict and encouraged students to have difficult conversations. For Jacob, theory assisted in his approach to work with student employees on an individual basis. He said, "But now working with these students and seeing each of them have their own personalities and their own working styles that they're good at and how can we best utilize their strength in our office." Previously, Jacob did not modify his approach working with student employees, but now he sees the need for more training and support where others are more independent and appreciate autonomy. Student development theory heavily impacted Jeremiah's approach to his interactions with students. He explains:

> What I would do normally before I actually learned this was, just look at what's on the paper and not actually really pay attention to the student's side of the story, which I think is the most important component of meeting with the student. Allowing that student to reflect on what happened and to actually tell their story. And I would say in the beginning I was cheating students because I didn't allow that opportunity. I did not allow them to actually genuinely tell their story before I made a decision.

Student development theory transformed Jeremiah's work with students and has provided the foundation for him to be more open-minded and understanding with students on an individual basis. The *Student Development Theory* course combined with his practical experience heavily impacted his experience, whereas the course alone may not have resonated as much without the hands-on opportunity to apply what he was learning and observing the difference it made with

the students he was working with. Coursework modified participants' approach to working with

students, but their experience also contributed to their appreciation for differences in others.

Coursework, specifically, *Student Development Theory*, heavily impacted participant

interactions with students. The curriculum, combined with the GA experience, helped GAs to

appreciate and value differences in others. Jeremiah explains:

> Just looking at something very individually, that's something that I've learned to do since
> I've been here. So don't look at it from one perspective, but try to look at it from other
> people's perspective. Try to understand their view or their opinion and not just try to look
> at it from my view or my lenses.

Jeremiah has learned to step back and understand that there are multiple realities based on the

individual and understood his lens was not the best or only perspective. Sally also appreciates

different views. "Understanding we all come from different pasts and even though what we may

look like, doesn't mean we here the same way." Sally builds personal connections with the

students she supervises and uses this a foundation to build trust. Bailey works in housing and

understood how important it is to be able to work with students of different backgrounds. She

says, "Being aware of the various backgrounds of students, especially in the community I'm in

now, and what that looks like and what their experience may be like here. And how this

university shapes them as an individual." Bailey was able to reiterate how a person and his/her

environment are transactional, and a person's background and individuality affects their

experience at the institution. The GA experience provided the venue for participants to work

with students and staff that are different than themselves. Although this was a challenge for

some, overall, participants were extremely appreciative of the opportunity to work with those

who are different and understood that working with those who are different provides a learning

opportunity as well.

Appreciating differences was a valuable outcome of the GA experience, but GAs were also able to develop personally through their role. Students became aware of their own approach, strengths, and weaknesses. Jeremiah shares:

> I've learned to look at things on a much broader scale and learned how not to look at things through a binary lens. So prior to now, I used to think that there was either a right or wrong and I guess going through this master's program has kind of opened my eyes to understand that not everything is black and white. Learning to think out of the box, I guess.

Jeremiah now understands the value of multiple realities and the situational nature of decisions within student affairs. He also understands that he developed this mindset throughout the GA experience, whereas before he believed there was always a right or wrong. Theo learned to have more control over his emotions at work. Theo says:

> I've never been a very emotionally intelligent leader or person. Because typically when I'm upset it reads on my face and body language. So the entire year when anything would upset me, everyone would know. So I think learning what spaces that that's okay to let your emotions show and what spaces aren't.

The professional experience that Theo obtained as a GA ignited his emotional awareness. Sally also modified her approach to working with students. Sally explains:

> I've had to learn how to be softer in my approach with my students. I can be very, I'm very direct. I like to tell it how it is. So softening that approach and finding the balance between being direct and just being, I wouldn't say disrespectful, but coming down hard on my students. So learning that approach and just, I think, just being more understanding.

Sally recognized her original approach to working with students was not resonating with them, and she was able to adapt in order to effectively communicate with students. Bailey also modified her communication style as a result of her GA experience. She reflects on her interactions with RAs she supervises, "even my approach, I've learned there honestly has to be a balance in order to have respect from people when you're a supervisor and when you're in that

position." She continued to share that she understands she will not be liked by all staff members but that it is important to stay true to what she thinks is best for the community she is working in.

Personal development and becoming self-aware is an important outcome of the assistantship experience, but a stronger appreciation for students also seemed to develop through their role. Although Theo had a difficult time as a GA, overall he says, "Students are important and this is about them." GAs desire to work hands-on with students fostered the foundation to build personal relationships. Kolby said, "I think that's my favorite part of my position, is mentoring. And not even supervising, but mentoring is the best part." This was also echoed in another focus group. Sally explains, "My responsibility is, especially when it comes to my students, is representing those students, being a student development professional and an advocate for students." Missy also understood that her relationship with students could result in positive change. She explains:

> I've also learned how me, as a professional, can totally impact and change a student's life for the better and how amazing mentorship is. Even though sometimes it doesn't seem like a big deal, mentorship is a big deal. I would have those conversations and I could impact students – like I've been impacted by my professors, that this change can slowly happen, as frustrating as it may be sometimes as a professional, I feel like I could help in the change, I could have a little finger in that change.

Missy, as well as many other participants, were inspired by their ability to assist students in their development and growth. Mentorship and building relationships with students became a pivotal part of the GA experience.

GAs shared their own development through the GA experience. The academic courses and experiential opportunities do not work in silos, but instead they build off one another to enhance the learning for these graduate students. Most referenced their confidence in connecting student development theory to their work with students. Through this experience and working with so many others who are different than they are, GAs expressed how they now appreciate

those differences and understand how vital individuality is to the student experience. They grew

personally as they became more aware of their strengths and weaknesses and were able to

modify their practices to meet the needs of their department. Lastly, GAs shared the special

nature of their relationships with undergraduates. Participants reflected on the unique opportunity

to build relationships and positively influence the lives of those they work with. This theme

extends previous studies' understanding of the learning that takes place for GAs.

Implications

It is not surprising that participants were comfortable applying student development

theory and mentoring students. Liddell et al.'s (2014) study found that the primary emphasis

among graduate programs in student affairs was development. Herdlein et al. (2004) found that

chief administrators felt new professionals exhibited strong counseling skills and were

comfortable with student development theory, but lacked competencies with budgeting and

strategic planning, reinforcing Cuyjet et al.'s (2009) study's findings where entry-level

professionals and their supervisors agreed that preparatory programs adequately prepared

practitioners in student development theory but lacked preparedness with budgeting and financial

management.

The personal development that participants reflected upon is also part of the CAS (2009)

standards, interpersonal and intrapersonal development, but it does not appear that supervisors or

divisions were always intentional with this reflexivity, and if it was intentional, more

transparency and communication is needed. Specifically, residence life participants shared that

their department has made positive strides forward in making the GA experience more

meaningful; perhaps other units are making similar strides, but the lack of communication or

consistency amongst the division is an area that warrants improvement. Within the institution,

departments should share what they do well and what challenges they face with GAs. Feedback from other departments may assist in their processes; using the GA voice to make improvements is also an essential element to refining the experience. Janosik et al. (2006) and Poock (2013) both agreed that student affairs graduate programs need concrete professional development guidelines. These would help in setting learning objectives and goals for graduate students and therefore assist in the planning and assessment of development.

Participants reflected on their appreciation for the opportunity to mentor students and that was often their silver lining or most admired part of their role. Their stories align with Nora and Crisp's (2007) study, which summarized the mentoring needs of undergraduate students to domains on listening, goal setting, academic subject knowledge, and being a role model. Healy et al. (2012) and Winston and Hirt (2003) confirmed that student affairs practitioners are appropriate personnel to mentor students. Tareef (2013) goes further to acknowledge that when mentors are closer in age, they may appear more relevant. Evans et al. (2009) echod the finding that GAs who serve as supervisors and mentors report a "gratifying experience" (p. 81). GA interactions and relationships with undergraduate students were extremely important and meaningful for participants. This also warrants further exploration to better understand what qualities undergraduate students want in a graduate assistant as a mentor, as well as focusing on the supervisor/graduate assistant relationship. The GA experience provided the opportunity for students to connect coursework to their work with students. It also provided an outlet for their own professional and personal development. Participants recognized the overarching goal of student affairs to assist undergraduate students in making their experience meaningful. I believe if we are more intentional with the GA experience, not only will they excel and become more

prepared professionals, but the undergraduate students they work with will also benefit. An investment into the GA experience is an investment in the entire field of student affairs.

Concluding Thoughts

This exploratory study researched the lived experiences of GAs as well as working to better understand how GAs learned through their role. Findings demonstrate that the role of a GA, a student/paraprofessional/professional, is extremely situational and fraught with blurred lines as it relates to the combined role of student and professional. This makes it increasingly difficult for GAs to understand what their position encompasses and where they stand within the office hierarchy. Relationships with supervisors were found to be very significant to the GA experience. Participants described their desire for an interpersonal relationship with their supervisor. GAs should be supported personally and professionally, and this is personified through regular check-ins and honest feedback. In order to better prepare entry-level professionals, the GA experience should be filled with rich and meaningful tasks and assignments, as this experience will influence the GAs own supervisory style when working with graduate students in the future. Autonomy and responsibility should challenge GAs, and when participants were given autonomy, they were appreciative of the opportunity to develop. Although transitioning to a new institution and a new position was difficult, participants were able to identify the positive learning opportunities. The GA experience provided the platform for participants to connect the dots from the classroom to practical application. It also assisted them in their personal development by becoming increasingly self-aware and modifying their approach at work. These findings demonstrate the need for purposeful design in the planning and implementation of graduate assistants' roles in student affairs. Administrators often take a tactful

approach to working with undergraduate students, specifically with learning outcomes and assessments, and the same attention should be given to the GA experience.

These findings further reinforce Kolb's (1984) relevance to the field of higher education, and expands ELT's reach to graduate assistants working within a student affairs unit. Kolb (1984) suggested, "the central idea here is that learning, and therefore knowing, requires both a grasp or figurative representation of experience and some transformation of that representation" (p. 42). Participants shared the academic content of the program modified their approach to working with students. The opportunity to practically apply what they were learning in the classroom enriched the learning process. The experiential learning opportunities participants obtained enhanced their development and understanding of the field of higher education.

These interrelated themes demonstrate how meaningful the GA experience is, and how much more meaningful it could be if intentionality was a centerpiece in its design. Supervisors and faculty should connect experiential learning with academic content. This synergy could greatly enhance the GA experience and provide more purposeful tasks in their assistantship and assignments within their classes. It can also assist faculty in understanding the challenges GAs face at work so that academic content and class discussions can target those areas. Supervisors can also benefit from understanding what students are learning in their classes. If a student is taking an *Assessment* course, the supervisor can bridge any assignments to their division's assessment plans. Most importantly, the GA voice should be taken into serious consideration. Supervisors, faculty, and administrators should consistently converse with GAs about their experience, and encourage their stories to shape future modifications to the GA experience.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

The graduate assistant experience in student affairs is not present in the current literature, but these unique experiences need to be better understood so that supervisors, faculty, and administrators can enhance the learning that takes place. This grounded theory study provided the platform to hear GA stories and their lived experiences. As previously stated, five themes developed from data collection: participants' (1) challenges in navigating the blurred lines of student and professional, (2) desire for interpersonal relationships with supervisors, (3) appreciation of autonomy and responsibility in their role, (4) difficult experience transitioning into their assistantship, and (5) ability to connect coursework to their practical application with students they work with. Although these findings do not provide a concrete roadmap for our work with GAs in student affairs, this study starts the conversation on research as it pertains to these experiences. These findings reveal the value of the GA experience and can inform future modifications for the field to consider.

Summary

This study sought to better understand the lives and experiences of graduate assistants working within a student affairs division. Graduate degrees are increasing in demand and graduate assistantships provide an ideal platform to obtain a master's degree with tuition assistance while also providing hands-on experience. The strong majority of the current literature focuses on content of coursework or advising (Bloom et al, 2007; Boquard, & Haddad, 2010; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Waple, 2006). Additional studies have assisted in understanding the challenges that teaching and research assistants experience, highlighting work overload and challenge in balancing multiple roles (Mazzola et al., 2011; Payne et al., 2015). The current literature provides a baseline understanding of the graduate assistant experience, but primarily

focuses on understanding teaching and research assistants, which contributed to the development of this particular study. Payne et al. (2015) suggested that engaging employees can contribute to increased job performance and create a positive learning environment within the department. In order to influence performance and learning, we must better understand the experiences of GAs working in student affairs.

Kolb's (1984) ELT was the theoretical framework utilized for this study. ELT revolves around the idea that experience is the foundation for learning to occur (Kolb, 1984). The framework influenced this study from the planning stages throughout the analysis and writing. Kolb's (1984) work is frequently used in student affairs research (Alsandor, 2005; Clyde et al., 2004; Evans et al., 2010; Forney, 1994), and is appropriate to reflect upon the experiences of GAs as well. This lens assisted in understanding the unique role to obtain hands-on experience and the personal and professional development that can take place when GAs are provided the platform to carry out experiential activities (Kolb, 1984). Increased learning and development occurs when students go through the learning cycle to obtain experience, reflect, conceptually analyze, and then actively experiment (Kolb, 1984). This framework assisted the researcher in making sense of the rich qualitative data.

Due to the small amount of literature available concerning GAs in student affairs, an exploratory approach under the qualitative paradigm (Creswell, 2009) was utilized to collect data. Grounded theory methodology was employed due to the lack of existing theory and incomplete existing theories for this specific group (Creswell, 2013). Charmaz's (2009) modification influenced this study due to the heavy stress placed on participant voice and the acknowledgement of researcher experience and bias. Interviews and focus groups, which lasted between 50 minutes to one hour, were conducted with ten participants; the interviews were

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transcribed and analyzed. Consistent with grounded theory methods, data was consistently analyzed throughout the data collection process. Interviews were transcribed and listened to in order to prepare the researcher for the next interview/focus group. Questions were modified based on participant stories. Rubin and Rubin's (2012) framework for interviews was used and allowed the researcher the flexibility for follow up and probing questions to increase clarity and deepen understanding. Krueger and Casey's (2009) framework for focus groups provided a similar structure and allowed flexibility for follow up and probing questions centering around key questions. Focus groups provided a unique opportunity for participants to expand upon different views and share feelings of validation or difference in opinion within a group setting; the first focus group had four participants and the second focus group had three participants.

Conclusion

Data was analyzed throughout the data collection process. Transcriptions were coded consistent with ground theory methods through initial, in vivo, focused, axial, and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006). The researcher also listened to the recordings of the interviews and focus groups to develop a stronger understanding of participant stories. Five themes emerged in this study.

Participants explained the difficulty in navigating the blurred lines of being a graduate assistant serving the roles of student and professional. Participants often questioned what it meant to be a GA. Most specifically, they struggled with the difference between being a student leader within their previous institution and being a graduate assistant/entry-level professional within their new institutions' departments. GAs wanted their voice to be heard. When GAs did not feel their opinions were respected, it negatively impacted their desire to contribute additional feedback or ideas. When GAs received positive praise for their ideas, it increased their

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engagement and made them feel more valued. Participants struggled to understand the hierarchy within their department. Pointedly, they were confused when asked to leave the room for certain meetings or when helpful information was withheld from them. In addition, it is difficult to understand when they are considered a student or an employee. It appeared situational and inconsistent. This theme is consistent with previous studies discussing the difficulty with role conflict as a student, researcher, and instructor (Feezel & Myers, 1997; Payne et al., 2015; White & Nonnamaker, 2011). Further, the faculty and administrators working with GAs should help them to be more comfortable with this role ambiguity. An assistantship is a unique role in which they are a student while simultaneously working within an administrative unit, supportive personnel may alleviate anxiety and assist GAs to better understand their dual role. This also highlights the importance of consistent feedback and discussion so that the GA becomes and remains engaged in their role.

The second theme to emerge was GAs' desire to have an interpersonal relationship with their supervisor. GAs shared their yearning for a deeper relationship with their supervisor. This was exemplified through personal support, consistent communication, and honest feedback. GAs reflected on their appreciation for personal support provided by their supervisor. Participants even referenced the term friendship as they grew closer to their supervisor on a personal level. New professionals also want to build a personal relationship with their supervisor (Bolton, 2005; Cooper & Miller, 1998; Jones & Segawa, 2004) and additional studies demonstrate this desire (Cilente et al., 2006; Kuk et al. 2007; Renn & Hodges, 2007; Tull, 2006). GAs explained their appreciation for consistent communication. Although it may seem trite and unnecessary at times, GAs appreciated regular check-ins with their supervisor. This provided an opportunity to discuss work related items and to connect on matters outside of the office. Forney and Davis (2002)

found similar findings that teaching and research assistants appreciated a supportive work environment and fluid communication with their supervisor. This theme also represents GAs respect for honest feedback. Participants shared how much they desired honest feedback on their progress. Positive feedback was helpful to know they were meeting job expectations, but constructive criticism was welcomed because it gave direction and motivation for improvement. This theme encompasses a synergistic supervision technique, synergistic supervision, which is commonly associated with student affairs (Arminio & Creamer, 2001; Liddell et al., 2014). Shupp and Armino (2012) believe that synergistic supervision should be incorporated in graduate preparatory programs. This finding complements existing literature about new professionals or teaching/research assistants and adds depth by revealing graduate assistants' desire to build a meaningful relationship with their supervisor.

The next theme centers around desire for responsibility. Participants shared that they were often disappointed by the minimal responsibilities they were assigned to carry out. GAs feel more engaged when assigned meaningful tasks, including advising and mentoring. New professionals have reflected that they were underutilized in their internship experiences (Shupp & Armino, 2012), and Park and Ramos (2002) found that teaching assistants were often disappointed with the minimal tasks they were assigned. Participants referenced strategic planning and budgeting as areas in which they want to enhance their skill set and experience. This confirms previous studies that demonstrate new professionals' comfort level with implementing student development theory but lacking the confidence or skills to tackle financial management and budgeting (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Herdlein et al., 2004). Administrators should take advantage of this eagerness to provide valuable experience and also to advance the work within their department. Participants felt extremely valued when they were granted autonomy in

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their role. GAs with more responsibility were challenged in their role and they recognized this as an opportunity for them to enhance their skill set. Participants acknowledged that autonomy will prepare them for a full-time position in student affairs. Payne et al. (2015) also found that teaching and research assistants wanted more autonomy and freedom in their role. Previous studies validate what participants shared in this study – autonomy is valued. However, participants were self-aware of areas in which they were not obtaining experience and shared that they wanted to be challenged in new ways.

Participants described the difficult transition in acclimating to a new culture at a different institution. Participants challenged the way things were carried out when it was different from their alma mater. They had a difficult time understanding culture and different governance within a new environment. GAs placed a strong emphasis on the job description and expected it to be a road map of their experience. Instead, they were often disappointed that many of the identified tasks were not actually realized. However, participants reflected on all experiences as learning experiences and felt that they obtained valuable lessons, even if they were not the lessons they originally expected to learn. The theme of difficult transition is heavily represented in the literature base, and this theme also emerged in this study. Training is also beneficial to ease with the transition that these students experience (Gardner & Jones, 2011; Park & Ramos, 2002; Tulane & Beckert, 2011; Weidert et al., 2012). Forney and Davis (2002) found that services to ease transitions for graduate students were very helpful. Additional support services specifically for graduate students are also found to be beneficial (Linenberger et al., 2014), such as peer support groups (Strake & Kumar, 2014) and departments focused on professional development, social interactions, and leadership skills for graduate students (Goretsky & Patel, 2015). Most participants had previous experience working in student affairs as undergraduates. This theme

illustrates that training and support services are still needed for this group, and assumptions of their comfort level should not be made.

The last theme to emerge was GAs ability identify ways in which coursework and their GA experience came together to enhance their development. Specifically, students referenced their ability to apply student development theory to their work with students. Previous studies also confirm that new professionals are consistently prepared to apply student development theory (Cuyjet et al., 2009; Herdlein, 2004; Liddell et al., 2014). The GA experience also fostered an appreciation for differences in others. Most commonly, participants discussed understanding that students have different backgrounds and expectations; therefore, it is important to approach their work with students on an individual basis. Further, this experience also allowed GAs to recognize their own strengths and weaknesses. Participants relayed areas they needed to develop and were able to modify their practice to better meet student needs. And lastly, participants shared how inspiring their work with students can be. GAs recognized the gratifying aspect of their work with students, and truly enjoyed influencing undergraduate students' lives. This theme also confirms Nora and Crisp's (2007) study describing the mentoring needs of undergraduate students and how GAs in student affairs can and do fill this role. The work of student affairs practitioners is commonly associated with mentorship for undergraduates, but no research identifying or understanding GAs as mentors is represented in the literature. Current research focusing on learning that takes place throughout a student affairs master's program focuses on the coursework, but this theme proves that learning and development takes place from the experiential learning opportunities GAs have in addition to their academic training.

Further, the findings from this study confirm the importance of incorporating Kolb's (1984) ELT into our work with GAs. Although ELT is commonly associated with undergraduate students as well as professionals in the field, it has yet to be applied to graduate assistants in student affairs. Kolb (1984) proclaimed, "knowledge is continuously derived from and tested out in the experiences of the learner" (p. 27). This research compliments Kolb's (1984) argument that learning is a process grounded in experience. Participant experiences inside of the classroom complimented their practical application with the students they worked with. Participants shared the academic content of the program modified their work with students and further solidified concepts discussed in class. The out of class experiences enhanced the overall learning that GAs obtained. These findings validate the significance of Kolb's ELT in higher education.

These themes help to better understand graduate assistants' professional lives. This explorative research can assist practitioners, supervisors, and faculty to better understand GA experiences in student affairs, and hopefully, inspires conversations about applying new practices to enhance experiential learning

Discussion

The findings indicate many recommendations for the field to consider. First and foremost, an emphasis should be put on training GAs. There appears be an assumption that GAs know how to transition into a new culture and do not need formalized or consistent training. Even if graduate assistants have experience working in student affairs as undergraduates, training should still be heavily emphasized. Expectations should be explicitly stated at the beginning of the semester so that the supervisor and graduate assistant are aware of their expectations and held accountable for their experience and service. Personnel working with GAs should also assist them in understanding their dual role as student and administrator. Support systems have positive

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impacts on graduate students (Goretsky & Patel, 2015; Linenberger et al., 2014; Strake & Kumar, 2014), and these should be considered for GAs in student affairs as well.

In addition to training and institutionalized support structures, discussion of expectations is vital and should continue throughout the GAs tenure. This study showcases GAs' desire for clear and consistent communication throughout the GA experience. Supervisors should set aside the time to have meaningful dialogue with their staff, including GAs. Supervisors should reiterate the expectation of the GA's role and provide feedback about where the GA is excelling and others areas that need to be worked on. Supervisors often use this approach with their full-time staff, and this should also translate to their work with GAs. In addition, communication amongst departments should also evolve to share ideas on training, the successes, and the challenges they encounter when working with GAs. Since participants experienced a difficult transition from their alma mater to a new institution, it may be beneficial for students to take an *Organization and Governance* course within their first year. Faculty could assist in the foundational understanding of institutional culture and governance to help GAs understand the diverse leadership approaches of universities and help them to understand and appreciate difference structures.

It is important for supervisors to communicate with their GAs regarding their quality of work, but it is equally important for supervisors to mentor and build a personal relationship with them. Participants shared how valued and engaged they felt in their role when they developed a personal relationship with their supervisor. Supervisors should work to mentor their GAs as much as undergraduate student leaders, and this begins with building a personal connection with the GAs. When supervisors take this time, GAs become more engaged to work harder through an intrinsic desire to exceed expectations. This can be done through formalized programs like

retreats or teambuilding activities. But this can also be accomplished through individual intentional discussion and interactions. When supervisors take the time to build a relationship, acknowledge personal goals and challenges, supervisors will display more understanding. This will create a better working environment for both the GA and the supporting staff in the unit. In addition, this personal relationship will contribute to the GAs' personal and professional development.

Administrators working with GAs have a responsibility to assist in their professional development as leaders in higher education. This responsibility should be taken seriously and supervisors should be held accountable. Responsibility must be given to GAs so that they can experientially learn through their role. When responsibility with budgets, student development, or conduct was placed on the GA, they appreciated the tasks and reflected on how much they learned from the circumstances they were put in. Supervisors should plan development milestones for their GAs and write learning outcomes and goals for the semester and year. This is often done with undergraduate student employees and student organizations, but little intentionality is displayed when promoting GAs development. Outcomes and goals should be set for the entire division of student affairs and assessments should be completed to measure development and success. Assessments do not have to be formal, but conversations or journal entries may be useful to understand what development has taken place. Supervisors can use these assessments to modify their own strategies and better meet the needs of their GAs. Tasks should be distributed to the GAs so that they are challenged and supported, and therefore will be better prepared when they assume the role as a full-time professional in higher education.

Stakeholders should obtain student input. Second year graduate assistants can assist with training ideas for the first year graduate students. Obtaining reflective data from first year

students allows stakeholders to know their challenges and better assist the next class with those obstacles. Student input is key to better meeting their needs and should not be undervalued (Payne et al., 2015). These practical applications are not new strategies for student affairs to consider, but applying these practices to graduate assistants appears to be a new concept. More intentionality should be placed on planning, preparing, developing, and assessing these students. While this study may help administrators and faculty to consider new approaches to working with GAs, there is certainly more research that needs to be explored.

Future Research

This exploratory study provided the opportunity to understand the experiences of graduate assistants, and further, this study also assisted in identifying ideas for future research. Now recognizing how important training is for GAs, a quantitative instrument would be beneficial to understand which variables in the training process are most significant to GA preparedness. This study also demonstrates how vital supervisor relationships are for the GA experience. Further research should be conducted to better understand what leadership characteristics are the most significant for GA success. Participants also shared how they enjoyed mentoring and working with undergraduate students; additional studies to better understand what these relationships look like, and/or what mentor qualities undergraduates desire in the GAs they work with and how GAs develop as a mentor through this specific role, would also be beneficial for the field.

To obtain a more holistic picture of the GA experience in student affairs, it would be beneficial to obtain longitudinal data from participants. Ideally, it would be helpful to collect data throughout their graduate program from their first year, second year, and into their professional career to better understand how learning takes place. It would also be useful to

conduct a study with data from multiple institutions (regional to research intensive institutions) and/or from students of diverse backgrounds, to compare participants' experiences. Further, it would be beneficial to extend exploration to the doctoral graduate assistantship experience as well. It would be helpful for supervisors and faculty to understand the differences and commonalities of the experiences of their masters and doctoral students.

To align with the benefits of a longitudinal study, developing theory grounded in the GA experience would profoundly contribute to the field of higher education and student affairs. Although this particular study did not produce a theory, one that acknowledges the GAs development over the course of their graduate program would assist practitioners, faculty, and the GAs to better understand their experiential and cognitive development. This would provide an in-depth insight into how those working with GAs could best meet their needs. A key component of creating theory is exploring the experience throughout multiple stages, and this type of research would substantially influence the work of faculty, supervisors, administrators, and graduate students in student affairs.

Most studies that center around skills gained in graduate programs solely focus on coursework. As a result of this study, we can acknowledge that experiential learning has a strong impact on GA development and preparedness, and a follow-up study focusing on what specific professional skills are gained through the GA experience would benefit the field of student affairs. However, it is important to accept that the GA experience and coursework obtained do not exist in silos, and a comprehensive look into the learning that takes place should ideally focus on both aspects. This can assist supervisors of entry-level professionals in their training and expectations for new professionals in the field. Administrators and faculty can also utilize this research to tailor their work with graduate students and better meet the needs of the field.

Most importantly, this research demonstrates that the unique experiences of graduate assistants in student affairs warrant further exploration. The field of student affairs, practitioners and the students they work with, will benefit when more intentionality is given to the training and preparation of future administrators.

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Informed Consent

A Qualitative Investigation of Graduate Assistant Engagement Informed Consent

Please read this informed consent document carefully before you decide whether or not to participate in this study.

Project Title: Experiential Leaning and Engagement: The Role of Professional Development and Engagement in the Graduate Assistant Experience
Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the proposed study is to investigate how master's students studying student affairs experience their role as a graduate assistant
What you will be asked to do in the study: You will be asked to meet one time with the investigator to participate in a focus group with other graduate assistants or in an interview
Time Required: Approximately 1 hour
Anticipated Risks of Participation: There are no anticipated risks to participants.
Benefits/ Compensation: There is no compensation or other direct benefit to you for participation. Information gained from this research may benefit student affairs professionals and education leaders.
Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential. Pseudonyms will be used for each person such that names are not revealed. All identifying information will be removed from the data set. When the study is complete and the data is analyzed, the list of participants will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report. The consent forms will be stored in a locked cabinet SEPARATE from paper or electronic copies for a minimum of 3 years.
Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating and you may withdraw at any time during the study if you choose to participate.
Whom to contact if you have questions: Please contact Abbey Muetzel, amuetz1@tigers.lsu.edu, 678-595-3411
Whom to contact about your rights in the study: Research at Louisiana State University involving human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). For information about participants' rights please contact: Institutional Review Board, Dr. Dennis Landin (Chair), 130 David Boyd Hall, Baton Rouge, LA 70803, (225) 578-8692.

_____   **I have read the informed consent.**
_____   **I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.**

_____
Participant   **Date**

APPENDIX B: SURVEY ITEMS

Survey Items (to be completed via Qualtrics)

1. Name (Fill in the blank)
2. Desired Pseudonym (Fill in the blank)
3. Undergraduate Major (Fill in the blank)
4. Undergraduate Institution (Name and Location) (Fill in the blank)
5. Current Graduate Assistantship (Fill in the blank)
6. Is this your first graduate assistantship at this institution? (Yes or No)
7. If this is not your first graduate assistantship at this institution, what department/office did you previously serve as a graduate assistant?
8. Amount of current graduate assistantship monthly stipend? (Fill in the blank)
9. Number of hours you work on average weekly in your current graduate assistantship. (Fill in the blank)
10. I am learning in my current graduate assistantship. (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)
11. I am receiving mentorship in my current graduate assistantship. (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)
12. I am being prepared for the transition to a full-time student affairs educator position. (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)
13. I know my learning style. (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree)
14. I would describe or define my learning style as _____. (Fill in the blank)
15. Gender (Female, Male, or Trans)
16. Age (Fill in the blank)
17. Race/Ethnicity (African American/Black, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Caucasian/White, Latino/Hispanic, or Native American/American Indian)
18. Parental Education Level. (Some High School, High School Diploma/GED, Some College, Associate's Degree, Undergraduate Degree, Graduate Degree, Professional Degree)
19. Hometown (City, State)
20. Active Duty or Veteran Status (Yes or No)

APPENDIX C: EMAIL INVITATION

Email Template

Hi {name},

I am writing to ask for your help for a very important study to explore the graduate assistant experience for master's students in student affairs. I understand that you are very busy in your role and that you receive various requests for your time. Unlike most contemporary studies involving questionnaire survey research, I am asking you to participate in a focus group. The reason is that I want to fully understand your experience as a graduate assistant. In total, I believe this will take about 1 hour of your time.

If you are willing and able to participate, please visit {Doodle Poll Link} by January, 30 of 2015 to indicate your availability. What you choose to share will be kept completely confidential and will only be reported under pseudonyms with all identifying information removed. Participation is voluntary and you have the right to terminate your participation at any time. If you have any questions about the study, I would be happy to talk with you. You may call or email me, and I hope that you will consider participating and look forward to speaking with you.

Thank you!

Abbey Muetzel
678-595-3411
amuetz1@tigers.lsu.edu

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

Thank you for meeting with me, I appreciate your willingness to participate. The purpose of my research is to better understand the graduate assistant experience. Before we get started, please take the time to read over the IRB consent form, let me know if you have any questions, and please sign the bottom.

Keep in mind that your participation is completely voluntary and if at any point in time you would like to stop or leave that is fine, and you will not receive any penalty. Do you mind if I record our interview for transcription? All identifying information will be kept confidential.

Like I mentioned, I am looking to learn more about your experiences as a graduate assistant and hope this interview plays more like a conversation than a formal interview.

GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

Why did you become a graduate assistant?
What was your expectation coming into this position?
Describe the responsibilities within your position.
In what ways have you connected coursework to your duties as a GA?
Can you describe a time when your experiences as a GA helped you to grasp a concept in class? (Vice versa?)
Could you describe the most important lessons you learned through your assistantship so far?
Who has been the most helpful to you during this time? How has he/she been helpful?
Tell me about the support systems you have as a graduate assistant.
How have you grown as a person? As a professional?
What challenges have you encountered?
After having these experiences, what advice would you give to an upcoming masters student studying higher education?
Is there anything else you think I should know to better understand your experience as a GA?
Is there anything you would like to ask me?

APPENDIX E: FORCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Focus Group Protocol

Thanks for agreeing to be part of the focus group. I appreciate your willingness to participate. The purpose of my research is to better understand the graduate assistant experience. Before we get started, please take the time to read over the IRB consent form, let me know if you have any questions, and then sign the bottom.

Is this anyone's first focus group? If so, let me explain the format. Don't feel like you to have to speak in a circle, or that you have to respond to every question. But, if you want to comment on somebody else's response please feel free to do so. Focus groups should entice conversation amongst participants.

1. I would like you all to do the talking and would like everyone to participate.

2. There are no right or wrong answers. Every person's experiences and opinions are important. Speak up whether you agree or disagree. We want to hear a wide range of opinions.

3. What is said in this room stays in this room. We want everyone to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues come up. If at any point you want to leave the focus group, you are free to do so.

4. I will be tape recording the group, but I will not identify anyone by name in my report. You will remain anonymous.

5. Since I want everyone to share their experiences and thoughts- please remain respectful while others are speaking.

GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

Why did you become a graduate assistant?
What was your expectation coming into this position?
Describe the responsibilities within your position.
In what ways have you connected coursework to your duties as a GA?
Could you describe the most important lessons you learned through your assistantship so far?
Who has been the most helpful to you during this time? How has he/she been helpful?
Tell me about the support systems you have as a graduate assistant.
How have you grown as a person? As a professional?
Is there anything else you think I should know to better understand your experience as a GA?
Is there anything you would like to ask me?

APPENDIX F: IRB APPROVAL

ACTION ON EXEMPTION APPROVAL REQUEST

LSU

Institutional Review Board
Dr. Dennis Landin, Chair
130 David Boyd Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803
P: 225.578.8692
F: 225.578.5983
irb@lsu.edu | lsu.edu/irb

TO: Abbey Muetzel
            Educational Leadership

FROM: Dennis Landin
            Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: December 15, 2014

RE: **IRB#** E9116

TITLE: Experiential Leaning and Engagement: The Role of Professional Development and
            Engagement in the Graduate Assistant Experience

New Protocol/Modification/Continuation: New Protocol

Review Date: 12/12/2014

Approved X **Disapproved**

Approval Date: 12/12/2014 **Approval Expiration Date:** 12/11/2017
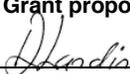
Exemption Category/Paragraph: 2a,b

Signed Consent Waived?: No

Re-review frequency: (three years unless otherwise stated)

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable):

Protocol Matches Scope of Work in Grant proposal: (if applicable)

By: Dennis Landin, Chairman

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING –
Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:
1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
7. Notification of the IRB of a serious compliance failure.
8. SPECIAL NOTE:
All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at http://www.lsu.edu/irb

VITA

Abbey Muetzel was raised in Peachtree City, Georgia and received her bachelor's degree from Valdosta State University in 2009. As an undergraduate student, she worked on campus in the University Recreation Center, and it was from this employment opportunity she was inspired to modify her career path to work in higher education. Ms. Muetzel obtained her master's degree from Valdosta State University in Higher Education & Leadership while working as a graduate assistant in the Dean of Students Office. The semester before graduation, she accepted a full-time position in the Admissions Office as an Admissions Counselor. She worked for a year and a half before deciding to enroll in a PhD program full time.

After visiting Louisiana State University, she accepted a graduate assistantship in the Enrollment Management office working on special projects for the Associate Vice Chancellor and assisting with on and off campus recruitment programs. After two years, Ms. Muetzel was recruited to apply for a graduate assistantship in the Office of the President. In this role, she currently assists with the President's correspondence, special programs, football operations for the University Suite, and special research projects pertaining to college affordability and student debt. She will graduate from Louisiana State University with her PhD in Higher Education Administration in December 2015.